

Episode transcript for 925. Walaa's Experience in Syria / Walaa Mouma Returns (Part 2)



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Hello listeners, and welcome back to Luke's English Podcast. Very nice to be talking to you in this episode.

This is episode number 925, and it's the second part of a two-part episode, featuring a conversation with Walaa Muma from Syria. Walaa was first on this podcast back in episode 703, which is about four years ago, and in that episode she talked about how she improved her English, largely on her own. She really focused on her English when she was a student.

It was a very difficult time for her, but she really, really doubled down on her English, and she used various focused methods to improve her level of English. She talks about those methods, she talks about exactly how she did it in episode 703. Yeah, so she's from Syria, and she was living in Syria near Damascus at that time, and of course that was during the Syrian revolution, as she describes it.

The uprising of people, the protest and civilian uprisings throughout Syria, and then the subsequent violent reaction by the Ba'athist regime, which lasted from February 2011 all the way

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through to December 2024, fairly recently, when the regime essentially ended when Bashar al-Assad left the country. Things have changed now, but it was, yes, a very difficult time for Walaa to continue her studies in Syria, but she managed to do it. So in part one of this, the previous episode, number 924, as you may have heard, Walaa talks about her academic studies, because these days she lives in the UK.

She managed to get scholarship funding through a UK government scholarship programme. That's how she was able to leave Syria, go to the UK and study, which was her dream, to do a master's degree in the UK. She managed to do it, she found a way to do it, and she moved to Coventry, where she studied at Warwick University, doing a master's degree.

And so, yeah, the previous episode was all about her academic journey towards studying for a PhD and essentially helping refugees to learn English. This is her passion, right? But again, going back to episode 703, when she talked about learning English in the face of all these difficulties and challenges and being displaced and living in fear of violence and attacks and, you know, missile strikes in her street, losing loved ones, horrible things. In that episode, she couldn't really talk very much about what really happened in Syria at that time.

That's because the regime was still in place, and so she had to be very careful what she said. It was a very tricky time in terms of having to be very careful, watching your words very carefully, because of potential repercussions. But since things changed at the end of last year, I think that Walaa felt very keen to come back

on the podcast and to be able to talk about the things that she couldn't really talk about before.

If you can imagine, she was probably desperate to tell everyone about what was going on, but it was just too dangerous to do it. So I think that's one of the reasons why she was so keen to come back on the podcast, to actually kind of deal with that unfinished business and tell us really about what was going on. So that's what this part, part two here, focusses on, is Walaa's account of what it was really like living in Syria during all of those troubles, and how she managed to kind of get out of it, how she dealt with it, and how it felt when she got the news that the regime was over.

I mean, it's not all done and dusted, obviously. There are many complicated things that have to be dealt with now. But anyway, I'll now let Walaa tell her story and give her descriptions.

I found this fascinating to listen to. I also found it very moving. So that's enough of an introduction.

Let's get back into the conversation with Walaa. And here we go.

When we last talked, 2021, I mean, the Civil War was still going on, essentially.

Not sort of to the same extent that it had been in previous years, but it was still in the sort of stalemate situation, let's say. What's happened since then? Can you talk about it? Of course, of course. First, let me tell you something.

It's never been a civil war. It's always been a revolution against a dictator who kills his own people. And because people said no, like, you can't just like proceed with your corruption and this corrupt government.

You can't just like kill people. You can't just harm people of this country and steal all the wealth of this country. Because people said no, the reaction from the government was just like killing people, kidnapping people, making people detainees and prisons that you can see and prisons that you can't see.

Because of course, we found out now so many prisons underground where people are just like dead or they're, you know, they're taking it's just like crazy. So I'm really glad that we were able to get rid of this criminal. Of course, I'd be happy, a lot happier when he's put into a fair court or something like that.

So, you know, actually, oh my god, this, this is like, so I'm really just like speechless, you know, five years ago, when we talked about this topic, if you remember, after we finished the interview, I asked you to kindly remove some bits from the interview, because in that in those bits, I talked about my experience in Syria. You know, these days, and interestingly, these days, when I talk about revolution, and when I talk about my happiness after our victory, some people, a very small number of people, not so many people, very small number of people, they would say like, well, you've been in the UK for years, stop talking about Syria, you haven't experienced things, so you can't speak for us or something like that. Of course, like I said, this is just a small number of people, because there are so many other people who have watched my videos, who know me very well.

