

Syria, what happened and why it happened : Once-beautiful ancient cities that were my homeland

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I Introduction

Syria has several ancient, historical cities and is blessed with rich nature and heritage. Its people also have deep faith. Once, Syria had cultural diversity, traditional music, community, and many kinds of palatable dining. Bread is the main staple in its Mediterranean diet because fine wheat is widely available. The Syrian dessert has mainly pistachio fillings, and its trees with many pale pink or rose colour endocarps are beautiful. They have shared conversation or communication, and they kept a precious enriched time with a good neighbor.

However, Syria has faced tremendous turmoil since 2011. Innocent people face a massive crisis, and their living conditions are getting harder. In addition, their more complicated issues have also been the worst they have ever experienced since the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has spread worldwide. Nonetheless, people's recognition of the crisis and complicated situation in Syria may be fading worldwide as these issues are put behind us, and they may become latent issues.

It is difficult to analyze the cause of the crisis in Syria and the current situation only by the news, especially in Japanese, as it was reported in Japan. Also, sometimes, it is more difficult to break the silence about it inside of Syria. Therefore, Rifai's perspectives as a Syrian and analysis have significant meaning for our community and international society.

This paper informs the circumstance in Syria based on a symposium, "Syria, what happened and why it happened: Once-beautiful ancient cities that were

my homeland", that was held on zoom on January 18, 2021, from 6-8 pm Japan time. The authors also refer to some statistics, data, news and materials.

The speaker of the symposium was Ghamra Rifai, who was working as an Iraq and Afghanistan Project Officer at the Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC) at that time.

The message of the speaker before the symposium was as follows. I will be talking about Syria and everything that has happened since 2011 from my point of view as a Syrian citizen in an online symposium at Rikkyo University. There will be some history, some fun facts and some very serious information that needs to be shared. The lecture is in English, open, and free, but you need to register ahead of time.

II The key speaker

1. Ghamra Rifai: A way to humanitarian work

Let us introduce the speaker as of January 2021. She was born and raised in Homs city, Syria. She moved to Japan to study at the Graduate School of Science and Technology at Niigata University in April 2011. She obtained a Master's degree in Engineering in Advanced Material Science and Technology in 2014. Following these incredible experiences, she enrolled in a PhD programme at Niigata University in 2014.

However, the reality in Syria kept worsening after she moved to Japan. She was worried about her family, relatives, and friends. At that time, she met staff members of the JVC. Initially, she attended some symposiums as an Arabic interpreter volunteer. Through these activities, she became more aware of the human rights of children in conflict areas.

For that reason, she decided to change her field and turned to humanitarian work, and since 2018, she has been working as an Iraq and Afghanistan Project Officer at the JVC, Tokyo. I admire her work; she has supported many children and local staff members in Iraq and Afghanistan.

2. Rifai's decision: so that reality does not fade

Unfortunately, this may be her last symposium in Japan. She will go to her next destination next month. Her sudden decision to leave Japan has made us sad. However, she said, "Please do not worry about it, I am okay." What is the reason behind that decision? If you are interested in it, please ask her directly. I believe she will have better life opportunities at her next destination.

Also, I would like to thank Rifai's friends, who were born in Syria and will present at this symposium from Canada, and her friends in Peru and Bulgaria. I am honored to be with you. I was worried that talking about today's topic may stir bad memories for her and her friends. However, she said, "I would like to inform everybody about the reality in Syria. If I do not tell them, facts will be forgotten."

III Once ancient cities: Blessed with nature, culture and faith

First, Rifai introduced the history of Syria and showed us the past scenery through photographs that were blessed with beautiful nature and heritage. Thus, through this first section, we could understand that they are proud of their long history in Syria.

The introduction about an outline of Syria is Rifai's favorite section, as follows. The name of the origin of present Syria was Assyrians, Syriac (Aramic) . Greater Syria (al-Sham or Levant) includes Syria, Lebanon, Palestine (Israel) and Jordan; the Fertile Crescent is composed of Levant and Mesopotamia. Presently the capital city is Damascus, the total population in 2011 was approximately 22.5 million; it has 14 governorates, and the area is 185,180 km².

