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WHO WE REALLY ARE:
A CONVERSATION WITH SYRIAN REFUGEES IN AMERICA

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. McKENZIE: Good afternoon, and welcome. My name is Bobby McKenzie. I'm a visiting fellow here at Brookings, and we are honored to have you here today, for this public conversation entitled: “Who we really are: The conversation with Syrian refugees.”

I met with Leon Wieseltier about a-month-and-a-half ago to discuss a roundtable that we were planning to have today with Syrian-American officials and leaders, and Leon agreed to participate in this roundtable on one condition, that we would have a public event that would entail a conversation with Syrian refugees. And the purpose for this is that across Washington, D.C., the brightest lights are talking about the Syrian refugee crisis, but very rarely do we actually have Syrian refugees who are talking about their own experiences.

And so what we often find in cities and capitals like Washington, D.C., are statistical abstractions, but not the human experience, so we are really delighted to have all of you here today to listen to some rather powerful stories.

And let me briefly introduce Leon Wieseltier; he is the senior fellow -- excuse me -- He is the Isaiah Berlin senior fellow in culture and policy here at Brookings, between 1983 and 2014, he was a literary critic at The New Republic. He has held various senior positions at Harvard, as a lecturer and professor, and we are delighted and honored to have him lead this conversation.

I should say when I reached out to the Syrian-American community to try and identify four refugees that we could have here. They also had a very clear message that we should try identify and bring to the conversation Syrian refugees would decenter some of the common notions about refugeeness. And so, amongst us here, we have a very distinguished group of individuals who I do believe will be able to tell powerful stories, not just about forced migration and the lived experience of displacement and refugee resettlement, but also about the amazing things that they’ve done since.

We have on my right here, we have Mariela Shaker, who is a concert violinist, who has performed at the Kennedy Center for President Obama. She has also been someone who has been an outspoken advocate for refugees. And we also have a Harvard Medical Doctor, we have Taha Bali, who is -- he is not only a Professor, excuse me, at Harvard, but he's also a medical doctor up in Boston, and

also an outspoken advocate.

We have Qutaiba Idlbi, who has been working with the Holocaust Museum, to bring attention to some of these issues, and has been a voice of reason at a time when there's very little reason out there, to hear about these issues. And finally, we have Kassem Eid, who has also been an outspoken ally for Syrian refugees.

So, I want to end here, but just by saying we really hope that you can hear these stories and take them back to your colleagues, and we also hope that this will be a launching pad for a wider, deeper discussion about the refugee crisis.

I should end by saying that since the uprising in Syria, half of the population has been misplaced, 4.6 million refugees are living in frontline states, and yet we've only taken 2,500 Syrian refugees in the U.S., 2,500. So, with that let me turn it over to Leon. Thank you.

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you, my friend. I'm just going to say a few introductory things, because like you, I'm here to hear our guests, to hear our friends. I'm not here to be smart today, I'm here to be humble, and to listen very carefully to the stories that we are going to hear, which will be accounts of experience exceedingly unlike our own.

I will say first, however, that I think it's safe to say that the Syrian conflict has now become the defining conflict of our time. Nothing less than that; partly because of the magnitude of the human suffering involved. We now know close to half-a-million people have been killed. That number of 250,000 that we've used, for so long, turns out to have been wrong by half.

We know that 7 million or more people have been internally displaced, 4 million people have been -- are refugees outside the borders of Syria. It is the defining conflict of our time, because of the principles involved in this conflict. This is a war against two tyrannies, against a savage secular tyranny, and a savage religious tyranny. And in this war, both of these tyrannies have the support of outside powers, most of them other tyrannies, whereas the good people who were fighting them, have the support of exactly no outside powers, to at least not the consequential support of any outside powers.

So, as a matter of principle, it's a defining episode of our time, and it is that because of now what the refugee crisis, that it has produced, which, in our generation, is the greatest test we will face

of the principles of universal human solidarity and rescue that we profess that have been part of our philosophical and moral tradition, not only in the West, but in other traditions for a very long time.

From what I've said, you can correctly infer that I think that the United States has disgraced itself in this conflict, disgraced itself by its lack of intervention, and disgraced itself by its inaction in helping refugees who are experiencing near adversity in part because of the lack of any action against this horror in the first place. But I don't want to belabor that point right now.

What I want to do is begin by saying that I am the son of refugees. My parents were Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust and came to New York in 1947. I grew up among refugees, and until I was 7 or 8, refugees were the only adults I knew. I just want to say a few things that I've learned from my experience about who refugees are.

The first thing I will say about refugees, the most conspicuous characteristic of them is that they love life, and that they are prepared to endure unimaginable hardship, unimaginable hardship, so as to preserve life; their lives and the lives of their loved ones, and the lives of their traditions and their communities.

Nobody imperils their children in dangerous sea voyages, and treks across mountains unless they believe they are rescuing their children from an even greater danger that certainly awaits them. So the first thing I learned from my parents and my cousins and the community in which I grew up, is that refugees love life.

The second one is that they have almost unimaginable inner resources, and one of the reasons that they have almost unimaginable inner resources, is because all their outer resources have taken from them and destroyed. Their inner resources are almost all they have to go on, and it is a humbling and profoundly moving spectacle to watch refugees reconstitute themselves, preserve their sense of selves, their families and reconstitute their lives.

The third thing I learned is that refugees will always feel, in some way, permanently in limbo. There are people who live after what is gone is gone, and before what is coming is coming. There is this sense of transition that what they had has been destroyed, and what they will have has not yet been built or given to them, or both. And there is this terrible uncertainty, this terrible uncertainty that

characterizes them.

They are also -- There was a contradiction in refugees that I noticed when I was a boy, which is that they seem both unimaginably resilient, and unimaginably fragile at the same time. When I was a boy, I remember thinking that nothing could destroy my parents, because look what they survived. And I remember thinking that I had to protect them from everything bad that I could because anything could destroy these people, because the world had been so cruel to them.

I also learnt that refugees are people who have felt abandoned by the world. It is a terrible, terrible feeling I can report, as the son of people who abandoned by the world. And all the rescue efforts, and all the resettlement efforts that will be made, and God knows, there are very, very few for us to boast about, will not erase, ever, that feeling that at some point the world abandoned them.

And this leads to my final point, and this was the thing about the refugees that I knew, that most pained me; it is that they are people who -- Put it this way, if the entire world had been destroyed when my parents' world was destroyed, it would have been coherent, it would have apocalyptic, but it would have been coherent.

