

*Transcript*

# Building a Democratic Syrian State

February 22, 2012

**Speaker: Louay Hussein**

*Leader, Building the Syrian State*

**Chair: Chris Doyle**

*Director, The Council for British-Arab Understanding*

**Chris Doyle:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen. A very warm welcome to this evening's lecture. My name is Chris Doyle. I am director of The Council for Arab-British Understanding. I am very, very pleased to chair this evening tonight. And I'd like to extend my very, very warm thanks to LSE's Middle East Centre for hosting this event with CAABU. We have a very active Syria programme and as part of that we have Louay Hussein here tonight.

What we are going to do is that Louay will speak for about 30 to 40 minutes. Now we have his colleague, Rim Turkmani, who I am very glad to say, she is my wife. She will be interpreting for him. Then we'll open it up to what I hope will be a very constructive and vigorous Q & A. So I'm sure looking around that there are very many people who would like to tweet and we have a hashtag for this evening which is #lseyria so if you wish to participate in the debate about the event, but if we could have our mobiles on silent, I would be very grateful so we don't have any noisy interruptions.

Louay Hussein is here as part of the delegation of the Building the State Syria current. He is here with Anas Joudeh, who is a lawyer and active on issues on citizenship and youth, a very warm welcome to you, Anas. And also Dr Mouna Ghanem who can't be with us this evening. Louay himself is a long term opponent of the Syrian regime. He has been imprisoned a number of times and he was perhaps the first opposition leader to be imprisoned and indeed, I'm afraid, tortured at the beginning of the uprisings last March. He has continued, despite that, to continue his long-term quest for a democratic Syria and reconciliation. He, together with colleagues, set up and ran the first public opposition conference within Syria, the Samiramis Conference, last June. Since then, he and others have established the Building the Syria State current. That current aims to try to examine options about the future of Syria beyond just toppling the regime. It's very much active within Syria and its focus is within that. I think this is what makes this evening very special because it's very rare to get an opportunity to have somebody from the opposition, from within Syria, able to come here.

Just by way of background, just so you know, they've been here this week. They had a meeting this afternoon with Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt. We've had various other meetings with MPs and media. Mouna Ghanem will be on the Today programme and Anas, I believe, will be on the Today program tomorrow morning and Newsnight later this evening. And of course they will all be going back to Syria which of course is in a major crisis and we can't help but pause to think of all of those people at the moment who are facing intolerable repression under this regime and it's really quite incredible to meet and very privileged to know somebody like Louay who had personally suffered so much as have so many Syrians for his very strong and steadfast political positions. So without further ado, I'd like to welcome you and thank you, Louay, for being with us tonight and invite you to speak.

**Louay Hussein:** Good evening everybody and thanks to the LSE for giving me the opportunity to talk to you, and thank you Chris for this introduction. He must know my by heart now because he has introduced me so many times during the last few days. If we had such an event in Syria right now, within the current circumstances, it would have been an international event that the whole world would be talking about it. It would have been a really rare event. If we were in Syria and we all left this room and went down to the streets, we would have probably been faced with fire as we are a big demonstration.

So you have to excuse me, we are not used to this. We are not used to speaking about the future of Syria to such a large audience without feeling the fear inside the country. Within the limited time we have here this evening I am going to try and answer this particular question which is 'Is overthrowing the regime enough to achieve a democratic prosperous Syria that we want'? I am saying this in the context of overwhelming language on the media and on the political platform that only talks about overthrowing the regime and forgets the other aims as if overthrowing the regime is a target in its own right.

So lately, in the language of the media, we don't hear anymore terms like democracy, freedom, dignity, reconciliation, national unity. These are things for which push people to go down to the streets. Some seem to have forgotten for a

moment that the only reason we want to overthrow the regime is that we do want to build a free, democratic, prosperous Syria for all people on the Syrian land. The language is dominated by terms like violence, arming, counter-violence, who is going to win in this armed conflict, and other very destructive language and terms.

Indeed, to achieve such a free, democratic Syria, we need to overthrow the regime, to achieve a state where the will of all the free Syrian people, a state that is built by the will and the free will of all its citizens. But unfortunately, the way this regime faced our will, the will of all the protestors who went down to the streets calling for freedom and democracy and dignity, the way the regime handled these protests diverted it more into an existential conflict.

We always emphasis in our Building the Syrian State current, that for us, overthrowing the regime is not an aim in its own right: we want to overthrow the regime because it's an obstacle in our way to reach a future, beautiful, free, democratic, prosperous state. This is why we stood up to the cause of arming the opposition, because we think of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The road to democracy doesn't go through violence. It goes through a non-violent struggle.

