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SARIA'S STORY:
LIFE AS A SYRIAN REFUGEE

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, December 6, 2017

PARTICIPANTS:

Conversation and Q&A:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Good afternoon. We'll jump right in. Thrilled to be here. My name is Arne Duncan and I'm lucky enough to be a small, small piece of Brookings. And I get to play Oprah today, which is the easy job. And this one is a big deal for me. We're just going to basically give Saria a chance to sort of walk through his life. And he's a young man but has done more and seen more than most of us will do in a lifetime. And he and I got to know each other last summer when my family visited Jordan and was just unbelievably moved by his intelligence and leadership and what he's been through and what he's doing. And we'll get there -- it's a crazy story -- but he's now a freshman at Georgetown University here in town, which is just absolutely remarkable.

Anyway, so I'll be quiet. I'll ask questions for a while. Do we have a timekeeper? I guess we'll (inaudible) on time and so we'll leave 15-20 minutes at the end for the audience. So give me a five minute signal if you could. That would be great.

But let's just go back. We'll just sort of walk right through your life, growing up as a young boy in Syria. Let's just start there. What was that like and what was normal, what would be very different for folks in this environment to think through. And we'll just sort of take it a step at a time.

MR. SAMAKIE: Perfect. Well, thank you all for inviting me here. Thank you for Brookings. You know, honestly if you asked me like four months ago of what is Brookings Institute I would be like I have no idea. (Laughter)

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I didn't know either not too long ago, so.

MR. SAMAKIE: If you asked me four years ago what is Georgetown, I would be like I don't know. So thank you all.

You know, I mentioned this in my short bio, but really probably the strongest memory that I have from living in Syria is when my dad, who was a tough man, you know not

only with me, with my siblings, with my mom, and everything, decided to removed me out of private school where he enrolled my siblings and he sent me to public school. And to him -- and I'm quoting him here -- you know, a private school is not going to benefit you with anything. I'm going to put you in public school so, you know, where everyone goes to school. So I did that, you know, but education was not the important factor here. For my dad he had seen my brother go to university and he saw the effect of university on my brother and he was like universities corrupt the mind. You're going to be with me, you're going to go through the family business, which was like an agriculture business, tourism. He's like you're going to do that and we will -- you know you will finish your elementary school, high school, but then you're out.

And so I kind of accepted that reality mainly because saying no to an Arab dad is a very hard thing to do. (Laughter) So I accepted that reality and went on with it. But really public school all that we learned was really constituted by our dear President on the wall, you know, framed. And I remember I used to tell my friends, I was like -- you know, if we were to criticize the government in any way he would be like, shhh. You know, black guards are going to come and take us, don't say anything about this. And we just kind of lived in that reality. But really what affected me was seeing that but simultaneously as well going and experiencing life outside school. And that is during the summer, or during whenever my dad decided to be like okay, this week is not important for school, come with me. I would go out, interact with people who were 20-30 years older than me. I mean it's kind of crazy that when I was 10 years old I was stuffing pillows under me and driving a car. At 12 I was arrested for driving because I was 12. You know, you're not supposed to be driving when you're 12. (Laughter) But, you know, given how the situation is I was able to go, they let me out of the station. I worked with people, I had a team that I was running, responsible for at the age of 13. And going back to school I would tell my friends these things and they wouldn't believe it. And so that really had a great effect on me. And my dad would always remind me, he's like -- he had this quote which when you first hear it it's kind of crazy, but then as I continue reflecting on it, it makes sense, which is

if you give a book to -- and he was say it in his Arabic accent and everything -- if you give a book to a donkey the donkey will learn the content of the book in 10 years or 20 years. Eventually it will learn it. But if you throw a donkey in life the donkey won't know how to do anything. And he was like I want you to be someone who can maneuver through life.

And so I was like, all right. And that, you know, continued until ninth grade. It continued until ninth grade when in ninth grade I finished and the Arab Spring started happening. I started looking at the revolutions in Tunisia, in Egypt, and I started seeing all these young people really fighting for their rights, the spread of social media. My siblings became very interested, would listen to revolutionary songs all the time, calling for freedom, calling for democracy. And none of us really imagined that this would come to Syria until the day it did.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: And talk about -- we'll get there in one second -- talk about the reality you've said of bodies on cabs being driven around to send a message. What was it like to live under Daddy Assad?

MR. SAMAKIE: Yeah, Daddy Assad, you know -- and these stories are from my mom and my dad, the things they've witnessed. They were the old generation, very afraid, very against the revolution or anything that would change the status quo. And one of the things I remember hearing from whether my mom or our cousins is back in the '80s they would tie people to tanks and would drag them in the street as a reminder this is what happens when you revolt against the Assad regime. My dad's cousin served in the military and was in Hama at the time, you know, of the uprising in the '80s. And he saw it in his eyes how instead of executing people with guns they would nail them to the head standing in a row. And to me I'm listening at these and seeing these things and I'm like, you know, you guys can't see that we have someone who might be bad guys from these things. And, yeah, so these are the stories that we grew up hearing and living under in Syria.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: And you grew up fast to a lot of responsibility, you were on a team of guys early, grew up hard but not crazy. And then, at least from my perspective,

sort of everything changed when you were 15 --

MR. SAMAKIE: Yeah.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: -- with the Arab Spring. And I just want you to take your time and walk through two radically different -- or radically crazy experiences. Sort of walk through leading up that, what happened. Let's just take one at a time, just go slow through it.

