

## 24 Striving Against Oppression and Tyranny

Let's define what oppression and tyranny mean. As I am using them, "oppression" means trying to unjustly control someone's actions and speech, while "tyranny" means the action that enforces the oppression. If you say, "You may not go anywhere without me," that is oppression. If you say, "If you don't obey, I will beat you and lock you in the bedroom", it becomes oppression. When you carry out the threat it is tyranny. Both violate the God-given right to personal safety and liberty. Both remain strong in much of the Muslim world and elsewhere. They especially affect women and have for millennia. God calls intoxicants abominations (5:90), which perhaps cuts down on a major cause of domestic abuse, it is still common in Muslim countries.

It has been over fifteen years since I wrote the first draft for the bulk of this book. Much has changed in the Muslim world during that time, though all of the original inequities discussed in prior chapters still exist for many Muslim women. However, in some cases, the status of women has definitely improved. For instance, in June of 2018, the first drivers' licenses were finally issued to Saudi women and other restrictions were relaxed. We discussed another example in Chapter 9 on marriage and the increasing number of Muslim countries doing away with their rape-marriage exoneration laws. In brief, these laws allow convicted rapists to marry their victims to avoid punishment. Such laws coupled with immense social pressure all but force women into accepting marriages with their attackers, thus almost ensuring themselves years of misery and abuse. These laws have been overturned in the last several years in Somaliland, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Turkey (though here the government tried to reinstate this law in 2016; public outcry stopped it. At the beginning of 2020, the ruling party tried again to pass this cruel law. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, I have been unable to determine whether or not this law has been reinstated.) Other countries like Egypt have not had these laws for many years. These improvements have come about in large part because of the striving of many women to bring about the changes.<sup>1</sup>

In all cases Quranic principles we have already discussed—the principles of equality regardless of gender and of freedom and human dignity for all—support these improvements. Please see Chapters 2 and 23 for equality. Freedom and human dignity are also covered in Chapter 23 and in this chapter.

In spite of these advances, in other countries, women's status has diminished even further in recent years. Perhaps one of the worst examples of this can be seen in Syria. With the rise of ISIS, oppression and tyranny against all their victims became the rule, but even more so against women. Then in an astounding turn of events, Syrian Kurdish women began to take up arms with the men against ISIS in the defense of their homeland and to regain their freedom. As the fighting moved from the predominately Kurdish area into areas that were heavily Arab, Arab men and women began joining the Kurds in the

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Rothana Begum's "[Women Are Championing Their Own Change](#)", in *The New Arab*, published March 7, 2018, and last accessed 7/1/2020.

fight to throw off the oppressors. By the middle of November 2017, it appeared ISIS was all but defeated. Then Turkey began attacking Syrian Kurds on their shared border, declaring the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to be a branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Turkey had outlawed as a terrorist group. Thus, they diverted Kurdish forces from the fight against ISIS to defend against those attacks. In late June of 2017, it appeared this diversion in the fight against tyranny might be resolved and these courageous Syrian women could focus again on their original struggle. That was not to be then. On December 19, 2018, then United States President, Donald Trump, ordered the withdrawal of US forces from Syria, though just the week before officials from his administration repeatedly promised the Kurdish forces they were valued allies and would not be deserted according to a Washington Post online article <sup>2</sup>.

Syrian women played a courageous and critical role in the war against the tyranny of ISIS and against its. In doing so they became models for all women to fight against oppression and tyranny.

Amberlin Zaman wrote of these women in her on-line article for Al-Monitor, "Syria's Arab, Kurdish women join forces to fight for future", November 6, 2017 <sup>3</sup>.

AIN ISSA, Syria — At just 21 years old, Zilan's burdens are already heavy. She has a pair of violent ex-husbands and a daughter from each. But she said she has left all that behind in her home village near Raqqa, the recently liberated capital of the so-called Islamic State in Syria.

Zilan is among scores of women joining an all-Arab women's force that was formed earlier this year as part of the Syrian Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ), the globally acclaimed women's militia that has become the bane of jihadis. These fresh recruits are testing the limits of the deep-rooted patriarchy of Arab communities and more critically, the uneasy cohabitation of Arabs and Kurds that is meant to serve as a blueprint for the future of Syria.

"I feel respected as a woman. My life has meaning now," Zilan told Al-Monitor during an interview at the Shahid Arin Military Academy for Women in Ain Issa, a nondescript town northwest of Raqqa.

She continued describing other women in the ranks of the Kurdish People's Protection Units and what brought them to join the fight against the "jihadis" of ISIS. They came from widely divergent backgrounds ranging from traditional to secular, rural to city dwellers, well-educated to uneducated. All shared a commitment and the camaraderie born of shared hardship and danger.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trumps-decision-to-withdraw-us-troops-from-syria-startles-aides-and-allies/2018/12/19/80dd8ab2-03b2-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.ca4244637c1f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trumps-decision-to-withdraw-us-troops-from-syria-startles-aides-and-allies/2018/12/19/80dd8ab2-03b2-11e9-b5df-5d3874f1ac36_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ca4244637c1f). Last accessed 7/1/2020.

