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Trends in Syria Studies:
in time of internal war

Introduction

Alexa Firat[1] and Samer Abboud[2]

In November 2023, the contributors to this volume (except for Uğur Ümit Üngör) met over two-days to discuss current trends in Syria Studies at a workshop co-hosted by Temple University's Global Studies Program and Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Languages and Studies (now Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures) and Villanova University's Center for Arab and Islamic Studies. Contributors were asked to prepare short commentaries in advance of the workshop that addressed questions of how the Syrian conflict has impacted their own research and what this tells us about the future of Syrian Studies. These questions served as the starting point for more robust discussions around disciplinary tensions, ethical commitments, and the myriad challenges we all faced in reconstituting the 'field' in which our research takes place. These conversations took place against the backdrop of our personal reflections on how the Syrian tragedy has impacted us in different ways. What emerged from the workshop was a collective awareness of both the myriad obstacles to producing knowledge about Syria and the necessity of continuing to do so amidst the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe.

Although Syria has now entered a new era, the challenges, catastrophes, and traumas of the past will not disappear with the regime. The lasting legacies of the protracted war and anxieties for the future meet in this elated but tense

[1] Associate Professor (Instructional) in Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Temple University
[2] Associate Professor in Global Interdisciplinary Studies at Villanova University

moment. The issue of access and positionality (as will be discussed below) will continue to concern researchers as they consider research questions and begin to navigate this new landscape. The essays in this collection not only animate these concerns, questions, and more within contributors' respective fields, but also serve as a mindful reminder of our affective beings as researchers. The tools we developed and relied on during the years of protracted war will continue to serve us as social scientists bearing witness to this transitional period and producing knowledge on it.

This introduction to the collection lays out some of the key themes that animated our discussions and which we hope will resonate with Syria Studies researchers who have undoubtedly struggled with some of the same issues we discuss throughout our contributions. Our collective aim was not only to reflect but to raise questions that all scholars of Syria can relate to in some way, whether these are disciplinary questions about how we study war or ethical questions about who to interview. In offering scholars' wide latitude to reflect on the future of Syria Studies we hope that the essays shared in this volume will provide scholars insights into how individual researchers have struggled with how to produce knowledge about Syria since 2011.

Research in a time of protracted war

Our collaboration engaged with open-ended questions about the nature of research and knowledge production in a time of protracted war. We did not set out to establish frameworks for research, 'best practices', or to intentionally intervene into robust debates within conflict studies about how to conduct research in/on conflict zones. Rather, we encouraged contributors to write from the perspective of their own research and positionality as researchers from/of Syria. What emerged from these discussions was a set of deeper questions that cut across all the contributions: How do we conduct research amidst

protracted war? What constitutes 'the field' when access to the country is virtually impossible for many of us? How are our research questions and methods shaped by the current state of protracted war? The issue of access – to documents or interlocutors for example – was one of the central themes raised throughout the workshop.

For many researchers, broad issues of 'access' structure our projects and determine what kind of writing we can conduct. Conflicts seemingly restrict access in several ways because they create insecure and unsafe environments for researchers, fear among potential research participants, and limit acquiring resources, such as texts. Malthaner acknowledges these limitations but encourages researchers to understand access negotiations as an analytical resource and not simply a limitation[1]. Contributors struggled in different ways with how to deal with the problem of access and how to see possibility amidst constraints. Salamandra and Malas explicitly confront this problem of how to negotiate access when both were able to travel to Syria. Presence in Syria raises several important ethical considerations around risk and transparency. Conversely, Jabbour's contribution reflects on how a lack of access to Syria and military archives changed the nature of her research questions and research design. Üngör sees opportunities in new forms of digital research made possible by the conflict and thus points to a terrain of expanded, rather than restricted, access. For all of us, the question of access was mediated by our own personal connections to Syria and concerns about conducting research in Syria.

All the contributors to this volume have deep personal connections to Syria. Many of our contributors are from Syria and have family who remain in the country. Others have spent their entire professional lives researching Syria and have close friends (and even family) who are in the country. Some of the contributors have been able to travel to Syria since 2011 while others have either refused or felt unsafe doing so. Regardless, there are clear distinctions for all of us between producing

'expert' and 'experiential' knowledge. For Julian et. al, experiential knowledge refers to "ways of knowing, and stocks of knowledge, that are based on practice or being in a situation. It relies on listening to how those experiencing conflicts describe those knowledges."[2]. Conflicts are "messy"[3] and the knowledge we acquire through 'expertise' or 'experience' is filtered through the fog of conflict, competing truths, limited access, politicization, and the fractured lives of people around us. The essays in this volume point to the importance of reflexivity in conducting research on Syria specifically, and conflicts more broadly.

There is a wealth of literature on the ethical, methodological, and theoretical considerations researchers face in producing knowledge in times of conflict[4]. The Syrian conflict highlights the robustness of peace and conflict studies in helping us understand the nature and trajectory of war. But, for many of us, the conceptual and theoretical tools from conflict studies were also limiting in helping us make sense of the specificity of the Syrian conflict. The emergence of new digital platforms like *al-Jumhuriya* and documentaries like *Return to Homs*, for example, were both evidence of and complications to a shift in both gatekeepers and knowledge producers. YouTube, the vast array of "arte-facts" as compiled in *Syria Speaks*; and the emergence of *The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution* brought to the Anglo-speaking world more Syrian cultural production in the first four years of the war than had ever been translated into English before.[5] What Syrians had to say about their war and the myriad of ways they were saying it would also filter into how and what we as researchers from afar were ingesting. Here, our collective discussions at the workshop revealed many of the tensions between frameworks for understanding conflict and how the narratives of those around us complicated dominant ways of knowing. Misfits between conflict's messiness that we were witnessing almost daily through conversations, memes, group chats, voice memos, and images on the one hand, and the conditions of disciplinary

legibility and publishing expectations on the other hand, created tensions between how we were understanding events in Syria and how our various disciplines expected us to write about them.