MR. SAMAKIE: So after I finished freshman year of high school I dropped out of school and mainly first because my school was turned into a military base. Second of all my dad found it as a perfect opportunity to be like okay, no more school, it's too dangerous. And so I was still working, but first of all I was separated from my friends, I had much more time to involve myself into the uprising, witnessing demonstrations, participating in ones, running away from the government forces. And so I started developing ideas and I wanted to express them. So I went to Facebook and I started writing my ideas on Facebook. I turned to photography mainly because I felt I was very surprised with what's happening in the country. And I felt that I'm slowly slipping away into depression and I wanted an outlet to express myself. And so I went to photography, started doing some photography. And when I say doing photography don't think very fancy, small phone, just really about pictures of flowers and stuff, but to me it meant something. And until one day, on Friday -- and Fridays in Syria were known to be the big thing, especially at the beginning of the revolution because every Friday was called something different and it represented something different for the revolution. And on Friday my cousin and I went to the mosque for Friday prayers and after we got out, we were in the old city of Aleppo, old section, and we just pulled out our phones and started taking pictures. And five minutes later we were picked up by shabihis, which were mercenaries by the Syrian government who were paid for every person they brought in. The next thing you know on the spot they accused us of working with foreign news agencies. Foreign news agencies at the beginning of the revolution were not allowed to enter the country, as you know. And they took us to the military intelligence in Aleppo. We happened to be lucky to be the first people to arrive that day and

they were ready for us. They threw us on the floor, started beating us immediately, regardless of our age. I was 15, my cousin was in his 20s. Regardless of our age they started beating us immediately and then stand against the wall. We gave in our belongings down to our shoelaces. And I remember this guy going into the room with a water pipe, and he's like insulting us directly. And after they guy in the room told him that we were accused of working with foreign news agencies the guy takes out his pipe and starts beating us on the back, on our heads, right away. And so I knew that the time it's a matter of life and death. So I extend my hand to my cousin standing to my left and I grab it and I'm like, it was great meeting you, you're probably going to die soon or never be let out of this place. Because I had friends, I knew people who were captured by the Syrian regime, captured by the Syrian intelligence, and did not return.

And, you know, to give you some context, in terms of the intelligence in Syria, really if you're in you're dead and if you're out of there you're reborn. And so going in I did not know if we're walking out of this at all. And it was important to me to make peace with myself, with my cousin, and to really end this the right way. So we did, and he kept beating us until they discovered on our Syrian IDs that I happen to be born in Canada and my cousin has a British nationality. And immediately he's like stop, stop, stop, stop, don't hit them. And the treatment changed 180 degrees. Now he's like, oh, we're very sorry, we deeply apologize for doing this. And a guy comes from upstairs and he's like you guys are coming with me. And one level of stairs and we're up there, investigation. Now the narrative changed again. It's like for me they're like you stand on this tile -- it was about this big. And they're like, if you move out of this tile, if you sit down, if you say anything we're going to kill you. And my cousin, they asked him to do the same thing at the end of the hallway.

You know, going to the investigation -- you know, this is a long story and I'm going to try and --

SECRETARY DUNCAN: No, no, take your time.

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MR. SAMAKIE: Yeah. The first thing I remember him telling me was enter the room. The room just -- still that picture of the room, half-gray, half-white, frame of the president on the wall. And he's sitting there behind his table, lit on a cigarette. He looks at me and he's like -- and I'm there shivering, I'm hearing people being tortured downstairs. He lits on his cigarette and he's like tell me everything or I'll put in a place where even god won't know where you are. And, to me, at that moment I recognized that I either, you know -- I am weak in front of him and he can take advantage of that weakness, or I show him that I am actually strong in front of him. And so I look at him and I'm like do you want me to tell you the truth or do you want me to tell you something that will make you happy, because these two things are completely different. And the guy goes like, tell me everything. And so one of the things that came up was -- he asked me this, he's like are you against the government. And I was like, for you what does the government mean, and he is like I'm asking you are you against, you know, the regime. I'm like are you talking about the president or are you talking about the government as a whole. And he was like, you tell me. And I'm like well -- and, you know, it's probably not the right decision to be in the Syrian military intelligence and be like you're against the regime, but I was like, you know, I don't know if I'm walking out of this, might as well just tell him the full story. So I was like, you know, I'm against the regime. And he's like you dare tell me this here? And I'm like you wanted the truth. And I'm like but before you judge me let me tell you why I'm against the regime. When you work in agriculture and you have your plants to farm and you have an official letter to go get your diesel from the gas station and you got there and you get bullied and you get hit and you get threatened with guns, and you go to the military just 100 meters away from you and you ask them for their protection, they look at you and they tell you it's not our problem it's yours. Would you be with the government or against the government from my point of view? I was like I thought that the government is there to work for the people, to protect the people, but as a citizen I do not see that.

They printed out my entire Facebook wall and I tried to act smart and be like

someone is stealing my identity on Facebook. That didn't go well. He held my head, banged it against the table and I was like, all right, this is my user name and password. And my cousin -- he was telling me this later after we went out -- he was like -- because they took my cousin up with them to the computer room and he was like I've never seen in my life a scroll on the Facebook user name section. And when they wrote our user names there is like a scroll and it was really tiny. You know that there a lot of people that have been there. Printed out my entire Facebook profile and highlighted everything that was in opposition to the government. But I intentionally did not write anything that was opposing to the government directly. I mean all of them were statements that you can interpret against the government, but nothing was direct. And one of them, I still remember, was a chant we used to do in demonstration, which is whoever kills his people is a traitor. And he comes to me and he's like here you are claiming that our president is a traitor. And I was like I am not claiming our president is a traitor. No. I was like what does it say. And he's like whoever kills his people is a traitor. And I'm like so you think that the president is killing his people, right, and that's why he's a traitor? And he's like, no, no, no, I didn't say that, you said it. (Laughter) I was like, no, I didn't say it, I said whoever kills his people is a traitor. And he's like, what do you mean? And I'm like, whoever picks up a guy, you know, and shoots a Syrian, shoots at another person who also is a Syrian, regardless who they are, is a traitor, right or wrong? And he's like right. So I'm like so why are you thinking I'm going against the government or against the president? I'm not doing that.

