

## Crossing glances on Syria

Entretien avec

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Apart from the protagonists of the Syrian conflict, three categories of actors and observers have formed a more or less tacit alliance: humanitarians, researchers and journalists. We asked three personalities from their ranks, who were directly invested in these six years of war, to share the lessons learned and to look towards the future. An exciting long run interview that allows us to better understand the constraints of one and another and their indisputable complementarity.

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**Humanitarian Alternatives** – *Respectively, as a journalist, a humanitarian worker and a researcher, have your working conditions changed over the last six years of conflict, and in what way?*

**Laure Stephan** – The basis of our work is reporting, field surveys, face-to-face interviews... Yet none of that is possible in Syria. As we know, most journalists are obliged to cover the conflict from a distance, unable to obtain a visa from Damascus (handing them out sparingly), or enter rebel zones (it's too dangerous, namely because of the risk of kidnapping). Telling stories which we hear but cannot witness is a source of frustration. It's also, personally, a source of questions regarding the quality of the information we can produce.

I am not a war correspondent. Yet it seems to me that it is very difficult to get access to all sides of a conflict. I'm thinking of Libya – I was around Benghazi during the summer of 2011 – and I was only able to see the reality of the East of the country, with its protagonists and inhabitants. But at least there was the possibility of measuring what happened there, and of collecting direct witness-accounts. It's important in order to subsequently understand and analyse. Yet in Syria, we work with “filters”, basing our stories on information provided by others, which we try to back up. It's far from easy. Especially given that the Syrian conflict is occurring at a moment when the media are under pressure to move quickly, whilst we need more time to access sources – and corroborate them.

One of the other difficulties, at least at the beginning, was the lack of substantial knowledge. It's a country which has been very little covered by journalists because it's so difficult to work there – assuming you can even get a visa. We did know a lot of things about the security system or inequalities, by way of books by researchers, novels and witness accounts. But we knew a lot less about the organisation of society or the networks of power. This led to some readings that were a bit distorted, namely along a dividing line of faith. Whilst we were able to describe the dynamics of the uprising and its repression by the regime, the regional dimension of the conflict and the development of the insurrection, we were not able to sufficiently explain the internal dimension, which is to say the division amongst Syrians regarding what is happening – and not only in terms of the regime and the opposition – because these groups are themselves fragmented.

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**Jean-Hervé Bradol** – Since the beginning of the conflict, the conditions of intervention have been marked by the Syrian State's refusal to authorise the presence and actions of aid organisations, apart from a small group of NGOs who had been present and registered before 2011, and of course the UN and the IFRC. As early as 2003, MSF tried to get authorisations to work in Syria, namely with Iraqi refugees, who were numerous in the country. In 2011, still without authorisation, we negotiated on a case-by-case basis, asking South African diplomats for example to speak with Damascus; we went to see the opposition, where it controlled parts of neighbourhoods, cities or regions, to provide supplies and to donate medicine or medical equipment. We were then shocked to observe the extent to which Syrian medical colleagues are literally hunted down by the regime: it's a real witch-hunt for doctors and care workers! In the summer of 2012, a few weeks after the beginning of the armed insurrection in the eastern part of Aleppo, as I was travelling to a neighbourhood controlled by the opposition – which involves crossing a governmental zone – I realised that the mere fact of being intercepted at a checkpoint with bandages or products to treat the wounded puts these doctors in danger: they had every chance of being stopped, tortured, and of never getting out of prison alive. A few months earlier, in the spring, whilst visiting the western part of the bombed city of Aleppo where a surgeon college, Jacques Bérès, had gone to operate on his own initiative, we saw that part of the hospital had been destroyed: from the very beginning of the conflict, health centres were very much targeted. As for us, we would have liked to work in Aleppo, because there were a lot of wounded people arriving: 100, sometimes 200 newly wounded people every day. But the risk of bombing was too great. We therefore decided to support the Syrian doctors who were there, by donating equipment, even though the truth is that at the beginning of the conflict, they needed personnel more than equipment. They managed to gain access to the medical stocks in Aleppo, which is a commercial and industrial city where the big national pharmaceutical companies are represented, but on the front line, they were increasingly lacking trained personnel. Those who were there worked day and night for weeks, exhausted, without pay in the beginning of the conflict, organising themselves to get members of their families to safety. So they were essentially asking for reinforcement in personnel. We were unable to meet this request, but MSF managed to set up its operations in the north of Idlib province, one of the transit points on the way to Aleppo from Turkey, installing a small field hospital dedicated to surgery, in private quarters.