And they know that I've been through a lot before I left the country. But for those people, I'll say, I've been through a lot before I left Syria, the war started, that revolution started in 2011, I left the country in 2020. So these are nine years of oppression, of, you know, just like suffering that I stayed in the country.

See, so I mean, I told you, and these are things now that I want to talk about, that I asked you to remove in our first interview in four or five years ago. So you know, when, when the war started, I was in year nine at school. And, and it was really a very difficult situation for everyone, not just for me, but for everyone in Syria.

And I come from an area called Barzeh, which, which is on the outskirts of Damascus. And Barzeh was, was the one of the first areas that started demonstrations in Damascus, in response to what happened in Daraa, which is a different city in Syria. So in Daraa, there were a few, a few children who wrote some graffiti against the government on walls in Daraa.

And the government actually took them, and they removed the nails. So that was their way of, you know, reacting to those little children. And that's why demonstrations started across different cities in Syria, to say no for this.

And Barzeh was one of those like, areas that went on demonstrations, and they were really peaceful demonstrations. I used to go on demonstrations after school, we would, we would shout out, silmiyeh, silmiyeh, peaceful, being peaceful, being peaceful, we want peace. And then, you know, after, after actually a few weeks, maybe the government at that time, were just like

trying to think about what they wanted to do, or how to deal with this, how to tackle this issue.

And then a few weeks later, they started shooting demonstrators. And, you know, it's just crazy. Like, you know, there's a song, there's a song that actually kills me a lot when I listen to it in Arabic.

And the lyrics goes, the lyrics go like this. تقتل بولادي وظهرك للعادي وعليه. هاجم بالسيف يحيف. Which means, which means, like, for people who attack us, you give your back, but you confront your own people, and you shoot them.

And then, alas, for like, someone who can do the these things to his own people. It's just like, crazy, really, like, because you won't believe that a soldier who belongs to your own army, who is supposed to be defending your country and defending you as a citizen, and then they just like attack you and they kill you. I mean, it's unbelievable.

It's shockingly unbelievable. And, you know, we started to have martyrs and every time they want to, and every time they want to just like bury the martyr, they will shoot more people. And we will have more martyrs.

And Wallahi, we have like a recorded video of a relative of my family from my mum's side. In a recorded video, he was on camera actually, he was just telling the soldier, why are you harassing the women? And that soldier shot him in his head, so he fell a martyr. So it's just like, unbelievable.

And weeks after weeks, we started to have more martyrs and more martyrs. Until I remember I was in year 10 in the second term at school, when they started bombarding the area, bombing. And it was some sort of like being under siege.

I'm not sure if we say in English under siege or besieged the area, but simply put, it's like the government would stop people from getting out, outside the area, and no one would be allowed inside. I think you could say either it was under siege or it was besieged. To besiege is the verb, to be besieged and to be under siege.

And then, you know, so many people who could afford leaving the area, actually were able to do it. But it was like a full siege. For us, it was not possible to leave the area.

So we stayed until I remember, actually, I'm not sure of the technical term in English, because you know, I never even wanted to, needed to use these terms. In Arabic, we call it which is a type of rocket. So when they use these rockets to hit buildings, it was at that point where we thought, when we thought, well, see, we can't stay in that area.

So these type of rockets, they hit buildings, we were able to hear people screaming inside, like dying, burning because of what the rockets did. But we were unable to do that. Because what they do usually when they hit an area, they instal snipers.

And again, I'm not sure of the of the technical term for this, but it's a type of sniper that will shoot people automatically following heat or blood. So I'm not sure what this is, actually. I'm not sure either.

But it must be some sort of heat, heat guided weaponry, because they, you know, there's, yeah, the targeting systems, they can, they can target body heat, or they can, they can use infrared, different types of different ways to identify targets and to target, I guess, people or buildings. They can be guided by heat sensors, for example. Yes, yes.

So and the way we were able to figure that out is because we would find dead cats in the streets. Oh, my gosh. So that's why we knew that they use this sort of thing.