In Syria, the religions are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The official language is Arabic. Women in Syrian society were treated with respect. However, the final word in women's affairs usually goes to the men in their lives (husband, father) . Elementary and junior high school education are mandatory. Also, the education system is free of charge from elementary school up to university (at public universities) . Private universities were not allowed, and private schools were under the control of the Ministry of Education until the year of 2001. There are no entrance examinations at universities - everything depends on the student's high school score. The average illiteracy rate was 19.11 %, 12.1% among men and 26.21% among women.¹

Also, it has a coastline with beaches, we can see snow in the winter season, and Palmyra that was a world heritage site, was surrounded by a vast desert, and there were camels. The capital of Damascus has the national opera house, the national museum, Mosques, Churches, traditional café and restaurants, and also, Syria has many kinds of appetizing dishes (Rifai loves Syrian food) . People share food with family members, relatives and friends.

Since the beginning of time, Syrians have held open both their homes and

their hearts for people in need, such as the victims of the Armenian holocaust, Lebanese war refugees, and Iraq war refugees, for example.

IV What happened and why did it happen in Syria?

Despite Syrian people having rescued many people based on mercy and religion in a land blessed with rich traditions and culture, the day came suddenly; many Syrians were separated, became refugees, or faced sudden death.

Rifai explained what happened and why it happened as follows: In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, came to power through a military coup. Many citizens did not want to follow the dictatorship. Accordingly, citizens who were against the Assad regime have been raising anti-government campaigns since 1976. In retaliation against them, the Hama Massacre occurred in 1982, and unarmed Syrian citizens were killed at the Syrian Army's hands under the president's orders. The total number of killed citizens at the lowest estimate was 2,000 people.

Hafiz Al-Assad died in 2001, and his son Bashar al-Assad was inaugurated as president of Syria. They ran unchallenged in presidential elections (referendums) as an oligarchic government for 40 years. For that reason, 2011 Calls required reforms of the political system, democratization, and freedom of speech. Then, on April 18, a horrible massacre took place right under the Homs clock tower in the home square, the symbol of the city. This massacre claimed the lives of an unknown number of peaceful protestors who were singing, praying and asking for freedom in the main square of their city.

The revolution started with peaceful demonstrations of frustrated civilians. However, the government responded violently using weapons and pitting Syrian Army soldiers against their own people. As the military campaign against civilians started, Syrian Army soldiers started to defect. They then started using their weapons to protect the demonstrators. The government responded by arming civilians to support military operations. The clashes between the soldiers who defected (the Free Syrian Army) and the government attracted an inflow of huge numbers of foreign fighters.

Here Rifai gave us a question: "If we were soldiers, would we obey the president's order to kill unarmed fellow citizens? If you disobey this command, you will have disobeyed a military command that would have you go to prison and be brutally tortured or, perhaps, even executed."

Rifai desired to discuss it with participants in groups for five minutes. However, it was a difficult question because almost no one had ever experienced such a merciless situation; therefore, it was normal for them to feel upset and worried. It was not easy for the participants to quickly start a discussion among themselves, especially since they were all Japanese students.

For that reason, the authors summarized the crisis of Syria again² before rephrasing the question as follows: "What would you do? If you were a soldier and the government orders you to fire on unarmed citizens, can you refuse his order without suffering harmful consequences?"

Then, after a five-minute group discussion, the participants exchanged and presented their opinions and tried to come up with meaningful solutions to the issue. It is important to consider the opinions of students when considering complex and uncomfortable situations.

However, unfortunately, the actual condition began to worsen, and the Syrian people had to face even more crises and hostilities than they had previously experienced, as the government cracked down on the demonstrations and the army opened fire on innocent protesters. The number of dead people rapidly increased, and more people gathered on the streets in reaction. Finally, many Syrian citizens gathered and took to the streets, standing together and shouting, calling for freedom of speech, dignity, and political change.

Then, Rifai mentioned the failure of the intervention of the international community and chemical weapons. Finally, the United Nations Security Council started to react to what happened in Syria in October. Unfortunately, it has been deeply divided over how to respond to the crisis.³ "October 4, 2011, the Russian Federation (Russia) and the People's Republic of China (China) vetoed a draft resolution in the Security Council that had strongly condemned Syrian authorities for their violent crackdown against pro-democracy protesters this year and called for an immediate end to human rights abuses "⁴ Nonetheless, on August 21, 2013, chemical weapons were used against civilians. ⁵The international community reacted, and the United States of America (USA) threatened to attack Syria. Russia stepped in to remove the chemical weapons. In 2014, ISIS declared the formation of a worldwide caliphate. After gaining control over many parts of Syria and the Republic of Iraq (Iraq) , ISIS started to conduct terrorist attacks outside the Middle East, especially in Europe. In 2014, several coalitions were formed against ISIS. Airstrikes and military operations killed many civilians and displaced scores. The Syrian government,

with the support of Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) , used the war against ISIS as an excuse to attack the opposition. Then, she showed us three photographs after the destruction of Mosul, Aleppo, and her birthplace of Homs. From these, participants were unable to see any trace whatsoever of the once beautiful ancient cities, with their long histories, since they had been reduced to piles of rubble.