So this goes on. One of the funny things is they found a picture of freedom on my phone and they asked me, they're like where is this from, and I'm like Google. And he looks at the guy scribing next to him and he's like who's Google? (Laughter) And he looks at me and he's like, who's Google? And I'm like Google is a search engine. And he looks at the guy next to him, he's like we should block Google. (Laughter) This was at a time when Facebook was just unblocked, like one year and a half. Facebook officially became unblocked in Syria in 2010. So we're talking, you know, 2012. Not such a long time ago.

Anyway, you know, for me -- they let me out. I had to sign -- at the end they told -- when we were going out they looked at me and my cousin and they're like -- the guy who was 15 years old had caused more trouble than the 20 year old. And they let us out and when I was leaving they're like we're going to keep an eye on you and I was like all right. Obviously I had to delete everything off of my Facebook at the time. Thank god they didn't ask for my Twitter. (Laughter) That would have been a disaster. And I went out -- and the reason why I went out is because of being born in Canada, you know, because of having that privilege. And walking out of that place I was like, all right, I had the privilege of being born in Canada and being let out of the Syrian intelligence, but what about the thousands of others who were detained and are still detained in the intelligence right now who don't have a foreign nationality that can save them. And, to me, that was a reminder that I survived this and there's a reason behind it.

But then not long afterwards, a month later, I was kidnapped by the Free Syrian Army. My dad wakes me up in the morning, he's like we're going to our farm outside Aleppo, like 100 kilometers. He's like you're coming with me and I'm like all right. We go there. Middle of the day an armed car drives into our place, they ask my dad for the car, and he refuses because he says the car is registered under my name so if I give you the car anything you do with it is going to go back to me. Immediately they look at me and they're like take his son. They pick me up, handcuff me, throw me in the back of their pickup, which is like filled with bombs, AK-47s, rifles, all you can think of. They take our car as well. And at that moment when I'm laying in the back of the pickup my dad comes to me -- and he's in his 70s -- he looks at me and he's crying. Now he's begging them now to take him instead of me, or just take the car and let me go away. And they promise him that -- and we're talking about people who are 24-25 max -- and they look at him, they're like we promise you we're going to let him off. And I needed at the moment to say something to my dad to ensure him that whether I return or not it's going to be all right. And I look at him and I'm like, dad, you know, I will come back, but if I don't please forgive me.

And we continue driving. You know, pretty early in the drive I realized that we're not going -- they're not going to let me out anyway, and we arrive to our first location. They take me in, and trust me, that was probably the first time where I looked at the wall and it was very interesting for an extended period of time. And a guy comes in, very tall, orange shirt, black pants, heavily bearded, bald. Sits next to me, he looks at me, and he's like we kidnapped you. And I honestly start laughing. Yes, I know you kidnapped me. (Laughter) And he's like we kidnapped you and we're going to ask your parents for \$2 million. Your dad works with the Syrian government, he supports them with guns, appears on national TV occasionally -- which was all wrong. And they're like \$2 million, you're not walking out of here without it or you're going back in a plastic bag. And so I'm like you're probably going to have to kill me pretty early because there's no way they're going to be able to provide you with \$2 million. And he leaves. And the guy standing at the door guarding the door comes in afterwards and he's like are you crazy, Saria? And I'm like, no, not really, why? And he's like the guy you just sat with beheaded nine people and you're going to be number ten, and you were there laughing. And I'm like, yes, he beheaded nine people but I still don't see why I should be that afraid of him and telling him what I really think.

You know, the first few days I got to know the people who were responsible for me, and for me I would always ask them question. They got annoyed to a point where how much questions I asked about themselves, about what they used to do. One of them used to go to university, another was a defect of the Syrian military. And these two, they're really interesting stories for me and they stuck with me because one of them was a university student. And I asked him, why did you join? And he was like I used to go on demonstrations with the peaceful resistance and everything, but when I was standing there and I held one of my friends dying between my arms after he was shot by the regime I was fed up with this and I wanted to pick up the guns and I wanted to shoot back. The guy who was the defector from the military, I asked him why did you join the Free Syrian Army. And he was like I was stationed in Homs and

they asked me to -- I was a sniper and they asked me to position myself on top of one of the buildings and shoot whoever was going, whoever is walking, a man, a child, a woman, a pregnant lady. No matter who it is you shoot them. And he was like I could not do that. But I joined them. And they're like please understand that while we're here and while we're a part of the Free Syrian Army we are still soldiers being given orders. And to me that was eye opening because -- especially now you see while the Syrian regime talks about the Free Syrian Army while the Free Syrian Army talks about the -- especially when it comes to the soldiers. At the end of the day they're people given orders. And to me it was important to see the humanity of these people and to really understand what they wanted.