So these are like automatic systems that are guided by heat in order. So basically, a body, a living body would become a target. And it was indiscriminate enough that it couldn't detect the difference between a person and a cat.

Yeah. So that's why, like I said, we would be able to see the dead cats, you could see them from your windows. So that's why people wouldn't dare to go outside and rescue their neighbours, because, because you don't know what would happen in these situations.

And just, it's important to tell you something, we started peaceful demonstrations, but when they started attacking people, and people in Berzeh started to have the Free Army, which is just in response, just to respond to what the National Army was doing at the time. So the reason why they were bombing Berzeh, which is my area, is because they wanted to get the Free Army out of, of that area. And of course, the Free Army wouldn't give up their arms, because they were defending the area.

And the only victims were just like innocent people who have had nothing to do with either side. So we just wanted to get rid of the regime, we didn't want people to be killed, we wanted, we wanted to live peaceful life. And like I said, even those people who started as Free Army, they started because they were able to see their own people getting killed every single day, you know.

So I remember that we, we had to speak to like people, like soldiers on the checkpoints, because they would allow you to evacuate the area, because anyway, they wanted just to, to have the Syrian Army, the, they wanted to have the Free Army inside the area so they can kill them all. So if you are just like civilians, and you wanted to get out, and you went in the morning, they would allow you to get outside the area. But of course, you need to bribe them like money or things.

So I remember, my aunt gave them, you know, food and money and things like that. So they allowed us just to leave the area. Anyway, we lived in Berzeh for almost one year.

And during this one year, this, the area was under siege. So not just the Free Army, but some civilians, of course, who couldn't leave the area, because they hadn't, they didn't have another place to go to, they also stayed. So many people died in Berzeh during that time.

And like I said, that continued for one year. So that was the first besiege, the first incident of people being under siege in Berzeh. After one year, we returned to the area, they seemed to have had a sort of truce.

So like an agreement between the Free Army and the Syrian Army that okay, people are allowed to come back, but we don't want you to attack us, we will not attack you, something like that. So it's crazy. You go to Berzeh, you will find one checkpoint for the National Army, another checkpoint for the Free Army.

It's silly, so you know. But of course, when you get when you go to the Free Army, you feel you feel that they're not going to kill you, they're not going to do anything for you. But when you go through a National Army checkpoint, you will be really worried and afraid because they can ask you, they'll ask for your ID, of course.

And if they mistake your name for someone else, for example, they can take you and no one will know anything about you years later. Or you don't have to have done something wrong for them to take you. They can take people randomly, actually, because they can.

So why not? They'll do it. And so we continued living sort of like peacefully. And like I said, I was in year 10.

When we left the area, when we came back, I was doing my baccalaureate, which is similar to A levels in the UK. I finished my A levels, got to university, doing a bachelor's in English Language and Literature, did completed my first year. In my second year, now again, these things started to happen again in Berze, because now they got into they got to a point where the government just wanted to get rid of the Free Army.

So they didn't want to do any truce with them anymore. So they wanted all Free Army out of Berze. Because at that time, they

started to take Free Army soldiers from Damascus on green buses, very big buses, they'll take them to Idlib.

Idlib is a city in the northern parts of Syria. So they wanted, and that's my feeling, they wanted to take all of them to Idlib so they can bomb Idlib and get rid of them all. So the deal was, okay, we will allow you to get on buses with your families, with your children, if you want to, and you go to Idlib, you live a peaceful life there.

And now we will free Berze, so normal civilians can live normally in Berze. So that was the deal. But of course, that took time.

During that time, they closed the area, no one was allowed in or out. So this time, it was different. So this time, even if you go to the checkpoint, and you say, well, see, I just want to leave the area, I don't want to return, they will not allow you to leave the area.

So I remember every single day, we would wake up, the school students, university students, doctors, nurse, whatever, will go to the checkpoint and say, well, see, we need to go to university. Some children, school students wanted to go to schools. They say, no one is allowed out.

And, you know, it's crazy that I remember one of the soldiers, I just told him, I really want to go to university. And he replied to me saying, which translates into, you go out, sorry, you go away, or I shoot you. It's as simple as that, you know.

And we lived in that hope that every day, we're promised that the following day will be a day when we are liberated and allowed to

leave the area. And that was wasn't happening. So imagine we lived in that situation for three months.