Such tensions have been taken up by several scholars of conflicts who argue for taking these social experiences seriously as shaping researcher methods. Perera refers to the "methodology of the excluded" as one that "demonstrate[s] sophisticated informal theorising, resistance to malevolent power, and experience-led knowledge in their narratives"[6]. As researchers from/of Syria, we are all proximate to these forms of theorizing and knowledge production. How we incorporate them into our own research remains something that many of us struggle with. For example, one recurring discussion in our workshop was how to understand the changing nature of social relations inside of Syria. Here, again, 'access' becomes a major issue for researchers to negotiate. Conversations, text exchanges, social media, and other sound bites of knowledge about what is happening inside of Syria that comes from family, friends, and interlocutors are expected to fit into our frameworks for understanding conflict. Yet, they often do not find their way into our writing. As Jacquemond and Lang argue, within cultural studies there is no absolute border between scholarship and criticism.[7] Evidence often remains anecdotal, leaving us struggling with how to make sense of patterns and render them legible to an academic audience. For example, how do we write about changing interpersonal dynamics among Syrians that were apparent to all of us? Moreover, can we remain "neutral" in our positions vis-à-vis what we see and hear? Does our work interfere with our relationships with friends, colleagues, and interlocuters directly affected by the conflict and their behavior in it? When discussing Salamandra's work during the workshop, we were confronted with the necessity of acknowledging that our own work may be interpreted as taking one side or another or eschewing those with which we did not agree. This made for substantive discussions during our workshop that focused on the compatibility of what we see and hear in our social lives and how

this gets incorporated (or not) into our research, and our position within this framework.

These questions of how to translate our social knowledge into academic work raised the broader issue of how conflict shaped us as researchers and our own writing. If it is not the conflict itself that many of us seek to understand (although some of us are trying to understand that) then how can people write alongside the grain of protracted violence and humanitarian catastrophe? How do we negotiate between proximity to the "methodology of the excluded" while also trying to write in ways that are legible to our various fields? Conflict shapes our research, but it is not only the conflict that we seek to understand. What does it mean to research cultural texts, literary figures, theater, literature, or art amidst conflict? *Syria Speaks* anthologized the myriad of artistic and intellectual engagements that was being contemporaneously produced during the first years of the conflict. cooke's approach to apprehending the output is a kind of ethnography of the cultural producers and their impulses that emerged then.[8] Does conflict subsume how we research Syrian art and life outside of the country? We vigorously debated these questions throughout our workshop. Murad's contribution, for example, makes the case for the Syrian war novel. In doing so, his essay implicitly asks whether a Syrian novel published after 2011 can avoid any reference to the conflict at all. Does the war novel have a counterpoint or does war forever serve as the backdrop for Syrian cultural production after 2011 as how the grammar of the regime had done before?

The Syrian war novel is an example of how the conflict produced new areas of inquiry for researchers. The conflict limited and foreclosed research but also opened new avenues for researchers to explore contemporary Syria. Üngör's contribution highlights the new opportunities posed by the collapse of the wall of fear in Syria and the availability of digital methods that allow us access to narratives and knowledge. Skeiker's testimony captures how transformative the conflict has been for researchers of Syria: "Then 2011 came, and nothing was the

same". For Skeiker, this meant quite literally becoming a different kind of academic as he transitioned to a scholar and practitioner that saw in theater a way to address the well-being of Syrian youth. He traces his own professional trajectory from a young boy fascinated by the middle-class worlds of Syrian *musalsalat* to a theater practitioner committed to ethical allyship with displaced Syrians. In doing so, he also traces shifts in the field of applied theater from a focus on telling stories about gender exclusion to one that emphasized the therapeutic potential of theater among refugees. These various shifts within Skeiker's personal life were reflected in the broader trends in how theater was taught and applied in the Middle East in relation to the Syrian displacement crisis. The displacement of millions of Syrians paradoxically created different forms of access for researchers from/of Syria.

How can we begin to understand how the Syrian conflict impacts how we research, write, and teach about Syria? For Atrash, translating literature in the midst of the war underscored the purpose of "epistemic activism" to not only disrupt western epistemologies of the Arab subject, but also to compel readers to hear Syrians. The contemporary Syrian poems she had translated and taught in a class awakened the shared experience of trauma across cultures and histories when a student recognized their own historical trauma as a non-White Canadian and their relation to indigeneity and the indigenous communities of Canada. The story underscored our resolve as knowledge producers on Syria. We have all been devastated by the humanitarian catastrophe surrounding us. Tragedy has surrounded all of us for more than a decade. Relationships have been severed or strained, and families have been separated for years. And, as many of our discussions in the workshop demonstrated, nobody remains "the same" after more than a decade of conflict. Acknowledging the personal impact the conflict collectively had on us provided an important opportunity to collapse the personal and political in our discussions, which then shaped our essays in this collection.

At the same time, the fall of the regime has opened different ways to think about questions of access, fieldwork, and research in and about Syria. We simply do not know what the short- and long-term future holds for researchers as the country undergoes a political transition. New questions will emerge about how to conduct research inside of the country, what the repatriation of Syrians means for researchers, how to balance the demands of instant commentary with those of the often-slow research and publishing process. The fall of the regime is certainly a moment of optimism for many of us but also one tinged with precarity and concern. Syria will not transform overnight and many of the ethical and methodological issues raised by contributors to this special issue will remain applicable well into the future.

Trends in Syria Studies

The array of essays attests to the richness and diversity of Syrian Studies and the possibilities for future projects. Reflecting the issues related above throughout, each contributor engages their discipline within the context of conducting original and meaningful research during the stressful and devasting time of war in a place with which each had a personal and professional relationship. While these contributions were written prior to the fall of the regime, the insights, analysis, and questions they raise remain even more relevant today as Syrian state and society face the challenges of a political transition.

Samer Abboud situates Syrian state transformation after 2011 within the study of Syrian state formation in the post-Mandate period. Drawing on Hinnebusch's delineation of three distinct periods of state formation in the post-independence period, Abboud argues that the post-2011 period represents a new, fourth period that will shape Syrian state formation. Abboud argues that this period will be shaped by conflict absorption, or how the state absorbs the logic of conflict into its

machinations and attempts to construct a durable political order in the context of simmering, sustained violence.

Ghada Atrash's self-reflective essay forefronts the necessity of "epistemic activism" to disrupt knowledge production of the Arab world in general and of Syria in particular, dismantling colonial epistemological structures and interrupting systematic silencing of Arab voices, histories, and civilizations. As a literary translator she not only brings Syrian voices to Anglo audiences, but more urgently imposes a listening to Syrian voices through literary narratives that can help make sense of their lived experiences and artistic ambitions, creating space for empathy and understanding as well as alternative modes of knowing. Her essay demonstrates this in practice beyond theory.

