

Denison University Presents
Author, Alia Malek
Laura C. Harris Symposium
Challenging Borders Series

Introduction Dr. Isis Nusair:

I am honored to introduce Alia Malek to our campus, this is her second visit. She came two years ago and read from her book called *A Country Called Amreeka*. And we're very happy that she's here again to read from this book that just came out yesterday. So, we're actually the first college that she's visiting and reading; and sharing her work.

Alia was born in Baltimore to Syrian immigrant parents, she began her legal career as a trial attorney at the US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. After working in the legal field in the US, Lebanon, and the West Bank, Alia decided to also be a journalist and an author, and I guess she's been all along, it's just now official. She went to Columbia University. Her undergraduate degree is from Johns Hopkins and it's in International Relations and a minor in --- creative writing, right Alia? And then the legal law degree is from Georgetown and the journalism Master's Degree is from Columbia University, so that's an interesting trajectory if student are interested to see how you can combine legal work, your life's work, and also creative writing work.

Alia, as a journalist and civil rights lawyer, she's the author of *A Country Called Amreeka*, it came out in 2009. She is also the editor of a collection called *Patriot Acts Narratives of Post-9/11 Injustices* that just came out in 2011. She just released a book called *Europa, An Illustrated Introduction to Europe for Migrants and Refugees*. And today, and today she will be reading from her new book called *The Home That was Our Country, A Memoir of Syria* where she talks about nearly a hundred years of Syrian history through actually a personal lens of her own family. The book just came out and it's already been getting great praise and we are actually lucky, we ordered copies. We have 25 copies, so if you want Alia to sign them and dedicate them personally to you, you're more than welcome, we'll do that after.

And I also want to thank everyone that helped us, the students in our office, Joanna Amyaz, we have actually a contingent of people coming from Kenyon and Wooster. This is part of, a grant from the GLCA and also Denison University. So please help me welcome Alia to our campus. (applause) We're going to talk for about 45, 50 minutes and then we're going to open the space for question and answer, and take it from there. Thank you for being here. (applause)

Alia Malek

Hi everybody, is this okay, can you hear me? Okay. Thank you for having me, thank you for those of you who came, a solid two hours to get here. I'm going to... so Isis sort of gave me just some general parameters about what you wanted me to talk about. And she asked me how my publisher felt about me, this being the first stop, because the book published yesterday officially, and I'm based in New York. (short laugh) My publicist, the publicist at the publishing house was really hostile when he found out I had a commitment at Denison on March 1st. And I finally got

to the bottom of it; I said like what is up with this hostility to Denison? Apparently, his ex-girlfriend graduated from here, so. (laughter) He had so many things to say about Denison, it was bizarre. Anyways so I'm just going to, I doubt I'm going to talk for 45 minutes or we'll see, I'll keep my clock on and see how long this takes.

I'm going to kind of just give you, I don't know, a little bit of a talk and then I'm going to read from the new book, which I haven't read from yet, so this could be rough. And then I'll happily do a little bit of a Q; actually I'd much rather do a bunch of longer Q&A, but Isis refused to do it that way, so you have to listen to me. And then once I read from the book I'll put on this slide show that I have to keep looking at in the meantime, which is just a bunch of pictures that cover some of the ground that the book covers.

So, I'm guessing here everybody heard about the travel ban that was announced, oh so delicately a few weeks ago. It was announced on a Friday and on that Saturday morning I woke up to a panicked message from my friend Kinan Azmeh who was in Beirut at the time. He said he wanted to know in his text, "Do you think I can no longer come back to America?" My friend Kinan is a virtuoso on clarinet and a brilliant composer. He had just debuted a new piece that he had composed for Yo-Yo Ma, with Yo-Yo Ma. He's a member of the Silk Road Ensemble so they're good friends, and he had just been in this massive concert in Germany. And Kinan had been flying to Beirut, at the time that the ban was announced, to perform with the Lebanese Orchestra that was hosting musicians from Bela Russia, when he heard about President Trump's executive order banning all refugees and citizens of the seven Muslim majority countries.

So his message also asked, but only half-jokingly, "Do you need a place to live? My apartment might be empty from now on; sad face emoji." My apartment is better than his apartment though, so I declined. (short laugh) Kinan like me, is Syrian, but unlike me, he's not American. He's a green card holder. He's been in the US since 2000 when he came to study at Juilliard and he'll be eligible for citizenship in a few years.