V The severe damage based on the crisis since 2011

Next, she explained the severe damage as a consequence of the conflict in Syria through some data. Syria's population structure has changed drastically since the crisis of 2011. The shocking fact is that at least half of them were deprived of their fundamental human rights. For example, it was estimated that approximately 40 thousand people have died, approximately 5.6 million have had to become registered refugees, and approximately 6.6 million face more difficult conditions as internally displaced persons.⁶ Their living conditions have become more demanding than they have ever experienced before.

In addition, the economic crisis in Syria is a serious issue. For example, the Syrian currency dropped to one-tenth of the value it had compared with 2011. For example, the official exchange rate has been more than 512 Syrian pounds (SYP) to the US dollar since November 2021, compared with 47.4 SYP to the dollar on March 30, 2011.⁷ Furthermore, it keeps getting worse.⁸

She then introduced the tragic environmental situation as outlined in the following article: "Blazes broke out on Friday, October 10 2020, in the provinces of Homs, Tartus and Latakia, destroying over 9,000 hectares of agricultural and forested land, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) . The wildfires killed three people in Latakia and displaced thousands across the three provinces, OCHA said. Authorities said on Sunday that the fires have been brought under control."⁹

VI COVID-19 affected the Syrian people: long lines for everything

Due to the current COVID-19, the damage of living conditions is getting worse. Rifai refers to the article as follows. "In recent weeks there has been a sudden rise in obituaries, death notices, and people falling ill in Syria. While the official number of COVID-19 cases as of August 4 was 847, with 463 of those in Damascus, this seems greatly at odds with the situation on the ground, and the real number of cases and death is likely much higher. There has been a distinct

lack of credible information as to the precise figures, leading to a necessary reliance on projected numbers instead. Dr. Ahmed Habbas, the assistant director of health in Damascus, estimated that there could potentially be as many as 112,500 COVID-19 cases in the capital and its countryside alone. His estimate was based on assessments from burial offices, which showed an average of 800 deaths over eight days in Damascus, or around 100 deaths per day." ¹⁰

Also, according to her presentation, there are blackouts up to 18-20 hours a day in some areas. The drinking water crisis happened to last for days in many parts of the country. The lack of medical services and health care are remarkable. Many children cannot access a school because there is a discontinuation of education for many reasons. Also, fuel crises and the prices of all commodities have shown an unprecedented rise.

She also showed participants two photographs of a large crowd and a long queue with yellow cars found on an Arabic website, and she translated the accompanying Arabic into English. "There is a queue for bread, a queue for gasoline, a queue for sugar and rice. And we are waiting for our turn for death, mercy, and salvation. The gasoline queue in front of the government gasoline station in Tartus was more than two kilometers long." Finally, she introduced her family members' living conditions after 2011.

VII Conclusion

Syria had once beautiful ancient cities blessed with nature, faith, and heritage. The Syrian people promoted endogenous development; they had strong communities and kept enriched and spent precious time with their large families.

However, many Syrian people were frustrated by the dictatorial oppression of an oligarchic government before 2011. Demonstrations by those who were strongly dissatisfied with this were initially peaceful. They believed that a wave of change, especially regarding the freedom of speech, would come to Syria.

Nevertheless, the wave of killings and arrests, torture and humiliation targeting even innocent people involved in the demonstrations have expanded. No one thought the army would open fire on innocent protesters under government orders. Syrian people were strongly shocked and angry at what happened in Damascus. Soon, disorder and unrest expanded to other

communities and cities, including Rifai's hometown of Homs. It complicated the conflict, and people faced severe crises and fell into confusion. Increased military and government attacks have destroyed many residential areas, buildings and historical heritage. Moreover, the intervention of the international community has failed Syria.

The people of Syria desired freedom of speech and their dignity, and they hoped to live in a world free of discrimination, human rights abuse, weapons, and war. It means that they do not want to be alive, barely breathing, without fundamental human rights. Instead, they want to live in this world as it befits humans, since they are knowledgeable that violence and silenced voices do not solve anything.

The crisis has continued, and the peoples' living conditions are harder than ever experienced since they were born. Consequently, approximately half of the citizens have had to be displaced as refugees. Furthermore, with the devastating pandemic, there is even more suffering in many areas of their lives and the situation is only worsening, and there is increasing distress due to the long queues for daily living necessities.