And when I asked them what do you want guys, and they're like for this to end, for us to go back, open a small house, get married, have children, and that's it. And we would joke about this when I was kidnapped, but they were like, sorry, your dad is going to give us so much money, we're probably going to take part of that money and get married with it. And I was like please invite me to that wedding when you get married. (Laughter) But the crazy things that happened was, for example, one night when -- so one of them was called (speaking foreign language), and that translates literally into twilight. And the guy asked me if I would take him as a brother. And it's crazy to take someone who just kidnapped you as a brother, and I was aware of that. But I was so vulnerable that I wanted someone and I accepted him as a brother. And one day I was by myself in the room, he walks into the room, has a rifle with him, sits down next to me. And he's like have you ever held a rifle before and I was like, you know, fortunately not. And he's like well I'm going to teach you how to put a rifle apart today, I'm going to teach you how to shoot. And I was like okay. So he teaches me how to put the rifle apart, how to hold it, and now the rifle is in my hand. And he's sitting next to me, he's unarmed, and then this situation, the shift of power is with the person who kidnapped. And the kidnapper is there unarmed. And I hold that AK-47 and I throw it back at him. And he looks at me and he's like what did you do? And I'm like this is the thing that ruined our revolution. And I was like this is

not what I stand for. I was like if we're going to hold the revolution that we've wanted from the beginning this is not the -- we don't fight it with guns. It's not necessarily that I want to kill everyone who has a different opinion than I do. I'll sit, I'll listen. Regardless of what your perspective is, I will listen to you. And he was like who taught you this and I was like no one, it's part of being human. And it turns out that it was a trick. They wanted to test me if -- you know, they wanted to test me and before entering the room he took out the pin of the rifle, which is the most important part of the rifle, that shoots the bullet up. And he was like if you had done anything people were standing outside ready to shoot you. I would have taken you out immediately.

And another incident was perhaps when one of them came at night, very -- he was very angry. What happened at the night was there was a lot of shelling in the area and they attributed that shelling and that fight that my dad had sent the military to save me. And I was like, Jesus Christ. I was like, guys, he did not do that. And a guy comes at night, you know, 2:00 a.m. in the morning going crazy. And he's like it's all because of you, it's all because of your father, he sent the military, we lost a lot of good men. And he asked me to sit in the corner. Brought a flashlight and lit it in my face until the sun rose. I was practically blind by the time he finished. And then he sat me down and said sorry, you know, I'm a heavy smoker. He pulls out two cigarettes, places them next to each other, and he's like if you pick this one we will reinvestigate your story. But if it turns out that whatever we have against you is right we will not kill you first, but kill your family, your friends, everyone you love, in front of you and then kill you. If you pick the other one, you confess, we let you out, we go get your father, and we bring him. And for me I knew that I can't take any of these two. And so for the next three hours or so I looked at him and I was like whatever you have against me is wrong. And the guy goes crazy, lifts me up from my hair -- that's probably -- I lost some hair here, slaps me twice, punches me once, asks me to stand in the corner, calls for the torture tools. And that was an ironic moment where the torture tools arrived and breakfast arrived with the torture tools as well. One guy

brought breakfast and the other brought torture tools. Both different guys and looking at each other. The guy who brought the breakfast goes in, looks at the guy who's ready to torture me and he's like what are you doing to (speaking foreign language)? They gave me a title (speaking foreign language), which is father of Suse. And he's like I'm going to torture him, and he's like no, you can't do that, you can't. This is not how we do it. And so they sent the torture tools away.

We sat down, the put the breakfast down on the floor, and the two guys sit down and the guy who's going to torture me -- and I'm still standing in the corner. And he's like -- the two guys ask me to come and join them for breakfast but I don't respond until the guy who was just going to torture asks me to come and join him. And so I do. I go, I sit next to him, and as I'm about to sip my tea he holds my hand and he's like slap me. And I take it back and I was like no, I'm not going to do it. And his face -- I remember it turns red, probably as red as my face right now -- turns red and the other guys look at him. And he's like sorry, I tortured you all night, please slap me so I can forgive myself. And I was like I'm not going to slap you. I was like I forgive you, that's it. Afterwards this guy, you know, became my other best friend there. One day I woke up in the morning, he's wearing my shoes, jumping right, left, and center. He's like these shoes are so comfortable, can I take them for the day? And I was like yeah, sure, take them for the day. Leave me something to wear.

But the next two incidents were really the ones that really opened my eyes. And please hear -- I don't want you to think that I was the heroic person going against them with all my strength all the time because at night, every day, I would sit and I would cry in the corner when everyone would be asleep. And I would pray to god and I would say please, god, if this is my time let it be honorable. If not, give me the strength to fight against these people. And I understood. And kind of what gave me strength is that if I die in their hand it will be such a strong message to show how the people who took an oath to protect the people have killed one of the people. And to me that was a good enough cause to die for. And so one day when their

general comes in the room pretty angry, sits me down on my knees, my hands were free behind my back, my eyes were blindfolded, takes out his gun and puts it right on my head. And he's like are you going to confess or not, we're wasting time on you. And I was like I've told you everything. Whatever you have against me is wrong. And he's like, all right. And at the time I knew that I had to do something. This is going to be so quick. Like it's a 50-50 percent change. And so I take out my hand and I place it on his gun and I'm like shoot. And he's like what? And I'm like shoot. If this bullet is meant to kill me it will, but if not I dare you to shoot. And thankfully he did not shoot. The guy takes his gun and walks out of the room. And the four guys that are protecting me, they look at me and they're like we kidnap people who are 30 and 40 years old and they are there, you know, begging us not to kill them, and here you are 15 years old not giving a damn about life. And I told them the reason why I thought my death would be honorable if I did.