But the way that the plan was rolled out caused a flurry of these kind's of confused conversations. There were a lot of texts and messages and panicked emails, and phone calls that went around the communities implicated by the ban. People asking: If it was worth it to take the risk of going abroad to fill concert halls; or to attend loved one's funerals of people who happened to pass away right at the time of the ban; or whether they should go present their research at the international conferences they had been invited too? Those were just some of the activities that I know, just from personal relationships I know were disrupted.

And it was also though, the ban was another moment for Syrians to sort of pause and just shake our head at how surreal it is that Syria is now at the crux of everything both domestically and internationally and kind of, to have this nostalgia for the days when nobody knew anything about Syria.

And growing up in Baltimore in the 1980's, even though my family's inner life at home is very much shattered by Syria as if it were this other member of our household; it was always too small, too specific, and too irrelevant to be a part of most American's consciousness. Sure, national politicians did sometimes mention Syria, but always as a lesser minor character in the

Israeli Palestinian epic or in other good-versus-evil framings of the world, but that rarely ever filtered down into everyday American's lives. Instead, Syria was just this intimate thing for me.

Back then Syria was where my family was always going to return after my father finished his medical training. But my parents gave up that dream in 1980. First, the regime and its opponents, were engaged in open and violent conflict even back then; and second, regime affiliated men had murdered a member of my family, and with impunity. We weren't able to do anything about it. And lastly, my mother's mother had suffered a crippling stroke that year that locked her in and eventually ended her life. So, with my paternal grandmother having already died, and a few years before Syria became a kind of motherless motherland for both my parents, and they made the decision eventually to stay in Baltimore.

Inside our house, in our family's consciousness Syria became this alternate, and sometimes mythical, sometimes romanticized reality where we had been alternate versions of ourselves where we would have had extended families, not relatives who we saw in intervals separated by many years. Where my parents had old friends and who could share stories about them as teenagers. Where our parents didn't speak with accents and where they had the confidence of belonging to a place, where if nothing else, they shouldn't have been lonely. And so, Syria only came up in conversation outside our house with fellow Americans when we were asked where we were 'from-from' and even then, it really didn't mean anything.

And sort of to illustrate, and this is a weird kind of nostalgia. When I was kid there was this kid who wanted to bully me and like everybody knew we were going to have a showdown on the playground. And I was taller actually than everybody so had it gotten physical, I would have definitely won. (laughter) But he came up to me and he you know, we had separated, we were all ready, like he walked up and we were about to like throw down, apparently, something you know, something tough. And he, in front of all the other kids he's like; "So if you're from Syria does that mean you eat a lot of cereal?" (laughter) I mean, clearly didn't slay, I mean I felt sorry for him. (laughter) But you know, there was sort of the idea that there was nothing there to really sort of associate Syria within this negative way.

Of course, the more vicious disperse in America at the time, and what set us apart in the basis for the more vicious insults to come in life, would be about being Arab generally and not Syrians specifically. And it was that experience of being Arab- (hyphen) American that initiated me in the condition of hyphenation in this country, and set the course for my life and what I would go on to pursue as careers versus as an attorney in civil rights, and eventually as a journalist.

And the way I try to explain this condition, I'm sure a lot of you are aware of it, just looking out at the diversity that is here; is that it sort of means being fluent in the mainstream or popular or accepted, or [consensus] narratives about society or about the people who make it up, about the world that we live in. We're always seeing that that's a simplistic narrative lacking nuance and even accuracy, and in fact knowing parallel and alternative narrative and competing narratives to that. And I thought about this a lot. You know there might be a variety of reasons for those simplistic narratives whether it's ignorance, or malice, or just laziness. But the result is singular. They're at best limited incomplete narratives and they help enable the stereotypes and the crude thinking which ultimately, I think devalue the lives of other people. People with whom we share

a society, and that means at best cringe-inducing, pop culture representations and at-worst the kind of regrettable policy that we are seeing in a much more blatant sense these days.