Up until 2013, we increased installations of this kind, ending up with five teams made up of expatriates in small hospitals, whilst continuing to supply our Syrian colleagues. We therefore had a real presence, we were starting to get our bearings, as much politically as technically in the landscape of northern Syria. What brought all that to an end were the kidnappings by opposition groups. These kidnappings were not only carried out by the Al Nosra Front or IS but also by other groups linked to the Free Syrian army (FSA). From then on, we noticed a gradual deterioration, as I have described elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. Members of our personnel were kidnapped in August 2013, such as a Syrian logistician traveling in a vehicle carrying also a young American from another NGO based in Turkey, Kayla Mueller<sup>2</sup>. Kidnapped in too, she died in captivity at the hands of the Islamic State in February 2015. To this day we do not know if this was the group which kidnapped her initially. It was extremely difficult to know who was doing what.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Hervé Bradol, « Comment les humanitaires travaillent face à Al-Qaïda et l'État islamique », *Médiapart*, February 1<sup>st</sup> 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Kayla Mueller was not working for MSF, but the fact that she was in one of the NGO's vehicles started a polemic, following the report of her death, surrounding the conditions of the negotiations for her release. For more details, see for example Médecins sans Frontières, « Déclaration de MSF à propos du documentaire diffusé par la chaîne ABC sur la vie de Kayla Mueller », August 26<sup>th</sup> 2016, [www.msf.fr/actualite/articles/declaration-msf-propos-documentaire-diffuse-chaine-abc-sur-vie-kayla-mueller](http://www.msf.fr/actualite/articles/declaration-msf-propos-documentaire-diffuse-chaine-abc-sur-vie-kayla-mueller) [Editor's note].

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In early September 2013, a Syrian surgeon from MSF, Mohammad Abyad, was kidnapped, beaten and executed because certain parties accused him of publishing his political opinions, hostile towards Islamists, on his Facebook page. In January 2014, at the time when things were going badly for the opposition, which was beginning to fall apart, the Islamic State captured five of our colleagues in the governorate of Idlib. The group increasingly declared that all these foreign doctors were spies, like the journalists, and that they should be treated in the same way, recognising at the same time that they were targeting foreign journalists. So, from the beginning of 2014, we gave up sending expatriates, except in the areas under control of the Kurdish communists. We carried on with our Syrian personnel and other healthcare teams, to whom we delivered supplies. In the current political geography of Syria, there are two blocks from which MSF is absent, that of the regime and that of the Islamic State, because we are unable to control aid delivery there.

**Matthieu Rey** – Having arrived before the conflict, in 2009, I benefited from classic research conditions, in the sense that I had a residents' permit and I was affiliated to research institutes. The first distinction was made in 2011, at the very beginning, between those who were already present and those who were arriving. The latter were seen with suspicion by the regime and were therefore subjected to different checks. This was initially a discreet mode of dissuasion, with attacks on people with little protection, for example, like an Algerian journalist working for the French journal *Le Monde*, arrested in April 2011 before being released a few weeks later. The signal was clear: the regime could go after anybody and the status of a foreigner was no protection. A second clear signal was sent to journalists in the autumn of 2011: over the summer, having declared Syria a kind of journalistic impossibility, most journalists realised that they could get a tourist visa at the Lebanese border without too many checks, without fingerprinting or ID photos at the border. This came to an end in December 2011. At the time, a journalist friend of mine said “there are going to be problems”, and a short while later, Gilles Jacquier died in as-yet unresolved conditions<sup>3</sup>. But the signal was very clear: journalists were now dicing with death. In Homs, in February 2012, an American journalist and a French photographer<sup>4</sup> were killed, whilst Edith Bouvier from the *Figaro* and the independent photographer William Daniels managed to flee the country with the help of the Free Syrian Army<sup>5</sup>. The signal grew even clearer: the regime would do everything necessary to track journalists using satellite phones as needed, because they condemn what is happening in the country. The argument presented to me is simple: “since these people entered the country clandestinely, they are not in the country, so if we kill them, we do not kill them. It's up to you to prove that they really exist”.

This period corresponds to the shifting of the regime, and certain of its factions, towards war, which is to say, the use of heavy weaponry against the civilian population. The political sphere retracted and humanitarian aid took on all of its importance in the face of the human devastation and the massive migration of populations. Yet up until the end of June 2013, a number of foreign researchers managed to enter Syria clandestinely, like the French team of Gilles Dorronsoro, since the regime reduced its zones of control throughout the country: assuming that a relay amongst the new authorities which were developing was established, circulation remained rather easy. Furthermore, the economic and financial conditions of public research remain precarious and hence prevent certain relays. Since early 2012, we have also seen a rise in consulting firms, which are important sources for understanding the manufacturing of information about Syria during this period. Having dealt with other complicated situations, like Afghanistan or the DRC,

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Jacquier, a reporter for the TV magazine “*Envoyé spécial*”, was killed by mortar fire in January 2012, in Homs. He was the first Western journalist to die during the conflict [Editor's note]

<sup>4</sup> Marie Colvin of the *Sunday Times*, Rémi Ochlik from the IP3 Press agency [Editor's note].

<sup>5</sup> See for example “Comment Édith Bouvier a survécu à l'enfer de Homs”, *Le Figaro*, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012 [Editor's note].

