
Forward-Looking Leadership: A Syrian Perspective

AN INTERVIEW WITH HIND KABAWAT

Hind Kabawat is an attorney and Senior Research Associate in Public Diplomacy at the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. She has led a variety of public diplomacy efforts in Syria to promote interfaith tolerance and cooperation, modernization and reform, and educational innovations in conflict resolution and diplomacy education. She is a recipient of the 2007 Women's Peace Initiative Award, presented by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding.

Residing in Damascus and Toronto, Ms. Kabawat is International Counsel at Joseph Young and Associates, Foreign Affairs Director for the Syrian Public Relations Association, a member of the Canada Arab Business Council, and a consultant for the World Bank. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in economics from Damascus University, a law degree from Beirut Arab University, and a certificate in conflict resolution from the University of Toronto. She earned a Master of Arts in international relations after completing the Global Master of Arts Program (GMAP) at The Fletcher School in 2003.

On March 31, 2008, The Forum's managing editor Julia F. Bennett spoke with Ms. Kabawat about the political crisis in Lebanon, Syria's fragile relations with its neighbors, the critical need for leadership in the region, and recommendations for the next U.S. presidential administration.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Lebanon has been without a president since November 2007. In what ways does this internal political crisis serve as a battleground for the assertion of regional hegemony by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States?*

HIND KABAWAT: Lebanon has lived through a civil war for 15 years, and I believe that democratic elections are of crucial importance, as they are for every other Arab country. From my point of view, there is no reason for any one country to intervene in the internal affairs of another. Neither

Saudi Arabia, nor Syria, nor the United States has the right to interfere in the Lebanese elections. Given the many projections about alliances be-

Given the many projections about alliances being formed between Syria and Iran, or between Saudi Arabia and the United States, the Lebanese should be more aware of these issues and stick together as one people.

ing formed between Syria and Iran, or between Saudi Arabia and the United States, the Lebanese should be more aware of these issues and stick together as one people. The Lebanese should remain united and ensure that elections occur without external interference.

..... participation indicate the further alienation of Syria from its Arab neighbors?

FORUM: *In solidarity with Lebanon, heads of state from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen boycotted the League of Arab States summit hosted in Damascus in March 2008. Does their lack of partic-*

KABAWAT: It upsets me to see that there was no Lebanese president in attendance at the Arab Summit. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen did not boycott the summit, but they did only send low-level representatives. I believe that this decision was not related to developments in Lebanon but instead was influenced by the United States and its policies toward Syria. The indirect role of the United States in the proceedings of the Arab Summit is quite deplorable.

FORUM: *Syria's ties with Iran make it unique among Sunni-majority Arab states. How would you describe the nature of this alliance and the common interests that these powers are seeking to advance?*

KABAWAT: Syria is a secular state, and its alliances are not based on religious affiliation. At the end of the day, Syria does not want to be alone. When only one country from your neighborhood is willing to speak with you, you are left with no options. As a result of the U.S. boycott and sanctions against Syria, we have no choice but to ally with Iran. Ultimately, the rules and regulations developed by the United States only hurt the Syrian people. Look at our airlines and our medical facilities. We, the Syrian people, are paying the price. If the people of the Middle East face sanctions, they may have to enter into a partnership with the devil in order not to starve. Syria's alliance with Iran is one of necessity rather than strategy.

FORUM: *The United Nations commission that has been investigating the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has recently stated that a "network of criminals" is responsible for the car*

bombing. What is the significance of this statement, which represents a shift away from the UN's prior implication of Syria?

KABAWAT: Everyone is innocent until proven guilty. There are already people in prison, charged with activities related to the assassination, but we cannot just point fingers and accuse someone of guilt without a proper investigation. I am not only saying this because I am Syrian, but because I believe in justice and a fair trial. I think that the commission needs to finish the investigation, find the perpetrators, and give them a fair trial. Syria has been cooperative during the entire investigation, especially with regard to the most recent report.

FORUM: *How would the return of the Golan Heights territory alter Syria's role in the peace process?*

KABAWAT: I think Syria wants the return of the Golan Heights through the implementation of the "land for peace" formula. We need to get to the negotiation table, with issues such as justice and peace at the core of the discussion. In the end, we can no longer tolerate the killing of civilians. This needs to end, and we should be serious and committed to the cause. The Syrian people and government have sent many peace signals in the past, and Syria's attendance at the Annapolis Conference in November 2007 reflects its commitment to this issue.