Syrian military decision making during the conflict provides the backdrop for Rula Jabbour's contribution to this collection. Situating her work within the field of Strategic Studies, Jabbour reflects on her doctoral research that asked why the Syrian military continued to support the regime once protests began, unlike the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries. Much like Malas' struggles with how to conduct sound, ethical, empirically verifiable research, Jabbour struggled with how to access material about the Syrian military and make sense of an evolving conflict through this institution. Strategic Studies provides ways of understanding the role of the military during conflict and post-conflict phases but could not provide conceptual paths to understand other phenomenon, such as regime stabilization and military defection. Jabbour's contribution highlights the limitations of studying the Syrian military sociologically and trying to understand the institution beyond the lenses of fields such as Strategic Studies.

Sumaya Malas is a current doctoral student whose contribution encourages researchers to think through the difficult challenges of research design in cases such as Syria. Malas' paper considers how the "post-conflict" framework discourages researchers from pursuing projects until conflicts

are perceived to be over. Such expectations both limit when scholars see opportunities for research and constrain their conceptual toolkit to understand conflicts such as Syria's. As someone who continues to travel and conduct research inside of Syria, Malas struggles with three primary obstacles: data accessibility and research transparency; an underlying politics of suspicion and the "slow burn trauma" that mediates her relationships with interlocutors; and managing disciplinary standards for research. Her contribution neatly charts these obstacles and how she negotiates them in her own work, concluding that other researchers should not shy away from the real challenges of conducting fieldwork in "hard-to-reach" contexts.

Rimun Murad's work as noted above makes a strong argument for the emergence of the war novel as a consequence of the conflict. His reading of Khalid Khalifa's *Death is Hard Work* sheds light on the generational shifts that speak to the diversity of voices in Syria since the 'corrective movement' of Hafez al-Asad in 1970. Furthermore, since the early 2000s Khalifa had become the most prominent Syrian author to be published in translation, and this global recognition comes not only with awards, but with the burden of representation.

Christa Salamandra's reflection on ethnography and her formative work on class, consumption, and Damascene elites nods to the field's risky capacity to expose the inner political workings individual's acts of distinction. Transitioning to studying television dramatic series – *musalsalat* – Salamandra observes that the popular politics aired out in public demonstrations across the country in 2011-12 had already been addressed on air; in particular corruption and the neglect of the working poor living in unofficial housing settlements. With the onset of the conflict, the field of satellite television – a lucrative business especially after the neo-liberalization of the economy under Bashar al-Asad – became a site for another kind of performance, i.e. loyalty, either to the regime or the opposition. And as a self-reflective ethnographer, Salamandra finds herself

amid the fray exhibiting the anthropological empathy which after 2011 had become amplified as a problematic analytical stance.

Trying to understand the nature of violence and its institutionalization was a question taken up by Üngör, who begins by asking: how has the Syrian conflict changed the world? He identifies four ways that it has done so: through the transformation of regional power dynamics, the rise of extremist groups, the humanitarian catastrophe, and the failure of international institutions in bringing about an end to the crisis. Üngör argues that the conflict has had a profound impact on conflict studies and generated substantial methodological innovations in the fields of oral history, perpetrator research, and digital research. In sharing how he adopted these methods in how own research he is charting paths for others to think about how to conduct research from outside of Syria. Ultimately, Üngör's essay helps researchers think about the opportunities posed by the lack of access to Syria and how to contribute to and learn from the rich Syrian archive that is emerging from those living outside of the country.

Fadi Skeiker personal testimony centers his journey from young TV-star-wannabe from a middle class family to an engaged theater director and professor. His trajectory of study in the US to teaching at universities in Jordan, Europe, and now in the US is a story that continually develops across time and space in his commitment to theater as a practice of citizenship and social justice, coincidentally the values that propelled many protesters to the streets in 2011. As Skeiker's narrative illustrates, theater in the broad sense of the word is more than an art form, but, moreover, a generative site of growth, empathy, and understanding for both performers and spectators.

Lastly, Alexa Firat shifts from studying the Syrian literary field throughout her career to the narratives of the conflict projected across her computer screen by the loosely defined collective Lens Young (ʻ*adsat al-shābb*) since 2011. Recognizing a visual narrative of the conflict across geographies

and time, Firat considers how the images challenge viewers to remember both personal and collective memories.

The contributions to this special issue provide important insights into how the architecture of regime power took root and how different social forces and cultural producers responded to decades of regime rule and more than 13 years of conflict. Syrians will experience the political, affective, economic, and cultural legacies of regime rule for decades to come. Questions about how Syrians will relate to each other after the regime's collapse, how the state pursues justice and accountability for state violence, or how power will be distributed among various political factions in a future political system are all questions that will unfold against the backdrop of much of the analysis provided in this special issue. Continuities in state structure between the pre- and post-2024 period will provide scholars with important ways to understand the nature of political power and Syria's regional alignments. The opening up of prison and *mukhabarat* archives will certainly provide a wealth of information for a generation of scholars interested in the study of violence and the Syrian military structure.

And, of culture, we will continue to look toward this field to process, document, archive express, represent, and innovate with the experience of this momentous experience. Just as the artistic work produced during the early post-2011 years spoke to the desires of revolutionary bodies' hope for political and social change; it was also burdened with the past. What will emerge from this historical moment in the field of cultural production will offer a productive site for researchers to consider the collective affective and aesthetic dimensions of a post-Asad Syria, while carrying with it the traveling experiences of Syrians over the last 13 years, at the very least. Like *dabke* dance music's mutability from region to region and event to event,[9] Syrian cultural producers will find fertile ground for expression in this new political landscape.

Conclusion

We are researchers working in the time of rupture that is both historical and personal. The impetus for the workshop was a first step in acknowledging that our work as scholars of Syrian Studies was indelibly tied to this unfolding, and that putting this collection together was to recognize not only the material complications like access, but also the human ones that interfere with our ability to think reasonably in times of conflict. There will come a time when a post-conflict Syria will be recognizable, but it has not yet arrived as we write.

The future of Syria Studies will thus largely be shaped by two seismic transformations since 2011: the brutal, catastrophic conflict and the collapse of the Assad regime. The effects of both transformations will be felt for generations to come and will serve to structure the research agendas for a new generation of scholars, whether they are studying the diasporic experience, the structure of post-Assad parliamentary structures, or Syrian novels. As we approach the future of Syria and Syria Studies with both excitement and apprehension, we must remain cognizant of the complexity of doing research in contexts such as Syria's that will continue to demand that we navigate shifting terrains of access and ethical concerns.

Moving forward to research this new environment, it will be incumbent on us to listen to Syrians—colleagues, friends, associates, and citizens—to hear what they say and how they say it. These are the spaces in which we may be especially of use as researchers today. This is an exceptional moment in world history, one in which we researchers have a role to play beyond the field of Syrian Studies as documenters, questioners, observers, and analysts, and to remember the past as we move through the present.