Now, during these three months, some people died because of hunger, some children died because they didn't have milk, some people were ill, and they needed to go to the hospital and they couldn't. So it was really, really, you know, unbelievable. And it's, it's, it's, you know, it's cynical, you go to the checkpoint, and you can see a normal life in progress.

Mason Do you mean you see some other people? Tanya Yeah, because, for example, this is a checkpoint that separates Berze from the main road to Damascus. So you can see across the checkpoint, you can see a normal life just in progress, people going to work, people buying things from supermarkets, but you're unable to cross that checkpoint. You can't, you actually, sometimes they they'll allow you to stay there and just wait, maybe to torture you more, because you can just a normal life going on, but you're unable to be in that life.

Yeah. And I remember just so that continued, like I said, for around the three months. Just just one month before we were liberated and allowed out, they started to allow university students, and teachers and school students to leave the area, provided you go back, of course.

And they'll have lists of names who leaves who comes back etc. So that but that wasn't for everyone. So not every civilian was allowed to go out.

But during that one month, they allowed only students to go out and patients to go out and they come back as well. And I remember, they first told us, you can leave as a student, but you're not allowed to bring anything with you as food or beverages. So you're not allowed to bring anything back with you.

Wallahi, I remember like the first day I left Berze, as I was walking, and I arrived to university and I can see food and drinks. I didn't even want to eat anything or drink anything or buy because, you know, to me, it was like, how am I supposed to eat and drink normally? Where at a time where I know that my family is just like craving for something and that and it was, you know, it was really difficult because as we were crossing the checkpoint, some women will come and cry and say, could you please bring us this and this and this and this when you come back because we were their only hope to bring something, but we were not allowed to do that. And of course, some people were able to smuggle some food back, but you know, it was like you were putting your life at risk to be able to do that.

But imagine what a crime or offence it is for you to have been accused of smuggling food to your family, you know, it's just like unbelievable. And a few weeks after that, they said, you're allowed to bring one kilogramme of anything so you can bring one bag, no matter what you put in it, it needs to be only one kilogramme. It's not a lot.

It's not a lot. And the soldier would be waiting at the checkpoint with a scale, with a scale. So I remember, I went to supermarkets and I put some vegetables of different, of like, like different sorts,

weighing up to one kilo or a little bit, a little bit more than one kilogramme.

I still remember as soon as I arrived at the checkpoint, and the soldier was weighing, was weighing up the bag, he was like, this is more than one kilo. So he, like he, you know, he said bad words to me, and he threw the bag, and he threw everything that was in that bag. I can't explain to you how it means, how it feels to be in that situation where you are in your own home country, treated that way by your own national soldiers.

And it's just like, you know, ridiculous. Absolutely. It's shocking.

And anyway, after, like, after a few weeks, like I said, the whole duration was three months, they were able to take different cohorts of Free Army until they took all of them to Idlib. It was only then when they, they allowed people to just go back to normal life in Berserk. And, and as everyone expected, after they gathered most of the army in Idlib, they started bombing Idlib.

And, you know, for the past few years, we would always hear about bombings and attacks and air attacks in Idlib, because they gathered all the Free Army there. And the situation in Berserk after that continued to be normal. So there was no armed conflict or anything in Berserk, except for the economic crisis started.

So people are in really desperate situations at a time where an average employee's, employee's salary is something that is like less than 20 pounds a month, less than 20 pounds a month, you need at least 200 pounds a month to survive. So it's really disproportionate, like, unbelievable, if you haven't got someone

outside Syria to help and support you financially, you would literally die. You know, so I was able, I'm lucky that I was able to be strong during the years when I arrived in the UK, save up some money and help my family back home since then.

I'm really proud that I'm able to do that. And I there's so many Syrian people, so many Syrian people like myself outside Syria are helping their family back home. Otherwise, Syria has, Syria would have collapsed so long time ago.

And to me, like the night when Syria was getting liberated, and we knew that the regime was toppled, I couldn't sleep at night just to know that this is happening. I still can't comprehend or understand. I need time, I need more time to digest the whole situation that is now gone.