VIII Our messages

The Syrian people's analysis reminds us of significant issues. As above, despite an unstable situation of extreme difficulty, Rifai has never lost her presence of mind and hope and tries to shape her future by herself. We admire her spirit. Nonetheless, if you happen to feel lonely, stop by our class at any time.

At the very end, we would like to convey to you the feelings of the students and ourselves: wherever you go, whatever you do, we are on your side. We do not want to say goodbye. We believe we will see you again in our life. So, the last messages from students are straightforward and essential and are: "We love you."

The moment we projected the final slide, we never missed listening to Rifai's definite answer in her last message: "I love all participants, I love Rikkyo students, and you are very nice to me."

Dear Ghamra, Rifai, we are proud of you. We pray for your calm days and wish for your well-being at the next destination. And we were proud to be able to participate close to you in the symposium.

Finally, the moderator was Yayoi Suzuki, a professor in the College of Community and Human Services.

Appendix

1. Participants' questions are as follows.

Can I ask a question? So, there are no restaurants or petrol or bakery anywhere in Syria where people can buy stuff? Are there some in the capital in Damascus? Because the government is there, but the rest of the country does not have?

There is a saying, "For every Libya, there is a Syria" in the international community. This particularly in regard to humanitarian Intervention. If it is appropriate, may I have your comment or opinion on this?

During the group discussion, we concluded that it might be necessary to obtain information about escaping abroad. One source of information would be from social media. Do people in Syria have an easy access to social media and the internet?

Could you teach Arabic at Rikkyo University? I want to take an Arabic class!

The role of the international community.

Which country supports Syria under COVID-19?

I am very interested in your next destination. If you do not mind, please let us know about it.

2. Participants' comments are as follows.

If I knew when I was 18 years old that our enemy was so cute, I wouldn't have entered the Israeli Army! I want to make some lectures with you and me to Israel. When are you leaving Japan? What should I say? Good luck in your next step.

Almost everybody who will be in that cruel and brutal situation will be killed by the order to kill.

If you are trained to fight as a soldier, I think there would be no option but to obey the order. I was lucky not to be in such a situation.

I hope you can hear me. Your question was, what would we do if we were Syrian. I took it to mean what we would do as individuals. I think that we have two basic options. One is to fight, and the other is to try to leave. I would probably try to leave the country, because it's a civil war, because I wouldn't want to kill other Syrians. I would hate that. I would try to go to Europe, just as millions of Syrians have been attempting. People think differently; there are many different opinions - somebody else would perhaps stay and fight. That also depends on the family situation - for people who have small children everything is more complicated. So, it all depends on the person's family situation, but my general answer is: I would leave.

I see! So, there is a divide among the Syrians in Syria. Thank you for that!

Ghamra-san, I am horrified to hear what is happening to your beautiful country, Syria. Thank you for sharing your story today. It was an eye opening for me, and I will keep thinking of you, your family, and the Syrian people.

I agree that security council members are the ones who are causing insecurity.

I am interested in that because I am a volunteer at Stand With Syria, Japan! Have you heard of that? You should try to reach out to them.

I also want to learn Arabic!

Reform is needed in the UN Security Council!

Ghamra-san. Thank you for your great lecture, your talk made us think seriously about what we would do if we were Syrians... I am speechless. I want to hug you and my Syrian friends. I miss you! and I wish you happiness, always.

Thank you very much for your moving story.

Inshaallah! ♥ God bless you, Ghamra-san and Dani-san! 🙏

「もし自分が現地の人だったらどのように行動するのか」についてディスカッションを行った際、自分を守ることに精いっぱい、周りの人に気を配れるほどの余裕があるのだろうかと絶望的になった。そんな状況下で長い期間過ごしている人々のことを思うと苦しくなったし、ガムラさんの話し方をみるとさらに心が打たれた。さまざまな所属の方とこういったことを話す機会は本当に貴重なので感謝を伝えたいです。

ディスカッションで自分が当事者だったらということを考える中で、命の選択がかつて美しかったシリアの場でしなくてはならないという辛い現状を知った。また、グループにガムラさんとダニーさんどちらもいらっしやって、国と国ではなく人と人として話し合えばこんなにも思いが伝わり、誰もが争いのない社会を求めていることを実感できた。