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the private sector of this knowledge-manufacturing is trying, by seemingly simplifying it, to take over parts of the market. There are the groups already present who are continuing their activities – like International Crisis Group – and new ones who are trying to get a place. The surprise is not coming from their presence, but from the immense aura produced by their reports in political spheres. They became a kind of reference point on which politicians based themselves, allocating a value which was sometimes higher than the producing organisation allocated itself! Humanitarian workers also participated in this movement: let us not forget that, as early as spring 2012, there was a debate about whether the conflict was a civil war or not. The Red Cross Movement confirmed the fact in June 2012. This is an example of the performative effect of the qualification of the situation which concerns NGOs on a more operational level: how to get inside the country, and how to help refugees? This agitation amongst classic academic researchers and journalists lasted until 2013, when the regime let it be known to everyone that the renewal of documents would be extremely complicated, meaning that it was in a position of extreme difficulty and wanted to regain control of access to the country. A real selection took place amongst journalists and researchers, leading to mass departures, until the emergence of two phenomena at the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014. First, the conflict shifted to include internal and external actors, collaborating in the name of supra-ideological motives: for the regime, the defense of Syrian sovereignty enabled Hezbollah to take up positions in Homs and to act directly, whereas for the opposition, it was a question of the rise of logics for fronts in the south, in the north, etc. Violence escalated, which meant that any research in the field became very dangerous. Then new actors appeared in the field, with the gradual establishment of war-economy logics based on the organisation of a kidnapping market: namely with the arrival of the Islamic State, as a sponsor supplying this market, meaning that someone kidnapped by a group, and resold for 20,000\$ to another party, for example, would be worth several million on arrival. Westerners became a source of financial retribution. From then on, beginning at the end of 2013, journalists, researchers and NGOs left the country. Since then, and up until the present day, this logic is still in place, which means that the building-up of information is done from a distance, through social media networks and other means of diffusion, with all the manipulations, approximations and fact-checking that this implies.

**H. A.** – *In this closed, controlled conflict, which nevertheless involves a great number of protagonists, what are the kinds of sources at your disposal, and how do you check the information which is given to you?*

**L. S.** – It's one of the questions which readers or listeners always ask journalists covering Syria! Beirut is not a bad observatory, even though it will never compare to being on the ground. Amongst the sources I consider the most valuable are the Syrians passing through Lebanon – they are able to speak more freely in Beirut – and those who work there, after events have occurred. A bond builds up over time with these meetings, and therefore a degree of trust as well. I would also add to this category the “observers” which can be found in Beirut: commuting diplomats, journalists having the possibility of going to Damascus...

In terms of the Beirut observatory, it must be kept in mind that we have had or still have the possibility to meet the protagonists of the Syrian conflict: on the rebel side, this was true until 2014, thanks to the support networks for insurgents which existed in the north and east of Lebanon, and the fighters themselves who could pass through these regions, to be treated, to be supplied with weapons, or to see their families... On the side of the pro-regime forces, we are able to keep contact with people close to Hezbollah, in the absence of interviews with decision-makers. We are, in a way, positioned behind the scenes of the party's military involvement in Syria.

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Then there are the sources at a distance, which we contact by telephone: it's easy to be in contact with activists from the opposition on the ground. On the other hand, it's more complicated to talk to pro-regime sources but it has to be done, because it is precisely a conflict which is being described, and not merely a dynamic of repression and rebellion. Finally, we can make contact with the families of refugees in Lebanon still present on the ground, to collect witness accounts and better understand the context... Every time, it is important to separate ideology and opinion from information.

Fact-checking is foremost a question of identifying and cross-referencing, of questioning what is said, given that we are rarely speaking with neutral actors. But we are under no illusions, it's very complicated. We have to be careful, we have not always been, and time is our best ally to establish relationships of trust.

**M.R.** – It's also a classic question for any field analyst, but I'll answer it as a historian. What I have noticed with others, as regards Syria, is not that we have a problem of sources, but rather a problem of an excess of sources. By way of example, there are more than a million videos on YouTube, and their treatment alone would represent four or five theses! It is therefore easy to know what is happening in any given place, but it is impossible to criticise, juxtapose or build a correct narrative of a fragmented situation. This is part of the regime's strategy to control time and space, playing off with the displacement of information: when information is fragmented at the neighbourhood or village level, the time spent collating it is like completing a jigsaw puzzle of 5000 pieces, which takes considerably more time than it would if we had only 3 pieces. For all that, we do have methodological tools and criteria for analysis at our disposal to know how a video was made, for example: who produced it, what exact location was it filmed in, following which techniques, etc... We can see that between 2011 – when people delivered witness accounts openly, taking huge risks, but communicating very little contextual information – and today, the situation has changed: we are now dealing with information professionals who supply relatively precise dates, indicating the symbolic places of a city and providing shots which allow us to measure the importance of an event, such as a demonstration. Tweets are much more problematic, especially those by the Islamic State, which come pouring in every day and become impossible to process.