But really the second time that stuck with me the most, which is when they brought me an old guy, sat down in front of me and started reciting verses from the Koran, cherry picked to whatever he wanted. He sits in front me and I'm like I'm going to respect you mainly because you're an old man, but whatever you're saying -- and the verses you're reciting are completely out of context, completely wrong. And saying that to an old guy who's completely an extremist sets him crazy. The guy stands up and he's like chop his right arm and his left leg and he walks out of the room. And he's like I want them in a plastic bag and we're going to send them to his family. The guys are like, sorry, please tell them what they want, we don't want to do this to you. And I'm like I will not. You know, if this is meant to happen it will. And this ideology of if something is meant to happen to me, good or bad, I really picked it up from my dad. Two things that he taught me, never harm anyone and always believe that if anything is going to happen it will happen for a reason. And I took that and that's why, you know, when I first came out of being kidnapped I called him and he was like how are you, and I'm like I'm good. And he's like what happened and I'm like I applied everything you taught me.

But funny enough, when I was leaving -- and the negotiations between the kidnappers and my brother -- because my brother helped the negotiations -- were all recorded because my brother downloaded an app, so they were like part of a short documentary that we did -- but what happened is when I was leaving, you know, my brother comes to the pickup point and I go see him, I give him a hug and I look at him, and he's like in a moment of shock. And I turn around and there are like these 20 guys standing saluting me. And I was like what is happening. And they're like you have proven to be stronger and more courageous than we can ever be and they're like we would like to offer you a job to work with us. You never have to go into battle, you can order your office on line, for some weird reason. I found that weird. You can get you a car and you can start working with us. And I'm like no, thank you, I really want to go back to school.

And I gave them my number, I gave them my house number. And they did call. My mom picked up the phone and they're like oh, hi, where's (speaking foreign language), we're looking for him. We're his friends, we're in Aleppo now, tell him we say hi. And I unfortunately wasn't there to pick up the phone, but I go into the room and my mom's like there's this guy called (speaking foreign language) and this guy called (speaking foreign language), they're like your friends. She's like sorry, who are these people and I was like oh, those are my kidnappers; what happened? (Laughter) And she said no, oh my god. We didn't pay \$2 million, we paid around \$20,000. But yeah, that's these two differences in terms of who I got taken by.

And one question that I always get is who treated you better. And I was like it's not really about who treated me better, they both did something that's unethical, unmoral, you know, not normal, and that is they kidnapped someone who is 15 years old. And it's not about who treated me right or wrong, but it's really about what I had to learn from these two experiences. And going back to my house, you know, I was shocked, my family was shocked that I was just like continuing my daily life after -- like the next day. And I asked myself repeatedly since then of how I am not traumatized. And I still don't know why.

And so these are the two things that stay with me. The experience of the kidnapping and being detained are much longer, but I want to go into questions. (Laughter)

SECRETARY DUNCAN: In a few minutes. A couple of things. So that was 15. What age did you go to Jordan?

MR. SAMAKIE: So at 17. So after returning from being kidnapped, you know, the borders were closing in. We could not leave anywhere outside of Aleppo. The situation was too dangerous. We lost all our properties, all our businesses. And my dad is like I'm not sitting at home doing nothing. And so he's like I'm going to teach you how to make yogurt and we're going to start selling yogurt. And I was like I guess we're making yogurt and selling yogurt. And so I was making yogurt around 150-200 buckets a day. And not because I love yogurt, but because it was a profession and I went on with it. But at the same time, you know, I realized that I don't want to spend the rest of my life making yogurt (1) -- not that there's anything wrong in making yogurt, but that's not what I want to do. Second of all, I want to participate in the building of my country in the future. And right now I am on the margins of -- I can't do that without an education. You know, Jordan was an option because I had -- two of my siblings they went there, they started from the beginning, and I wanted to take the decision of going to Jordan. Now, my dad -- this is something I just recently started sharing in my talks, mainly because of how personal it is -- told me if you ever decide and leave Syria I will disown you as my son. And to me that was the gamble. You know, this is a guy that, you know, taught me everything since I was -- since day one. And at the same time there's my life, and what do I choose. And to me I went to my mom, I went to my sister -- she was also there in Aleppo -- and I was like I want to go to Jordan and I want to continue my education there. And they supported me and -- you know, I had to lie to my dad. I told him -- we fixed things, we became friends afterwards. And he passed away and luckily I was there for him. But, you know, one day I was like, yeah, I'll come see you at this time, but at this time I was packing my bags and I was taking down official borders and out of Syria. No support, nothing at all. And I knew that that's the first

step that I have, you know, taken life by my own hands. And I can't be a burden on my family and everything. And so November 2013 I was on my way out of Syria. And this is something that I did not include in my documentary mainly because of legality. I actually had to leave Syria through the unofficial borders, through Turkey. And as I was taking the unofficial borders I was taken by Jabhat al-Nusra, which is the less extreme version of ISIS. And the first thing walking into a crowd a guy comes behind me, places his hand behind my back. And I turn around, dressed in military from top to bottom. And I'm like the third time is the time. I'm like, shit. (Laughter) And he takes me and I go into a room, there's these two guys. And the first thing they say is like chop off his head. And there I'm like wait, wait, wait, wait. I start speaking Arabic and I'm telling them, guys, I'm just going to visit relatives outside your borders, I will come back. There's no need to chop anyone's head here. Then they're like they throw me in a room for a couple of hours and then they're like you're free to go. I arrive to Turkey and Turkey is like we can't let a Canadian citizen to enter our borders unofficially. And I was like, guys, there's no going back. And I was like please call the embassy. They called the embassy, 10 minutes later they are like all right, you can go through. And I came to Jordan and in Jordan the first day I arrived, second day I was up looking for a job because all I had in my pocket was \$300. And I knew that whatever my mom has on her, whatever my sister on her, it's there, and for me it's a new life.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Take a minute and just walk through a little bit of what we did last summer. Family visited the refugee camp just so folks can get a sense of the reality of other Syrian refugees in Jordan.

