

Alahmad Watson Interview

Unedited Transcript

- Parks: So, I thought one way to start might be for you just to recount, or just tell the story, of how we met.
- Alahmad We are all a group of people, 23 people, we only choose, like, one idea. Some of them choose to get the book. Others choose to do something like read to children, to education, so we're in the group of, like, entrusting or of creating a book.
- Parks: We never did the book, did we? That kind of fell through, right?
- Alahmad Yeah, it did, but I think the most important point was after the group moved to D.C., 90 percent or maybe 80 percent of them forget the projects [started] when they were in the Syracuse. Maybe all, like in the middle, or even like some forget the idea because I saw it's very difficult to do it. I mean, when you're starting something new, it's not easy. But, what happened when we were in D.C., you sent the email about what's happened with this idea and so, I mean, it was just, like, encourage us to start the idea again.
- Parks: It still didn't happen, right?
- Alahmad I'm sorry?
- Parks: And then the book didn't happen again, right? So, we never did do-
- Alahmad It did happen, but I mean, the idea continued and we did ... the goal, not like in a book model, in the model of organization and website [inaudible 00:02:47].
- Parks: That's right. So, how we did we start working on ... so, we moved from that to starting to work on Syrians for Truth and Justice, right?
- Alahmad Yeah, then we loved the idea. We started off talking, in the beginning, talking about the book fairs, but when I left the organization [Violations Documentation Center], we just said, okay, we'll change the idea of the book to the idea of an organization because now we have time and there is no conflict of interest.
- Parks: Yeah, yeah, exactly. So, why did you decide you wanted to start an organization? What were you hoping the organization would do?
- Alahmad How [inaudible 00:03:39] to do something and lead from all our experience because during the five or six past years, since 2011, I did many workshops, visits, read a lot of things, so one of the goals was to put all my experience, [inaudible 00:04:01] experience, experience of others, numbers, inside this organization.

Alahmad So, it's not just like when you start something new, you can't put all your vision in this project, but when you be among something like happened already and started, it's hard to make a crucial change.

Parks: Yeah, I think that's true. So, one of the things we've talked about is, of course, I'm not Syrian.

Alahmad We'll give you the nationality of being Syrian.

Parks: But, we've talked about sometimes it's useful that I'm a U.S. citizen and sometimes, we kind of let that fact stay in the background. So, how have you thought through having this project be partially developed in the U.S. context as it were? Has it been a benefit or negative, or how have you thought that through?

Alahmad I mean, it was of course a positive, but sometimes when the donors and the people see the project and see the role of America, they are just usually like, weird about that. But, we tried to explain to people do some change to say, no, there is a great contribution by an American professor, but it's just a local Syrian project, which only talk about the local issues of Syrians.

Alahmad So, it's a project through the Syrian eyes, but also supported by international experience like you and Eva, and other people.

Parks: So, when you thought about what you wanted the group to do, you chose the name Syrians for Truth and Justice, and I'm just wanting ... when you think about how the Assad Regime produced truth, how do you think they went about producing truth, or what they took to be facts? What was their way of convincing people that they were legitimate, as it were?

Alahmad Exactly, and also the core of this project is not ... is against Assad. It's about against all public relations. I mean, it's against about all, let's say, fake news or fake truths. So, of course, Assad Regime occupied a good part of these violations, but I mean, it's important to mention that it's about telling the truth of people, through the people, through stories and narrative. But, it's not only targeting Assad and its truths. It's about also targeting the truth of other groups like ISIS or [inaudible 00:07:11] and other groups who are always committing the violations.

Parks: I think one of the things we've talked about is what we're trying to do is get the voice of the Syrians who never got their stories told on official media or never had access to say what was really happening on the ground, right?

Alahmad Exactly. And for different reasons, because sometimes, I mean, why, because they don't have this ability because sometimes there is media only focusing on Regime violations. There is another people focusing only on Kurdish forces violation, other only focusing on opposition of ISIS. We are trying to really do something to be like the voice of all victims, not only the victims of Regimes or victims of ISIS and so on.

Parks: And so, what have been some difficulties, like, I mean I can think of one of the difficulties we've had is actually getting people in Syria able to send us the stories, or getting the money to pay the people in Syria who were sending us the stories. What has been some of the hardest stuff you've had to do to think of how to collect these stories and then circulate them?

Alahmad I mean, yeah, the communication, still have problems to communicate, send money to them, and we can talk about challenges from now until tomorrow, and even like receiving money from Europe to Turkey. In the beginning, we would spend one year just for the organization. I mean, there is a real lot of challenges.