<sup>3</sup> Please see <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/syria-raqqa-fight-kurds-women-sdf-islamic-state.html>. Last accessed 2/7/2018.

Zaman wrote of “Storm” who survived beatings from two husbands and their mothers. Even more devastating was the loss of her children when the marriages disintegrated, leaving her with nothing but her own strength and her decision to fight for her country’s freedom. She also wrote of Leila, a Shiite Muslim from Iraq who joined the struggle in 2014 after seeing clips of Syrian Kurdish Women’s Protection Units women fighting for the Syrian town of Kobani, which was a turning point in the struggle against oppressive ISIS. And finally, she described “Action” a former Kurdish student from Latakia, a courageous feminist soldier supporting Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (the PKK), outlawed in Turkey, as mentioned above.

Here is a final quote from Amberlin Zaman’s article:

.... Polygamous, imam-officiated and underage marriages permitted by the supposedly secular central government have soared since the start of the conflict in Syria but have been banned in Rojava [“Western Kurdistan,” as the Kurdish-dominated swath of territory controlled by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units was known]. For every male mayor, there is a female co-mayor vested with equal powers — a model repeated at almost every level of government and civic authority. Women manage traffic and run schools. In an interview with Al-Monitor, Fawza al-Yusuf, a top Rojava official who spent long years in the PKK before returning to Syria in 2011 at the start of the uprising, boasted, “We have launched a feminine revolution not just for Kurdish women but for all Syrian women that ought to inspire the world.”

This indeed demonstrated a feminine revolution for the Muslim world! In the 1970s when I began to investigate the Quran and Islam, such a future outcome was almost beyond imagining for most Muslim women. Muslim friends told me the religion decreed a woman’s place was in the home raising a family and supporting her husband. For many women that provides their ideal in life. This role has a tremendously important part in society, as the last chapter indicates.

But what if a woman faces military attack and/or oppression like the women of Syria? What if being a homemaker does not match her individual nature? Or it does not fulfill her spirit when defending her family and home calls to her? Must such women just squash their individual needs and personalities into a predetermined mold? How unjust; this shows another form of inequity for many Muslim women.

What does the Quran say about it?

Verse 3:195 again provides a solution:

*Their Lord responded to them: “I never fail to reward any worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female—you are equal to one another. Thus, those who immigrate, and get evicted from their homes, and are persecuted because of Me, and fight and get killed, I will surely remit their sins and admit them into gardens with flowing streams.” Such is the reward from God. God possesses the ultimate reward. (Quran: The Final Testament 3:195)*

Here Quran speaks of women facing persecution and oppression; they fight, even to the point of being killed. Note that as always this is in self-defense not in aggression. It does not give women the right to impose their wills on others any more than men have that right. However, the Quran gives everyone the right to fight oppression and tyranny:

*You shall fight them to ward off oppression, and to practice your religion devoted to God alone. If they refrain from aggression, then God is fully Seer of everything they do.*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 8:39)*

Actually, God commands us to defend ourselves, our families, and others from attack. Please note the following verse, which addresses all those who believe and not just the men:

*O you who believe, you shall fight the disbelievers who attack you—let them find you stern—and know that God is with the righteous.*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 9:123)*

If we do not defend ourselves we encourage the aggressors and others we may not be aware of, as the following indicates:

*You shall prepare for them all the power you can muster, and all the equipment you can mobilize, that you may frighten the enemies of God, your enemies, as well as others who are not known to you; God knows them. Whatever you spend in the cause of God will be repaid to you generously, without the least injustice.*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 8:60)*

All this does not in any way negate the techniques of passive resistance and non-violence, which can be powerful methods of fighting in many circumstances.

The Quran encourages believers to fight in situations where oppression afflicts the weak:

*Why should you not fight in the cause of God when weak men, women, and children are imploring: “Our Lord, deliver us from this community whose people are oppressive, and be You our Lord and Master.”*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 4:75)*

No doubt exists that the women of war-torn Syria continued to be oppressed by many factions not just ISIS, including those who should be their helpers and defenders. In May of 2018, *USA Today* reported<sup>4</sup> on the horrifying conditions and torture untold numbers of Syrian women were being subjected to in Syrian President Bashar Assad’s prisons.

BBC reports<sup>5</sup> from earlier that year gave equally horrendous news about the way women refugees have long been coerced to commit adultery to obtain help from workers for the United Nations and other international aid programs.<sup>6</sup> This has been known for years but tolerated to get aid delivered to the refugee camps. It became so widespread that

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<sup>4</sup> Please see <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/05/01/syrian-women-tortured-and-humiliated-assad-regime-prisons/567909002/>. Last accessed 7/1/2020.