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Conflict Absorption and the Paradox of State Power in Syria

Samer Abboud[3]

Introduction

The study of Syrian politics in the late 20th and early 21st century typified debates about the relational power of (the Ba'ath) party, state bureaucracy, army, and regime. Hinnebusch's excellent book *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria*[4] charted a research program for scholars to think about how the intertwined structures of army, security, and bureaucracy evolved in post-1963 Syria. The processes through which social forces (such as peasants and students) and institutions were absorbed into the state provided frameworks for inquiring into state (trans)formation in the late 20th century. When Bashar al-Assad assumed power from his father in 2000, many scholars of Syrian politics remained interested in questions of state transformation and what trajectory state, army, security apparatus, and regime would assume. Implicit in this scholarship was the question of what was new and what was old in the post-2000 configuration of political power. On the eve of the uprising, Hinnebusch had delineated three distinct periods in the scholarly literature on Syrian statehood that paralleled the evolution of the state itself: early

[3] Associate Professor in Global Interdisciplinary Studies at Villanova University

[4] Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria: Army, Party, and Peasant* (London: Routledge, 1990).

independence (1950s-1960s); the consolidation of authoritarian rule (1970s-1980s); and the liberalization period (1990s-2000s).[5] Syria's catastrophe constitutes a new period for scholars to understand Syrian statehood more broadly and the relational power dynamics underpinning the party-army-state relation more specifically. The three distinct periods identified by Hinnebusch corresponded to a set of research problems that guided scholarship on Syrian statehood. Scholarship about the early independence period, for example, was interested in how state formation occurred in relation to Ba'athist power and the incorporation and exclusion of specific social forces, while research about the liberalization period was mostly interested in the problem of how the regime sought stability amidst economic liberalization. In my contribution to the special issue, I would like to suggest that the problem of understanding Syrian statehood in the post-2011 period is one related to how to understand conflict absorption into the state and the paradox of state power highlighted by Syria's territorial fragmentation. In the post-2024 period after the collapse of the regime, new challenges in understanding Syrian state transformation will emerge as many of those discussed here will persist.

My contribution is motivated by the question of how to understand Syrian statehood in the post-liberalization, conflict phase of state formation. I make two interrelated arguments about how we can study and understand Syrian statehood today in the context of conflict transformation. First, the normalization and bureaucratization of the logic of war reveals patterns of conflict absorption that are reorienting the state around the continuation of the conflict and targeting of state enemies. The absence of a formal peace process or peace agreement create the conditions of possibility for the materialization of new state practices that extend the logic of conflict into the future. The

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[5] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Modern Syrian Politics," *History Compass* 6, no. 1 (January 28, 2008): 263–85.

regime's ability to "craft peace"[6] outside of external pressure and under the protective umbrella of the Astana process will give shape to the political order that emerges in the coming years. Conflict absorption also creates the conditions for the recruitment of new elite networks, reconfigurations of local power centers, and the institutionalization of enmity against state enemies. Second, the tension between regime claims of victory and Syria's continued territorial fragmentation highlight the paradox of state power. On the one hand, the regime is powerful enough to control most of Syria's territory and to lay claim to authority in these areas. On the other hand, large swathes of the country remain outside of state presence and control. How the state absorbs conflict and how Syria's territorial fragmentation is resolved (or not) into the future will shape how we understand Syrian statehood in the conflict phase of state transformation. This question remains relevant amidst the regime's collapse and the transition authority's inheritance of a fragmented country.

Conflict Absorption and State Power

The conflict has been defined and understood in large part through the phenomenon of physical violence inflicted by state and non-state actors against civilian populations. Salwa Ismail's excellent work on Syrian state violence argues that there exists a 'civil war regime' borne out of decades of Ba'athist rule that rendered violence governmental[7]. That is to say that governmental violence was not an aberration from an otherwise liberal politics but central to how the regime ruled and governed over Syria. Similarly, Shaery-Yazdi and Üngör argue that internal violence in Syria has a long history rooted in the

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[6] Kristian Stokke, "Crafting Liberal Peace? International Peace Promotion and the Contextual Politics of Peace in Sri Lanka," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 5 (October 30, 2009): 932–39.

[7] Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

country's post-colonial politics[8]. Historicizing state violence in Syria de-exceptionalizes violence after 2011 but also poses a conundrum about how we understand conflict and state enmity towards political opponents. Are state enemies always simply targeted for violence on the battlefield, in the prison, or on the street? Rather than focusing our attention on how the regime rules through violence, I am encouraging a different question by asking how war is absorbed, normalized, bureaucratized, and enacted gradually through different mechanisms of punishment that seek to expand and sustain existing governmental practices that bifurcate Syrian society into friends and enemies in relation to the conflict.

The central problem I explore in my book *Managing Syria's Conflict*[9] is how we understand how war extends beyond the battlefield and is absorbed into the machinations of statehood. How do we study conflict absorption in Syria? What is it that we are looking for? Conflict absorption refers to both the forms of bureaucratization and institutionalization of a particular conflict logic and the reconfigurations of elite, state, and security power that enable such absorption. I understand conflict logic as something that emerges from a specific narration of a conflict by state or non-state powers that then materializes as a set of political strategies. Szekely argues that battlefield strategies can be understood through an inquiry into the conflict narratives (or logics) of armed groups[10]. For Szekely, differing conflict narratives produce different battlefield strategies. In the same light, inquiring into how conflict logic materializes beyond the battlefield requires us to consider the institutional, identity, ideational, and social forms of conflict's materialization. I am

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[8] Roschanack Shaery-Yazdi and Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Mass Violence in Syria: Continuity and Change," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (2022): 397–402.

[9] Samer Abboud, *Managing Syria's Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

[10] Ora Szekely, *Syria Divided: Patterns of Violence in a Complex Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

not suggesting that the institutionalization of enmity is novel in Ba'athist Syria but rather that it assumes different, more legalistic and punishing forms, in the wake of conflict.