But we still need so much work because it's not just that person, the president, but of course, it's the whole system of having a corrupt government and things like that. Like one, one form of the corrupt, for example, of the corruption in Syria, you will never ever be able to do any sort of paperwork without bribing people there. That was the default setting, like you don't put money, they will not complete any paperwork for you.

That was just a simple example of the corruption in Syria. And some people, you know, what kills me the most is that some people come to you and say, oh, we were living in a happy life when President Bashar was ruling the country before 2011. What do you mean before 2011? Before 2011, people were just like taking, it's like, for example, you have, it's like, for example, you

have a field of seeds, and they are giving you just like, well, it was like a tablespoon of seeds.

So that was the way they treated Syrian people. In Syria, you would never dare to criticise the government. If the government does something, and you want to say, well, this is not acceptable, they shouldn't be doing that.

And you wouldn't even dare to say anything about the president himself. Like if you say something, they will kill you, you know, you will disappear. And of course, people haven't forgotten the massacres that the late president, so Bashar al-Assad, his father did in Hama in the 1980s.

So this is a, this is a family with a history of crimes and massacres. So you can't just like turn, to turn a deaf, to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to this, to everything and say, well, we were living happily. No, no, we weren't living happily.

No one, you know, you weren't even allowed to mention the name of a foreign currency. That in itself is a way to accuse you of something so big and put you in prison. So you never see the sunlight in your life.

To an extent that funnily enough, after the regime was toppled, some people on Instagram would go on videos and would say, test, test, dollar, dollar, you know, just because they have this fear of not being able to say the word dollar or pound out loud. Like you, you don't dare to say, I mean, how do you say dollar? Oh, that's a crime in Syria. Yeah.

Oh my gosh. And yeah, I can imagine in that, and even still probably that you see the regime being toppled and you think to yourself, am I even going to allow myself to have hope? Right. Because when it's been, when it's been taken away from you so many times, I mean, that's the sort of mental torture that happens in the situations like this, where, you know, you try not to give yourself hope because you don't, because when you have hope and then it's taken away from you, that's, you know, one of the most painful things.

Right. So I can imagine how hard, you know, I can imagine why you couldn't sleep because it's like, you can't really even come to terms with what's happening. And you're even scared to, to, to, to feel relief.

You know what I mean? Yeah. Well, actually on that night, you won't believe it. It wasn't feelings of fear.

It was feeling of joy and happiness and immense happiness. I was so happy to know that he's like, you know, he's leaving the country. He used to say something like, I'll say it in Arabic and then translate.

He used to say, Of course I'm trying to say how he speaks. That was an impression of him, wasn't it? Which means a country is not a hotel that you leave when the service is, is become, you know, bad or something like that. What have you done? You left the country and so many people were making fun out of him saying, Oh, has the service got bad in this hotel? That's why you left? Oh my gosh.

Wow. Yeah. So for me, it was like, just like getting rid of this criminal, you know, this gave me immense happiness.

He was one reason for why we had to endure all this suffering for, for the past few years. And it's funny, you know, they used to live a luxurious life. Imagine um, the first lady, you know, they make fun out of her.

She used to call herself the Jasmine lady or something like that. Sayyidatul Yasmin. Now people say Sayyidatul Naftali.

So they're making fun out of her. Anyway, she used to say that she'd have her clothes and dresses tailored by Syrian tailors, only Syrian tailors taking pride of Syria. But as, as they got into the, the palace, they, they, they found boxes of Louis Vuitton and, you know, Gucci and those big brands and things like that.

So imagine when, when an entire family has an income of only 20 pounds a month, and somebody having boxes and boxes of those big brands, expensive brands, and then their palace, I mean, how crazy it is. And you know, what I like about most European countries, they look at presidents as a person who's a staff member in an institution who needs to do his duties, which is, which is sound. It's a sound idea.

But in Syria, no, the president is someone you worship three times a day. You can't criticise that person. You can't say anything about that person or you, you will be wiped from the face of earth.

You know, it's crazy. And he and his supporters and soldiers and everything, they used to say, Syria al-Assad. So al-Assad Syria,

which means they are making his surname attached to the name of the country, as if it's something that belongs to him.

It's one of his belongings. I mean, how horrible. It's our country.

It's the Syrians country. It's for everyone, for people from different, and it's lovely. Syria is lovely.

