

Marwa Al-Sabouni

## It's a Long Story

When the war in Syria was tearing apart their home city of Homs, architect Marwa Al-Sabouni and her husband made the decision to stay there with their two young children, rather than to become refugees. In her memoir, *The Battle for Home*, she writes about the experience of continuing daily life in a battle zone, and of the importance of architecture in determining the fates of cities. Marwa's work now is concerned with the impact of conflict on urban environments, and the possibilities that can emerge from rebuilding. She believes architecture can play an essential role in strengthening communities, and in healing her country.

Edwina Throsby: Marwa Al-Sabouni. Welcome to Its a Long Story.

Marwa Al-Sabouni: Thank you.

**ET:** Now Syria is a country that a lot of us in the west associate with war and destruction. They're the only stories that we hear out of Syria. What's your perspective of your homeland?

**MAS:** The the war has been now going on for almost 8 years so it's no surprise that everybody's associating Syria with war. We as well as Syrians we still associate our country with war and many of us who, I mean who live in the country many of us still are in conflict zones but, for example, in my in my case I live in a city which has been majorly affected by war but now for two years it's, I mean it's a different story now. The conflict has passed and we have no more battling in the city.

**ET:** Yeah. You write in your book, *The Battle For Home*, about the history of government corruption in Syria existed before the war.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** And the impact that has had on the architecture and the urban planning of the cities of Syria. Can you talk a little bit about that? What was it about governments before and after the war that made them vulnerable to corruption?

**MAS:** You see the history of corruption started in the region not only in Syria in the late, in the late phase of the Ottoman Empire. So that was in the falling phase and corruption was just, was ruling at that time took root while under the colonisation mandate. So under the French in certain countries and under the British and other countries. And since then it has been an epidemic in our countries. Of course, every country worldwide – architecture—df

**ET:** —of course.

**MAS:** Suffers from corruption, but there are percentages and we have so high percentages of corruption because of this history. So when it comes to architecture, architecture is, works with two other, two other let's say junctures which is economy at the capital, the capital of money and the legislation body, which is the authority. So city's authority plus the development —

**ET:** —development industry that provides the money to create the buildings.

**MAS:** That would go through the channel of an architect or an engineer who can manifest and design divisions of those two. So when those two are corrupted. You can imagine how difficult for the third hand to produce something relevant or something that can be done right and this is what happens in my country and , in our cities, that the city's planning committee and the city's authority have taken so many wrong decisions and with the help of ignorant and sometimes arrogant architects just, you know, vandalised the whole look and image of the city.

**ET:** This as you say is not a new thing and it's not a result of the war. It's something that preexisted the war. So let's go back to your own childhood.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** What sort of neighbourhood did you grow up?

**MAS:** I grew up in a neighbourhood called, it's called New Homs because it's not a suburb in, like Australian suburb meaning I mean because it's very close to the city just, you know, 10 to 5 minutes by car you can go 15 to 20 minutes on foot and you will be in the city centre. We had no traditional housing. We had block building, three stories building no more and pleasant area to live in.

**ET:** So it was like an apartment that you lived in?

**MAS:** Yeah, yeah.

**ET:** Right. You describe your family as one that was, and I'm quoting, "highly conscious of class distinctions and especially condescending towards the vulgar non-city residents. We were separated from those piranhas in our schools, neighbourhoods and streets. What was your family like?

**MAS:** I mean you also call it a typical family of Homs because most of us in the city what we call a city not, you know, not a sprawl and not a suburb, another village, was both parents educated, university educated, good income, big apartment. What else? I mean just, you know, network, the social network is also from certain class and, yeah, I don't know. I don't approve of this because as I grew up I learnt that things shouldn't be this way, but which is inside this box.