The regional and international context of a conflict is a major determinant of how conflict logic is absorbed into the state. Liberal peace approaches to conflict resolution emphasize the need to create new forms of belonging and political structures out of the ashes of conflict to prevent conflict recurrence, or, in other words, to suppress conflict logic. The state apparatus is intentionally reoriented around the suppression of conflict between different groups[11]. Post-genocide Rwandan authorities' articulation of a single identity around "Rwandan-ness"[12] sought precisely to suppress the identity markers that fueled the genocide. Liberal interventions into conflicts seek to prevent the absorption of conflict logic into the state apparatus by creating new forms of belonging and power sharing that are either wholly new or whose antecedents are not associated with conflict or its narration. In Syria's case, however, the absence of external pressures on statehood has allowed the regime to absorb the enmity and exclusionary violence of the conflict into the state apparatus. The Astana Process has supplanted United Nations led efforts to initiate reconciliation[13]. As the major forum for the deliberation over Syria's conflict, Astana has protected the regime from external pressures to reform state institutions and

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[11] Susan L. Woodward, The Ideology of Failed States: Why Intervention Fails (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). I am referring to this as a problem of how external interventions produce different forms of post-conflict statehood. Woodward's argument is that these forms are structured around absorbing external interventions and not increasing domestic state capacity. Liberal interventions are not always successful in suppressing conflict as reforms often reproduce or ignore the conditions that gave rise to conflict in the first place.

[12] Danielle Beswick, "Democracy, Identity and the Politics of Exclusion in Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Case of the Batwa," *Democratization* 18, no. 2 (2011): 490–511.

[13] Samer Abboud, "Making Peace to Sustain War: The Astana Process and Syria's Illiberal Peace," *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 3 (2021): 326–43.

practices. The regime's isolation from external interventions has thus allowed for a pattern of conflict absorption that emphasizes enmity over reconciliation and which, I contend, will shape how we understand this post-2011 stage of Syrian statehood.

Conflict absorption is a process in which a narration of the conflict is bureaucratized and institutionalized and underpinned by power configurations that enact this absorption. I want to illustrate the complex processes involved here through an example of the state's approach to reconciliation that highlights how bifurcation unfolds in relation to the conflict. In 2012, a new state ministry called the Ministry of National Reconciliation was created. The stated aim of the new ministry was to foster national reconciliation between Syrians and to serve as an institutional platform for deliberation. The Ministry was a cosmetic body that mostly sponsored poetry readings and other cultural events that promoted 'dialogue' and 'understanding' that were effectively euphemisms for fealty to the regime. Reconciliation as a state-led process paralleled the violence and forced displacement realized through the *musalahat* (reconciliation agreements) imposed on besieged areas. The *musalahat* became a subjugating tool[14] of the regime's war that forced Syrians to decide between remaining in their homes under regime rule or accepting displacement to Idlib and essentially de-nationalization. These *musalahat* were at first negotiated by local actors in civil committees and when the Russian military forces entered Syria in September 2015 they began to standardize, oversee, and monitor their negotiations. The Russians established the Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria[15] for the monitoring of national reconciliations based out of the Hmeim military base through which they would guide the

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[14] Marika Sosnowski, "Reconciliation Agreements as Strangle Contracts: Ramifications for Property and Citizenship Rights in the Syrian Civil War," *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 4 (2020): 460–75.

[15] The official title of the Center was *The Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic.*

work of the civil committees. One version of state-led reconciliation promoted social harmony through cultural events and the other materialized the logic of enmity against state enemies through forced displacement.

The *musalahat* were formally negotiated by civil committees located in different governorates who acted in the name of state reconciliation but were working under the authority of the security apparatus to ensure that state enemies would be forced out of areas under state control. The civil committees largely operated outside of formal state oversight while under the supervision of the local security apparatus. So wide was the gap between the Ministry and the civil committees that a parliamentary body reporting directly to the Council of Ministers was created to oversee the work of the civil committees, including appointing new members (who were always local notables and elites), although the Ministry of National Reconciliation was created to do precisely what the committees were doing. During one parliamentary session, Dr. Ali Haidar, the man heading the Ministry from its inception to its dissolution, complained that the Ministry's staff had never exceeded 35 people since its creation and could not do the work entrusted to it. He would strike a more somber tone in public interviews by declaring that the committees and Ministry worked together on reconciliations but there was very little control over the committees' work beyond rubber stamping new members who were always approved by the security apparatus. As the Russian military advances brought more and more territory under state control after 2016 the importance of the civil committees relative to the Russian military presence and the state apparatus increased considerably. Specifically, the civil committees emerged to take on important state functions around generating knowledge about the Syrian population that could then be marshalled to punish state enemies. Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Reconciliation was dissolved in 2019. The reconciliation agreements produced knowledge about who was living in besieged areas and what their political loyalties were

(thus who chose displacement were indexed as disloyal and those who stayed indexed as loyal). From these reconciliations emerged a settlement process that similarly sought to produce knowledge and act upon Syrians who were absent from the country or areas under state control. Again, the civil committees in these areas would be tasked with generating information about absent Syrians.

Civil committees have now assumed the responsibility for generating knowledge about Syrians and their property: who is displaced; what properties have been abandoned or damaged; how did people die; who engaged in 'terrorism'; who can return, and several other questions that determine whether and how Syrians can live in their own country. The committees' role in categorizing acts corresponds to a post-2011 legal architecture that seeks to punish Syrians for their 'betrayal of the homeland'[16]. To enact punishment, Syrians must be categorized and acted upon accordingly. Once categorized, the names of citizens are sent to the Ministry of Finance that then issues circulars denouncing individuals for specific crimes and issuing measures for property appropriation or other forced forfeitures. Categorization and punishments extend to a series of crimes that broadly fall under the category of acts of disloyalty. Someone who is absent for desertion or who is known to have 'hands stained in Syrian blood' is indexed as a disloyal subject. Anyone caught in this web of categorization and punishment risks losing not only their assets but their social identity as a Syrian to own property, work, or reside in the country. Punishment is also extended to kin in various ways, such as the unexplained deactivation of close to 600 000 smart cards used to distribute state subsidies[17]. Syrians can, of course, 'settle' their status with the state through the settlement process to return to areas under

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[16] Samer Abboud, "Reconciling Fighters, Settling Civilians: The Making of Post-Conflict Citizenship in Syria," *Citizenship Studies* 24, no. 6 (2020): 751–68.

[17] Joseph Daher, "Expelled from the Support System: Austerity Deepens in Syria," February 15, 2022..

state control but this process does not guarantee restitution. Nor is ‘settlement’ a safe and secure process. Indeed, many people fear submitting themselves to settlement because of the potential for arrest[18].