But what happened was that only their world was destroyed and the rest of the world went along on its course, and so not only were they confronted with the magnitude of the indifference of the world to the destruction of their world, but they also, after death, as it were, had to have a second life, and after had to pick themselves out of the ashes, out of the ashes, and then they had to do completely banal and trivial things.

Like in my mother's case, run a candy store, an in my father's case run a furniture shop, and then have children, and ten buy their children clothes, and then find schools for their children, all the while remembering that everything that they loved has died, has been destroyed. And this was something about my parents and those refuges that I will never forget. There was this haunted quality, this haunted quality.

The reason we are here today -- the reason we are here today as I say -- is not to discuss the modalities and instrumentalities of diplomatic or military interventions, even though there is a lot about refugee policy, and about the shortcomings of our refugee policy, and so one, these discussions

are taking place. Most of them, as you know are more or less futile.

Anyway, right now, today, what I'd like us to do is to listen very carefully, very carefully to the account that our guests, that our friends will give us of their experience so that we know exactly who it is that we are talking about when we talk about this defining crisis of our time. I will ask each of my friends to say a few words about their experiences and I will ask Mariela to go first.

MS. SHAKER: First of all, it gives me great pleasure to be here with you all today. I would like to say that life in Syria is rather impossible; a truly humanitarian disaster threatens an entire generation. There is nothing worse than experiencing death every minute in Syria. During the time I was in Syria I studied business administration, and I graduated from the University of Aleppo, and I was also employed as a violin teacher at the Arabic Institute of Music.

Music was always my dream and I wanted to come to the United States to have a high degree of music performance. We didn't have electricity. I was struggling badly to send my applications to universities. I was running between Internet cafés, and the mortars and the bombings to send my applications. I swear that I applied for 50 or 60 institutions until I got my magical email from Monmouth College, a Liberal Arts college in Illinois. I got the acceptance letter with almost full-tuition scholarship, even with such a huge scholarship affording the room and board which were not covered by institution, was overwhelming because both my parents lost their jobs in the war.

They couldn't help me even with one dollar. I was so disappointed that I'm going to lose such a great opportunity to Aleppo and find my new future. So I thought a lot, and I mean, I kept searching working and working, hoping for a miracle to happen, and indeed it happened, because I found about an organization, it's called De Sur, and they are helping Syrian students and refugees.

I reached out to them several times but I couldn't hear anything back, and I understand, because they get a lot of emails, especially in such a difficult situation.

So I went to their website and I try to search on their donors, and I searched on each name, on Facebook and on Google, and one of them, he is a man, a very fine man from Saudi Arabia, and I found that there is a mutual friend on Facebook, between us who also came here with a scholarship. So I thought that definitely I should talk to this person. I wrote to him an email, I sent to him

my music videos, and acceptance letter I got from Monmouth, he was so glad that I reached out to him, but he said, Mariela, I'm sorry, I just support people from science major.

I say, yeah, I totally understand. I'm so glad that you replied to my message. Later on he told me, you know what, I'm really impressed with your story, and that you found my email on my Facebook, so you are going to the United States. And so he paid for half of the tuition -- I mean, half of the room and board, and the rest of the amount I found about an organization the same way, you can tell that I work so much on line, even with that situation, without electricity. It's called Board Council of Iranians, and they helped me with the rest of it.

And they recently selected me as the Goodwill Ambassador, the Peace Ambassador for their organization, and they invited me to go to the United Nations in Geneva to perform a talk on behalf of refugees, and on behalf of their organization.

My family, they are still living in Aleppo, surviving with the basic necessities of life. I try to call them every day, just to make sure that they are still alive. However, I am glad that I was able to fulfill my mom's only wish, to see her two children in a safer place, and I recently sponsored my brother to cross the Mediterranean on a rubber boat, and he is now in Netherland in a refugee camp.

Although I feel very save here in the United States, I'm constantly deeply concerned about my family and friends in Syria. We have great potentials of Syrians, but we are in need of your support more than any time ago, to build up a good atmosphere to flourish. My best friends in Syria are architects and doctors, but their future is full of mystery, and their life is threatened with death daily.

I was able to -- One of my Muslim friends, she reached out to me, asking how can she apply to Monmouth College, she used to be my former student when I was teaching in Aleppo. I made the proposal to Monmouth College and they welcomed the idea, and they gave her a full scholarship, and now she's a sophomore in Monmouth College. I tried my best to help her, and I'm so glad, but is this enough? I don’t think so.

I would beg you to, please, not to extinguish the last flame of hope by closing the doors in front of Syrian refugees. I would specially mention these students, and ambitious youths who are really desperate to come to this country, to do great things. We are here to represent both Syria and America.

I, myself, consider myself as not just a legally legitimate Syrian citizen, but also a new devoted and loyal, young American woman.

I have recently granted the asylum, and I received my green card last year. What an honor to be in this great country, the country which has given me my new life, my new future, the life I've always dreamed of, I always wanted to come here to be a professional violinist, and I can't thank the American Government enough for making my dream a reality. I performed at the Kennedy Center last year, part of UNHCR, and I was honored at the White House, and named as champion of change for world refugees by the President Obama.

I would also like to state that I'm a Syrian Christian, but I feel the relation between Islam and Syrians -- I mean, Islam and Christian in Syria is old and gold. We are attached and linked together as a very fine, mosaic antique piece. We can't afford to lose any small piece because otherwise the picture is not going to be complete.

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you, Mariela.

MS. SHAKER: Thank you so much.

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you very much. Kassem, would you --

MR. EID: Hello, everybody. And thank you for coming here. My name is Kassem Eid, I'm Palestinian-Syrian. My father left Palestine in 1948 and came to Syria to start his life. In 2011 when the Syrian Revolution started, I was studying English translation at the University of Homs, I was also -- I used to work in the Four Seasons Damascus, and just like millions of other Syrians who participated in the revolution, I had a lot of reasons to join the revolution because we wanted to make Syria a better place for everyone, or all Syrians, and the regime, the Assad government responded with bullets and violence.

They went after the peaceful protest for more than nine months. I watched and saw, while I was living in hometown Moadhamiyeh, the western entrance of Damascus, how the Assad regime used to send his mercenaries to kill, torture, burn people alive, rape women in front of their families, just to stop people from demonstrating against him, but we kept on demonstrating, we kept on asking for freedom, and we hoped that the world will do something to help us.