<sup>5</sup> Please see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43206297>. Last accessed 7/1/2020.

<sup>6</sup> Last accessed 7/1/2020.

in some camps everyone assumed women who went to receive aid performed some sexual act to obtain assistance.

The United Kingdom's *Telegraph* website <sup>7</sup> reported the same thing.

In the last several years, Syrian women have been forced to take on the roles of their dead husbands, but still find themselves bound in many ways by prewar norms. Reporters Vivian Yee and Hwaida Saad wrote their online *New York Times* article "*These Syrian Women Rarely Left the House. Then the Men Disappeared*".<sup>8</sup> They tell the story of Fatima Rawass who supported her family when Syrian rebels threw her husband into prison. Shrapnel then killed him shortly after she bought his release. Ms. Rawass would like to remarry but dares not do so because her father believes as a widow she must devote herself to her children, and he has the power to take those children away from her if she disobeys him. Thus she finds herself trapped in a situation where she must follow her father's dictates though she works and lives as an independent woman.

More than just Syrian women have suffered these terrible forms of oppression. Far too many women throughout the world, face them.

As we saw in the last chapter, God states in the Quran oppression is worse than murder. Examining this more closely, when you murder someone you end their life—their opportunity to grow their soul enough to return to God in the hereafter. All societies regard murder as a very serious crime. It breaks God's commandment: "*You shall not kill—God has made life sacred—except in the course of justice*" (6:151). Perhaps that is why in the story of Adam's sons (5:29), the victimized son indicated that the murderer bears the sins of the victim (though we know from other verses, at least under normal circumstances, this does not remove the burden of sin from the victim).

However, oppression is even worse than murder as we see in 2:191, 2:217. When you oppress someone you torture their soul, the very essence of their being. You may even cause their turning away from God in their agony, and thus essentially damn them to hell. Such an action will have grave consequences for your soul as well.

From the verses shown above, we can see that this feminine revolution going on in Syria and elsewhere matches God's teachings in the Quran. This revolution returns Muslims to the Quranic principles of equality, justice, and freedom hidden for centuries, buried by culture and traditions, which go against the true principles of Islam.

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<sup>7</sup> Please see <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/27/women-syria-forced-exchange-sexual-favours-un-aid/>. Last accessed 7/1/2020.

<sup>8</sup> Please see <file://localhost/%E2%80%A2%09%20https://www.nytimes.com:2020:01:19:world:middlceast:syria-war-women.html>. Published in January of 2020 and last accessed 6/29/2020.

*Syrian women are not the only Muslim women to rise up against tyranny and oppression. During the 1970s and early 1980s, many women in Iran also helped in the rebellion against these dark forces, as have women in Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, and other Muslim countries. Other ways exist to take a stand. The Quran clarifies that if you can escape oppression, which affects your soul, you will be held responsible if you do not do so:*

*Those whose lives are terminated by the angels, while in a state of wronging their souls, the angels will ask them, "What was the matter with you?" They will say, "We were oppressed on earth." They will say, "Was God's earth not spacious enough for you to emigrate therein?" ....*

*(Quran: The Final Testament 4:97)*

*Thus fleeing one's home in the face of oppression provides its own form of struggle against these dual evils. The following gives the narration of such an escape.*

### **Our Escape from Iran**

My family fled Iran in the midst of war and an oppressive political atmosphere when I was eight years old. We fled in 1982, after the 1979 revolution and in the midst of the Iran-Iraq war. In leaving their homeland, my parents hoped that my brother and I could live in a society with freedom and educational opportunities. Our journey was unexpectedly long, arduous and dangerous. A car ride at the beginning of the journey got us to Kurdistan. In Kurdistan, we traveled days and nights on horseback stopping at villages that hosted us for a meager meal and a few hours of rest. One of the most challenging aspects of the journey was that my two-year-old brother became very ill due to lack of nutrition, sanitary conditions and the stress of the journey. There were no hospitals or clinics nearby and his condition worsened. We remained in one of the villages for more than a month where my parents searched vigorously for a physician. With considerable difficulty, they found a physician who treated my brother and he started to get better although his full recovery took years.

However, the worst in our journey was yet to come. Our guide made the unfortunate mistake of leading us to Iraq! Then, we were captured by the Iraqi government of that time. More than a year of involuntary containment followed. We faced the physical hardships of hunger and a harsh environment as well as the emotional strain of not knowing our fate. We were blessed to finally obtain our release and gain admission to the United States with the help of the International Red Cross. Surviving this journey has helped me value freedom, opportunity and education. By God's grace, my brother and I were able to make use of opportunities in the U.S. to become the first physicians in our family. Furthermore, in the U.S. I got access to the message of true Islam (Submission), its purified practices and book ([Quran: The Final Testament](#) translated by Dr. Rashad Khalifa) and found a community that is embracing this path of wisdom, peace and happiness (International Community of Submitters). Being guided to this path has been the greatest blessing in my life.