**ET:** So it was a very sort of tight, closed community.

**MAS:** Funny enough it's not tight as it should be. It's ruled by status.

**ET:** Right.

**MAS:** Yeah, so it just, you know, appearances.

**ET:** So what did your parents do?

**MAS:** My father was a doctor and my mother had a biology degree but she was a stay at home mum.

**ET:** And do you have siblings?

**MAS:** Yeah, we're four.

**ET:** Okay.

**MAS:** I'm the oldest.

**ET:** So your family life growing up is there any, are there any memories that stand out for you?

**MAS:** I'll go back with you there, but I mean first I have to explain why I assume I will hesitate and stop for a moment because of the war. The war takes, it takes all of your just, you know, it takes over your brain and basically what you have in mind because of, I believe it's the shock of the event that memories, even memories from the war stops to I mean it disappears and have a short-term memory. So it's very difficult for me to remember things from the past which I feel like a very old lady.. Seriously!

**ET:** That's so, I mean it sounds like it's almost sort of a protection mechanism or something. Your brain sort of puts a wall up around things.

**MAS:** I think this is how the brain works because even my daughter and my son find it difficult to remember at this young age 13 and 10 to remember childhood, their early childhood, and they remember certain images but they are aware that they've lost, they had this memory gap thing, yeah. So when you say strongest memory of childhood, I just, you know, I may remember myself as a tomboy playing soccer with the boys and in the street going on my bike, but I mean I don't know what else to remember really.

**ET:** That's amazing because I guess I assume that you are not the only person who's had this effect, right? This is across the a culture so a culture has in effect lost their memory.

**MAS:** Unfortunately, yes, it's shocking to hear my children saying this. I mean I'm a grown up, I'm an adult, I have the decades to remember, but they have got like a couple of years and they just, you know, they have gaps as I said. They remember things but others just, you know, they went black.

[MUSIC]

**ET:** Do you remember the war breaking out?

**MAS:** Yes, that's easy to remember.

**ET:** What happened? What was your experience of the outbreak of war?

**MAS:** You mean like emotionally or —

**ET:** — well, well, sort of both. I mean do you remember what the signs were that this was happening? Did you hear a report on the radio or was there —

**MAS:** — no. Believe it or not the hysteria of society. You will notice that it's too difficult to make a conversation of peaceful or calm conversation with anybody. People just, you know, were on the edge.

**ET:** They were frightened?

**MAS:** They were angry.

**ET:** Right.

**MAS:** Yeah. And because the like the elders were frightened because they were wiser so they know the kind of, I mean I remember my mother in law, she has deceased now, she was so frightened. She was, you know, she was unable to explain why, but they were just

so frightened. They know that something big will happen and the young, the driven were just, you know, so angry. You cannot make sense with them.

**ET:** What was is they were angry at?

**MAS:** Everything. They were angry at everything and that's the challenge. Because I'm not in favour with what happened on both sides, but I mean the problem with revolt and this will sound very controversial and I know that people won't agree, many people won't agree, but the problem with revolt is that it is driven by anger and anger can be, I mean it's just destructive. It's a destructive mode of mind and, yes, it leads to very severe consequences.

**ET:** Do you remember the first time you saw violence around you as a result of the war?

**MAS:** Heard.

**ET:** Heard.

**MAS:** Yeah, because you shut, I mean we shut the windows, we closed up the shutters, we sat on floor because bullets were everywhere. And it was very weird and very strange to hear the bullet and the guns out in the streets. And, of course, many people died because they were curious. They just, you know, opened their window and just were killed.

**ET:** Wow. And you were there with your husband and 2 little children at the time?

**MAS:** Yeah, they were around, they were a little bit after three, my son like 3 1/2 or more, and my daughter is six and plus.

**ET:** What did you think about protecting them?

**MAS:** We just tried to take the precautions just be away from the source of, as far as we can. I mean people just, you know, went into the hallway or sat protected by a room or two from the façades and shut down.

**ET:** So you would sit in the innermost rooms of the house.

**MAS:** Yeah, the centre of the house and as low as you can go when you hear something. Not all day, of course, yes.

**ET:** You get asked a lot why you didn't leave.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** But you can understand why people want to know because, you know, when you imagine being in the city with a young family in that kind of extreme conflict situation, you know, the urge to flee that must have been extraordinarily strong. I mean people imagine that it would be strong.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** But it wasn't so much for you and your husband.