You know, so many people get surprised when I tell them Syria is a, is a home for many traditions and religions. We've got Christians, we've got Muslims, we've got believers. We've got people from different traditions and religions in Syria living in harmony together.

So how come you say Syria al-Assad, you attach your surname to the name of the country? I mean, you know, or they would, his soldiers would write graffiti on the wall, something like Syria al-Assad, which means Syria attached to al-Assad or we burn the country. Just stunning. It's just, yeah, absolutely horrendous.

I was going to ask you in our first conversation, Walaa, you talked about how you got your scholarship and went to the UK. How did you actually get out then? Was it difficult? Was it not difficult to get out to travel to the UK? How did that work? Yeah, so remember I told you after the second truce, things were normal. So we didn't have an armed conflict in Berserk.

It was more of like an economic situation. So for me, things were just like, things were normal. I was just carrying on with my life as a student.

I graduated from university. I applied to start a master's. In the mean, actually, when I graduated with my bachelor's in English Language and Literature, I would, I was doing a few things, applying for a master's in Syria, just in case, and applying for a scholarship in the UK, because my goal was to get a master's from the UK.

But just in case, God forbid, if I don't get it, I had another option, which is the master's in Syria. So I wasn't like, under any particular threat at that time. But I mean, it wasn't settled.

Yeah, yeah. Okay. Things were settled.

But it wasn't, it wasn't kind of tricky to get the right to leave the country and, you know, to go through the border and to say to the officials, I'm going to the UK to study and here's my passport. And they just stamped you and let you through. I mean, it was just as simple as that, was it? Because, yeah.

Well, I just want to highlight one thing before I address your point. While Birzeit was settled, the same complicated things that were happening in Birzeit started to happen in other areas. So just that I was safe doesn't mean that everyone else was safe.

So of course, you still go through checkpoints every day. On your way to university, there's always those random attacks and bombing that happen everywhere in Damascus. So that was still happening and going on.

But I was very quiet about applying for a scholarship outside Syria. So you wouldn't just talk about it to anyone. You would just talk

about it to very close people that you're applying to leave the country because you have this fear instilled in you.

It's like carved on your body. You can't tell people about your plans because you're worried. Because sometimes, even if someone hates you, they could say something to the government, bribe them, and they could file a report against you, even if it's not true, and put you in jail.

So I was very quiet about applying for that scholarship. Only until a few days before I left the country that I posted something about it. And I didn't post on my personal profile.

I was posting in a group for Syrian students to help people apply for the same scholarship, just sharing my experience. The UK embassy in Syria is closed. So I couldn't apply for any of these documents in Syria.

I had to go to Lebanon to apply for the visa and everything, which is because I didn't have to deal with Syrian institutions inside the country. But I'd say I wasn't under threat in terms of getting some official papers from different places in Syria. And I had to bribe people, not because you're taking anything.

For example, if you want to apply for anything, some people will tell you, oh, come after two hours, come five hours from now, you'd put extra money, they'll give you your papers. Because you just want to take your papers, of course. And after I applied for all my official documents, like a birth certificate, something like DBS in the UK, something similar in Syria.

So I gathered all these official documents with my visa from Lebanon. And of course, going outside Syria to apply for a passport, not passport, sorry, to apply for a visa wasn't that easy, especially that around that time COVID had already started. So it was very difficult.

And at that time, Lebanon had rules, and they still have, I'm not sure, they have these rules that you are not allowed to go to Lebanon unless you've booked a hotel and you've got a reason to go there. It was very difficult. But I'm lucky that my scholarship is offered from the British government.

So it's, it's like really prestigious, and they've got, they're powerful. So they were able to put our names, like a list of, of the applicants on the borders. So they allowed us in, and then again out to come back home.

Yeah, I see. And yeah, I had to go to Lebanon only once to apply for the visa, and I came back home. The second time I went to Lebanon was just to fly.

Yes, I see. Okay. Well, yeah, it's interesting.

Thanks for, for kind of clarifying that, because I was just curious, really. Well, how extraordinary, well, an extraordinary sort of description that you just gave to us there of all the things that your country went through and that you went through. Yeah, it's very interesting also to just to be, you know, to be able to hear those things this time, compared to last time, you know, when you couldn't say a lot of stuff, which I totally understand.