And more importantly, and this is one of the reasons I wrote *Amreeka*, it deprives everyone else in society of truly knowing and valuing who makes up the place that we all share. And so even as a kid in the 80's I knew that the evening news was not giving us the full picture and I felt stigmatized myself personally by the bad guys, and the stereotypes that I saw in both tv and film. And I try to explain this also to people. It's like this kind of hyphenation can make you fill in the margins, even as you succeed within the system, as I have extensively, and even as I realize that the kind of success I've had is something I would have never been able to have realized in Syria.

So I did as Isis pointed out, I went to law school. At the time, this was a long time ago, I can't even believe it; I think some of you guys were born when I graduated law school, which makes me want to just shoot myself. (laughter) But it's true, I graduated law school in 2000, and I went to the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. I was the first Arab American Honors Attorney. And I'd gone there because what I wanted to do was sort of, you know combat the effects of that kind of prejudice when it rose to the level of actions that you could address in law. And that's where I was on 9/11, when, everybody knows what happened on 9/11, right? I don't have to go back over that territory. But it meant being privy to some very interesting conversations that I think probably planted the seed.

You know right after 9/11 there was a lot of talk in the Department of Justice as to how these, how to sort of investigate and pre-empt these, what was...whatever they construed was happening. And I was in my office one day when a colleague of mine from the criminal division who is Haitian-American, came in, and he was like, "I have to tell you what they were talking about upstairs." When they were talking about like ideas of how they should prosecute the so-called war on terror. So, we did what any good government bureaucrats did, we went to Au Bon Pain, where like you can basically find most of DC's workers around three o'clock in the afternoon. And we had this conversation; he said they were sort of batting around the idea, and these were people obviously from the front, from the political appointees from the Bush administration. The.. Ashcroft Department of Justice who said, you know people were throwing out the idea on the table that maybe we should denaturalize, naturalized Arab Americans; and these were people like my parents. I'm born in the US, but my parents were naturalized.

And, you know I remember my jaw dropping. And of-course that was my fantasy when I was thirteen, like getting my parents deported back to Syria, but by the time I was, you know charged with, you know protecting and enforcing the nation's civil rights laws; and I guess it just doesn't sound super kosher. And I remember having this, thinking to myself like; why is it possible to talk about this group of people even though they've been here all along? You know Arabs have been coming to the United States since the late 1800's in the same waves of immigration that brought over people that we don't even hesitate to think about as quote-on-quote, "Full Americans". And I remember thinking that part of the problem was this invisibility. That there was no knowledge, no representation of Arabs as Americans, and only as foreign. I remember thinking at the time that really somebody should do something about it, and I went on with my life. I was you know already in debt for law school, and you know I already committed to being a lawyer, and you know that's what I...I thought this was going to be somebody else's problem.

But then, you know, life is funny and you really don't have much control over it. And shortly thereafter it became clear that they US was going to invade Iraq. And after three years at the Department of Justice I decided to resign my post and I moved to Beirut, and I was representing the refugees who were coming in from Iraq at the time in 2003. And my life went on.

And then several years later in 2005, I decided to get a masters in journalism at Columbia. And at that point, like a book that I long thought needed to exist, hadn't yet come out and not because...I mean, I don't doubt that people tried to sell a book like this before. I guess maybe it was a matter of timing and having the so called right credentials, but that's why I wrote *Amreeka*, which retold American history through Arab American lives and it goes all the way back to late 1800's. And it starts in Alabama on the football field actually. And then *Patriot Acts*, which I think Isis also mentioned came out of that. Dave Eggers reviewed *Amreeka* and then recruited me to curate that collection of first personal oral histories for the organization he's founded called the Voice of Witnesses; beautiful, if you don't know, you should check it out. Anyway, so that was sort of like what my focus was on; Arab Americans and Muslim Americans and sort of talking about these people in the margins. I never imagined like Syria was going to become like 'the' story and it's uh, I mean from whether from domestic headlines to sort of international headlines. Obviously, you know the so called Islamic state is in Syria; Syrian refugees are going to cause the EU to unravel; Donald Trump is afraid of Syrians. You know it's kind of, it's just absolutely surreal when I think back to that playground incident.

And in 2011, right when everything seemed like it was starting to happen, I decided to, in the Middle East, I decided to pack up and I moved to Damascus and I spent the next two years there. I had always wanted to write a book about my grandmother and about Syria, but ironically there was no market for such a book until Syria fell apart. And, this is the book I have written.