It's always hard to talk about this, but I remember how I used to tell my friends, especially during the protest that one day the United States will help us, because I learned my English from reading Reader's Digest magazine when I was 5 years old. Other kids were playing soccer in the street, and I was reading Reader's Digest, because I just found reading about America very charming and amusing.

We were living in a dictatorship for more than four decades, where we were not able to think, talk, or actually do anything. We had the famous line in Syria that said, even the walls have ears, so when the revolution started it was a dream coming true for all of us, we just wanted to feel free. It's very simple. This is something you have here, and you rarely appreciate. A lot of my friends died by snipers, by barrel bombs, by tanks, and the massacres where Assad sent his mercenaries to kill them, and miraculously survived so many times.

In 2013, the Assad regime used chemical weapons to attack several areas in 2013, Assad regime, he used chemical weapons to attack several areas around, Damascus, he attacked my hometown, Moadamiyeh when I was there. I was exposed to sarin gas, in the day that's always described as judgment day. Sarin gas is something, I don't know how to put it in words, but if death had a scent or a favored perfume, it would have been sarin. And Assad used that against civilians.

I miraculously survived that attack, after my heart stopped and I was placed between the martyrs, between the dead bodies. After I woke up, the regime was bombing the town very bad, it was like World War III, they were trying to invade, and kill whoever was left alive. I went to the frontlines and I watched Assad sending his troops, wearing full chemical gear protection, trying to invade and kill who was ever left alive.

People always ask me how the rebels manage to hold their regime at that day, and I always say it was a miracle. We had a lot of miracles in Syria. I also survived two years of starvation and hunger, because our own government -- it was supposed to be our own government, the Assad regime blocked aid and bombed all the infrastructure in our town, and we had nothing to eat, more than leaves of trees and olives.

I help children while they were gassed by sarin, while they were dying, and I also held children who were starving to death. And I always find it harder, very hard to know which weapon was

worse, starvation or the sarin. We stopped caring about the bombs and the aircraft because it will take seconds or maybe minutes to kill you. But what I'm trying to say is, what we saw in Syria is something beyond explanation. It's very disgusting, it's very shameful to have all these atrocities committed by a lunatic, who is still in power, who is still killing and torturing and raping women.

There is the -- the seizure follows which was basically pictures of detainees tortured to death in prisons. I saw some of these people. This is not just images, this is images for people. I personally buried some of these people who were tortured to death by Assad regime, just because they want to bring some medicine or some food for the people besieged inside Moadhamiyeh.

When I left my town and I came here, after I worked as a media activist with international media because I was one of the rare English speakers in that area. I came here hoping that coming to the United States, speaking to the government, or maybe the United Nations will help raise awareness that can push the Obama administration to do something in Syria.

I remember how I was translating Obama speech to my friends in a basement after he said that -- he was making that deal with the Russians, and he's not going to punish -- at least punish Assad for doing that massacre. And how people got very disappointed, and how they felt, they lost their final hope in having help or accountability against war crimes.

I came here, I went to the White House, the State Department, Congress, the Senate, any place I could have gone to, I did a speaking tour for more than a year, I went through more 40 states, I spoke in Harvard and Yale and Princeton, many universities, a lot of think tanks here in D.C., testified on the Security Council several times, and all of that got us in t nothing. Right now, thousands of people are getting displaced inside of Syria because of the Russian aggression.

We have a lot of people trying to jump into rubber boats and cross into Europe, and we have lunatics like Donald Trump and others calling them terrorists, and other bad names that I'm not going to say.

MR. WIESELTIER: We know, we know --

MR. EID: I feel very disappointed from the United States, the people are very kind, the government is very bad, I'm seriously considering going back to Syria and my friends know that I want to

go back to Syria. We are asking for a safe place for Syrians where they can stay, harmless, without getting bombed by barrel bombs, or by the Russians, or by the Iranians, or by Hezbollah, or by ISIS, or by any of these people, a place for civilians who can just stay there with their families without jumping into a rubber boat, or without getting bombed by a barrel bomb, it's very simple, ask and demand. I think this is the least that the United States can do.

I feel very angry when I see President Obama trying to shine up his image by meeting some of the Syrian refugees that he helped created, if he acted against Assad, and took down that lunatic, we could have saved thousands of lives, hundreds of thousands of lives. We could have stopped ISIS from growing, we could have done a lot of things, we could have saved so many people, and so many good things in Syria. I think. That's it. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you, Kassem. Qutaiba?

MR. IDLBI: Thank you, Leon; and thank you, Bobby and Brookings for having me here. My name is Qutaiba Idlbi. I'm originally from Damascus. I come from a middleclass conservative family, from Damascus. My family used to live in Saudi Arabia, that's where I was born, then after I was born they decided to move to Syria. That's when my dad decided to retire.

My dad was a leading peace caller in Damascus. So when he was -- when he retired, kind of like he focused all of, you know, his life and his time, actually teaching us a lot about life, the background. So I grew up in kind of, like, more political and like different atmosphere than, like, regular Syrians or Demascans.

I remember I would walk to my dad's office, like inside our house, and I would ask him something, and he would actually -- he would not answer -- he would point to somewhere in our huge library that got more than 10,000 books, and he told me, like, find that book on that shelf, and come here.

And I would start reading to him, like from the beginning, and then like meanwhile, he would explain to me, he would start out, he would tell me, like, did you find your answer, or not yet? That's the way I like -- So, I kind of started my activism when I was 12 years. I helped with a small opposition group that was started in 2001.

The first time I was followed by the Intelligence was when I was 18, because I attended

the hearing for sentencing the human rights activist from Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change. When I was 21, I mean like when the revolution started, 2011, so it was kind of like, really no question, whether to participate or not. It was like just the moment like, you know, I think like me or like the people around me, like everyone was waiting for.

I remember in March 28, 2011, it was the first very public and huge protest in Damascus in the Ummayad Mosque, and I remember, I mean between -- we were five brothers, four of us were in Damascus at that time, and I remember like, the day before we were arguing with my mom, who would actually go to the protest, and who would stay.

Because going to a protest in Damascus it's not really like going to the market, or like going downtown. It's like, either you will get arrested or you will be killed, and actually it's kind of the same, being killed is even better than being arrested. So, we agreed that, you know, two would go down to the protest and two would stay home, and then like in the morning we argued, like who would go and who would stay, and my mom was like, just go, all of you. So, we would -- kind of separated in different points where we knew the protest would happen; and I was at the lucky point.