MR. SAMAKIE: So in Jordan, you know, I'll just tell you how I got involved in this working with Syrian refugees in Jordan. In Jordan when I started working I knew that at one point I have to -- I came here for continuing my education and so I started applying to schools in Jordan. And all the schools that I applied to -- private, mainly because I knew if I'm going to go into the public schools in Jordan there's not going to be that great of a difference from the public

schools in Syria. So all the private schools that I applied to in Jordan rejected me until one of my co-workers happened to be a Kings Academy alum and she's like hey, there's this place called Kings Academy. You know, it's a pretty cool place, why don't you look into it. And I was like sure. So I started looking into it and I applied. I applied and I came for the interview and it was -- my headmaster is here, by the way, from Kings Academy, which I really appreciate it -- and I applied there and I got an interview. And they're like, all right, take the acceptance test. I took the acceptance test, I get a phone call and they're like sorry, you failed. And I failed because I only started speaking English five years ago. And looking at the test it was all like factor this equation and do this and do that. And I'm like what the hell do they want. And I failed. But then the guy, he's like sorry, you failed, but we're willing to give you another chance next time.

And so I go get books and -- from the same person who told me about the school -- and I start studying. And I do the -- I familiarize myself with the language and I do the acceptance test another time, I get accepted, I'm given partial scholarship, a very generous scholarship, but at the same time I still have a big amount to cover for the next three years. And at the time, you know, I was like the opportunity was right there but now it's fading away. But I was like I've gone through a lot of things in my life, let me try and figure out a way around this. And so I put it together a GoFundMe campaign and it starts spreading on the internet and I really told the reason why I want to go to Kings Academy, what do I feel like I have to offer. And the reason why I decided to go to Kings and stay in the region and not go to Canada -- because I had that option -- is because I knew that the moment I stepped out of this region I will become a foreigner, and I did not want to do that. And so I knew that Kings is going to equip me with the tools I needed. And so I really fought for that place. And then three days into it I received an email, they're like sorry, I would like to provide you the amount needed for the upcoming three years. And I remember the day and I called the school and they were screaming on the phone, not me, they were screaming. They were like oh, this is great. And I go there and that's where I

learned my English, that's where I learned the thoughts that you observed and that other people observed. That's where we started doing our NGO.

But really where I started becoming involved in community service was when I was rejected from basketball because I was too old to join to the team. And they're like you can't play against other schools. And I was like -- there's this teacher at Kings, her name is Miss Thessa, she's like come during community service. And I was like all right. I joined and I saw how they do it. And I was like all right, now I want to do something different. So two of my friends and I were taking this class called capstone, we're doing a lot of research in terms of education, you know, technology and everything. And we're like -- and then we start looking into the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan and we realize that the international community is really observing the refugees living in the refugee camps. And that is important. But they're also marginalizing 80 percent of the urban refugees living in Jordan. And to us that was a large population, a population that had no access to education, healthcare, or basic life necessities. And we wanted to work with them. So we developed the NGO and kept working for three years.

But then when, you know, when you came, at the time what I was working on -- this is the summer before coming to Georgetown -- is I wanted to really document the lives of urban refugees in Jordan, to go through the struggles they're living through. And so I did my research on the ground, went from one building to another to really find where they're centered. And I got to meet that one family, Umsulayman. And the first day I entered Umsulayman's house -- she lives in a room on top of a roof -- and you say it. She has six children, one of them is her nephew who she adopted because his parents died, were killed by the regime. Umsulayman's husband was killed by the regime as well, and she saw it in front of her eyes. And she is living on a roof, in a room on top of a roof paying 50 JD a month for -- and that is around \$80. She gets 100 JD a month and they charge her 50 JD for electricity, water, and rent. And to pay 50 JD for one room on top of a roof is absurd because a regular house pays between 30-50 JD in Jordan. So this lady is being taken advantage of. Her children, you know

12 and 13, they work not for \$5 an hour, but \$5 a day. And you saw when, you know, we were sitting there and her children were like it's time for us to go to work. And did not only hit me, but I think sitting there 13 and 12 going to work at 6 p.m. at night because they're afraid they might lose their job and they have no income to support their family. And, yeah, I felt that these stories are being forgotten and that really people need to see them, need to hear them.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Last question and we should open up. Obviously we could talk all day, but talking about the future of Syria and what do you want to do? And is there a way for you to go home?

MR. SAMAKIE: So I have five search warrants under my name in Syria given that I've skipped military service and the regime still thinks that I am in Syria. So there is no way of me going home anytime soon. I wish I can go home. Every day I think about it. I close my eyes and I walk my way like in streets of Syria. But really in terms of future of Syria, sitting now, seeing -- people are saying the situation is getting better. And, yes, the situation is getting better, but then, again, why is the situation getting better. You know I was just reading the news yesterday, areas and homes are demolished and people are not even allowed to go back. My cousin works with an organization within Syria and I asked him to really check on where's the funding coming from. And he's like it's all Russian based. And so now when we think of a situation is getting better, you know, the government is taking control. It's not really the government taking control, it's Russia, it's Iranian fighters, it's Hezbollah on the ground. They're taking control. And Assad is really just, you know, moving the way they like. And not only that, efforts of -- there are no efforts of bringing the refugees back. They tell them yes, you're welcome to come back, but there's nothing to come back to. Be it Aleppo or other cities, the government would fix the road and then they would put a fence. And my mom was there recently. They would put a fence next to the building that's demolished and they're like don't come near this building, it might fall apart. But the street is fixed. And I'm like, guys, where do you start, do you start with the street or do you start with the building that's going to house

people.