FORUM: *Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Syria has accepted a disproportionate majority of Iraqi refugees. As conflict continues and the prospects of return become dimmer, how does the integration of over a million Iraqis into schools, mosques, and urban centers impact the daily life and identity of Syrians?*

KABAWAT: I have been involved with Iraqi refugees in Syria, and I have brought attention to their plight by facilitating meetings between American officials and Iraqis in Damascus. First of all, there are more than 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria. They now make up one tenth of our population, and they require our support. We are paying the price of a war that we did not want and that we did not cause. I believe that Middle Easterners need to take care of each other and help each other out. But the United States has an obligation as well. It started this war and left the Syrians to take care of the refugees. This task is becoming very difficult for us, as the expenses accrue. It is time for the United States to talk to Syria about this issue.

FORUM: *Do you think that the ongoing Iraqi refugee crisis will have long-term ramifications for Iraqi-Syrian relations or for U.S.-Syrian relations?*

KABAWAT: As far as the Iraqi and Syrian governments, I am not so sure. But the Iraqi and Syrian people caught up in this refugee crisis have responded by treating each other as people, not as citizens belonging each to their own nations. Iraqis and Syrians alike have said, “we are people and we should take care of each other.”

For the United States, I think the refugee crisis provides an opportunity to begin a dialogue with Syria to find a solution to the problem. It is critical for the United States to see how Syrians are supporting these refugees, to see that the Syrians are bearing a heavy burden because of the situation in Iraq.

FORUM: *When Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, visited Damascus in April 2007, she became the highest-ranking U.S. politician to enter Syrian borders since 2003. In your view, has this diplomatic overture been followed by tangible progress toward normalized relations between Syria and the United States?*

KABAWAT: The central problem for U.S.-Syrian relations is the hard, even severe, line that the U.S. government is taking against Syria. The Ambassador of Syria to the United States is one of Syria’s most qualified and effective diplomats. He has been trying his best to improve relations, despite the fact that the U.S. government is boycotting Syria in every way possible.

Along with the U.S. embassy in Damascus, the Syrian ambassador in Washington is doing a superior job of maintaining bridges that connect the American and Syrian people—despite the problems between our governments. At the end of the day, the most important link between the United States and Syria is the people. We Syrians have nothing against Americans. We consider the American people our friends. I think there are very perceptive Americans who think that their government is wrong in its policies toward Syria.

At the end of the day, the most important link between the United States and Syria is the people.

.....

Cultural relations between the populations are strong. This spring, the U.S. embassy in Damascus is sponsoring a concert featuring American jazz artists, and the Syrian embassy in Washington has planned a gala event to benefit Syrian children with cancer. In the past few years, there has been a steady increase of Americans pursuing Arabic language studies in Damascus; they are always welcome in our country, and their presence

reflects a growing interest in Syria among young Americans. After all, the culture, the people—fundamentally, we are all the same.

FORUM: *How can education and interfaith dialogue serve as effective means of promoting greater understanding among the diverse sects and ethnicities in Syria and throughout the region?*

KABAWAT: Education is the key that will open the doors in Syria for reform and democracy. We cannot do anything without a strong education that teaches diversity and open-mindedness. I think that person-to-person interface helps a lot, because it is a small step toward something good; like they say—a journey of a thousand miles starts with one small step. Dialogue is an excellent way to break the ice and to think seriously about our problems. You know, the problems we have now, we have never talked about them openly before. Maybe it is finally the time for all the sects in the Middle East to discuss why there is so much hate, why Shi'i and Sunni Muslims are killing each other, why Christians are killing each other, why Jews and Muslims are killing each other. We need to sit down and talk about the roots of all this conflict if we are to stop the killing.

FORUM: *Are these means of conflict resolution being employed sufficiently to enhance relations between the Middle East and the West?*

KABAWAT: I know that many people—Israelis, Syrians, Iraqis, Lebanese, and Americans—are communicating informally through track two diplomacy efforts. This is the only productive way to move forward. When the governments aren't talking, the people must maintain the dialogue. Leaders come and leaders go, but the people remain. I think that Track II diplomacy conducted by citizens is the only way to sustain relations between countries whose foreign policies do not allow for otherwise normal relations.

