

## **Madison Nipps-Gros gives her impressions of M. Nabil Shofan's visit on 11/12/2015**

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of December, the English International and European Terminale classes had the privilege of meeting Nabil Shofan, a journalist and political refugee from Homs in Syrian. Sent to us by the Maison des Journalistes, Nabil is now a broadcast journalist and a founding member of the Syrian Center for Press Freedom. For over an hour, we were all ears, getting to know more about the difficult situation in his homeland, his journey as a Syrian journalist and most importantly the question of press freedom.

Under Bachar El Assad's regime, anyone expressing even the remotest thought against the regime, runs the risk of being immediately arrested and even killed. Nabil Shofan is the living proof that one misplaced sentence can get you thrown into prison. When the Arab Spring first spread to Syria, in late January 2011, it was a peaceful movement for more democracy. But the protesters soon faced the violence of the regime's armed forces resulting in a number of deaths and leading to even more unrest. Nabil, a young journalist at the time, wrote articles denouncing the government's atrocities. He kept these anonymous. However, he believes it was speaking with a university student which proved fatal. That day a student told him the protesters deserved to be killed, to which Nabil answered that the people should be given what they want. He was later arrested and held in captivity for three months.

So how can journalists, whose primary job is to ensure transparency by spreading the truth, do so in a country where there is virtually no freedom of speech? Nabil asserted « Today, Syria is the most dangerous country for journalists. » Journalists in Syria have multiple enemies, from Daesh to Sunnite militias to Bachar Al-Assad. Even after seeking refuge in neighboring country Jordan, Nabil was not safe as he was sent back to prison on the basis that he was in contact with terrorists. Still, he gave us the impression that being a sort of spokesperson for the civilians was his duty and that this encouraged him to continue his profession despite the dangers. He made it clear: « I don't write against the regime, I write what the people say ». The will to continue expressing himself freely after leaving Jordan was one of the reasons Nabil came to France. After some hardships as a refugee seeking asylum - with all his money being spent in the first month of his arrival - Nabil was able to stay with various French families. Eventually he gained support from the Maison des Journalistes and moved in with them. « Journalism in France is good » he claimed. Coming from someone who had survived brutal repression for merely being a journalist, this did not come as a surprise to us. Still, it was refreshing to hear this simple statement, in the sense that we now fully realized drawing caricatures of various religious leaders or condemning the latest school reforms was not allowed all around the world. It slowly dawned upon us that we take our liberties for granted, forgetting how much our ancestors had once fought for them and how fragile democracy can be.

In addition to this, Nabil spoke of the Islamic State and of how the government had arguably helped to create it by releasing many prisoners who became the leaders of Daesh. He showed us a news report he did in which he interviews Nicolas Henin, a French journalist on his book « Jihad Academy » in which he uncovers the secret life of the organization and how they recrute so many people. As an ex-hostage of the Islamic State, Nicolas Henin has seen the jihadist's love for women and money, and the small place religion holds in their lives. Nabil did the translation for us, explaining that Daesh's propaganda pushed young men especially to join their ranks, by making them believe they will be part of something glorious and maybe even become a famous and feared soldier. He compared becoming a jihadist to becoming a popstar, hence the name « Jihad Academy » derived from « Star Academy ». It was interesting for us to actually see Nabil's own work as a journalist and his report was rather insightful.

Then came the time for us to ask our questions. These were mostly about the complexity of the conflict and Nabil explained the intricacy of the various actors involved, who they were supported by and against whom they were fighting. Daesh fighting the Free Syrian Army and the Assad regime; Bachar Al-Assad fighting Daesh and the Free Syrian Army; the Kurdish people fighting the Free Syrian Army and Daesh; etc – it was hard to follow. Perhaps most difficult was trying to understand, on an international level, how other States can intervene and effectively end the conflict. Fight Daesh first or Bachar Al-Assad? On one hand, Russia is supporting the regime and sending airforces to fight alongside it whilst, on the other hand, European States do not want to side with a tyrant they wish to remove on the long-term. For Nabil, Western governments establishing a dialogue with Bachar Al-Assad would result in pushing the Syrian people towards Daesh. In his opinion, they should pressure Assad to give up his power in order to implement the principles of democracy. This of course, he stressed gravely, and for what seemed like the umpteenth time, is « very difficult ». A pending silence hung in the air as we listened attentively with a mixture of awe and profound solemnity.

Today, Nabil contributes to several Arabic-language media outlets including Rozanna Radio. He is now in a safer place and able to carry out his daily life and profession without the fear of being arrested. However, he cannot forget the situation for journalists in Syria: this past year one journalist in Syria was killed by Bachar Al-Assad's forces and another was arrested by Daesh and they have not received any news since. When asked if he will ever return to Syria, his answer was maybe, once the war is over. For now, he is busy sharing the importance of free expression and information to highschool students like us. At the end of the meeting, all of us students quietly filed out of the room, a little wiser than on the way in, and still trying to process the information. Some even stayed to ask more questions. We truly thank Nabil Shoffan for dedicating his time, and enlightening us on this complex yet extremely relevant subject.

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