And I remember, there were like 9,000 or 10,000 people all like -- most of them were -- they were all grown up, going out of the Ummayad Mosque, all of them shouting: Freedom, freedom! Haria, haria! And I remember that moment I was -- This might, you know, sound very similar to yours. It might sound like a moment from Braveheart, but this is something for Syrians that is not really usual.

I mean, you were born here, you know, it's very normal for you to walk out to the streets, say, you know, act as the way you want. Say what you believe, and I mean, criticize whatever you see is wrong. This is not even like, you know, not even closely familiar in Syria. I remember -- I mean, like I was in a family that I had more space to talk about this stuff with my family. I remember my friends would have no courage even to talk about this with their parents.

I remember my friend once was -- like, I was going to visit him, and he opened the door crying. I told him, what's going on? He was like, I asked my dad about the Muslim Brotherhood and he hit me in the face. That was how people dealt with this stuff in Syria, because would lead you to, like, to death, maybe. So things went on with the revolution. I remember I was detained the first time after a

month-and-a-half delivering aid to Moadhamiyeh, where Kassem used to live.

I remember I stayed there for 10 days, and the main thing, I don't want to disturb you with everything happened in there, but I remember the main thing under torture in Assad prisons. My only -- The only thought that I had in my mind, that whatever happens here, like here or like after I leave, like the only thing what is important right now is actually not too late for anyone to be in the same position where I am right now.

Not to be -- No one should be under the lashes or under electricity, lying, being tortured by those people; because it's not something that any human can handle. I was released the first time. I still had the energy to continue with the revolution. You see, to catch up where I left, and to continue with my work. Ten days later, another security branch arrested me, this time it was more serious. I was the correspondent for an English correspondent in Damascus, the only one at that time, talking to CNN, Sky News, telling them what is going on, on the ground where demonstrations are going out, what is the reaction from the government, what do the people want, and I was detained for that.

The government accused me of spying for international agencies, because BBC and CNN work for CIA and MI5. I remember after the second time, was really different because after I left it was, I knew that they tried also to kidnap my little brother while I was -- and to pressure me, you know, to confess more. At that time it wasn't really -- the thoughts of being heroic, and I continued like doing the work, or doing the work I was doing inside, it was, like, gone away because this is not only about me right now, it's about like my direct family.

My little brother was 17 years old, or 16 years old, when the government tried to kidnap him while he was doing his final exams in high school. So, I had to take my brother and leave to Lebanon. Of course that included paying a bribe for the security at the border, so they would allow us to go to Lebanon.

We stayed in Lebanon for six months, and I remember every day and the other we were a couple months, things will move on. We saw what happened in Egypt, everything is going to be fine. You know, the revolution would win, Assad would step down, we'll have a free country, a democratic country, where we can go back there and live normally. A couple of months left, and we were, like,

maybe in the summer after (inaudible). I mean six months were passed but nothing really happened.

And around that time, still, it is, I mean, Hezbollah harassments, this U.N. intelligence were all over Beirut, so we had to leave to Egypt. It was the beginning of 2012. It was also, my little brother had to go to high school. So we went to Egypt, I just took my brother out of high school, but the intelligence in Egypt didn't give me residency, because I was an activist in Syria.

That was a danger for the Military Council ruling in Egypt at that time, so I had to leave Egypt every three months, outside, and like risk -- And every time I had to be humiliated in there for coming back, because I'm Syrian, just to be allowed in and out of the country.

Beginning of 2013 I was nominated for a program here in the United States with State Department, so I came here, and I applied for asylum, and applying for asylum her is kind of like the same thing as applying for refugee status in the Middle East. When you are in Turkey or in Lebanon or in Jordan, you submit your case to the U.N. with all the papers, all your story. The U.N. takes your case, say, for the United States; they do the first security check. If you pass it then you have -- then DHS Officers in the region, they go and also they interview directly.

After the interview, a second security check, if you pass it, you get allocated here to the resettlement agencies, and after they decided where they are going to put you, there's a final security check that you'd go through. So, like along all of that process, you are like, you have to be checked, like, a million times. But the refugee population is like where usually it's far away from everything that is going on inside the country.

Asylum is the same thing, you apply for asylum for a security check passed, you make your interview, a second security check, and then when one day they decide you are accepted there is a third security check, and then you are granted asylum. So, I got here. I started a small aid and development firm with actually an American friend and activist, Heju Wishon. He was kind of -- At that time when I first got here, he was the only family and friend that I got here.

I didn't know anyone in the United States, in Washington, D.C., at least when I first got here. But, yeah, he was kind of like the only one I knew who have been -- we've been working together for, like, three years now. My family is all over, I had another -- four brother, two of them are in Turkey

with my mother. My mother has a B.A., a business administration background but she's now running schools for the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Another brother I have in Qatar, and I have another brother in Damascus.

The reason he stayed back home, because he believed that at the beginning of the revolution, when actually we told people to go out to the demonstrations, and there's one incident, actually, I'd like to tell you about. We had a meeting two weeks before demonstrations started. There was like an incident where people were demonstrating, it was like the internal ministry, like in February and then we had a local meeting in our neighborhood, like the opposite figures, and we were -- So we were talking about the preparations, what can happen, we should be ready, and someone actually asked, if we know that Assad and his government are going to shoot on us when you go out to the streets. Why would we go out to the streets and, you know, get people killed and get ourselves killed?

I was too naïve at that time. I told him, because the international community is not going to allow Assad to actually shoot on innocent people asking for freedom and democracy. Because the international community is going to step up, and is going to tell Assad to step down, and with support millions of people are asking for democracy, and for my brother, when those calls fall on deaf ears, he felt that he needed to stay there.

He needed to be, because he cannot really betray the people that we promised them that -- we promised them that. And we promised people to remember at that time, like this is what we want, and it's a funny thing, but actually we were like, for me, I can talk about myself specially. I envy American people, like in my mind, before the revolution, I envied them for a long time.

Not for Hollywood, not for the wide streets, the long buildings, you know, the fancy cars, we had a lot of fancy cars in Damascus though. But I envy the American people for their freedom, for being able to walk tall, for being able to express what they feel, to express what they believe and for being able to walk around and criticize what they think is -- to say what they think is right, and criticize what they say is -- what they believe is wrong.