The practices of reconciliation and settlement bifurcate Syrian society into categories that index loyalty and disloyalty which in turn create subjectivities that the state can act upon. My contention here is that the relational power dynamics linking civil committees, the Russian military, and state institutions is one example of the process of conflict absorption through which the state is reoriented around the slow, gradual bureaucratic process of punishing Syrians. The question that I am interested in then is how we understand categorization and punishment as a new form of government in Syria that is reliant on the objective power (and fear) of violence but is nevertheless enacted through the slow bureaucratic process of appropriation and exclusion. Conflict absorption in Syria should be understood in terms of war’s normalization and institutionalization as a set of practices that seek to extend the enmity of war to the future. The withdrawal of subsidies for families, asset appropriation measures, the rezoning of land that is then acquired by the state, are all practices that are justified through a conflict logic that seeks to punish enemies. Statehood is thus increasingly refracted through the conflict’s narrative and aimed at the bifurcation of society into loyal and disloyal Syrians. The local power centers that have emerged to propel this bifurcation and punishment represent a new, significant social force that will exercise influence on Syrian statehood.

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[18] Samer Abboud, “‘The Decision to Return to Syria Is Not in My Hands’: Syria’s Repatriation Regime as Illiberal Statebuilding,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (2023).

The Paradox of State Power

The paradox of Syrian statehood is that while the state has been reoriented around the punishment of disloyal subjects there are large areas of the country outside of state control, a tripartite power system (the Astana Process powers Turkey, Iran, and Russia) exercising control over major battlefield decisions, several US bases strewn throughout the Eastern part of the country, almost daily Israeli raids into Syrian airspace, and thousands of foreign militia fighters active throughout the country. How do we understand Syrian sovereignty and statehood in a context of overlapping external interventions into the country and territorial fragmentation and competing governance projects existing alongside state presence and power in other parts of the country? Hinnebusch argues that external intervention produced a de-constructed, failed state in Syria that allowed for groups such as ISIS to emerge and take root[19]. This argument encourages us to think about what the current forms of external intervention in Syria portend for the future of statehood. This is a broader question of how we understand the effects of territorial fragmentation on Syrian statehood.

Territorial fragmentation is best exemplified by the differing situations in the northwestern and northeastern parts of the country. In the northwest, several armed groups organized as the Syrian National Army (SNA) under the loose protection of the Turkish military vie for influence with a coalition of armed groups headed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in large parts of Idlib governorate. In the northeast, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is an administrative body supported militarily by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The regime's response to the myriad governance projects that emerged after 2011 was an attempt to erase them from existence. The state's politics of erasure first targeted all expressions of alternative governance that had

[19] Raymond Hinnebusch, "State De-Construction in Iraq and Syria," *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 57, no. 4 (2016): 560–85.

emerged after 2011 including councils, courts, civil administrations, and civil society organizations. These governance models had represented a threat to the reassertion of state authority in reconciled areas and were immediately disbanded after reconciliation. One of the many tasks of the local committees present in these reconciled areas was to identify what these governance projects were and who administered them as a step towards dissolving them.

The politics of erasure was principally enacted through the expulsion of known oppositionists from reconciled areas while alternative governance institutions were dismantled. Known members of governance bodies and even medical staff were forcibly expelled as part of the reconciliation agreements[20]. Expulsion also aided political bifurcation because it allowed local committees to identify, document, and initiate appropriation measures against known oppositionists. Forced expulsion was typically followed by legal measures that appropriated the individual's assets and the withdrawal of legal rights that allow them to live and work in Syria. These laws include Law No. 23 (2015) that expedited property expropriation; Law No. 11 (2016) that suspended property transfers in non-regime areas (and was made retroactive to March 15, 2011); Law No. 33 (2017) that completely transforms the issuance and management of property documentation; and Law No. 4 (2017) that alters the civil status code, among many others. Their expulsion was both physical and social[21].

These practices in areas that fell back under state control suggest that the regime has no intention of absorbing any vestiges of opposition rule into the state. Continuing this policy towards the northwest and northeast may prove difficult given

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[20] Mazen Ezzi, "How the Syrian Regime Is Using the Mask of 'Reconciliation' to Destroy Opposition Institutions," *Chatham House*, June 26, 2017, https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/how-the-syrian-regime-is-using-the-mask-of-reconciliation-to-destroy-opposition-institutions/.
[21] Abboud, *Managing Syria's Conflict: Enmity and Punishment as Illiberal Statebuilding*.

the current power configurations and external actors supporting the various armed groups that rule in these areas. Whether or not the AANES can be incorporated into the state as part of a deliberative process is the major question determining the future of this area and its relationship to the state. Regarding the northwest, whether the area, which is quite literally populated by people who have already been displaced by the state through reconciliation agreements or has otherwise refused to live in areas under state control, can be brought back under state control is a major question that will impact Syria's statehood. The issue of how millions of people who the state has branded as enemies could be incorporated back into the country has no clear answer. Moreover, while Turkey may be willing to strike a grand bargain that facilitates the (forced) return of millions of Syrians there is nothing to suggest that HTS will simply vanish or acquiesce to any agreement between the Syrian regime and the Astana powers. In any scenario, continued violence is likely to contribute to the resolution of both simmering problems in the northwest and northeast.

Any resolution to these outstanding territorial issues is likely to be independent of the issues of American bases and continued Israeli military incursions into Syria. At the same time, the Astana powers are formally guarantors of Syria's battlefield but seem uninterested or unable to address the American and Israeli involvement in Syria. There are more questions than answers as to how these various powers intersecting and relating to each other will contribute to Syrian statehood. Hinnebusch's argument about de-construction and Syria's descent into a failed state regarding ISIS may reasonably be extended into post-ISIS phase as we consider regional powers' role in Syria. The contours of what this de-construction and 'failure' look like in the coming decades will be an important area of inquiry into Syrian statehood.

Conclusion

Research into Syrian statehood will need to account for how the processes of conflict absorption exist alongside the paradox of state power wrought by the country's continued territorial fragmentation. The reconciliation and settlement processes foundationalize a form of statehood that is underpinned by elite networks, exclusionary laws, and institutions that seek to extend conflict into Syria's future. Future research into Syrian statehood needs to account for the relational power dynamics embedded in these processes and how the various layers of military and security power buttress them. This entails inquiry into altogether new forms of social and political power in Syria that emerged after 2011. How these forms of power emerge and co-exist will provide insights into Syrian statehood for decades to come. The country's continued territorial fragmentation in parallel to the reconfiguration of the social base of state power will also have profound effects on Syrian statehood. How the issues of the northwest and northeast resolve themselves will be of interest to scholars in the future.