Personally, in order to build up personal accounts over a given period of time, I have chosen a scaled approach, meaning that I mainly focus on relevant actors as belonging to places, and the idea is to cover a maximum of places in order to collect fragmented viewpoints of this puzzle, so as to reflect the breakdown of reality. For example, through different interview campaigns in refugee camps, I was able to reconstruct a relatively correct narrative from 2011 to 2014. It took time, obviously, but it's very effective because if there is one context where anyone would find it difficult to put forward a fantasised narrative, it is when they are asked to recite their life story in near-daily detail. These are the techniques used in “history from below” and “oral history”, which allow us to show the meaning which each actor gives to their narrative and to deconstruct any potential propaganda rhetoric.

There is also the fact that, from the point of view of sources, a whole documentary production was born from the event that the war in Syria constitutes: from May 2011, we saw a process emerge in the opposition structures with archive offices, fascinating considering that there is no opposition State. There are quality reports based on a whole host of varied and multiple field interviews, which are perfectly traceable and identifiable, which enable us to understand different aspects of the repression. These actors understood that one of the stakes of the conflict is the

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construction of narratives, in the sense that the negation of what has happened would also allow the conflict to continue.

**J.-H. B.** – Twitter is an important source for us, which I feel has transformed working conditions, including in the field. In Syria, it enabled us to identify leaders of opinion, journalists or researchers who gave us valuable information which helped us to understand the nature and dynamics of the groups which we were dealing with.

**H. A.** – *In your respective positions, do you have privileged access to humanitarian workers, researchers and journalists, or is it the opposite?*

**L. S.** – Yes, I often meet and speak with humanitarian workers who work in the field or follow projects in Syria. They are another important source of information, as much on humanitarian situations as in terms of context. I think it's also a way, for each of us, to compare our analyses and information. With the risk, sometimes, of having readings of the conflict which may be erroneous, in our little circle.

In terms of researchers, I closely follow what is produced about Syria, particularly on the military aspect of the conflict, and I interview and meet regularly with some of them in Beirut. Some of them mention the same difficulties in working at a distance, in spite of the best intentions.

However, I am skeptical about the “experts” which have flourished in the context of the Syrian conflict – and which, we, journalists easily call upon, because we are precisely not in the field and we need quick answers, which they are willing to provide: they often impose very ideological points of view, without clearly defining the basis of their work.

**J.-H. B.** – I think that, in Syria, humanitarian workers have not sufficiently “defended” journalists who have been attacked verbally and ethically by different protagonists of the conflict, which they justified by saying they had to avoid being assimilated to them in order to protect their security. Under these circum-stances, the undermining of external participants who are only doing their job – of investigation and of witnessing for journalists, as it happens – often starts with the latter. In Syria, it was clear, but it was a bit naive to think that by keeping quiet, this credibilisation initiative would not end up concerning us. More generally, this regrettably goes back to the development experienced by humanitarian workers and journalists since the 1970s and 80s when they were, on the contrary, strongly linked. The “professionalisation” of these different actors, and the industrialisation, in a sense, of their jobs, the financial constraints and therefore the delay constraints of press coverage, the will of NGOs to control their own information – all of this has conspired to drive us further apart. I remember, in Somalia, in 1991, that the few journalists who came there lived in the MSF house: this created a relationship of proximity and common concerns. Today, if journalists are hosted by us, as with other NGOs, it is because it has been organised by our communication services, and is no longer a spontaneous response to an encounter: a division has set in, fed by humanitarian paranoia regarding journalists and the media on the pretext that they “distort everything”, that it is “potentially dangerous to talk to reporters”... But this ignores MSF history: the NGO was built by doctors, of course, but also by journalists! This is, in my view, one of the lessons of the Syrian conflict: distancing ourselves from journalists for security reasons, when they started to have problems with different groups which targeted them, was a mistake.

The link with researchers is just as foundational, even though it is considered less “embarrassing” than the link with journalists. We've seen all the great researchers on Syria at one point or

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another, whether at Crash, or amongst my operational colleagues, who learn a lot from researchers about how to better work in the field. In exchange, researchers benefit from material to investigate, and understand what is happening. Researchers are without doubt recognised, credited with a certain aura, a knowledge which often places them “above” journalists in NGOs’ esteem. I’m fighting against this idea, firstly because these are different jobs, and secondly because many journalists have real knowledge as well. It all depends on how seriously each takes their jobs. It’s up to us, then, to identify the meaning of their analyses and of their speech, particularly in the context of a conflict as complex as Syria. Of course, certain journalists or researchers will have discourses which are orientated towards the regime or towards one of the opposition groups, but by the very nature of the MSF organisation, all points of view are of interest to us, pro-Bashar included, because we want and need to understand what is happening on both sides.