That's what the Syrian people envy Americans for, and that’s what they wanted for themselves. The Syrian people they didn’t go out against their government because they wanted a better

economy, because they wanted a better car to ride in. No. They went against their government because they wanted to be able to breathe. They wanted to be able to say that this is right, and this is wrong, without being tortured to death.

I was working with a group of people not -- like the close group around me, nine of them; six of them died under torture. I was the lucky, the first one, I was the lucky one to leave. Another three of them, who left now to Turkey, their families had to pay $200,000 to get them out of jail, because they were sentenced to death, along like with other colleagues. Those are like my close friends that I know. And I think being here, I mean, a lot, you know, would ask why would we have the refugees? Why do we have like -- why should we accept people like me?

Why should my asylum, like why should other people come here? And I think we -- like, whoever asks this question actually forget who we are as Americans. We forget our background; we forget why we came to this country originally. We came here running from a religious tyranny and a political -- everyone came here running from a different tyranny. Everyone came here to be who they are, that's being American is, it's actually being who you are.

It doesn't mean, like, changing your hair color, or like the way you dress, or like the way you talk. It's just being free to express yourself s the way you are, this is what being American is, and those are the moral standards that we did our revolution for. So, for those who cannot stand -- those who believe in those moral standards should stand for it, and say that our -- like the way we deal with the Middle East right now is a shame. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. WIESELTIER: And now, Taha?

MR. BALI: Thank you very much, Leon, for moderating this, and for Brookings for having us. Thank you, Bobby for the promotion to full professorship at Harvard.

I'm quite humbled by the listening to my friends here, and I actually have a slightly different background. I was, I guess, privileged to come to the U.S. two or three years before the revolution started. I can still relate -- and I could still relate to high emotions and the sentiments, and the sentiments, and the exhilaration of the seized Syrians in 2011, and pushed them to take to the street in their hundreds of thousands, even though they knew that the regime had a formal policy of shooting to kill

on peaceful demonstrators.

And this enthusiasm, even from abroad, that was shared by millions of other Syrians, you know, pushed me to be active, you know, politically active in supporting the revolution, although what I did would definitely pale in comparison with what people on the ground did. So, at the expense of being a little bit anti-climactic, I'm going to take a step back and tell you how life was in Syria before the revolution. At the time of the so-called stability that is so elevated by pundits nowadays.

So I was born one year after the Hama massacre which took place in 1982. For those who don't know it -- for those who know, this is basically when the regime under the pretense of suppressing Arab insurgency by a few hundred people, or armed men basically, collectively, punished a city killing at least 10,000 people, according to the more modest estimates.

So, the Hama massacre, basically started a new phase in the Syrian life, and the regime asserted its dominance over the society by having its symbols, and that the picture of the statues of the President everywhere, and by having one of the most brutal police states, probably, on the planet at that time.

So, it was in these years of the '80s and the '90s that I and people of my generation grew up, and you could find the president's pictures everywhere, including on the school children notebooks. And people -- my generation would remember that, you know, even as a 6 or a 7-year-old you would be horrified by like defacing the face of the President on your notebook. You know, like drawing a mustache, or like putting a sticker on it, would be like an act of defiance for elementary school kid.

In school we would have all to wear the same uniforms including military fatigues when you get to seventh grade. Every morning you would have to say, "Our leader forever is Hafez al-Assad," and you would have to swear an oath out loud, to stand up to imperialism, to reactionaryism, and to crush their client tool, the criminal Muslim Brotherhood gang. You'd have to say that as a 12-year-old kid every single morning.

An act of defiance that I personally developed in high school was to actually not say these words, but only to move my lips. And, you know, I would do that always with this fear that accompanied every last Syrian that, you know, if the military instructor would see me, and we had those

in school, I would get in trouble. In fact, the government and the regime was so involved in Syrian lives that almost every last student in school had to enroll in the governing party.

And they would make sure to bring that up every single year. During high school -- middle school, high school and even in college. And because I lived a few years abroad, I was able to evade that, and I prided myself on being able to evade it, but it was always at some risk. It was so much so, that when I got accepted to medical school, I had to have my paperwork signed by the Air Force Intelligence Services. They actually oversaw admission to medical school.

But that was the year 2000, it was the year when Hafez al-Assad died and his son became president, and many Syrians actually had high hopes for the new president, if anything because of how bad his father was, so things could only go uphill, I guess, at that point.

So, this was very short-lived, it was only one or two year, it was called the Damascus Spring, and before we know it, by the year 2001/2002 life again became punctuated by these tales we keep hearing about friends, acquaintances, political figures, who got arrested, tortured, disappeared, and sometimes killed. This is when Kurd Uprising happened in 2004, and the news was suppressed heavily in Syria and we had no Internet at that time. That was definitely something in the background.

The new era of some presidents culminated in his referring them in 2007. Syria has one of the longest presidential terms on earth, probably the longest, it's seven years, and there's no term limit. And the President -- the father won by 99 percent, or 98 percent five times in a row. The son did it in 2000 and then in 2007 he again got 97 percent with the majority of the 3 percent being nullified ballots.

And this is again, not elections, this is a referendum where we have to either say yes or no. There is no other candidate on the ballot. It's not done in a secret booth, there is a security officer in every voting center, and there are always rumors, or actually laws that makes every citizen go and vote, because if you don't, they threaten you by not issuing paperwork. In my case I was preparing to come to the U.S., and the threat was that I will not get a passport.

So, I actually had to go and do that, and there's probably very few things as difficult and humiliating as voting for a President that you detest. And at that time the whole country is forced into celebrating this event. This includes civil servants taking days off, for months on end to basically go on

marches, including students, college students, teachers, and actually even on hospital premises, employees were made to dance loudly and annoying patients. I remember that as a medical student.

So, basically when I came here in 2008, I really had no regrets and, you know, I didn't look back. In 2010, on December 17, when Mohamed Bouazizi burnt himself in Tunisia, he basically fired the spark of hope that, you know, basically went across the whole four for five continents where Arabs lived or where the Syrians lived. And by March 2011, when the revolution happened, you know, it's hard to imagine that for someone who was living 10,000, you know, miles away, we actually cried tears of joy, just watching people at the table, and Kaseem and Mariela demonstrate in the streets. It was so incredibly inspiring.

A few years later, with all the destruction, with all the death, there is nothing more disheartening to someone who has been living in America for six or seven years, to see the convergence between the right and left, and basically calling Bashar al-Assad the lesser evil. This is incredibly unfortunate, and it's quite antithetical to everything that America stands for.