It's very interesting to be able to hear you say them now. I think we should probably end the conversation, although I feel like I could listen to you talk about lots of things. But it's been really interesting to catch up with you again, Walaa.

Is there anything else you want to say, you know, to my audience around the world just before we end the conversation? Any final thoughts? Yeah, thank you. Thank you so much for everything, for your comments as well. I just want to end up with a final thought about learning English and say that my English used to be, I think, a lot better when I was back home than being in the UK.

I'm not sure, maybe you're able to tell. Wait, your English used to be what? A lot better. Your English was better when? When? When I was back home in Syria.

Your English, when you were in Syria, was better than it is now. Is that what you're saying? Yeah. What do you think? Well, okay.

Why do you say that? Because, you know, so many people, I hear so many English learners saying, well, I'll wait until I move into an English speaking country. And it's only there they'll have the opportunity to practise English. But I think I used to practise English a lot more in Syria.

Because here, I use, I don't use English very often. I use Arabic most of the times because, because you go to the shop, you buy everything without needing to speak to anyone, really. And at home, everyone speaks to me in Arabic.

I speak to my friends in Arabic. I've got some friends, we speak English, of course, but I don't frequently speak to them. Like it's not now, it's not on a daily basis, because I'm doing most of my work from home.

So I'm not sure. I have friends with whom I speak English, but I speak Arabic more while I'm in the UK. I understand.

So you're kind of living in an Arabic bubble to an extent. It's a bit like the way I live in France, but I live in a kind of an English bubble. You know, yeah.

So despite being quote, unquote, immersed in the country, in terms of actually the amount of time I'm spending in either language, yeah, I'm personally speaking English 95% of the time. I mean, I don't know what the percentage is for you between Arabic and English, but it's a similar thing. So you're saying that even though you live in Wales, you these days speak a lot more Arabic than you used to, even when you were living in Syria and you were spending all that time focussing all your attention on learning English, and you feel that your English was better then than it is now? Maybe you're able to judge, sorry, maybe you're able to judge more because you spoke to me four or five years ago.

So you're able to tell if my English has improved or, I'm not sure. Well, I just, I need to make a point, which is like, how, what is the criteria by which you are deciding that your English is, is better or worse? Like what, based on what criteria? Oh, I haven't got criteria. So maybe it's not about improvement.

It's about frequency of using it. So I'd say I used to, I used to use English a lot more than now, because in, in Syria, I knew that I hadn't have anyone to practise English with. So that's why I used to immerse myself in English, listening to English podcasts all the time, literally on the bus, on my way going to university, coming back from university, before I sleep, I speak to myself in the mirror, recording my voice, and then listening again to my voice recording.

So trying to identify my mistakes, so I correct them. And then I'd record again. But now, because I take it for granted that I can speak English whenever I want with my friends, but I don't speak with my friends all the time.

We meet up, of course, I meet with my friends every, every so often, but it's not like, you know, doing this on a daily basis. So, but don't get me wrong. Of course, I read in English every day on a daily basis because of my research, but, but I don't speak with people on a daily basis in English.

Yeah. I just want to make a point. I think this is interesting, an interesting way to consider the idea of self-assessment, right?
Yeah.

So, you know, you're self-assessing your English here. And at this moment in time, your self-assessment is that your English is not as good as it was four years ago. But it just shows that self-assessment is subject to all sorts of subjective influences.

And it's a question of perception. So, your perception of your English is based on how you, how you judge the amount of time you're spending on it, how you judge the attitude you have towards

it. So, you look back at yourself four years ago, or, you know, in the, in the period just before that, when, as you said, you were focused on English so much, even living in Syria, and you see yourself then, and you see someone who was completely dedicated to English and who was completely, you know, like focussing on English that much.

And so, you see that period of your life as the fruitful English period, right? And you see yourself now not with the same level of focus and attention on it. And so, your perception is that English is not a primary concern for you. And so, that influences your self-assessment.

Do you know what I mean? That your self-assessment is influenced by your attitude towards your learning of English, rather than your actual English level as it stands right now. So, for me, I, I, my, my professional judgement on this is that I think that I wasn't, definitely wasn't going to say that your English is worse than it was last time. That's definitely not something I noticed.