かつて**戦争**もなく平和だったガムラさんたちの生活が、ものの数年で戦争に陥ってしまう。人によっては究極の選択に迫られてしまう。そして、そのことによっていかに危険な状態に陥るのが衝撃的だった。またガムラさんだけでなくダニーさんの話にある「人を殺すことに対してさまざまな背景がある」ということもまた衝撃的だった。コロナによってより危機的状況に陥っているようだが、それでもなぜ国は市民を助ける行動を積極的に取らないのか疑問に思った。そして「平和とは何だろう」という問いについて、自分自身でも再度問い直したいと考えました。

シリア難民については一時期ニュースでは報じられていたものの、最近では、国内の事件や出来事にのみ焦点が当てられ、本当に苦しんでいる海外の人のことは知る機会が少ないように感じます。ニュースで知ることができなかった元々その場所で住んでいた人の気持ちや辛さを学ぶことができました。また、「もし自分が市民に銃を向ける立場になったら」というディスカッションでは、実際にそのことがシリアで起きていると思うと、心にグッとくるものがありました。そのため、今回の講演会で学べたこと、ディスカッションできたことは私にとって深く考える機会となりました。

英語を完璧に理解することはできませんでしたが、ガムラがSOSを訴えていることが強く伝わってきました。またイスラエルの人と同じフィールドで話し合っていたのが極めて印象的でした。

かつては美しい故郷だったのにそれが変貌してしまったことを辛そうに語っていた姿が印象に残っている。人を殺す事に対する背景や教育についてのダニーさんの言葉も印象的で、人への思いやりを欠いてしまうことが非常に怖いと思った。教育の問題や政治の深刻な雰囲気などを伺って、もっと関心を広げていかなければいけないと考えた。

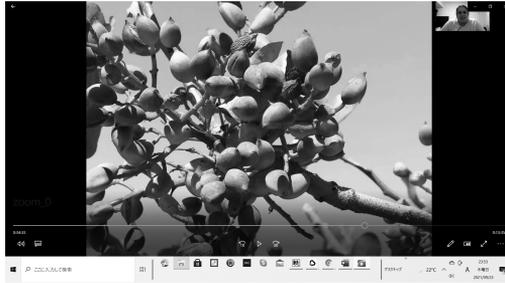
自分にはまだまだ知らないことがたくさんあると感じた。自分の立場だったらどうかという問いは、簡単な問題ではないと思った。世界で何が起きているのか自ら関心を持って知る努力をしたい。

中東のことに意識を向けていく必要があると感じた。コロナの問題も欧州や米国ばかりに焦点があてられていて、中東の問題はないがしろにされていた。関心を向ける必要がある分野なので、自分でも調べたい。自分は中東には空港に立ち寄っただけなので、機会があれば行きたいと思った。

ガムラさん自身が「留学したい」という夢を抱いていたというお話が非常に印象深かった。私もしシリアにいたら、そのような夢が持てるのだろうかと考えたら、きっと持てない。そんな中でも夢を持ち、それを叶えたことに対して私は敬意を表したい。そして、二回もお話を聞く機会をいただき、コロナ禍の自分の生き方を改めようと思った。

Acknowledgement

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A beautiful pistachio tree with many pale pink or rose colour endocarps in Syria.

¹The average literacy rate (aged 15 years old and above) in Syria (1999 ~ 2007) was 16.9 % (UNDP, 2009, p. 177) .

²Also, authors refer to Sinjab (15 March 2013) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21797661>) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

³Gifkins (September 1, 2012) (https://core.ac.uk/display/42412732?utm_source=pdf&utm_medium=banner&utm_campaign=pdf-decoration-v1) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

⁴United Nations, UN news (4 October, 2011) (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/10/390412-russia-and-china-veto-draft-security-council-resolution-syria>) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

⁵About details refer to Human Rights Watch (September 10, 2013) (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria>) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

⁶United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates 6.7 million are internally displaced persons as of 15 March, 2011 (UNHCR - Syria emergency) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

⁷US Dollar to Syrian Pound Exchange Rate Chart (US Dollar to Syrian Pound Exchange Rate Chart | Xe) and Historical Rates Tables (Historical Rates Tables | Xe) in The World's Trusted Currency Authority (<https://www.xe.com/>) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

⁸Since June 2020, it has been 1,256 SYP to the US dollar (Ibid.) .

⁹France 24 (December 10, 2020) Syria fires ravage livelihoods ahead of harvest (<https://www.france24.com/en/20201012-syria-fires-ravage-livelihoods-ahead-of-harvest>) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

¹⁰MEI@75 (August 6, 2020) Syria is facing a COVID-19 catastrophe (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/syria-facing-covid-19-catastrophe>) (Last accessed August 31, 2021) .

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