And the things is with Syria constantly being in the news, it's been such a reminder of the vagaries of fate, of how your lot can really depend on the suffix that follows Syrian whether it's refugee or immigrant or American, which is my case, and how it really separates me; so the only thing that separates me from the Syrians that are being unfairly maligned, banned and banished today. So, I always say that my work comes too late. You know *Amreeka* sort of came years after 9/11, years after it needed to exist, and I kind of feel the same way about this book, which is also ironically getting a ton of attention just because Syria is falling apart.

I'm going to read to you a bit from it because that's what I've been asked to do. You're going to have to bear with me, because this is the first time I am actually reading from this book. So how many of you guys read the prologue? Okay, you made me like get that together in January, okay. So, then I'll give you a little detail. I'll tell you a joke that's in the prologue, so you'll understand. So, in.... (Someone from audience "Do you need the pictures?") Oh yeah, I'll start doing that now.

This is a gratuitous slide show just so if you're bored you have something to look at. It's not in any order because I cover a hundred years of history in Syria. These are some of the pictures that I used in the research; some of the pictures that are in the book. But what was I about to start telling you? Okay, so I don't know how much those are to the characters in the book who are my parents; those are the ones I was trying to get sent back to Syria (laughter) in my teenage years.

Okay, so it's my mom's last day in Syria, that's my aunt on the same balcony, in the same house that I restored. That's me breaking up their marriage, trying too. (laughter) I was very jealous about it. This is my great grandmother, and my grandmother and all my great uncles and aunts. Okay, I'm just going to try not...I'm not going to get distracted, you guys can get distracted. So, I don't know how much... (Someone from audience "I want to see more slides".)

More? That's my mom, (laughter) that's my grandparents. And so, I wrote up mostly about this woman, my grandmother. There she is with the daughter of the Armenian family that we took in after the genocide. This woman looks so unhappy getting married. (laughter) There's my grandmother. That's my great grandfather in the Ottoman days. Because the book opened, there he is in his 60's still wearing his fez. That's the famous Hama at Water Mills. That's my grandfather. That's me getting baptized way too late, like in Syria with my parents. This is one of the pro-government manifestations like unfortunately was happening outside my window. This is another grandfather and the machine he invented. Okay. This is a wedding where everybody was beautiful, clearly. (laughter) This is Damascus, these are very typical Damascus streets. This is my mom in her underwear. Okay, so basically, I don't know how much you guys know about Syria, but one of the things I try to...this is mom's pharmacy class in the University of Damascus.

So one of the things I explain in the prologue, just so that people set the scene, and it's one of the things I really explore in the book; is that, you know, I say that Damascus unlike other cities has no anonymity, there's no disappearing into Damascus the way there is disappearing into like Paris or New York or anywhere, because there's almost 20 different security bodies watching and informing on everybody. And it's very insidious because all these branches are located in residential neighborhoods and they're called the Mukhabarat. And the way I explain them is they're a lot like the Stasi. Do you guys know what the Stasi are? They're famous East German Secret Police that were keeping tabs on everybody. And what I like to say about the Syrian Mukhabarat is like the precision that the Stasi have, the Syrian Mukhabarat don't have, but they make up for that lack of precision with like serious gusto.

And I tell a joke in the prologue that some of you, the three of you who raised your hands will hopefully remember. Or maybe I'll test you. (laughter) Put your hands up now huh. (laughter) But I'll tell it again. It's not really, it's like funny like a screwed-up way.

Basically, so this is a joke that I heard in Syria in the 80's or the 90's that really sums it up perfectly. There is the CIA, the KGB at the time because it was the Cold War. The Israeli Mossad and the Syrian Mukhabarat they're all taken to this like elite training site. Okay, it's on some island, there are these woods. Each of them, each team, has to go in individually and find the fox and bring out the fox. So the CIA, boom done, fifteen, you know half an hour, thirty minutes they're in and out. KGB, exactly thirty minutes. The Israelis are in and out in fifteen minutes and that sort of tells you how much the Syrians had faith in their own Syrian military, which was always being talked about as who would vanquish the Israelis.

The Syrian Mukhabarat go in for four hours and they come back out and they, unlike all the other agencies don't come back out with the fox, they have a rabbit. This rabbit has been severely tortured, and all the other agencies are like; um, "that's not a fox". And the Syrians have got their leather jackets on and they put their light up and they're smoking and they're like;

“he’s a fox he confessed, he says he’s a fox”. (laughter) And that gives you a little idea of what the Syrian Mukhabarat are like. So, that’s kind of a little bit and that’s been seeping into peoples like skin and pores for the last forty years of the regime.