What I noticed, not that I've been level checking you throughout the conversation, but your, your level of fluency is like off the chart, you know, you know, just the, the way you can keep the English flowing is, you know, high, high level of fluency. In terms of your pronunciation, well, I certainly noticed like that kind of Welsh accent in there. So, I mean, you know, how do we define what, what is good pronunciation? First of all, I mean, really, it's about clarity and I've understood you all the way through the conversation.

And in terms of the identity issue side of pronunciation, having a Welsh accent, well, I mean, it's nice. Right. I'm so proud of it.

Yeah. I mean, obviously you still, your accent, sorry, is still influenced by your, your, your Arabic as well. But as you've said, you said earlier in the conversation, there was a sort of meeting point where sort of some aspects of Arabic pronunciation in English combined with Welsh quite neatly, which is quite, you know, convenient.

You know, vocabulary wise, you know, you, you showed a very broad range of vocabulary to express so many different concepts during the conversation, the, the academic side of things, and also just, you know, the way you describe very specifically the experiences you had and the kind of political situation in, in Syria. So yeah, I mean, I don't agree. I don't think your English is worse than it was four years ago.

Not at all. I think that instead your self-assessment and your perception of your own English is influenced by how you, you know, is influenced by other things rather than an objective look at your, your, the effectiveness of your English. There you go.

Thank you. That's very kind of you. I think maybe, you know, maybe to describe it better, I would say maybe I used to focus on speaking and listening when I was back home, but now it's more reading and writing because of my work.

So I tend to spend hours writing and reading, but not speaking and listening. My advice would be for people is to just like, at least to try to listen to English. Like if, if you live in a country that doesn't

Speak English as a first language, if you just listen to English and try to speak, even if it's to yourself with yourself, then it's a really perfect way to practise the language and they can listen to your podcasts, of course.

Thank you for that. Just one more point, going back to what we were saying before, and just something that occurred to me is that maybe another factor that's influencing your self-assessment is when you made progress, right? And you made significant progress up to a similar level that you're at now in those years when you were focussing on English in Syria. Your progress went up quite steeply during that time, and you got yourself up to a level.

And then maybe you haven't yet, you know, from four years ago to today, the progress is not the same line. It's not the same level of progress, but it certainly hasn't gone down. You know, you've probably consolidated all sorts of other complex, complicated skills and strengthened the level, but in terms of general listening comprehension and spoken fluency and accent, yeah, the significant moment or period of progress was back in that time that you were talking about.

And so again, that might be a set that might be influencing. You might be thinking, well, I haven't made the same level of progress that I did then. So maybe your progress is not as good as it was, but your level is certainly not worse.

In fact, the opposite. Yeah. But anyway, your advice is try and do plenty of listening and that's what worked for you.

Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Oh, thank you. Yeah. Okay.

That's been quite a conversation. Thank you so much for coming back and telling us about all of these things. And I wish you all the best of luck for your PhD and for whatever you choose to do next.

Perhaps we can end by me asking you how people can sort of follow you because you, I think you do post occasionally on different platforms. So if people are interested in following you and noticing what you're doing and stuff like that, how can people do that? Thank you. Oh, they can follow me on Instagram or Facebook, or even YouTube.

It's English with Walla, the name of my different platforms. Thank you so much and take care. Have a lovely day.

Thank you. You too. Thank you.

Bye. So that was my conversation with Walla Mooma. Do I have to say much? I don't think I have to say anything else really at the end here, except to say thank you again to her for coming back on the podcast and being so frank about, well, about everything.

And I'm curious to know what you have to say, everybody. What were you thinking and feeling while you were listening to this? Did you learn anything from it? What are your thoughts on all of it? I mean, what's your response to this? And hopefully Walla is a good example for you as someone who, you know, it just shows that if you apply yourself to your learning of English, first of all, that the,

you know, the effects can be great. And, but she just talked about so many other interesting things as well.

And so leave your comments in the comment section. It would be nice to get your responses. Okay, everybody.

I think that's probably enough. I'll speak to you again next time. You could look up Walla's social networking channels.

You'll find links in the description or on the episode page on my website. Okay, everybody have a lovely morning, afternoon, evening, or night. But for now, it's just time to say goodbye.

Bye Bye Bye.