People on the right seem to forget how much they uphold freedom as their cornerstone value, and people on the left, progressives, make regime change to be a dirty word, when change is the cornerstone of being a progressive, and when the regime is genocidal, you know, a brutal regime that we have not seen the likes of since, probably, World War II. It's high time that this is changes, and that Syrians get the attention it deserves from America and the rest of the world. (Applause)

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you, my friends. There are questions here, I'm sure. Before we get to questions, I'm going to ask you each to answer, maybe the most difficult question of all. When we hear about the situation in Syria now, and when we hear about the predicament of the refugees now, we hear about a great deal of darkness, and the question I have for you, for each of you is: What gives you hope? What sustains you through this darkness, even in the full face of what you know about the unlikelihood of Western interventions, about the continuing savagery in Syria? What gives you hope? That's the question I want to ask.

MR. EID: Personally, I still talk to friends still inside of Syria, basically on daily basis, either in the south, or north, or near the capital. Believe me, the Syrian people are like, in my opinion,

maybe the bravest on earth. I'm inspired by the nurses, who are still working in the field hospitals, which is just random basements in -- getting bombed and shelled by Assad regime almost on daily basis, and they are helping saving lives, by the little children who are still trying to go to school, or learn something while they are actually starving, and they are getting bombed almost every day.

And still, they are still trying to make something out of themselves. I'm also inspired by the brave men who are still defending our families back in Syria, standing against the Russians, the Iranians, and all the mercenaries who came to kill them, and without having any help from anybody else. I'm very humble to be and describe myself as Syrian, and I only get my courage from watching other Syrians living inside of Syria.

MR. WIESELTIER: Mariela?

MS. SHAKER: I believe that one day the light would overcome the darkness, and I believe in our humanity. I feel powerless of course to change the current situation in Syria, but I believe in the power of music that it was the bridge which has brought me to the United States and gave me my new life. I feel music is a powerful language, whenever I perform I feel that I express myself. My tell the story of my suffering city, I tell the suffering of my people, and I feel music will, one day, help healing the pain our world has felt.

MR. WIESELTIER: Qutaiba?

MR. IDLBI: I mean, I mainly I would echo what Kassem said, yeah. I get hope when I talk to people, inside mainly. At least, I mean, until recently. Recently, I mean, I was in a very hard position, when you talk to talk to people inside and you feel they are like -- they are really -- I mean, they have the feeling that we are really abandoned after the chemical attacks. I remember talking to my brother, and he told me after the chemical attacks in Wutah, he told me even though it was very hard, in Wutah the monthly death rate is like 250 to 300, on the chemical attack night, it was 1,400, and that was too much on people.

But it told me at least people feel that, I mean, this is the first time they can actually say goodbye to their beloved ones before they are buried, because they are in one piece, because there was no blood. Even at that time people felt that the world has abandoned them, after the chemical attacks

deal -- the chemical weapons deal, but they still had hope.

Nowadays, it's not only that they feel that the world has abandoned them, but they also feel that everyone is actually against them. It's not that everyone is just standing aside. So, I'm now in the position like I feel I have actually -- I'm the one, I have to give them hope. So I get hope actually, when I go to Utah, and standing event for Syrians outside when it's 15-degrees freezing, standing four hours outside for the Syrian refugees.

When I get donations for a toy drive from Oklahoma when -- I got 2,000 toys from there, when I get emails from South Carolina telling me I have a space in my basement, or like, we have our guest room and we would like to host a Syrian refugee. That's where I get hope from.

MR. WIESELTIER: Taha?

MR. BALI: So, I would be lying if I said I'm not more cynical than I was in 2011, but there is hope for sure. I definitely echo their comments that looking at other Syrians, you can't help but being inspired. You probably have met them in -- a number of impressive Syrian men and women that I've met in the last five years, is just incredible. It's hard to even come up with the list of I think for hours.

And moreover I think that the fact that so many Syrians live abroad now, even though it definitely has its negative effects, but long-term it will have quite the positive value to the country and to the region. I think the Syrian Diaspora will bring diversity, will bring know-how, will bring, you know, different perspectives on things that we definitely missed in Syria prior to the revolution.

And finally, I think nobody probably in this whole world appreciates freedom more than Syrians now. So we have to, you know, learn this the hard way, but I don't think we'll be letting go of this at all. And even though we get all the bad publicity for ISIS, it's actually Syrians who are on the very forefront against ISIS and the regime at the same time.

And there's probably no more -- no other Arab country that has gone far in fighting extremism and radicalism, not only militarily, but even intellectually, as much as Syrians have gone, because they had to. It wasn't up to them, they didn't have the privilege of taking decades to actually overcome the extreme forms of political Islam, so they had to do it, you know, right there on the spot as they were fighting another battle.

And now, you know, a political Islamist cannot just throw up to Syrians and, you know, quote some verses of the Koran and get their attention. They have to prove that they are actually, you know, promoting good governance, they are promoting rights for the people, they are promoting rights for everyone. They are not going to be oppressing people, and just, you know, abusing religion. I really feel this realization the Syrians have come to is something extremely valuable, and a lot of other countries around us are yet to get there, so this definitely gives me hope.

MR. WIESELTIER: Thank you. We will now take questions from the floor. I think there should wandering microphones. There is one, or are there are two. The question in the back, all the way, the gentleman there; and then I see one --

MR. PASHA: Hi. Rabin Pasha, Founder of Middle East Young Entrepreneurs' Dreams. First of all I wanted to thank you so much for your very sincere and inspiring stories of survival, and sharing the situation the ground. I think it's extremely critical for the refugee community for Syria to speak up and to educate the American public now more than ever. I, myself, came from Iraq as a refugee 20 years ago, and listening to your stories reminded me of the time that we had to go to school under Saddam Hussein -- under Saddam, and chanting those stories, and seeing the remnants of genocide, and the Iraqi Kurdistan, and with the chemical weapons and all, and so many in the international community, at the time, did not even think of us, and give us the attention that we needed.

I'd like to ask you and just to speak about the younger generation now that’s in Syria, and especially looking at you, you know, the voices of inspiration, of hope, that would rebuild the country after ISIS, after Assad. You know, as we look into what institutions need to be rebuilt, and we look into an economy and return to resilience. I mean, I've been to Damascus myself, before, when I was working in Iraq and the U.N., and the amount of liveliness, and the resilience of people and the commerce was just wonderful, and that needs to come back.

