**Syria: The Inside Story**

On the 10th June, Laila Alodaat gave a talk to a packed-out St Andrew’s Centre.

The audience numbered around 80 and were warm, concerned and attentive.  Laila said she was inspired by the number of people in Hertford who care.  We, the organisers, would also like to thank everybody for their tolerance as we shifted seats around to squeeze everyone in.  Thanks in particular to the St Andrew’s folk who helped out spontaneously – you know who you are!

Luckily, we didn’t run out of cake, which would have been a stain on our reputation!  However, we are aware that without amplification it was hard for some at the back to follow the presentation so the main points are summarised below.

While the situation in Syria is bleak indeed, I would urge people to note from Laila’s talk that grass-roots community organisations, including the one we raised money for, *Badael*(Arabic for ‘Alternatives’), are doing effective work to maintain and promote civilised alternatives: non-violent education, training, activism, etc.

It is also worth continuing to campaign for the UK to accept more refugees.  While we don’t have a good track record on this in terms of numbers, Laila said that we have accepted the most vulnerable people – orphans who would otherwise be trafficked into slavery – and not the most useful – high-skilled adults - as some nations have done.  **Citizens UK Resettlement Campaign** supports campaigns for displaced Syrians to be given refuge in the UK.  We were told about Catherine Henderson's aim to get a group going in our area.

The Peace and Justice Group intend to follow up on Laila’s talk in light of the interest it generated.  We are for the whole community, not just members of our own, or indeed any, church and will always be delighted to welcome anyone who shares our interests and concerns.

**Laila’s presentation**

Laila talked us through the history of Syria, the origins of the conflict and the events since it began up to early spring 2014.  She then gave us updated figures since spring 2014 to demonstrate how far things have deteriorated in the last 1.5 years.

History of modern Syria

Laila gave us a background for what has happened.

* Hafez Al-Assad, father of current Assad, was a terrifying dictator, who committed innumerable crimes against his people.  Laila compared the fear among people in those days to modern day North Korea.
* The vast majority of families in Syria have a relation who ‘disappeared’ under Hafez’s regime; for Laila’s family, it was her uncle, not a political man, but who happened to make a comment in passing in a shop and was arrested and never seen again.  Grotesque torture was routine, including sexual violence, and dying under torture was common.
* The most notorious crime under Hafez was the massacre of at least 40, 000 civilians by special forces in Hama in 1982.
* On June 10th 2000, Hafez died.  The TV broadcasts, 9 minutes after the announcement of his death cut to emergency changes in legislation paving the way for Bashar Al-Assad, Hafez’s son, to be made president… and the people realised nothing would change for them.  So, it was for 9 minutes that the people felt they may be free.
* Laila then gave figures calculated by independent organisations for the following decade.  These figures ranked Syria among the worst places in the world for corruption, lack of rule of law, lack of accountability, civil liberties and economic problems, in particular unemployment.

Then came 2010

* In other countries the Arab Spring was blossoming.  This inspired a group of children in the city of Daraa to write some anti-government graffiti.  The children were detained and tortured, which sparked a protest.  In March 2011 there was unarmed civil action, where people took to the streets calling for freedom from violent oppression.  Women’s voices, unusually, were heard, as women stepped out of their traditional roles and took part as activists and leaders.
* Assad’s armies reacted disproportionately.  There were widespread killings, torture and unlawful arrests.  We watched a particularly harrowing video clip of an elderly man being singled out and beaten unconscious and thrown into the back of a car.
* And thus it began.

Timeline of events since 2010

**July 2011**

The *Free Syrian Army* was set up by a defecting soldier to fight back against the aggression of Assad’s forces.

**May to September 2011**

International sanctions banned the purchase of Syrian oil.  (Do you remember the sudden hike in petrol prices?)

**22nd August 2011**

Investigation of human rights law breaches by the Human Rights Council found substantial evidence of gross violations.  We saw some terrible video footage of Assad’s barrel bombs on civilian areas with devastating consequences.  In addition, denial of food, water, medicine and electricity in besieged areas was now commonplace, with aid not reaching civilians due to corruption.  People were starving to death.