**M. R.** – For me, in Syria as elsewhere, the reason for which it is fascinating to talk with humanitarian workers and journalists – and I could include the military – is because we have completely differentiated points of view. I am increasingly working on understanding how, coming from different positions and starting points, we converge in certain fields and how this can help us analyse the phenomenon. A humanitarian worker will have technical questions which we do not ask ourselves – how to get this equipment to this place? – but which lead us to ask other questions: does the population consider itself in terms of individuals, families or beneficiaries, for example? What I find fascinating is that humanitarian workers have roughly the same logics: a field site should be measured according to a certain number of criteria and the statement that “there is a war” does not resolve or absorb all of reality. In the case of Syria, where there is indisputably a war, this does not prevent intervention in certain parts of the country. This flexibility contradicts the reality of the academic sphere, increasingly inhabited by the legal aspect of conditions and practices, since States feel responsible for researchers – those depending on public funding, in any case – and they are simply forbidden from entering contexts like Syria. This goes back to the traumatic death of Michel Seurat in Lebanon<sup>6</sup> which means that States now do not want to take the risk of losing anyone. In Syria, the repatriation order was given on July 7<sup>th</sup> 2011, because there were demonstrations against the French Embassy.

Humanitarian workers are different in the sense that they feel the need to bear the human cost of their engagement, by taking the greatest precautions, naturally, and no doubt less easily than before. Yet if they feel capable of intervening in dangerous zones, as was the case in Syria in Atme or Raqqa, they will do so. Their reflection leads them to think in terms of real risks and to ask the question “to stay or to go” when the situation become really difficult, for example when the risk of kidnapping becomes too great, as has been the case in Syria.

It’s different again for journalists, who are guided by the immediacy of information, which is an increasing tyranny. And the Syrian crisis represents a double paradox: firstly, the complexity of the field meant that a lot of unseasoned journalists were sent, who had to make do with information which they were at pains to put in context. Secondly, reporting often implied going through the regime, at the risk of diffusing information that had no connection with the complex reality.

**H. A.** – *Matthieu Rey, you were talking about the surplus of information from Syrian Internet users communicating through Facebook, Twitter, or other media. We are almost surprised that such means of*

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Seurat, a sociologist and researcher at the CNRS, was kidnapped by Hezbollah in Beirut, Lebanon on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1985, with Jean-Paul Kauffmann. He died in captivity.

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*communications can subsist, given the very violent situation of war. How did these technical tools enter the country and continue to function? Did humanitarian workers, researchers or journalists bring this equipment or was it supplied by internal networks?*

**M. R.** – Two dynamics joined together very quickly. First of all, it's important to note that it was Bashar el-Assad himself who, long before the war, allowed this information technology to develop. He built his career to appear as the person who, in the footsteps of his brother Basel, was going to develop information technology in Syria. His entire government staff incidentally came from the Syrian Company for Information Technology, of which he is the CEO. It was therefore the “blue-eyed doctor” [Bashar el-Assad trained as an ophthalmologist – Editor's note] who promoted the development of the Internet and mobile telephone networks. If we look at the 2006 Syrian Development Plan, which announced 6% growth – which was incidentally met – 2% concerned telecommunications. When the revolution broke out in 2011, Syrians were therefore equipped, even if they did not have cutting-edge technologies. During the first months of the revolution, the problem was less one of accessing these technologies than one of protecting them, which the regime was at pains to do. In truth, the regime and the opposition shared a certain naivety about information technology: we know that between 2011 and 2013, Bashar el-Assad tweeted according to the Syrian time zone, which is to say during the night in the United States, which prevented him from having any real impact on the media. It was only in 2013 that he began to tweet according to international time zones, at 8pm in the United States, in order to gain access to evening news programmes. Yet, from 2011, with the help of the cyber-activist group Anonymous, the Syrian people had access to the Internet. From June to December 2011, the regime's initial response was not technical, but repressive regarding Syrian activists, which did not fundamentally change the situation. On the contrary, it reinforced the professionalism of Syrian activists and actors in the field, even though this came at a great cost: in a few months, the campaigns of repression had systematically decimated all the young, slightly naive people who rushed to Facebook or other networks announcing the revolution on the Egyptian or Tunisian model, which is to say by agreeing to meet in Damascus or elsewhere. Unfortunately, very often, they did not meet, but ended up instead in Bashar el-Assad's prisons, where hundreds of thousands of people – I would say a million over the course of 2011, on a rotational basis – were tortured. The activists therefore switched from an initially naive mode to a survival mode in terms of information broadcasting.

During the winter of 2012, the question of lack of equipment began to be raised and it was noted that sending it clandestinely over the borders was far too risky compared with buying equipment on the ground. In the end, it was easier to bring cameras and other equipment into the country legally, by way of approved traders, which were certainly expensive, but which seemed a better option than the torture awaiting anyone who was arrested on charges of illegally bringing in equipment. The necessary money came from humanitarians or other actors. And this continued until 2015, or thereabouts. One only has to look at the import/export graphs from Turkey, for example, to see that between 2012 and 2015, they increased 10 or 15 times. The war economy equates to an economy of production and exchange where each person finds their own interest. For the Islamic State, the control of information came later, roughly in September/October 2014, when the international coalition began to take action. At which point, the emirs of the IS received orders to limit videos and tweets as far as possible, because they knew very well that they contained information which any military could exploit, namely to shoot at them. A blackout set in on the IS side from the moment that Westerners – namely following the attack of Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 – began to seek to control IS information. Initiatives therefore aimed to overwrite the totality of servers and other services linked to the Islamic State on the Web, and

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even on the Darknet. Certain hazardous initiatives were even denounced, such as the destruction, by Anonymous, of Tweeter sites which enabled intelligence services to track their enemies.