But it won't just come back through the politics and through the United Nations or through the United States, and the disenfranchisement of young people have to be channeled towards the economy through the entrepreneurial spirit; we live that hope. So what can we do? What you can as the inspirations and stories of survival, and Diaspora community, and I look at you and I also look at myself,

working together, what can we do for the future young generation starting now, to inspire them into thinking of envisioning a greater dream of rebuilding their countries? Thank you. And thank you, again, for sharing your stories.

MR. EID: Thank you for sharing your stories as well. Personally, I'm going to be very, very honest, and say right now I'm very interested in saving lives in Syria than thinking about rebuilding Syria. I ask and I keep asking for safe zones in Syria to protect civilians, so we can give the civil community a chance to rebuild to show the terrified Syrians who have been living under five years of genocide and atrocities that there is a third option beyond Assad and ISIS, which is living a free and a safe area, where you can have you children and your family living together.

The can go to school, they can eat without worrying about getting staved. They can breathe fresh air without getting worried about inhaling chemical weapons or chlorine gas. Right now this is my main concern, and I think this is something all of us, anybody who is interested, really interested in helping the Syrian people, is to help save the lives in Syria.

MR. BALI: So, I completely agree with these remarks, you should definitely protect life before you go to anything else. You know, that said, I think there is quite a bit of mobilization from Syrian communities throughout Europe, and in the U.S., and basically trying to establish different NGOs and different bridges between Syrian refugees, and Syrians inside of Syria, and the communities in the West.

So there are, you know, great efforts to support educational faculties inside Syria to mentor students abroad, to have people who are not able to complete their studies there, come here on grants, and several other efforts of that nature. I'm not going to name any organizations, but there is many of them, for sure, and this is all the resource available on line, we can talk afterwards if you want.

MR. WIESELTIER: A question here?

SPEAKER: Mohammed Hannon?

SPEAKER: Sure. Mohammed Hannon here, an American journalist. Well, thank you so much for sharing about your very inspiring stories. Could you, please, share with us, about the challenges you face in your day-to-day life, living here in the United States of America. Thank you.

MR. WIESELTIER: (Inaudible)? But you don't have to.

MS. SHAKER: No -- Of course. I mean for me, I got the chance to meet some wonderful Americans, and I truly feel that I'm home. I got along very well with my professors in Monmouth College and I truly consider them, like more than a family to me, more than a home to me. The challenge of course being really far from my parents and my brother, and know that it was the last goodbye, this is what, like, really breaks my heart the most. Other than that I feel I'm so lucky to be here.

MR. WIESELTIER: Kassem?

MR. EID: Yesterday I finished my second year outside of Syria. I came to the United States on March 13, 2014. Since I came here I was just doing advocacy work, I want even thinking about applying for asylum, and then I have to, because I had no chance to go back to Syria of course. After I applied for asylum, that was a year-something ago, until now I got nothing, I just got a work permit five months ago, and it was very hard to find a job.

Jut living in the States everybody knows it's very expensive. You have to have work, I couldn't finish my college because I was part of the revolution. The regime actually erased all of my records from Syria, it's like I never existed in Syria, my ID, my passport, everything. And it was very hard here to apply for school, but the hardest thing was to wake up every day, and because I'm interested in Syria I have to follow the news, and have to keep track of what's going on.

Especially in the past six months since the presidential election started, the hardest part of my day, is after waking up and opening Facebook or Twitter, is just to listen, and watch all the crazy statements I'm hearing from the candidates, about refugees, about Syria, about Muslims. Ben Carson describes us as dogs. Donald Trump, I don't think I need -- even have to talk about him. It's very, very scary, just to think that one of these lunatics might actually become the President and will actually be the President.

I just can't understand that, especially coming from Syria and going through hell, to have a good President in power, I'm really shocked and very confused how Americans are actually letting these lunatics be -- even like a presidential candidate. This is very terrifying. And a piece of advice from somebody who survived hell to have a good president, I think you should do something now before it's too late. Thank you. (Applause)

MR. BALI: So, I definitely agree with Kassem's colorful remarks. So, beside the emotional burden of following the news every day, and having this kind of double identity, where you are walking very nice, peaceful, calm streets and looking at your phone, at scenes of a country basically completely burning down. There are daily difficulties like paperwork, it's extremely difficult for Syrians on every level possible.

So, it's very hard to get visas for your relatives including your immediate family. Most cases, you know, people have failed to do that. Friends who already have green cards, and citizenship are not able to expedite the process for their parents who are 75 or 80-year-old, and living under siege or in completely impoverished areas of Syria. So there is no special treatment for such humanitarian cases for Syrians.

Work permit is very hard to get by for Syrians, whether own TPS, their temporary protected status, or asylum, or even applying for a green card. To get a travel parole to go back to Syria, it's probably hard to get into Syria, but to Lebanon and Turkey and see your family, who are not able to get visa to the U.S. is also very difficult.

So there is this increased burden of security checks, and bureaucratic processing of Syrian cases, on every level of the government, and ironically, this is not sufficient for the political candidates not to still use the issue, and make the Syrian refugees a partisan problem.

And probably this is last point, that we are going to, you know, bring up in answering you question, it's also fairly disturbing to reduce Syria to the refugees' issue, and this is something that, you know, many Syrians who care about Syria, Syrian-Americans or Syrians living in the U.S., will find very difficult, you know, mentally and intellectually. Because, you know, refugees in the U.S. so far are only 2,400. Best case scenario if the administration gets its way, it's going to 10,000 this year, and this is basically one in a 1,000 of people displaces this year.

So 1 in a 1,000, so it's very hard to feel so passionately about that issue, and then, you know, 99.9 percent of other displaced people are not actively helped by this administration or other countries of the world. So I think these are some of the difficulties, to name a few.

MR. IDLBI: I think the main -- the first challenge is, will naturally mean refugees by

choice. Usually if you are traveling to a new place, you kind of like prepare yourself before you pack your stuff, you know about the place you are going on, you know, like you read a lot about it. What it means in our cases, I mean, I left Damascus, I had nothing, not on my back, not even in my pockets.

I mean, I just have the clothes that I had on, and I left, and I cannot get any of my stuff back. Even like when I came here, me, and for the first three months, I didn't know if I'm going to stay or I'm going to leave. So, I think part of it is like -- it's kind of like the hole that Leon talked about. We kind of like -- I mean, for me, I don't know, I feel like if I have to step up, like, what about the rest of the people, also lie down in the ash, I mean, if I focus on myself, what about people who cannot really be here, who can't actually work on themselves.