Note: these reports also document several incidents of Islamic State targeting civilians, before this group came to the international notoriety it possesses now.

**4th October 2011**

Russia and China vetoed UN resolution calling an immediate halt to the crackdown in Syria against opponents to Assad’s regime.

**Late 2011**

An Arab League attempt at cessation of violence failed.

**4th Feb 2012**

UN resolution condemning Assad’s actions was vetoed by Russia and China…

**16th Feb 2012**

A non-binding resolution was passed in the UN, endorsing the Arab League’s plans.  12 countries voted against and 17 abstained.  Kofi Annan was appointed special envoy to Syria.

**June 2012**

The UN Security Council authorised up to 300 unarmed military observers for a 90-day mission in Syria, to observe a ceasefire and implement Annan’s peace plan.

They withdrew 3 days later, due to intensifying violence.

A six point plan was then laid out in the *Geneva Communiqué*, aiming for political settlement and an end to violence.

**February 2013**

The death toll was now an estimated 70, 000 and 1.5 million had become refugees.

**August 2013**

UN weapons inspectors enter Syria to investigate allegations that chemical weapons have been used.  On the 21st, a large-scale chemical attack in a heavily populated area killed 1400 civilians, including many, many children.

The use of weapons of mass destruction was supposedly Barack Obama’s ‘red line’; it transpired that it was not.

**September 2013**

Human Rights Watch found that the chemical weapons systems used were only possessed by the Syrian government.  The US and Russia agree a plan to eliminate the chemical weapons, backed by a UN resolution later in the month, which Assad says he will abide by.  The process of eliminating them begins in October.

During 2013, Russia sold $1bn worth of weapons to Assad’s regime.  Middle East states like Saudi and Qatar supported rebels with small arms.

**Meanwhile….  October 2013**

Rebel groups began mass executions.

**February 2014**

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons told CNN that only 11% of the stockpile had been shipped out, despite a deadline to eliminate them entirely by 5th February 2014.

**January and February 2014**

More UN peace talks ended with little progress, but there was a resolution boosting access to food aid and condemning terrorist attacks by al-Quaeda-affiliated groups.

**Up to Spring 2014…**

By spring 2014, 9 million Syrians have been displaced – half of them children - and 150,000 killed.

The UNHCR appeal generated $4,264,717,711 worldwide, but only 14% has been received to date by those it was intended for.

**Extremists (largely Islamic groups)**

At this stage, Laila had noted that hundreds of non-State armed groups existed and that foreigners were travelling into Syria to join the more extremist ones.

**Children**

It was common practice early in the conflict for government forces to kidnap and torture children as young as eleven years to force families to cooperate and confess.  Rebel armed groups also recruited children.

**Women**

Women have also suffered from being especially powerless.

Reports noted that civilians suffered a disproportionate amount of casualties.  Laila told us that in certain areas of Syria it is more likely that you will be killed in your own home by a bomb than if you are fighting with one of the factions.  This is why women and children suffer.

Now – update from last 1.5 years

* 12 million people need immediate humanitarian assistance.
* 7.5 million people internally displaced by violence.
* 4 million registered refugees, but many more unregistered.
* 4.5 million in hard-to-reach areas – grave humanitarian crisis.
* 76000 died in 2014.
* Assad regime doubled the use of explosive weapons in 2014.
* 53% of civilians and 74% of girls die from explosive weapons.
* Fighters from 80 nationalities are contributing to the armed conflict.
* 90% of arms used in weapons sold by countries that are one of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council: China, France, Russia, UK and USA.  Most of these come from Russia or China.

Conclusion

Civil society groups – grass roots organisations – still operate, sometimes very effectively.  Laila believes that until we have cooperation from the whole UN to work towards some kind of accountability to rule of law in Syria, these people represent the best hope for Syrian people.

Laila concluded by quoting Valerie Amos:

“We can watch collectively the destruction of an entire country over many more years unless we get more courage from the international community and unless we find a political solution.”

One day, Laila said, our grandchildren will ask what we did to help while this was happening in the world and that in seeking to learn, our community was taking the most important action of all.