On the side of the regime, information began to be very well controlled from 2013 to 2015. The package became more technical, but the rhetoric was unchanged: it was a question of introducing doubt, placing a few systematic words to affirm that the regime is fighting against terrorists, minorities, etc. in order to enter into the debating game, in favour of conferences, to divide the adversary, play uncertainties off against each other by elements of language which allowed them to reconstruct a reality which remains in place to this day.

**A. H.** – *What are the facts, images or pieces of information which made the biggest impact on you during this conflict?*

**L. S.** – I have three images in mind: the image of little Aylan, dead on the Turkish coast. It does not directly illustrate the Syrian conflict, but for me, it is less an image of the drama of migrants than an image of the Syrian drama, and its consequences – the millions of refugees, the despair, the fear. Another image is that of the tarpaulin in the middle of the ruins of Aleppo, the tarpaulin stretched between the East and the West, to block the snipers' line of sight. And finally, the more recent image of inhabitants leaving eastern Aleppo: an aged couple, a young man who we imagine to be their son, who has a cat on his shoulder. They look devastated. The shot was taken as the final offensive of the pro-regime forces was coming to an end, they're about to take back Aleppo. It's a moment of great tension, of anxiety.

I think that the descent to hell of Aleppo, which has been at war since 2012, the terrible Russo-Syrian bombardments against rebel districts, the inhabitants' suffering on each side of the city cut in half – on different scales, certainly, depending on the side –, and the rise of radicalism in the East, will remain the most terrible dramas of this conflict. Another striking fact of this war is the tactic of sieges, for the most part imposed by the regime on zones held by its' adversaries, with everything that that implies, once again, in terms of civilian hardships.

And then there are narratives which resonate. Witness-accounts of torture and imprisonment by security services of the “pioneer activists”, as I call them, those who were the pillars of the uprising against the regime, who aspired to democratic change, who had projects for Syria. I think back to the two brothers, who were severely tortured, to the mother of another activist, who died as a result of torture in prison, to a woman who battled with the detention services for a long time to obtain elements confirming that her son died in prison, not because she was lacking in witness-accounts, but because it was her way to resist and to say that she wanted truth and justice. Astonishing courage. And a lot of these peaceful activists, when they were not killed, live in exile, and now look with despair on the way the situation has developed.

The narrative, too, of Syrian refugees here, who live in miserable conditions, and have become completely disillusioned. I think back to a couple from Minbej, a small village near Aleppo: the town passed under rebel control, before falling into the hands of Daesh, and then being taken by the Kurds, and may now be under threat from the Turks... They just have the feeling of having been entirely divested of their destiny, it is impossible for them to imagine returning, they live in fear for their relatives on the ground. To say nothing of the fact that in Lebanon, they live without papers, and with practically no prospects.

And if I had to choose a transitional moment throughout the conflict in Syria, it would be the capture of Mosul by the Islamic State organisation in 2014. Shock, stupefaction. Mosul is not in

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Syria, but the advances of the IS in Iraq had huge repercussions on the Western approach to the Syrian conflict, and on the international military implications in the country.

**J.-H. B.** – The first thing that struck me, and which I mentioned earlier, was the repression against doctors, health care teams, hospitals, etc. Of course, this doesn't only happen in Syria – in Yemen, currently, there are hospital bombings – but the witch hunt of doctors took on incredible proportions in Syria. Doctor colleagues are individually hunted down, they know that they are priority targets. Then, because I was in Syrian territory when it took place, the Sarin gas attack against civilians also had a big impact on me. The third phenomenon which I would mention would be the development of the Islamic State and similar organisations like the groups linked to Al-Qaeda. Of course, when you work on the subject, you know that there have always been particularly radical groups, throughout all periods of history, and not only in the East. Millenarian groups in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were legion. Later, possibly due to a generational effect, insurrection and revolution were more the prerogatives of Communism and Marxism. Since these have fallen out of favour, especially amongst young people, a new offer has emerged and I think it's one of the major facts brought to light by researchers and journalists, that is, this transnational jihadism. I was struck, on this subject, by the “competition” between official researchers, namely those from public institutions with access to intelligence service sources, and so-called “open-source” researchers like Eliot Higgins, Romain Caillet, and journalists like Wassim Nasr and David Thomson. This reinforces my belief that we must not value researchers above journalists, since there is no need for a hierarchy. Through their investigative capacity and journalistic tools, people like David Thomson and Wassim Nasr have really helped bring this phenomenon to light. They were able to make short-term forecasts in much greater synch with the rhythm of events than those of official researchers. I remember in 2011 and 2012 when the discussion boiled down to saying that Al-Qaeda was finished. The refusal to take an interest in the Islamic State at this time led to delays, whilst a number of “marginal” researchers had already identified this possible development towards a movement of the scope we know today.