Inquiry into conflict absorption into the state will necessarily require analysis of how institutions, laws, social networks, and the security apparatus coalesce around punishing state enemies in a context of diminished state institutional capacity. The sociology of these networks, how they materialize an elite tethered to the conflict, and what the political economy of their power looks like is an important area of inquiry to understand state power in the coming decades. Mapping who these networks are and how they supplanted existing elite networks will help researchers understand the power configurations that emerged out of conflict and how they sustain regime authority. To date, there are no serious funds or plans for reconstruction in Syria. These local networks are thus severely limited in their ability to enact any sort of reconstruction plan for the country. Instead, they serve as intermediaries or conduits of state power whose function is to work independently of centralized direction to

appropriate and redistribute the appropriated assets of Syrians deemed as enemies. The functioning of these networks is thus central to the state's project of punishing state enemies. They are nevertheless limited in having any effect on Syrian reconstruction.

The United States' recent passing of the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act (2023) that commits the United States to non-recognition of Syria while Bashar al-Assad remains in power reflects a general ambivalent Western approach to Syria. Western powers are unlikely to marshal funds for Syria's reconstruction anytime soon despite regime claims to victory and a very publicized repatriation process. Normalization with Arab states was a major victory for the regime but has not yet led to an influx of reconstruction funds as many within Syria expected. Syria's return to the Arab regional fold while remaining isolated by the West is likely to strengthen the regime's reliance on its main external allies Russia and Iran. For now, relations with Turkey remain tense but slowly moving towards normalization. This paradox of Syrian state power and the continued subjugation of major battlefield decisions to the Astana powers will be the major structural factor in understanding Syria's regional and international relations.

How we research Syrian statehood in the coming years and decades will depend on the questions we ask about the conflict's impacts on state power. The sociological, institutional, military, and political dimensions of state power have all been reconfigured since 2011. Given the paradox of state power and Syria's ongoing territorial fragmentation we are unlikely to understand this period of state transformation as anything concrete but rather defined by perpetual instability. This may mean that the conflict phase of Syrian statehood will be divided into different periods, such as the pre- and post-Russian intervention periods. Major shifts in the battlefield will have profound effects on how we understand Syrian statehood. Idlib's return to state control, normalization with the West or Turkey, the AANES' dissolution or incorporation into the state are all

potentially significant political inflection points that may periodize new moments of Syria’s post-2011 state formation.

2

Towards Epistemic Justice: On Translation as Epistemic Disobedience, Insurrection, Resistance, and Activism

Ghada Alatrash[22]

Introduction

As a Syrian-Arab-Canadian researcher, pedagogue, and racialized Woman of Color (positioned outside of Whiteness—that is the White race, color, and language), I continue to grapple with the notion of the production of knowledge on the Arab subject and the ethics (or lack thereof) involved in this production—a knowledge that has been written by dominant Orientalist and colonial researchers and knowledge producers, and one that has come to be epistemologized, legitimized, canonized, institutionalized, and universalized (Alatrash "On Decolonizing"). As importantly, it is a knowledge that insists on creating an epistemic divide (Spivak "The Politics" 408) that Others (Said *Orientalism*), dichotomizes and polarizes Arab subjects in the West.

As importantly, I am thinking about how we, as Arabs, can engage with "epistemic activism" (Hamraie; Medina "Resisting racist") to disrupt hegemonic Western Knowledge systems in which "epistemic racism" (Mignolo "Local Histories") is rampant in academic and institutional spheres.

[22] Alberta University of the Arts

Walter Mignolo ("Local Histories" 67) speaks of epistemic racism as "the hidden matrix that enables the exercise of imperial power. It operates through the pretense of universality and neutrality of Western knowledge, obscuring its own imperial roots and negating other knowledge systems as 'local' or 'ethnic'," ("Local Histories"), and Medina ("Resisting Racist") defines epistemic activism as a process that "consists in practices of interrogation and resistance that unmask, disrupt, and uproot biases and insensitivity" (1). In an effort to dismantle colonial epistemological structures and to disrupt systematic silencing of Arab voices, histories, and civilizations, I join other scholars, in part through translation, in the decolonization of epistemes by way of epistemic activism, in the act of re-writing and renarrativization (Xie) of histories, and in resisting, disrupting and questioning institutionalized hegemonic productions of knowledge on the Arab subject.

As a researcher and as a pedagogue, I continue to think about what counts as knowledge in Western academic institutions, and particularly as it inscribes and implicates the Arab subject, and how this knowledge continues to negate our humanity as Arabs and eliminates any sort of an empathetic or sentimental understanding. I am also thinking about the ways in which we can answer Foucault's (*Power and Knowledge*) call for an insurrection of subjugated knowledge and disrupt, trouble, and resist these "truth" systems (Foucault *The Politics*; *Power and Knowledge*) by offering alternate ways of knowing, understanding, and reading of the world as we work towards epistemic justice in Western academia. In this paper, I will specifically discuss the ways in which translation, or having access to translated works, can be engaged as a medium where alternative readings can come to act as counter-narratives. It is through translation that I am able to contribute to the production of knowledge about the Arab subject as embedded in specific local Arab histories, not as entangled in hegemonic patterns of knowledge production. I am concerned with, and questioning, a knowledge on the Arab subject as written by a colonial pen and

language—in other words: who has written this knowledge, in what language, and how has it come to constitute or deny the human condition of the spoken-about subject? And how is the Arab subject given agency, a reclaiming of identity, through the process of translation? Within the context of Syrian studies, I will engage in this essay my translations of Syrian narratives, past and post-revolution present, to shed light on the Syrian lived human condition as well as their diasporic experiences of displacement and exile, *as narrated and written by Syrians*, to help make sense of, and better understand, the complexities of the Syrian lived reality today.

The lack of translated Arabic texts continues to be a challenge and a limitation in Western epistemes. There continues to be an urgency for the need of translations of Arab knowledge and ways of knowing, as positioned through particular Arab historical lineage and as steeped in complex Arab geographies, literary works, and narratives. Translated works ought to be part of what informs the knowledge-making process on the Arab subject, as a way to assert the location of Arabness through an anti-Orientalist lens and pen. Edward Said ("Invention, Memory") suggests that translation ought to be engaged as a "humanistic enterprise that seeks to bridge cultures and bring them to dialogue with one another" (141), a bridge that can help us cross over where epistemic justice is the end destination. In her politics of translation, Gayatri Spivak ("The Politics of Translation") speaks to how original texts "must be made to speak English" (399) to give access to the largest numbers of activists—and it is by also bringing the Arabic text to speak in English, that I believe Arab voices, both past and present, could be given consideration at negotiation tables today and in the future.