**MAS:** We didn't have this urge. We didn't have this urge. Of course, it's a natural instinct to flight. You hear the danger and you flee, but as rational beings you could fight this urge. The key word for me is patience. That was what just ruled our mind at the time because many people left because they couldn't take it anymore. It's not, it's not the urge of fleeing

as much as the urge of I cannot take it, you know, it's too much for me. Anyone at the situation just imagine yourself in a movie, let's say a movie image or a movie clip where you are in the jungle or just, you know, and in some kind of danger frame and the first thing you will do is to look at your surroundings and then you will imagine your route where to go, what could happen, you can imagine your journey, you will imagine your destination as well if you have the time. And if you imagine this well enough at the time where we were trapped basically to stay and to take refuge and just siege yourself was the safest, the safest I mean from like I said in the rational way of thinking. But if you go into the psychological, the psychological makeup of that moment. Like I said it's the lack of patience sometimes and sometimes for other people it's the dream of, they would imagine the post scenario of this and this is a word that we heard from so many people there is no future here. So it's not the urgency of the presence, but also the lack of faith in the future. Also, I should make a note here that for other people that was very urgent. For example, I'm talking about, now I'm talking about somebody who had his apartment or my apartment at the time still standing other people which is, you know, we know many people who had the whole building collapsing over their heads and that's what I mean.

**ET:** That's when you would have less of a choice.

**MAS:** You have no choice, you have the choice. I mean everything is collapsing, your world is collapsing, yeah.

**ET:** So you considered what a refugee journey would be like, you know, leaving home, seeking asylum in a neighbouring country trying to —

**MAS:** — that's Step 1. That was for us Step 1. Then Step 2 was more a fate, faith, sorry, more faith oriented. For example, like I said I mean to be patient and to accept that you are, that hardship is inevitable.

**ET:** Having considered the possibility of becoming refugees and leaving Syria when you thought about the realities of that and the deep uncertainty of that future and the realities of, yeah, the realities of how that would play out, you decided to stay. You also had a house still standing, which —

**MAS:** — but others I mean if you ask others I mean I am one person from many who stayed. They will say I would rather to die in dignity. So dignity as well is just, you know, a concept that very much, I mean was very evident because what does it mean I would rather to die in dignity? Because people would imagine this and they will feel that they will be, they will be deprived from their dignity. Being unwelcomed guest, being a need.

**ET:** I mean it says, it's a damning indictment of the way that we treat refugees internationally isn't it?

**MAS:** That's very also controversial and cannot, for me it cannot be, it cannot be summarised under one judgement because on one end there are so many bad behaviours and bad attitudes towards refugees that should be condemned, but on the other there are refugees who, and I hope people will forgive me for this but I mean some percentage of refugees weren't really refugees.

**ET:** Right.

**MAS:** They took advantage of the urgency and crisis of others. They just, you know, seek asylum because they wanted the future as I said, they wanted the bounty, they thought

really existed and for many proved not to be and a percentage of those came back because they were disappointed, you know.

**[MUSIC]**

**ET:** Even though a lot of your compatriots couldn't see a future, you always could.

**MAS:** Not that I dreamt of any utopia that will come out of the war, no. That's not the case. It just, you know, I didn't allow myself to imagine something that I have no control of. I just, you know, I know that future can be bad or good, and it's for me in my view it's not my place to live according, according a judgement that I cannot make now. I have the power to control this moment and this moment only and this is what I chose to do is to make the best of this moment.

**ET:** During the war what was a typical day like for you? A typical family day?

**MAS:** Oh, exciting. You see in the war there were many phases where just, you know, many challenges and each phase was title just you know under this overwhelming challenge of the time. So, for example, there were times where a life threat could be of one kind could be snipers, and I mean I'm talking about phases that happened. We had the snipers, we had the mortars, we had the shelling, we had the shooting, we had the kidnapping. Yes, that's about it.