So this book that I wrote; let's see if it gets back to my great grandfather. It starts kind of with my great grandfather who was, and the reason I use him is his life is bookended in such a fascinating way. He was born in 1889, a subject of the Ottoman Empire and he died in October, 1970, the same month that Hafez Al-Assad seizes power of Syria, so an incredible life span. And then it goes on to his daughter, my grandmother, and then my mother, and then me. And we all live in the same house. It's taken away from us in 1970 the year, also the year Hafez Al-Assad comes to power. And it's taken from us and we only get it back in 2010 and we begin to restore it at the same time that the country begins to come apart. And that was sort of my cover story because being American, being a journalist, being you know a human rights lawyer; like these are things that can, you know, get you killed in Syria so I needed sort of like a reason because people are always asking; why are you here now, why are you here? And so I was always telling people that I was there to restore the house, which was partly true. Yet this is like lambs to the slaughter. That's my great grandfather. And then you see him with the fez.

Anyway, so in 1992, is my first time back to Damascus in about ten years and I was seventeen. So I'm just going to read you from that, and I'm going to skip around a little, because you wanted me to read. How am I doing on time? Okay, that's not bad, flying through, perfect. Okay so this is Damascus summer of 1992.

Reading:

I landed in Damascus on June 21, 1992, curious, excited, intense. The advance instructions had been manifold: Do not say anything remotely political; do not appear too American; submit to whatever anyone appearing officials demands of you. Everyone is watching, my family warned me. Best not to draw any unwanted attention to yourself. I was seventeen and traveling alone. On my shoulder, I carried a heavy camcorder.

(You can't even imagine this probably.)

My father wanted me to be his eyes and film as much as I could. He hadn't been home since 1986. Around my waist I was wearing a black fanny pack with New Orleans scrolled across it in neon pink. Through its band I had also threaded a camera in its belt case which declared Pentax in red letters. I also wore a ridiculous straw hat. I was arriving on a flight from Cairo that was packed with people from the region, jokes aside the way we dressed and carried ourselves was inescapably different. I had left the United States four days after graduating from public high school in Baltimore where the post-graduation ritual was to go to Ocean City, Maryland, drink and celebrate this milestone of the American teenage experience. My strict Syrian parents didn't really care about the American teenage experience, nor were they particularly sympathetic to the milestones, as they had come up. I had only gone to a few dances and parties and only after arduous battles to convince them I would not end up an alcoholic or a drug addict. I knew a trip to the beach with my friends was never going to happen so I didn't even bother to ask them if I could go. Yet, they had no problem sending me by myself to the Middle East and Europe. First to Egypt, then to Syria, and lastly to Germany. Lebanon, still not two years out of its civil war

was not on the agenda. I would spend the entire summer abroad with relatives. To my parents, these places were much less frightening than a teenager invited two hours away from Baltimore.

It hadn't taken much convincing to get me to extend my stay in Syria where my cousins had assured... uh, extend my stay in Egypt, where my cousins had assured me that Syria had much less to offer. After all, they told me almost with a shudder, Syria only had three tv channels, unlike Egypt's five. These were the days long before rooftops were congested with satellite dishes that received beamed programming faster than the sensors could forbid it. I would have stayed on even longer and thought about changing my ticket again, but I had apparently already irritated relatives in Syria who had been expecting me just days before. So, I bid them a tearful farewell and I promised to write.