For me, what I really want to pursue a life in is education because not only that I've seen the impact of education on myself, I've seen the impact of education on the students that we've worked with within my NGO. But really going to Kings changed my mind in terms of how we think of education. I didn't want to go and receive an education where I have a degree and I put it on my wall and be like here, I got a degree and I'm going to work in this. For me I wanted to see different perspectives, I wanted to broaden my horizons, I wanted to understand - and that's mainly why we started this NGO, taking the skills that we learned in class -- not necessarily the content -- and giving it to students who have no access to it. And see also a way I think of it is large amount of Syrian refugees are scattered between Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey. In Jordan they recently allowed Syrian refugees to be integrated into public school, but there's still a lot of work that goes into that in terms of who's teaching them, the timing, the situation. You saw, you know, when you spoke with that girl the amount of racism they're receiving for being Syrian and being taught in one school. And we're not saying that they're all receiving racism, but there's still a long way to go.

But the way I think about it is 10-15 years down the line -- and the average amount of years a refugee spends in a country is over 10 years -- 10-15 years down the line these refugees are going to be looked at, they're going to be blamed for social tension, for poverty, and governments and politicians are going to be like look at how the ruined our country. But in fact we're going to be pointing fingers at them where in reality we should be pointing fingers at ourselves because we didn't integrate the properly from the beginning. And to me that's an eye opening factor. Education should be as important as food and shelter because people need it and it changes people's mind.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: We just have a few minutes. Let's open it up. If we can keep the questions brief. Take a couple of question.

Yes, sir?

QUESTIONER: Thank you. I'm Tom Bradley; I'm a grad student at George Mason University. It'd like to find out, of the population of Syria about quarter of them are internally displaced, about a quarter of them are refugees in other countries. How many someday, 10-15 years from now, do you think will return to Syria, under what conditions, and what will the government look like after Assad is dead?

Thank you.

MR. SAMAKIE: Should we pile up a couple of questions?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Take this one and then we'll take one or two more.
Just go ahead.

MR. SAMAKIE: So in terms of the people who are internally displaced -- and when I was in Syria I would see people coming in, living in schools, living on the side of the streets, and we would go and talk to them. They want to go back to the areas they're coming from. And these people have started to go back, to open their shops, to open their houses, to rebuild. But when your house is in a building that was completely demolished it becomes difficult to really figure out where you're going to go back.

For those who are living in areas -- let's say Jordan. I'm going to speak of my experience in Jordan. You know, we went to the refugee camp together, we sat down, we spoke with people. And I remember one of the guys we spoke to, he told you that I will not go back until the Syrian regime is out because I've lost members to the Syrian regimes. It's just difficult to go back and see this person still in power. You know, again, refugees in Lebanon are returning back to Syria, but there are still a lot who are staying in Lebanon and working there mainly because they've started a life. And for them moving back changing that life. So it becomes difficult to really see -- they will go back, but then when they go back what are they going back to, and how easy is it for them to go back. There are a lot of security measures, for example in Homs and Aleppo that doesn't allow a lot of people to come back given whether they were against the government, whether they were captured once and then they flew, whether

they had -- you know, people like me who escape military service. I can't just simply go back there. And so there are a lot of measures that should take place to allow people to, to show them that Syria ironically is welcoming the Syrian people again. Now we have that idea of Syria not accepting the Syrian people simply because of a regime in place.

In terms of the future of the government there, you know, I'm not a political expert in terms of what's going to happen. We've all seen that Syria has been an example. Everyone thought that the regime was going to fall very soon, very early. They didn't. And so the future of Syria, I don't know. I keep up with the Syrian regime's news and everything and one thing that stuck with me and reminded me a lot of Cold War history is when Bashar al-Assad came out and he's like when we're looking for investment we're going to look East and we're not going to look West. That says a lot about the politics that's taking place in the country right now in terms of the interests, in terms of the proxy wars that are fought in the country. But I know for a fact that it is difficult when you lose a cousin, when you lose a brother, when you lose a son to a regime, then you come back and that regime is still in place. You wouldn't want to come back.

MR. COOPER: Hi, my name is Scott Cooper; I'm a retired marine and now I work at Human Rights First. We're at kind of a unique moment in our own country where we're not exactly welcoming of refugees. I wonder if you could tell us about your own experience and if you felt welcome here in America?

MR. SAMAKIE: You know, for me there's just one thing I find interesting. They tell you -- especially right now, they're like everyone is learning Arabic because they want to come back to the Middle East and they want to understand the Middle East. I'm like here I am, I understand English and I come here and I have no idea what tax reforms are, no idea what healthcare is, and no idea of what's happening right now. So there's that one part. So for me I have no thoughts in terms of what's happening in America, but I know for a fact that it is -- and we talked about this in the room -- that yesterday I had an assignment to read about the religious freedom or religious diversity in America by Professor Dayan Eck from Harvard about

how amazing it is of the different diverse religions and communities that have been affected by the American culture and are affecting American culture in positive ways in America. And I found it extremely eye opening that as I was reading this article I received a notification that says the Supreme Court gives an okay to the recent travel ban. To me I was like, you know, it's an interesting time to be alive (laughter), but I also know that there are signs, there are things like sharing Islamophobic videos on social networks, on Twitter is not the right decision to do when you have people planning mass shootings in mosques. And these things are not right.