**ET:** But I mean in the middle of all of this you had to get your kids to school, right?

**MAS:** Yes, yes and we did and they were endangered and certain kids died in schools. They actually died in school, they died under mortars, they were killed by snipers and that happened all around us and just people. As I explain in the book, people just were just being killed in the middle of the street and people I mean believe it or not continued what they were doing. I mean it will pause for a moment then they will remove the body or bodies and continue, not as if nothing happened because you will see it until now you see it on faces just the look in eyes, I mean just, you know, nobody just have a normal face no, the sadness and the break and all of this is just, you know, evident. But people moved on with their daily life business despite everything. And we're talking you said typical day because I mean this is the life-threatening events which could be on one day and on the other and just pause for a day or two then reoccur. But the daily challenges where just, you know, the, the shortages of amenities. So, we've got no electricity and people just went crazy because businesses stopped, hospitals stopped and just, you know, household work stopped, everything got paralysed, everything was so stressful to get done and people were just, you know, getting by through the day just was nerve-racking and many people left because of electricity not only because bullets. And then the shortage of water, shortage of gas, shortage of heat. We had like two winters without heat and our winter— I know many people have this, I don't know why they do have this stereotype that Syria could be a warm country, but the winter is very severe. Just you know it can be minus 10 during the night and 2 and 3 during the day. During the war we had snowy winters and snow was 10 and 20 centimetres outside and we had no heating inside. And also people died because of this.

**ET:** Yeah. How did you get food?

**MAS:** Food was never lost because Syria is an agricultural country and very abundant and this is something very critical now. It's very threatened at the moment not because of war only but because of reconstruction and something very, I try to be outspoken often and try

to draw attention at because it's very important to protect this source of peace because usually wars are followed by famine and we were so fortunate that we haven't suffered from that.

**ET:** It's not just, of course, the destruction of the city. You write that it wasn't enough, and this is a quote, it wasn't enough that your home had been destroyed. It began to feel like a further insult that you had to be humiliated by trivial things just to remind you of who you were and you write a lot in the book about this idea of the physical destruction of the city mirroring the emotional psychological destruction.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** When you're now thinking about rebuilding, how do those ideas play into it? How does the idea that the personal, mental, emotional, psychological self reflects the physical self?

**MAS:** For me it's at the core. Just, you know, everything that architecture and architects should aim at and should protect and should become their own I mean the core and principal source of inspiration because this is what they want. It's like farming. Land is supposed to produce food, produce some kind of production that is useful and could contribute and it should contribute in the cycle of life and architecture is the same. Building the city is the same. It's like growing products of land. It should not be something that just, you know, I mean it's not the necessity here, but the value. It shouldn't be something trivial and shouldn't be something that aimed at the very small group of people. It should and this is the analogy it should food, feed as much people as it should and once they are satisfied you can move into the second level. So, in architecture and building should satisfy the basic needs not in a functional way as maybe somebody would imagine at first, not just a functional way because the aesthetic aspect of architecture also needs to be surrounded by beautiful things and beautiful surroundings that could contribute in our psychological peacefulness is a necessity but also not in a luxurious and ostentatious kind of approach. So it's very tricky task to take on but it's very important and it should be at like I said the principal theme of the work of architects.

**ET:** And when applied to rebuilding a completely devastated city I mean 60% of homes has been destroyed —

**MAS:** — mass destroyed so it's on the ground just like pancakes.

**ET:** I mean it's been likened to Berlin after the Second World War.

**MAS:** Exactly.

**ET:** So there is a really massive rebuilding effort required which you and your husband involved in.

**MAS:** We are two persons who are sharing the experience, but we haven't I mean we don't have an official say because you have to be I mean you either be appointed by the owners of the property, which could be private here, or by the official body as part of a team or teams that are going to rebuild.

**ET:** One of the things that comes out very strongly in your book is the fact that rebuilding isn't just about the physical city, it's about rebuilding a culture and rebuilding a society and rebuilding of people who have been shattered.

**MAS:** — a social fabric.

**ET:** Yeah, exactly. So what are the principles that you think people need to be applying when thinking about how to rebuild a social fabric?

**MAS:** First of all not to rely on corporate businesses and investment, which is the major and main challenge in front of me. It's an international challenge. It's not only the rebuilding of Syria. Now the government, all we see on national TVs and media it's just, you know, built for investment. Syria is ready for investment. Syria is just, you know, just interacting and just, you know, inviting people to invest not to rebuild I mean and this is very dangerous and very unpromising unfortunately because when you, we are speaking about principles. We have to have the like I said people at the centre of the rebuilding. What does that mean? It means that what kind of housing people would like to live in.