Just a two-hour flight later I landed in Syria. I could immediately tell from the looks of the airport in Damascus that maybe what my Egyptian cousins had said was true, Syria was years behind. At passport control the uniformed man seemed initially amused by me as he took my passport. When he saw my name, he asked if I spoke Arabic. While my comprehension was fluent, even then I had yet to feel confident about speaking it. Also, as of 1992, my vocabulary was limited. I knew the words for ingredients and spices relevant to the Syrian kitchen, household chores, anything related to school, college or grades, the Lord's prayer, and a bevy of cuss words. But with the edict to blend in ringing in my ears, I answered I did. He asked me if I was Syrian, I reflexively answered with barely suppressed indignation that no, I was an American. "Where are your parents from he asked?" Syria, I answered, but I couldn't help adding that they were Americans too. "Then you are Syrian he chided me, and if you are Syrian he said, you should have a Syrian passport, don't you want a Syrian passport?" I felt it was a trick question, I tried smiling and shrugged, and insha'Allah, while this literally means God willing, in a pinch it's a polite way to demure, to avoid giving a straight answer and to assure accountability or responsibility. "Was I married he then wanted to know." I bristled at the idea that he thought I might already be married. Couldn't he tell I was going to college at the end of the summer? And it always annoyed me as I was growing up the visiting Arabs would refer to me as an 'arūs, a bride, and inquires as to whether I wanted a groom. Of course, no one had been really trying to broker a child marriage, still it was indication of what was generally expected to be the most important thing in life. Backwards Syria, I kept thinking, but then in an effort not to seem too American, I simply answered the question, no, I wasn't married. And I tried to look as dejected about it as possible. (laughter)

Finally, he waved me through. I could see the exit. It wasn't far and readjusting my straw hat and the camcorder on my shoulder I began to make my way there to greet my family. Suddenly a man leaning against a wall pointed at me and summoned me to follow him into the unmarked room behind him. Apparently, a whole world existed in the short distance between where I stood and where I wanted to go. A world in which there was several different functionaries whose whims I could be subject too. I looked for some signage, for some explanation, but there was none. I realized later that I wasn't meant to understand what was going on, or to ever feel like I was sure of anything. This would be the case with most of the interactions I had with the Syrian state. The arbitrariness was one of the myriad ways of controlling society and extracting its submission. I had no choice but to follow.

Once we were inside the small cramped room, he closed the door behind us. We stood in silence for what seemed like an eternity as he stared at me. Who was I, he wanted to know? What was I doing in Syria? Where was I going to stay? Who was I staying with? I answered to the best of my abilities. I was on vacation, I was visiting Damascus, I was staying with my grandfather. He too asked me why I didn't have a Syrian passport if I was Syrian, as I clearly was. I shrugged and explained, I was born in America. Then he pointed at the camcorder still slung over my shoulder. Where was it from he wanted to know, America? What was I going to do with it? Film stuff I answered, hesitantly afraid this was so obvious perhaps I hadn't understood the question. Was it staying in the country? No, I answered relieved to finally be catching his drift. "Good, make sure you take it with you, he told me, don't sell it to anyone."

He then said that I needed to register the camcorder in a tone that suggested there was a regularity to this procedure, not that it was being made up as we went along. In retrospect, I realized that register was a euphemism, what he really wanted was a bribe to let me through. Of course, I said, how do I register it? He held out his hand and beckoned for my passport and scribbled on the last page RCA, which was the make, and one of the random numbers he found on the camcorder. There was nothing to suggest that the next official would even know to look there. All that struck me as completely random. I had that passport for another five years and whenever I would see his illegible scrawl again, I couldn't help but grimace. Smiling at me, he asked my age which was simple math considering he had my passport in his hands. And before I could answer, even answer, he asked if I was betrothed. I was getting increasingly irritated. I had always been on the defensive in the US about being Arab. Arabs were endlessly maligned in the American imagination often portrayed as hopelessly backward.

I tried with the skill of a preteen and then a teenage to explain geopolitics to my classmates and teachers, while also trying to represent who I was, an alternative image of Arabs. The previous year's war with Iraq and my father's mistimed decision to grow a mustache that made him look like Saddam Hussein, had made it all the more fraught. Now, my first five minutes in Syria was frustrated by these Syrian officials proving some of the stereotypes correct. "No, I'm not engaged I told the guard." Hearing the annoyance in my own voice I added, and ins'Allah soon and tried to smile. The man then handed me back my passport and as I took it, he held on to it a bit longer so that we were both holding it at the same time. Was he going to change his mind, I started to wonder? "Welcome in Syria," he said in poor English finally letting it go. I resisted the urge to correct him and backed down to the main hall. I quickly looked to see how many doors there were wondering if I'd have to go behind anymore.