Parks: I remember, one of the things with when Syracuse had the money, is that budget-structured Syracuse wouldn't let us actually pay the people doing the work because they didn't have the proper legal ID. It was all this hassle of trying to figure out how to get the money into Turkey. Have you had similar problems paying the reporters from Turkey, who are now in Syria?

Alahmad I mean, Syria has this problem because we don't have the ability to transfer by bank. There is no banks in around 90 percent of the territory of Syria. Trying to pay for some people, there is other people in Syria paying for all the [inaudible 00:09:32], so it's kind of something like very old version of paid.

Parks: It almost sounds like the structures aren't really set up to pay people who aren't within a recognized state with a recognized state ID. Is that something that you're facing?

Alahmad Can you repeat, say again?

Parks: It seems to me, because Syria's fallen apart, there's no banking structures, there's no legal structures to pay people. And then we were trying to pay people in Turkey, because they didn't have the right state ID or the right refugee status, we couldn't pay them.

Alahmad Yeah, even in Turkey. In there and over the world, now there is a lot of structure or restriction on transferring money to Syrians. So, when you have a Syrian ID, or Syria passport, it's a big problem.

Parks: Yeah, just as a side note, didn't you literally just become Syrian a little while ago? Like, get your official Syrian passport and nationality?

Alahmad Yeah.

Parks: So, I don't think people will understand how that could be if you lived in Syria your whole life. Can you tell people what that means?

Alahmad I mean, telling them what? Telling them-

Parks: For a while, I thought you told me once that, for a long time, you didn't have Syrian citizenship and it was only like-

Alahmad Yeah, exactly. Until January 2012.

Parks: So, what were you in Syria before you had Syrian citizenship? Like, what did they consider you?

Alahmad I mean, they considered you like, there is a term, it means literally like "foreign". So, it kind of ... I mean, it's just like when you're foreign in your country. So, there is like the translation of the word. So, simply don't have anything. I mean, documents, no rights, no anything. Don't have anything.

Parks: And this was because you were Kurdish, right? You had Kurdish background?

Alahmad Yeah. Exactly.

Parks: So, why did they finally decide to give you citizenship?

Alahmad In the beginning, they tried to, just like the Regime and for political results, tried to make the Kurds, like, [inaudible 00:12:05], so in politics when bringing some people to a new side, you have to give them some advantage, so this is one of those [inaudible 00:12:14].

Parks: Okay, okay. So, when you say Syrians for Truth and Justice, what does Syrian mean there?

Alahmad It means the story of all Syrians. So, because usually in the civil war, you can, not only from the history, even now, if there is any incident, if you, like, see four media channels, maybe you will see, like, four different stories. But when we say "Syrians", we're trying to bring all stories we agree with or the stories we don't agree with. So, it's about trying to make this platform for all Syrians, regarding who they are, their affiliation, or if they're targeted by any groups, you know? It's not easy. It's a very big challenge, especially in the ruin of civil war.

Parks: Maybe, just take a second and tell people who may not know the challenges, what some of the challenges are.

Alahmad To what? In which regard?

Parks: In regard to, you were saying, you're trying to create a platform where everyone who is within Syria, thinks of themselves as Syrians. And you're saying, in the current civil war, that's hard because of divisions. I wondered if you can just talk a bit about what some of the divisions are that makes it hard to create this notion of an open Syrian identity.

Alahmad Exactly. Yeah. Because usually, and even in the Syria context now, it's not secret when we say that there's a divided society. We have, like, a truth. Or say, a truth by the

Regime, or a truth by the opposition, by other groups like ISIS, [inaudible 00:14:11], and so on and so on, but we are trying to really, specially focus on victims and bring the stories of those people, the people who faced violations by all the parties of conflict, because sometimes when you acknowledge the violation of the people faced, it's part of creating this unified ID. But, when you are doing this discrimination between the people, between the victims, it will make another problem, because we have not solved the main problem.

Parks: I agree. So, in a sense, it sounds like when you think about the future of Syria, it's more based on fundamental human rights than sort of an ethnic idea of Syria, or like a particular religious idea of Syria. Is that right?

Alahmad Of course, we will base on the ... the basic human rights [inaudible 00:15:10]. Hopefully, we're trying to do something different, not be like Lebanon or Iraq or in other countries in the region, are trying to be really something, like, create state based on the principles of human rights. We don't know which stance will succeed, [inaudible 00:15:30], but I mean, we're trying to do that now.

Parks: Can you talk a little bit about the process by which Syrians for Truth and Justice, it collects a story, makes sure story is true, and then tries to get that story out where people can read it? I'm not sure people will know how we actually do the work that we do.