And if I could add an other fact which struck me, it is the initiative of colleagues throughout the Syrian diaspora – like those of UOSSM International<sup>7</sup> – who managed to organise themselves quickly and undertake incredible volumes of work. I found it to be classic humanitarian dynamism in its' form, but reincarnated.

**M. R.** – If I had to choose three facts, I would first mention what I would call “the metaphor of the helicopter”. It was during the first demonstration favourable to the regime in Damascus, with a helicopter flying over the city. I said to the friend who was with me “Look, even the helicopters are demonstrating!” And she replied, “Yes, it's to remind us that they're there, just in case...” I saw the same helicopter again on July 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, this time in action to repress the demonstrations. Then, I think back to the first bombing with a barrel in a suburb of Damascus in November 2012 and to the waves of shock and blind panic it caused, people were saying “You know, something's falling from the sky...”. It was then that I understood that the game was changing, because we had known the fear of kidnapping, but this was a logic of destruction-extinction-fear by something mysterious, this silent thing falling from the sky and destroying everything. It took a year for us to find out what it really was, because the regime only uses it very occasionally – from time to time, a barrel of explosives falls out of a helicopter – and it was only since 2013 and especially 2014 that we witnessed real campaigns of barrel bombing. The regime's will was clear and implacable: certainly, it destroys flesh and wrecks people and above all, it sustains fear. The

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<sup>7</sup> Union des Organisations de Secours et Soins Médicaux (Union of Relief and Medical Care Organisations).

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third fact that I would mention goes back to February 2014, the demonstrations against Daesh in Aleppo: at that point we knew that Daesh was there, they had made themselves visible in a way, and they were getting chased out. And if I could add an event, equally a specific date, it would be September 2015 with the Russian bombardments and their first operations in Rastane and Talbissé, two towns located between Hama and Homs, the first to have rebelled against Daesh because they are officer's towns, so historically people of the regime, who know how to fight and all passed over to the Free Syrian Army. This explains why there has never been an incursion by Daesh towards Homs because they formed a barrier to its advance. These towns were supposed to become a zone for the exchange of populations in the agreements between Hezbollah and Oppositions. There, something new is played which ends a time by the fall of Aleppo. It remains to be seen whether this fall of Aleppo will stay the final date of the conflict, and the premise of a peaceful conclusion by way of the Russians.

**H. A.** – *On that subject, how do you see the continuation of this war, or the situation which it risks leaving in its wake, for Syria and for the other countries in the region?*

**L. S.** – It is a difficult question. We need to wait to see whether the cycles of political negotiations underway – Astana, Kazakhstan, under Russian-Turkish auspices – or forecast – Geneva, under the aegis of the UN – will yield more results than the previous discussion rounds (the last one, in early 2016, was a fiasco).

What is certain is that we can see a balance of forces clearly in favour of Bashar el-Assad today, thanks to his allies – Russia, Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah. Trying to invert this balance would require years more conflict. And the Russians are also in a position of power, so we cannot for the moment imagine a scenario where Bashar el-Assad might be removed from office. That being said, it is also difficult to imagine how the insurrection could end from one day to the next, even if negotiations are in progress.

Regardless of which scenario unfolds, I think that rebuilding the social fabric in Syria will be very, very difficult. Recently, an Aleppan told me, “If we manage to get out of this like Lebanon, we’d be lucky”. Getting away from this like Lebanon would mean, in his eyes, living side by side in deep chaos, where things are going badly but the country doesn’t fall to pieces, although war history has never been dealt with. For me, getting away like Lebanon is also risking following a model where those who might – elsewhere, in other contexts – have been judged as war criminals, put on suit and tie and are recognised as legitimate political actors by the international community. The Lebanese paid a high price for the lack of transition and reconciliation policies, and also due to the corruption and cronyism which accompanied the reconstruction.

**J.-H. B.** – My feeling is that we’re up to the stage in the war – which I experienced in other conflicts – where disarray reigns. This conflict has lasted a very long time – 6 years! – and has claimed many victims, caused an untold amount of suffering and there is no clear way out, and even less of a strategy. And it’s cruel and violent to think that it may yet go on for years. We get the feeling that even the most powerful protagonists – the governments of Moscow, Tehran, Damascus or Ankara – do not know where they are going either. I take as proof – or at least as a clue – that over the last few months, Damascus has regularly made announcements which contradict Moscow, and vice versa. The Russians declared that it was necessary to intervene against “the terrorists”, but that pacification procedures must also be undertaken, at the same time that Bashar el-Assad declared that he will not stop until he has reconquered the whole territory. But then what is the meaning of the negotiations underway in Kazakhstan, and later

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Geneva? Is there really a political will? In the same way, in the opposition camp, it's the same uncertainty which reigns: those who want to fight until the end will never accept a compromise which would end the fighting because that would be renouncing or abandoning their convictions. It's a very cruel state of confusion for the Syrian population, obviously, because in spite of external aid, the courage of Syrian families and small local organisations, we do get the feeling that this war will last, just like Chechnya, which lasted from 1994 to 2000-2001. It seems as though no one is in control of this war, which has somehow become autonomous: it has almost become a way of life for some, a road to wealth for others...