**ET:** What sort of homes.

**MAS:** What sort of homes, what sort of economy? I mean because the way you build is the way you dictate the cycle of economy and we had this small businesses craft-based trades, small trades kind of economy that flourished. And in Syria where I talk about the old part not because it's old because people when they hear the word old part of the city or the old city, they would imagine the museum or imagine something that just, you know, a place where tourists will visit a nostalgic architect speaking about traditional architecture. It's not that it's just, you know, the way this ecosystem of people worked within the channel of architecture that allowed this to flourish and take root. As I said, I mean the, when you have the high-rise, for example, you lose, the first thing you will lose is neighbours and when you lose neighbours this is a very essential part of a social fabric. This is how you just, you know, unravel the whole fabric by destroying neighbourliness. When you have, when you like we did in Syria when you just wipe down a whole area with all the trees and plants and the buildings that were connected in a way that reflected the life of people you just, you know, and replace it by just a ready-made box. You didn't kill the social fabric only, you kill all the environment. You just, you know, wipe down a whole set of ecosystems and in this sense you just, you know, like you paved on farming land and you don't allow the crops to revive itself and in this sense I think this is one aspect of belonging that I speak about in the book. There are many layers to this that finish up with very let's say refined way of creating a place that only an architect can do.

[MUSIC]

**ET:** Are you worried that history is repeating itself architecturally in Syria? That the French colonialists came in and destroyed a lot of the traditional neighbourhood and architecture, built towers, undermined social fabric. You argue in the book that that was one of the reasons that created the conditions that were favourable for an out breakable.

**MAS:** It's an intentional strategy that every colonial power resorts to wherever they go. They attack the social fabric they know because this is the way to control masses. In Paris, for example, they have someone planning, replanned Paris because they wanted to —

**ET:** — make their stamp.

**MAS:** No, basically to widen the streets in a way that the revolt, the revolters cannot cut the streets and cannot take, hide, I mean shelter or just flee. In this regard, they wanted to control the city and to control the city they replanned it in a way they could just monitor the city and it could fit the tanks and could fit the, I mean their power. So colonialism always follows this pattern. They go into the city and control it and in order to control it,

they come up with these forced, at first they enforce it and then they will leave behind them traces of just, you know, terms like progress, hygiene, modernism and this is how you make sure that the people after you, after you leave, will take the same, pick up the same strategy and this is what happened in Syria.

**ET:** Are you worried it's happening again now?

**MAS:** — it has never stopped, it has never stopped, and that's how we ended up with, of course, war has so many reasons, but this is the main major reason and major impact that had on conflict, but what my hope is that the more we talk about, the more we highlight this issue that it could be stopped. It could just, you know, allow us or give us an opportunity to break the cycle, and we have to remember that this is not a Syrian issue and this is not a regional issue and the reason that the world have given up on it's an international issue. Is it something that is taking place in every city around the world unfortunately.

**ET:** I mean social fabric is breaking down all over the place. We're spending more time inside the houses than we are with our communities. All of these things.

**MAS:** You have higher percentages of suicide and mental health just, you know, a topic that everybody is talking about, but the source issue is not being handled.

**ET:** This is the social isolation?

**MAS:** Yes.

**ET:** So look, going back to your early life, why did you choose architecture?

**MAS:** Architecture chose me I didn't choose architecture. I mean this is a question also I get asked frequently I just scored the grades that allowed me to get this major and this is something —

**ET:** — because architecture isn't particularly well-regarded in Syria, right? It's not something that you need, you said that, you know, you wrote somewhere that, you know, medicine is the top and then dentistry and then, you know.

**MAS:** It's well regarded, I mean it's like the third let's say because like you said I mean like I said before medicine is the top and then dentistry and pharmacy afterwards. It comes in third place all engineering majors. Architecture is one of them. So I wasn't too bad.  
[Laughter]

**ET:** I didn't want to suggest that you had flunked out of everything. [Laughter] But you came to love it, you know, you clearly, and you have insights about your profession that are internationally recognised as being, you know, important and sort of new.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** The other thing that came out of your time at university was that you met your husband. How did you meet him?

