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What is Home? A Personal Plea for Solidarity with Suwayda

I appeal for your solidarity in the name of all Syrians in Suwayda who are protesting against the Assad regime.

Salma



Salma (who writes under a pseudonym for her safety) is a Syrian activist and university student from As-Suwayda. She is the founder of **Talaat Soriat**, a women's movement leading protests in Syria. This article is part of "As-Suwayda Voices," an article series by Al-

Jumhuriya on the As-Suwayda protest movement.

My hometown, Suwayda, is now seeing its seventh week of peaceful protest. Despite an incident where the regime firing at protestors outside the Baath party headquarters three weeks ago, the protests remain peaceful and are seeing greater and greater numbers of people join. I want to appeal for your solidarity.

Six years ago, as I sat in my high-school classroom in that small city in southwest Syria, my teacher asked: "What is home for you?"

Despite being a vocal person, I didn't dare answer the question, instead listening to my colleagues repeat the same brainwashed answers around me until it was my turn to speak.

"I am still searching for a free homeland, without barriers, bullets, or prisons," I said. "That is why I cannot tell you what home is for me: I have never known it." Not the answer he wanted to hear, nor the one I had hoped to give.

Now, at 23 years old, I am double majoring in Sociology and Filmmaking at two different Syrian universities, and have been working for years as a human rights, feminist, and political activist. I document and write about the violations committed by the regime and other armed forces in every region of Syria.

A number of factors set me on this path, many of them difficult to articulate. My own political awakening introduced me to new ideas which led me to question why there were

no real laws in Syria to protect people, without discrimination, from different kinds of violations. The challenges I faced throughout my life helped shape the woman I am today and motivated me to challenge what I saw and pursue my goals. But what impacted me most profoundly was the Syrian revolution of 2011.

In many ways, the Syrian revolution raised me more than my parents did. It shaped my features and gave me reasons to continue working for a free Syria. March 2011 was the opening of a door: a chance for the Syrian people to stand up in their millions and fight for justice and freedom, to have our rights to life and growth recognized in a free homeland where we are protected instead of murdered in silence.

The revolution did not stop, and will not stop: the seed planted in 2011 continues to grow. The peaceful protests taking place today in my city, Suwayda, cannot be separated from the revolutionary movements that began in 2011. It is for this reason I refuse to leave Syria, because from inside Syria comes the real change. Peaceful protests in my city are aiming to bring an end to the political system and achieve democracy – it is unthinkable that I would not participate in them.

When I go down the streets and squares and join the peaceful protests happening every day, I do so because like every Syrian, I have experienced the human consequences of war. I have lost many friends and loved ones during the war in Syria: some left the country, some are still detained by the Syrian regime and we know nothing about them, and some died under torture in prisons or were martyred in bombings during the war. Every day I see thousands of

faces who don't have a ceiling to shelter under. Poverty and forced displacement – and the psychological and societal effects they bring – have all become daily reality that no-one cares about, not the anti-regime political forces, nor the coalition's representatives, nor even the United Nations. All of them are partners in the massacres in Syria, and their silence is a crime.

I will not compromise, forget or forgive.

Our demands are clearly outlined and inspired by the dedication to freedom which we live and breathe:

We demand a free, democratic, multicultural and unified Syria. We reject any project that aims to separate us from our Syrian lands and identity.

We demand the implementation of UN Resolution 2254 and that Bashar al-Assad, all armed forces and all parties who committed war crimes against us are held accountable.

We demand that all foreign forces occupying us leave. We demand the release of all our family members and friends detained in prisons.

We demand gender justice and a country where Syrian women can be leaders and partners in political, social, and economic change processes.

We demand to build a state of law and separate all three state authorities from the grip of military rule, without fear of arrest for expressing our political opinions.

One of the most prominent protest slogans in Suwayda is, "The Syrian people are one!" If we want the justice we dream of in Syria, then Syrians from all regions and

backgrounds must stand together hand in hand to achieve it.

I ask for your solidarity. I believe that your solidarity with protesters in Suwayda is crucial and can be a voice for those who are voiceless to share their own stories. Let the world know that in Syria we are not safe or free as long as al-Assad's regime is in power. You can do this by taking a stand against those who support the criminal regime which killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians and detained even more, deprived us of the most basic necessities of life inside Syria, and displaced millions.

I ask for your solidarity in the name of all Syrians in Suwayda, who are heading to the streets daily to protest against al-Assad's regime, foreign occupation, and rampant corruption. Your solidarity can bridge borders; it can help us stay determined to keep fighting and to put pressure on international bodies to reopen the doors of justice in Syria.

Stand up now with us. It's time for change and we have had enough. It's our right to have what we have always dreamed of - a home.