Then a jittery man in an orange jumpsuit approached me. He was looking for an Alia Malek, "Yes that's me" I said, surprising him as I went to shake his hand, which he took hesitantly. He'd been hunting everywhere for me he said. While never looking me in the eye he ushered me towards the exit. When he saw my great uncle, who was awaiting us outside he hurried me along and delivered me to him. Then he began obsequiously asking forgiveness for the delay, addressing my great uncle repeatedly as professor and doctor. Of my grandmother's siblings, I knew this great uncle the best as well as his beautiful American wife Clara and their six kids. We'd visit them in Cape Cod where they would summer.

I was so relieved to see a familiar face, but he was cross with me for having taken so long. In English he snapped at me, "Why had I not met with the man in the orange jump suit?" I didn't

know I was supposed to meet him. Turning to the man, my great uncle thanked him and dismissed him. As he did I saw him slip money into his hand. “God keep you oh doctor, oh professor”, the man bobbed his head, bowing. Suddenly embarrassed by my handshake, I hid my hand behind my back.

That was the beginning of that trip in 1992.

Should I read one more passage or, yes/no? Questions? Talking enough? Humus? I saw there was some out there. Read? Okay, I'll just read one little one from; this is also kind of dark too. This is now the spring of 2011. I've moved to Syria and this is May of 2011, if I'm not mistaken. I had just come back from Cairo where I had been covering stuff in Egypt, and I just landed back in Syria, and so this is where it picks up. When I landed it was the news of the death of Hamza al-Khateeb, a Syrian, thirteen-year-old. I felt like this would either quickly force a Syrian Tharir square or see that there wouldn't be one anytime soon.

Reading:

Hamza's school portrait became ubiquitous. It showed a chubby boy wearing a polo shirt under a baby blue sweater. The background looked like a blue sky swirled with the yellow of the sun, rays of light radiating from the center that almost cast a halo around Hamza's head. Where other boys might start to look like young men at thirteen, Hamza was still on the childish side of the age. Everyone in Syria became familiar with this portrait of him and one other, a still taken from a video of him after death: A naked and bloated corpse no longer the color of flesh but nearly purple from all the bruising.

Security forces had arrested Hamza on April 29th in Dar'a, four days after I had arrived in Damascus, for attending a rally with his family. But no one would hear of it until nearly a month later when Hamza's body was returned. According to activists at the time, it was released to the family on the condition that they say nothing. A video of it however was made and circulated soon reaching global networks like Al Jazeera.

The body showed many signs of torture, there were bullet wounds on his arms, he had black eyes, cuts, injuries consistent with electric shock devices, bruises, and whip marks. His neck had been broken and he had been castrated. While American media often sanitized what viewers can see of what can be done to a human body, the same cannot be said for Arab audiences. Images from Iraq and Palestine had not been sanitized for years. And yet what we saw of Hamza, which clearly showed violence done to a Syrian boy by the Syrian Regime shocked those who were willing to look. Hamza's father was briefly detained when the video came out. Syrians were put on notice. An expose' to be shown on state tv would give us the truth.

When it aired doctors on camera made the case that these injuries were acquired after Hamza's death and certainly not while the regime had him in custody. The doctors who testified on tv said the marks on his body were not signs of torture, but had been faked by conspirators who wanted to agitate the Syrian people. To allay any doubts Hamza's father and uncle appeared on state tv in a prerecorded conversation and said that they had trusted Assad, who they added had pledged to look into the circumstances of Hamza's death.

At first, I wondered why the regime had bothered with the charade, no one around me seemed to believe that anyone else but the regime had done this to the child. Even though some insinuated that he or his parents were at fault for ignoring what they should have known were possible consequences for participating in the rally.

But I began to understand that we weren't meant to be convinced. This was how the regime could hide a threat in plain sight. As state tv lingered on the bodily mutilation speaking calmly about how the wounds were inflicted post mortem, we were meant to actually look at and commit to memory the damage that can be done to a body, even to a boy. The message; be grateful this is not your child. It was a master class in how to hear, read, and speak the coded language. The one that exist between dictator and dictated.

What happened to Hamza taught me that, what many Syrians who were hesitant to confront the regime feared most was not instability or the badīl, the alternative to the regime; they had whether consciously or subconsciously understood that the regime would, like an abusive parent, punish them severely for their misbehavior, as if Syrians demanding reforms were just children. Really the regime has survived for years on an intricate architecture that made children out of adults. So remind anyone getting any ideas to the contrary; the regime began to make corpses out of children as they did with Hamza.

Not uplifting, I know. (applause)