.....
... Track II diplomacy conducted by citizens is the only way to sustain relations between countries whose foreign policies do not allow for otherwise normal relations.

FORUM: *In your opinion, does the United States have a legitimate role in the future of the Middle East? If so, how should the next U.S. presidential administration prioritize its strategic, economic, and diplomatic initiatives in the region?*

KABAWAT: First of all, the U.S. military should not remain in the Middle East. We need to get back to the traditional American values of justice and

fairness, and I hope the next administration will have the moral courage to bring a fair solution to the Iraq War for the people in the Middle East. That solution needs to be rooted in international law and fundamental principles of justice. The solution will mean fighting the radicals and terrorists and putting an end to the deep conflict between these groups and governments in the region. The United States should involve itself in these efforts by playing the part of the good role model and promoting the American dream of liberty and justice. Syrians used to view America as the country who brought freedom to this world, but no longer. If the United States goes back to its fundamental values, it can still be a good role model for the Middle East.

FORUM: *In your opinion, what internal changes could result in increased stability in the Middle East?*

KABAWAT: For the last 40 years, we haven't had good leaders in the Middle East. Why? Because the leaders have tried to make their own populations into followers and orphans who are not involved in governing and dis-

We need Middle Eastern leaders to start thinking about their own people as citizens, not subjects.

engaged from society. I can't identify any one leader in the Middle East as a positive role model, inspiring his own people to become leaders and involve themselves in reforms in the Middle East. This is a problem. We need Middle Eastern leaders to start thinking about their own people as citizens, not subjects. We need to teach the population to challenge the leaders and the teachers, to be involved in fighting for basic rights and against corruption and poverty, and to work toward justice in the Middle East.

FORUM: *Demographic shifts in the region are generating increased hope for reform and modernization, and young leaders will prove critical to these developments. To whom have you looked for mentorship? Are these sources relevant and available to youth today?*

KABAWAT: The Grand Mufti of Syria Sheikh Ahmad Hassoun and Marc Gopin, Director of the Center on Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University, have been instrumental in teaching tolerance and training others to do the same through their own work. I should also mention my role models at Fletcher, who helped me to further develop my professional goals. In a course on foreign policy leadership that I took at Fletcher, Senior Associate Dean Deborah Nutter emphasized that

her students shouldn't be in the audience—they should be the players. Her words have stayed with me, as I have facilitated interfaith dialogues in the region. Professor John Hammock and Peter Ackerman, Chairman of the Board of The Fletcher School, have also been integral to my appreciation for the notion that even small efforts can make a big difference and that we can change others' lives just by serving as a positive example.

If everyone makes a small contribution, those efforts can become seeds for a better future. Young people in Syria continue to seek mentorship from the adults in their lives. So if I can be more involved in the activities and decisions of my daughters and nieces, and in the life of the community around me, I will become an effective example for the next generation.

In Syria, there are many accomplished women who inspire me, just like I inspire others. It's not only individual aspiration that we need; collectively, we need to inspire each other, to support each other, to be mothers to each other. Inspiration can come from anywhere, not only from holders of prominent leadership positions. Any woman—no matter which social class she is from, no matter which profession she undertakes—can inspire me to be committed. I can be inspired by a tailor or any other laborer who wakes up in the morning and goes out to earn a living. A person working in a factory can inspire the Minister of Industry by embodying ethics, principals, and commitment.

FORUM: *Is your professional experience suggestive of increased opportunities for the next generation of Syrian women?*

KABAWAT: I am a very modest example compared to other women in Syria. I see a lot of potential for women in Syria to become leaders. First of all, in Syria, we have more progressive policies toward women than those that exist in other Arab countries. Najah al-Attar, who was appointed to the post of vice president in March 2006, is a prominent model of transparency and anti-corruption in the government. Syria has female ambassadors and ministers, as well as a high percentage of female members of parliament, so women are definitely involved in political life. More and more Syrian women should become leaders in politics and society; women in general can become better leaders if they are just given the opportunities. We are mothers, after all, and we know that when we create a better society for our children, it will lead to a better country for all citizens.

FORUM: *Thank you for speaking with The Forum.* ■