—Fari, Iran & U.S.A.

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*Not only Middle Eastern women find themselves on the front lines of the struggle against tyranny and oppression. This next story came from an astonishing American sister who long fought against oppression in her homeland, from the inner city ghetto of Detroit to the desert southwest.*

*She and her first husband were African American activists when they encountered true Islam based on only the Quran in Tucson, Arizona. They then became activists striving in the cause of God for all humans. When they returned to Detroit they reunited and adopted a family of 10 orphan boys to allow them all to stay together. After her husband's death, Carolyn continued living in Detroit with her sons and finished raising them. She became more and more active in the ghetto-based African American society there, eventually opening a community center that served hundreds if not thousands of people.*

*Returning finally to her home in Tucson she and her new husband began a food distribution program at Masjid Tucson, partnering with the Tucson Community Food Bank and again serving God while helping large numbers of people.*

*Here she shared her experience with oppression in her unique and powerful stream of consciousness style.*

### **Carolyn B. Smith – AKA Queen Lateefah**

African American – Woman – Muslim – Overweight

I'm not a Sunni or Shite nor Traditional Muslim

JUST MUSLIM

There are many levels of oppression against African American women: Sexism, Welfare System, Housing and our Neighborhoods, Classism, Men between us, Our men going to other women of race, Drugs, Family breakups, Jobs, Prison Systems, Schools, Police Brutality, etc.

Most people call me Queen Lateefah, and this is the name I used in the community I grew up in, one of America's most economically depressed and dangerous cities. African American people left the South and moved to Detroit for economic opportunities there in my hometown.

Black women took the Christian faith as their shield to live, defend and protect themselves and family. We knew our place, which was forced on us—stay at home, cook, clean, have babies. If you worked it was as a maid, cooking, cleaning, etc. All for very little pay compared to today, better now but still a ways to go. Black women got caught up with the women's liberation movement. African American women always were liberated—we always worked the fields or house. That's why a lot of our men stopped taking care of us. We wanted out of the house, so we jumped on the bandwagon.

African Americans get killed all over America just for being black—by the police, the ones who suppose to protect us.

Being Christian women taught us to submit to everyone and society—be good. But yet they paint us in bad pictures.

I couldn't do this because I was raised to be a strong woman.

Fighting injustice wherever it called me, I was either fighting for causes or protecting children; and believing there was a powerful God who would rescue me from this type of work. And behold God guided me to Islam, the true Islam—Total Submission to God Alone. God is in full control of everything. God's words of truth in the Quran, the Whole Quran, Nothing But Quran.

This is when I stopped fighting society and oppression because it is not me, it's God Alone doing everything. So I then learned Who God is, and who I am as a human with a soul, which is part of God. Now I rely totally on God Alone to protect me, guide me and keep the Devil and his work away from me. God says we all are equal. Now this is what I live by and I'm no longer giving my power over to man, society, or the Devil. Praise be to God, and I hope all women of the world will give their power over to God and not men or their country.

Islam<sup>9</sup> will prevail, 'cause God said so in the Holy Quran.

Peace,

—Carolyn Smith, U.S.A.

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In my understanding, each of us has the responsibility to fight oppression and tyranny. This provides one of the principles of a free country, like the United States, the one I am blessed to live in. Unfortunately, even here often that freedom actually does not exist if you happen to have the wrong color of skin, speak the wrong language at home, or live in the wrong part of town. Isabel Wilkerson speaks of this in her powerful book *Caste*<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *Editor's note:* Islam is a way of life in submission to God. One need not actually call herself or himself a Muslim to live such a life. Anyone from any faith, who truly wishes to surrender themselves to God, by whatever name they use for that entity, is considered by the Quran to be a Muslim. Verses 2:62 & 5:69, quoted in the beginning of Chapter 4 of this book, demonstrate this principle.

<sup>10</sup> Copyright 2020 by Isabel Wilkerson, published by Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC.



Sister Carolyn's story, which you just read, shares what it can be like dealing with this issue as a Muslim sister. The stories of other sisters in this book have also dealt with aspects of institutionalized oppression in this "Land of the Free".

To a small degree, even I have tasted prejudice, though I am white, speak English, and do not look like a minority. In my Introduction, I shared the negative reaction of a fellow employee after the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City when she emotionally blamed me for the tragedy because she knew I was a Muslim.

I believe if anyone in our society lacks freedom then no one can truly be free. So each of us must make it our business to fight against oppression and tyranny in whatever ways we can.