So instead of having a struggle between the rights, fighting for our rights, with an oppressing force, we may actually end up in a struggle when we have a force fighting with another force, and whoever wins will have the rule, but not necessarily democracy. And this is another reason why we also stood up against the cause, or the media cause, for military intervention in Syria to overthrow the regime. And this is again why today we stood up to all the cause of arming the opposition to stand up to the Syrian regime. Because arming the opposition means the victory is going to be to those parties who are better-armed, better-financed, and not necessarily to those who are more democratic, or the holders of the values of modernity and democracy.

Unfortunately, lately, the word 'non-violence' within the Syrian crisis context is being dealt with as if it is a dirty word. That was due to the language of media, media of certain states that are not particularly known to be democratic states themselves. Any call for violence and further violence is going to lead to further divisions within

the Syrian society that are going to lead to multi-level civil fight. We think that the biggest threat on the Syrian future is these social divisions that is leading to civil fight and civil war. If we enter the cycle of violence, certainly we will not be looking at democratic solutions. We will actually be trying to find some kind of solution that will divide the country into safe and safer zones.

I think the way by which we overthrow the regime is going to determine the alternative regime. So if we, for example, enter civil war, part of this war is going to be actually a sectarian war. In such a scenario, at best, the best solution is actually to build a sectarian state, not a democratic state, like probably what they achieved in Lebanon after the civil war. We believe that a democratic Syria that we want to achieve has to be built on a new social contract, and all the different ethnic and sectarian and religious components of Syrian society, regardless of how large or small these components, these groups, of how powerful or how weak, or how long they have been in the country, how new. The Syria that we want is we want it to be a moderate state, as you know here in Europe, a citizenship state.

We are not going to achieve such a state if we don't define it right now. It is our ultimate goal and defined right now how we are going to achieve this goal. This desired state, we want it to be a state for all its people, regardless of their political position, regardless of their backgrounds. We don't want it to be for the losers or the winners. So all the Syrian people, even if they are not part of the revolution, even if they didn't support the revolution, they should have full citizenship rights in this future state that we want to achieve, regardless of their sectarian background or their current political position.

I say this as a response to some cause and statements we sometimes hear in the media, claiming that those minorities who are not taking part in this revolution, they are not going to have a portion in Syria's future. Such language destroys the dream of having a democratic citizenship state. It destroys the basics of what citizenship state is all about. Any language that forgets that all those people, inside this country, regardless of their political position, they are Syrian, they are part of Syria, is going to lead us towards further social divisions.

I am talking here to a mainly European audience and, from Europe, we hope to see more understanding and support to the goal of achieving democracy than certain international blocs of countries that are not democratic in their nature. Because it is the European countries which ground the human struggle that realise the values of democracy and social justice. This is why we do hope that it is Europe, whether a government or a non-governmental organisation, which markets more the democratic language in the media sphere. We want this rather than focusing the language again on just overthrowing the regime, forgetting the main aim, because this language will only take us to further divisions. Because we have to decide how we are going to struggle against this regime.

I am emphasising this point a lot because we are on the eve of another international conference (the Friends of Syria conference the day after tomorrow in Tunisia) that might be the core of a new international axis, so it's a new division in the international community, that is not going necessarily to serve the Syrian cause. It may lead to another division within the Syrian society. We fear that because also some countries who are taking part in this conference, within certain blocs of this conference, they are calling openly to arming the opposition. And outside this bloc, there are also countries which are calling for further arming the regime to stand up to this revolution. This is why we need everyone's help to avoid turning Syria into an arena of international conflict. The winner out of such a conflict is not going to be the best interests of the Syrian people.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that the Syrians do deserve a democratic regime, and they do deserve the opportunity to realise the values of modernity, of freedom, of social justice and equality, and the rule of law. We need this now because during the last decade, this autocratic, oppressive regime knocked down the foundation of all the civil society that we desperately need to realise democratic Syria. It also deprived us from our right to have a political life, and to form political parties. It also deprived us during the last decades from a free media where we can openly debate things and exchange views and opinions.

So I indeed emphasise that we do deserve such a state, a civil society, and we do need it for all those brave Syrians who are going down to the streets and protesting despite the brutality they are facing, and we have confidence that those brave Syrians, we all are able to realise such a state. Those Syrians, those brave Syrians, are not poor helpless people. Those are very brave people. It's only that they are ruled by very oppressive, autocratic regime, a bloody regime, a criminal regime, as you all have seen on the screens of the media. Thank you all again and if my thoughts came across as a bit untidy, it is actually the fault of the interpreter.