And to me I see that and I'm like, you know, I wonder if third world dictators had Twitter accounts what would they do. Every day it's like something new. And for me I stay on the side, I look, I go ask my American friends, I'm like, guys, can someone explain to me what's happening? And they're like we don't know. (Laughter) And I'm like where should I go to understand what's happening. I tried to read news and you never understand what's happening. And I'm like all right, as long -- and I've heard -- you know you think that I wouldn't hear it in Georgetown, but first day of school walking into the dorm I hear a guy going like I hope there's no Syrians in this dorm. And I ignore it and I walk into the dorm. But I know for a fact if he came to me and he knew that I was Syrian, I would sit him down -- even though if he's told I'm a terrorist, even if he's told me, you know, anything he wants to say -- I know that I would sit with him and I would show him that I am not a terrorist, that Islam is not really about chopping off heads and killing people, and we really have a rich history that is being ignored.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: One, two, and we'll probably have to close it then. I found two questions.

QUESTIONER: Hi, I'm Mica. Where do you the extremism comes from, extreme ideologies? You talked about the old man who was an extremist, where do you think the source of that is?

MR. SAMAKIE: Should we take the other question before --

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Take it, sure, sure.

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QUESTIONER: So actually it's not another question. I'm a Syrian refugee too and I have the same story of you. And so thank you so much for sharing the story. And so I have a question. I left Syria when I was 17, almost 2 weeks to finish my high school. And then I get in Turkey when I was like 20 or 21. And right now I'm trying so hard to find any school to accept me to come just to continue my education. So can you please tell me what you did and what you should tell the American university how to accept more Syrian refugees?

Thank you.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: That's a great one to close on. Thank you. Take those two.

MR. SAMAKIE: For the extreme ideology, you know, the idea -- and I was actually -- for my class, for my international relations, I'm reading different research in terms of -- theoretical research in terms of why people chose an extreme ideology. For me, the way I look at it and from my experience with these fighters and soldiers, and when I asked them, it's mainly when you're pushed in the corner constantly you will develop an extreme ideology because you will feel that the whole world is against you. One of my friends she recently published a book. She was the journalist that uncovered the identity of Jihadi John, had gone to -- spoke with ISIS militants, spoke with ISIS leaders. And she would go, whether it's Taliban, whether it's ISIS, and she would ask the militants, she's like why did you decide to join this. And they would talk about how they group in Europe and they were marginalized by community. They had no one to belong to. And when these people came and offered something it's a sense of belonging. And it creates that. And so when you have the whole world against you and you have people building walls against you or people -- recently the BBC published the names of 33,000 immigrants that drowned on the shores of Europe. You know, when you hear these things it doesn't become a matter numbers. There are 33,000 people that died as they are trying to flee a war and go into Europe. And how do we think about that history, where do we see it? Because that can be interpreted as a reason why someone would turn and become an

extremist.

In terms of the other question, you know, as I was applying to universities in the U.S. I had to withdraw my application from two universities, one of them was around the corner, mainly because I didn't have \$30,000 in my bank account. The two of them -- yeah, I had to withdraw my application because I didn't have \$30,000 in my bank account even though I have shown that I am applying for financial aid. But, you know, Georgetown was willing to sit down and actually go through the process and that's why I decided joining them. I got rejected from all the other schools that I applied to in the U.S. as well. And whether it's because they were afraid of matters of immigration or anything, but that happened.

And I think, you know, recently I saw President Obama's message to transgender woman in India where he told her, you know, it's about standing up, speaking, it's about formulating your story to create action. And part of the reason why I decided to share my story is because I wanted to put a face to Syrian refugees. I wanted to show the world that if I happened to be fortunate enough to survive the incidents that I've gone through others in the thousands have not. And so it's about sitting down, taking that story, putting it together and presenting it, and really showing them what you have to offer. Applying to Georgetown you think that I wrote about kidnapped in my common app? But I really wrote about making yogurt (laughing). And I wrote about making yogurt and the guy who sat for my interview was like, yogurt? And I was like I love it.

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible).

MR. SAMAKIE: Yes. We'd sit -- I'd love to -- you know, if -- you live in D.C.?

QUESTIONER: (Inaudible).

MR. SAMAKIE: Yes. I've worked and live in D.C. I would love to connect. I've spoken to many different schools that would be more than happy to have you. So we'll connect and hopefully make it happen with good people like Arne and everyone else in the room.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: How old are you now?

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MR. SAMAKIE: I'm fantastic. Thank you so much.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: I said how old.

MR. SAMAKIE: How old? Oh. (Laughter) That's a good one. I'm 21 now.

SECRETARY DUNCAN: So just take a second and soak that in.

SPEAKER: Should you name your nonprofit?

SECRETARY DUNCAN: Okay, name your nonprofit. Good. Thank you.

MR. SAMAKIE: My nonprofit is called (speaking foreign language), which means Idea on the Go. We work on providing education through critical -- student and community center dedication through critical thinking, question generation, brainstorming, and project-based learning to urban refugees between the ages of 15-25 in Jordan. I am spending my -- I'm now monitoring the NGO from here, but every summer my plan is to go back and work on the ground. And when people ask me where do you see your NGO in the future, I'm like hopefully closed because we're in the 21st century and people are still not receiving education. That is just an absurd idea to sit down and contemplate.

Yeah, I'm 21 years old and when my RA at Georgetown heard that he's receiving a 21 year old in his hallway he was really worried that I might be causing him trouble, but it turns out to be otherwise. (Laughter)

SECRETARY DUNCAN: So I'm lucky enough to know lots of young people all over the country and remarkable people, but -- and I don't say this lightly, I don't know a 21 year old as smart, as intelligent, as courageous, as humble, and as human as Saria. So please give him a huge round of applause.

Thank you. (Applause)

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