Alahmad Yeah, I think the question of responsibility is very important. Usually, and sometimes, we're reaching the people through our reporters inside Syria. Sometimes, we are reaching the people. They are sending us to say, "Please tell our stories." Sometimes, we're reaching people, meeting them here in Istanbul or any different areas; trying to first fully understand their situation, before doing the interview, making relation bridge between us and them, understand the context, explaining to them why it's important to get the stories. Sometimes, then doing the story and asking them the question, making documentation, making videos, and so on and so on. Then of course, trying to translate to English as well and publishing the stories in the context of flow.

Alahmad So, in most of the reports, there is something called applicable. It means, like, because each kind of violation, you have to sometimes see if we are talking about war crimes or crimes against humanity, or so on and so on. So, it's not easy work. It's very complicated. But, the people see the last version of the similar story or even the report. They thought that it's easy to bring this information from Syria, but it's really not easy because we are talking about a lot of steps, a lot of difficulties and challenges, until we make this report out.

Parks: I think one of the things that we don't talk a lot about is the dangers that reporters face. We sent reporters into the site of the latest chemical attack, and that really wasn't the safest of places to go, right?

Alahmad: Yeah, exactly. And even when they couldn't brought a lot of videos and photos because the context was very, very dangerous. They went there for seconds because there were a lot of [inaudible 00:18:11] and a lot of [inaudible 00:18:12].

Parks: You know, I couldn't hear the last bit because the recording cut out.

Alahmad: Yeah, I mean, they couldn't bring a lot of videos and photos because they were there for seconds, for minutes, and there was a lot of shelling and a lot of also war planes flying there.

Parks: So, this is an odd question. A lot of times, when you'll send me the report and I'll look at the English. I'm sitting in my kitchen, which I overlook my beautiful yard, and it just feels like I'm very distant from these reporters. What do you think makes the reporters go into those areas and try to capture the stories? It's a dangerous thing to do, right? Why do you think they do it?

Alahmad: I mean, for different purposes. Some people because they faced the violation by themselves. Like, a reporter in Daraa, his name is Ali. He was detained by the Regime forces and he became working on documentation. Some other people, because of their belief in that. Some other people, they know the importance of documentation. So there is a lot of reasons behind of this, or why the people, even the [inaudible 00:19:37] people inside or outside of Syria doing this work.

Parks: It just struck me. So, we've been talking a lot about the difficulties of, like, paying people, getting the stories, documenting, setting up the organization. What would be one or two of the successes that you would point to, that we've had so far?

Alahmad: I mean, creating the organization in the context of civil war, in the context of divided country, in the context of [inaudible 00:20:10] and the racist speech, creating something focusing on all violations by all sides and [inaudible 00:20:18] inviting people. I think it's a success because you have to be very strong and courageous to talk about some sensitive issues like this. Syrian racism issues in the context of women's rights and minority rights, and all these sensitive issues in this context.

Alahmad: So, I think creating such kind of this project, it's important, but also we did many other ... as an example, we published the first local report about the chemical attacks in [inaudible 00:20:55]. We also published a long report about secret detention center in Daraa, which is called Little Taher. I mean, I there is money, success stories, and now it has been about one year, but we have a lot of database. We published a lot of reports.

Parks: One final question, so I'm doing this interview for this academic conference. It's going to be in Middle America. I'm trying to write this essay in a way that says why people should do this type of work. Why they should join with people like you to create these projects?

Parks: Do you have a way of saying to them why what, seemingly, is a conflict so far away, is something that they should absolutely be committed to and try to find ways to support people?

Alahmad I can understand why people and the government are, like, bored. Because usually when we are talking about a long conflict, it makes the situation boring, makes many people bored. Even the good part of the Syrian population became refugees and started a new life. They're forgetting Syria. But other people and other governments and even Syrian populations see they have this commitment of ending the conflict and making a good transition of justice and creating a new country.

Parks: Okay, let me think. Is there anything you wanted to be sure to say, that I didn't get a chance to ask you or anything-

Alahmad I mean, special people, sometimes, they don't have how to help. It's really not only about money and funding. It's sometimes about support, about volunteering, about giving the Syrian experience, helping them to, training them or something like that. It's about how we can take the people of ... even sometimes, we can put a lot of pressure on governments or Parliament to do something. We used to say, when the Syrian people need help, they're only thinking about money. But, your money, it's like they're expecting a small part, but there is a good space for other activities; volunteering, supporting Syrians, putting pressure on the governments, and many other elements.

Parks: Thanks so much for taking time to chat, and we'll be chatting again soon.