**M. R.** – I think that we can speak of a “multipolar” logic, to try to understand what might happen, at least in the coming months. There will be poles of actors – an Opposition pole, a Kurdish pole, a Regime pole and an Islamic State pole – which will each present the same characteristics: they will be present in a diffuse way, but will be multiple. There will not be an Islamic State but Islamic States, in the sense that there will no longer be a centralised command, but a fragmented one. There will be anchoring in the field almost identical to the current situation, with checkpoints where protagonists remunerate each other, feeding a classic war economy. Progressively, the political project will count for less than the survival project, in the sense that fighting to death will remain the basic principle.

What we will no doubt see more of in the coming months is an exacerbation of internal struggles between different factions of these four poles. For the Islamic State, it will be very difficult to follow, even though we can see that the faction calling for world war rather than local war has taken over since roughly 2015, with the series of attacks abroad, namely in Paris. It is interesting to observe that the other, “local” faction won one of its worst battles, its own Stalingrad in some ways, which is to say Deir ez-Zor. Maybe they will do the same thing with Mosul, but we risk witnessing a kind of worsening of the situation: the Mosul battle will drag on, with increasingly nebulous actions, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, town by town. Will Westerners take the media risk of using heavy weaponry? It is far from certain, given that they announced from the beginning that they did not want to follow that course.

In the other factions, like the Kurdish faction, I think there will also be internal dissent. In order to maintain its cohesion, the project of the “Kurdish” pole must commit to an Iraqi agreement which not everyone will necessarily adhere to. To say nothing of the fact that it will cause some problems with Turkey. At the heart of the opposition factions, the major conflicts will concern the place of Jabhat an-Nusrah and the place given to negotiations with foreign actors favourable to the regime: this is the debate currently taking place in Astana.

Another question is whether and how it is possible to build a military order on the different fronts and a civilian order in the interior. It will also be necessary to examine the interplay between factions of the regime, which risk developing into chronic instabilities. Whilst there are a multitude of polarisations, the strongest one opposes those in favour of Russia and those in favour of Iran.

In terms of the humanitarian field, I think that we risk witnessing a departure of Western experts in favour of locals, especially since we are going to enter a period of resource scarcity in Syria. Western sponsors will invest in other fields and Trump will cut all American funding to zones which are a problem for him. It remains to be seen what survival capacity this third generation of Syrian revolutionaries and actors of civil society has, who will be called upon to pick up the torch. That remains a big question mark.

Interview by Boris Martin, chief editor

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

### Biographies

**Laure Stephan** • An independent journalist based in Beirut, and regular contributor to the French newspaper *Le Monde* since 2010, where she writes about Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain.

**Jean-Hervé Bradol** • A doctor, specialised in Tropical Medicine, Emergency Medicine and medical epidemiology. His first mission with Médecins sans Frontières was in 1989, followed by long missions in Uganda, Somalia and Thailand. In 1994, he joined the Parisian headquarters as Programme Manager. Between 1996 and 2000, he was Head of Communications, then Head of Operations. From May 2000 to June 2008, he was President of the French section of Médecins sans Frontières. From 2000 to 2008, he was a member of the Board of Directors for MSF USA and MSF International. In 2009, he co-edited the publication *Innovations médicales en situations humanitaires. Le travail de Médecins sans Frontières* (L'Harmattan), with Claudine Vidal. Currently Director of research at Crash (Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires/Centre of Reflection on Humanitarian Action and Knowledge), he published *Génocide et crimes de masse. L'expérience rwandaise de Médecins Sans Frontières (1982-97)* in 2017 with Marc le Pape, at Manchester University Press for the English version and CNRS Editions for the French version.

**Matthieu Rey** • A research fellow at the CNRS at Iremam (Institute of Islamic Studies and Research in Aix-en-Provence, France), his work concerns the construction of the modern state in the Middle East. He is getting ready to publish a study on Syrian-Iranian parliaments in the 1950s and a history of Syria in the contemporary era. He participates in the Wafaw programme (When Authoritarianism Fails In The Arab World), financed by the European Research Council (ERC), some of the results of which are exposed in this interview.

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To quote this article: Laure Stephan, Jean-Hervé Bradol, Matthieu Rey, "Crossing glances on Syria", *Humanitarian Alternatives*, n°4, March 2017, p. 36-63, <http://alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/2017/03/09/crossing-glances-on-syria/>

ISBN of the article (PDF): 978-2-37704-175-6