**MAS:** We met because in architecture school that was something very nice at the at the college that we had a community and unlike other colleges we, the seniors and then the graduates and postgraduates, kept visiting back the university and kept relationships with other students because it's the kind of study that allow you to keep, I mean there are no barriers between the years. So a freshman student could help out a graduate student at the

same project and learn on the way because it's a creative and artistic major. So that's how we met. He visited, he had friends there and we just, you know, happened to be in the same group of friends.

**ET:** He was from quite a different background from you. He came from a neighbourhood called Baba Amr.

**MAS:** Yes, Baba Amr.

**ET:** Okay, which was not as sort of middle class as the neighbourhood that you grew up in and you write in the book that, and I'm quoting, "To marry my husband, who was born and raised in Baba Amr. I had to give up the idea of a conventional wedding as two worlds could not be united even for a night."

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** How has that played out in your married life?

**MAS:** Very well. We're best friends and that's what matters. And we just, you know, we fortunately we share so much of the common understanding of our lives and of the life around us and that's how we just, you know, we are partners on so many levels luckily. So that proves, I mean, background is just, you know, sometimes it's a challenge but in our case it had no effect.

**ET:** Have your families come to accept each other?

**MAS:** They didn't have to. I mean the war broke after we married I don't know like 7 years and you have to understand they weren't like enemies or something, but they had different customs and different rituals and different traditions. So they weren't in hate of each other, but they knew that they, you know, cannot accept the ways of life of each other. So there wasn't mean, bitter relationship.

**ET:** There was just no relationship.

**MAS:** Exactly, right.

**ET:** And you have two children, Nire and Ike.

**MAS:** Yeah.

**ET:** Why did you decide to bring them into the world? Was it that you always wanted to be a mother?

**MAS:** No, no. Again it just, you know, I know that some people just preplan every step of their lives but we just lived our lives. When you marry, you have children and that's it. I mean not much the thinking behind this. Yes.

**ET:** How have your kids come through the war?

**MAS:** They are very different in terms of personality. And in age. My son was very young. He didn't know any life other than war. Whereas my daughter was six and a half at the time and she had understanding or she grasped what does it mean to have a life previous to the war. And I think the war had shaped certain aspects of their personalities in terms of my husband put it as they become stronger and they are more aware of the worlds they are just, you know, they know I think this is true of all the war generation who is not too

traumatised they become, you don't see them as very naive sometime. The innocence of childhood not in a bad way I mean they will become aware of so many complexities that you get, do I need to be like this with them? The children of war become deeper. But on the other hand some people or some children become not cruel I mean the war just, you know, they become stiff.

**ET:** Tougher?

**MAS:** Tough. I mean, yeah, but I mean not in a good way. They become just to hardened inside because they had to protect themselves from so many hardships so they become just, you know, very tough and hard.

**ET:** How did you prevent that from happening to your own children?

**MAS:** By love basically. I mean when you just, you know, you have to be very careful and, of course, I mean obviously you have to be very careful with what they can see and what not and how to, we didn't lie to our children, which is something many Syrian parents did unfortunately. They found that lying to their children is a protecting technique, but we didn't lie. We didn't, because children know and they, it will take more time and will take more patience to explain everything and go through everything and have difficult conversations with them and answer so many "why" questions that mean not the easiest questions to be answered. So why does he or her, she kill, for example? So, with honesty and love is just, you know, what we surrounded them with.

**ET:** What sort of future do you hope for for them?

**MAS:** Again, it will sound through all this interview that I don't put that much emphasis on future. I just, it's something of, it's a choice in life to focus on what you've got in your hands and not be passive just be positive but it's just the difference of what moment to choose. So people might choose to be positive by aiming at something at the future and plan the future but the war told me and I from the questions you've asked you just maybe discovered that since my childhood is just, you know, live the moment but in a very, I try to be in a very positive way. I don't, I am not a person who will just, you know, don't give a damn or something it's just I try to focus on what I have in hand and do my best at this moment and leave it, leave the future that I have no control of.

**ET:** Marwa Al-Sabouni, it's been so wonderful talking to you. Thank you so much for your time today.

**MAS:** Thank you.