Should I still be, you know, working on the revolution and supporting the people, or should I focus on my personal career? I think it's kind of like you have this double identity or double life, also being kind of like the messenger in between explaining, you know, to your new community, what your old community is experiencing, what can (inaudible) community whether it's -- what being Syrian is.

And I explained to the Syrian community back home what being an American is, because I mean, in both communities I mean, we hear have an image about, like in the Middle East that, you know, we had and our mind, but also people in the Middle East have their image about us that the -- I mean, we put our image on media, they put theirs on media and like invasions, and all of that.

So I mean, being the messenger in between is actually a really hard job, and I feel at the same time, it's like something that you have to do, because if you are not going to do it, who would. And I mean, if there should be a time where, like this kind of, you know, east-west, war and propaganda war have to stop it somewhere. And the thing it's in our -- you know, like our children, actually to stop that.

MR. WIESELTIER: Wait, here's a question, yes. Yes, yes, you.

MS. SILVI: Thank you. So, my name is Jennifer Silvi. I'm a writer, I write about geopolitics and political economy. I'm curious to know what your reactions were, and maybe, if you know, the people at home, their reaction to the recent talks in Munich and in Geneva where the ceasefire was agreed to. I'm just curious if that -- none of you mentioned it as something that gave you hope, so I'm just curious what your thoughts are on that. Thank you.

MR. WIESELTIER: Well, there's a Brookings question. Do you want to --

MR. EID: Sure. Well, I wrote several articles in The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and I was always trying to deliver one message by telling different stories, which is, Obama destroyed Syria. It's very simple. This guy is more concerned about his legacy than people. He is a hypocrite who is using refugees and humanitarian aid, to shine up his image, the fact, the simple facts can say that (inaudible) Act in 2011, or even '12, it would have been very simple in Syria, life would have been very good, Assad would have stepped down, he could have saved the country, saved lives, and stop ISIS from growing.

What's going on right now in Munich is a joke, a sad joke, unfortunately, because people are dying because of that joke. The Russians are being part of a peace process, while they are bombing the shit out of hospitals and schools. I don't think that's anything close to diplomacy or humanity, or anything.

Kerry and Obama are just looking around trying to get anything to throw in front of American public, and tell them, look, we are trying to bring peace to Syria, I can just say that the only thing Obama brought to Syria was war and devastation; and I really hope that his legacy that he's aiming for through the blood of Syrians will eventually hunt him down in history, and show the entire world that this guy could have been a hero but he chose to be a villain. (Applause)

MR. WIESELTIER: I'm very glad you asked that question. You wanted to say something?

MR. BALI: So, Kassem doesn't mince any words. But yeah, I would say that the vast majority of students are not terribly hopeful about what's going on now. I think every time there is a new statement from the administration, the regime, and Russia and Iran, look for only two words in the whole statement which is, political solution, or there is only a political solution.

So, I mean, they strive to perpetrate this status where the U.S. is not actually enforcing a transition or it doesn't have to be only the U.S., but there is no international will to enforce a transition, and as long as the strategy is to just, you know, look Putin in the eye and, you know, wish that he would feel pain of Syrians, Bashar al-Assad himself, this is not going to go anywhere, unfortunately.

MR. WIESELTIER: One final question in the back.

SPEAKER: Thanks for your stories, guys. My name is Paul, I'm Lebanese, partly Syrian. We've witnessed the atrocities of the regime in Lebanon, before you witnessed them in Syria. So we kind of share the same pain. I mean, as my having part of the family back in Syria, they felt just like you were saying, betrayed by the free world, by the President of the free world, that was supposed to stand up to what he said in 2013 when chemical weapons were used in Syria.

Now it's too late, maybe. I don't what can be done. My question is about refugees. I worked with refugees for several months in Beirut and the situation is devastating, like devastating. Whether it's international organizations, local organizations, Arab organizations, it's terrible.

My question is, I guess. How will admitting more refugees in the States -- I mean raising the number maybe from 10,000 to 20,000 to 50,000? Is alleviating the pain of 50,000 people, you have 9 million displaced Syrians, 9 million refugees all of over the region; whether it's in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey. How will raising this number affect positively, in a sense, the Syrian people? And wouldn't it be much more effective to establish like you guys said, a no-fly zone on the borders with Turkey, where people can live freely, and you can, in a sense, cause less dilemma worldwide, and actually solve the problem itself.

MR. WIESELTIER: Qutaiba, do you want to say anything to that?

MR. IDLBI: Yeah. I mean, you are absolutely, you know, with treating cancer with bandages, that's what we are doing with refugee policy. But at the meantime, if I know no one is providing me with cancer treatment I have to deal with it with the list that I'm getting. So, yeah, if like the only thing I'm going to be having these bandages, I will accept it, I mean, that's how I see it.

As you've said, like the real solution should be, is yes, to have a political transition in Syria, to allow Syrians to have their own voice, to decide, who to rule them, who their government is. That's the real solution, that's when refugees actually would come back, because -- and also this is not about reconstruction mainly.

Areas like Idlib, or just Deir ez-Zor or Arihah, that were, you know, liberated from the regime and like the Iranian militias last year, people actually went back weeks after, like you know, it was

the -- although there was a lot of destruction, but people were like willing actually to go back and just like -- kind of like that the minimum living but, yeah, they wanted to go back to their destroyed homes and, like, stay there.

So, if we have the transition where, like, people are not afraid of their -- you know, about their lives, are not afraid that someone is going to knock on their door, and take them, and they will disappear. Are not afraid that, you know, tanks and airplanes are going to shell their homes, yeah, they would be here. That would be a treatment if that's not with, like with the recent policy, that's not applicable for us, or not available for us, you know, getting refugees here is like the minimum we can do.

MR. WIESELTIER: I want to say to our friends, I want to thank them. I want to say to our friends that they are our friends, and that we are their friends. And hearing what you've said today, I want to say also that we are your friends because all the values that you expressed here today, freedom, democracy, decency, openness, music, are all values that are also our values.

They are Syrian values, they are American values, they are human values. And so I want to thank you for coming, we can offer you not success, but we can offer you solidarity and say to you, that we not only support you, but we honor you. Thank you very much. (Applause)

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