Translation allows for the negated and abject Arab voice to express disobedience, rejection and resistance to dominant discourses, and to disrupt the colonial constructed categories of knowledge on Arab and Arabness. Translation allows for the Arab human experience to be heard through translated historical

accounts, novels, stories, poetry, songs, chants, amongst other forms of arts and creative expression. It is through the act of translation that marginalized epistemes are recentered, whereby a third space, an in-between space (Bhabha), emerges as cultures come in contact with one another, and where differences and boundaries "are constantly being negotiated and transformed" (Bhabha 37). Indeed, it is in these spaces of negotiation between different cultural and linguistic systems that new possibilities for production of knowledge, meaning, and interpretations are fostered.

Shareah Taleghani ("Vulnerability") speaks of the "poetics of human rights" as a form of "aesthetic or creative intervention" in which "sentimental poetics" ought to be engaged as representations that speak to the condition of the Arab subject today. I believe that it is what lies in these "poetics" of epistemological difference imbued through local Arab voices and their ways of knowing that can act as an antidote to hegemonic, racist knowledge systems residing in the bodies of Western academia, ones that insist on marginalizing and devaluing the Arab subject. Translated Arabic literature becomes one powerful example of sentimental poetics where the translated texts can be engaged as representations of Arab writers and critical thinkers, as forms of witnessing, and as tools of resistance, where translations become armament.

The truth of the matter is that within the contexts of Western academic institutions, we Arabs continue to come against a legacy of colonialism that enacts epistemic violence (Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?") on Arab bodies of knowledge; an epistemic violence that practices a silencing and an erasure of our knowledges, stripping the Arab subject of agency and voice, of their humanity, and in blatant racist and unethical ways. As in the words of Walter Mignolo ("Forward"), "racism is not a question of one's blood type . . . or the color of one's skin . . . [but] consists in devaluing the humanity of certain people by dismissing it or playing it down . . . [while] at the same time as highlighting and playing up European philosophy,

assuming it to be universal," and hence the urgency for a continuous call for "epistemic disobedience," "epistemic resistance" and "epistemic activism" (x).

As I locate myself as a Syrian-Canadian (I ought to add a privileged Syrian-Canadian) professor, I continue to look for mediums that can help me navigate my way through an academic episteme where racist portraits pigeonholing Arab identities into narrow cells have been erected by the colonial, imperial, political, and hegemonic. What makes the struggle more difficult is the lack of tools in hand, including the inaccessibility of translated Arab scholarship that could help inform an anti-Orientalist counter-narrative on the Arab subject. I deeply believe that this lack of representation happens to be yet another iteration of white supremacy, where white knowledge is grounded in the center while other knowledge add cultures are pushed to the margins—it is a form of delegitimization and sanctioning of other knowledge and other ways of knowing, of valuing one knowledge over another. And most troubling, there seems to be a concomitant reluctance to change the situation.

As Spivak ("Righting") argues, it is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination with gatekeepers facilitating this "epistemic violence," that is violence exerted against or through knowledge. It only takes flipping through the anthologies of world literatures taught as part of North American schools and universities to realize that there is no interest in Arabic literature, and I would even go as far as to say an interest in blocking it. Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism*) speaks to the notion of "embargoed literature" where he asserts that colonial powers have imposed restrictions on the production and distribution of literature, preventing certain voices from being heard and certain stories from being told. Along the same lines, it also only takes one look at the names of Nobel Prize recipients in literature to note there is an

almost a total absence of Arab representation and that Arab literature remains relatively unknown, unread, and "embargoed" in the West, for as Said notes, only one Arab Egyptian novelist and short story writer Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, and no one else.

When subjugated Arab bodies of knowledge are "insurrected" (Foucault, 1980) through translation and brought to rise up in rebellion against the established systems of knowledge, they give way to a "contrapuntal" reading (Said *Culture and Imperialism*), a way of reading and interpretation of texts and cultural productions that highlight the complex relationships between different cultures, histories and social realities and challenge the binaries and hierarchies that often underlie colonialist and imperialist discourses. As part of the cultural productions, art and literature become tools of resistance against imperial domination that can be engaged with the goal of attaining justice, and, dare I say, dreaming of peace. Edward Said reminds us that we, as Arabs, are often presented "as just one large group of screaming fanatics who are practically faceless" (Said "The Arab World" par. 52), and as "herds of peoples" (Said *Reflections* 181) in urgent need of humanizing. Here, I am thinking of the recent work of Syrian sculptor Assem Al-Basha, as one example. In 2013, in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man in Syria, the original statue of Syrian Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri, one of the greatest classical Arab poets considered to have held controversial irreligious views, was beheaded by members of Al-Nusra Front. While in exile in Spain, sculptor Assem Al-Basha created a bronze sculpture of the head of Al-Ma'arri that is 3.25 meters high and 1.25 meters wide. On the anniversary of the Syrian Revolution on March 15, 2023, the sculpture was unveiled in Montreuil, France, where it will remain until Syria is free again. It is precisely in such moments that art can bring cultures together. In the case of France and Syria, the once colonizer and colonized are able to break down barriers, build a sense of shared humanity with a common purpose of freedom and peace, and open a space for dialogue and negotiations. Here,

I also believe that in the same way Al-Basha's sculpture facilitated an *unveiling*, literally, of the face of an Arab, when it comes to knowledge production, bodies of knowledge, and knowledge formation on the Arab subject, translation has great agency in the *unveiling* and countervailing of Arab realities, in giving way to a revelation, as the voices are afforded the possibility of telling their own stories and disrupting the singular and violent representations on them in Western epistemes.

However, as I engage in the discussion of Arab realities, it is important to also note the limitation of an assumed universality that underpins Arab subjectivity as presented in Orientalist Western discourses. And so, it is important to note that for the remainder of this essay, I will shed light on the Syrian lived Diasporic reality in particular as one example of an Arab lived experience, albeit heterogeneity is also very much central to the Syrian Diasporic subject as it is constituted through different bodies, identities, experiences, and lived realities.

As I shift the discourse to Syria and the lived Syrian human condition, the words of Antonio Guteres Head of UN High Commission of refugees come to mind: "Syria is the great tragedy of this century - a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history" (Watt et al. 2013). My heart aches for my people in Syria, people who seem to have been abandoned and forsaken by a silent and apathetically disengaged humanity. In order to help elevate the Syrian human condition to the universal, and as part of my epistemic activism both as researcher and pedagogue, I have joined other scholars in translating Syrian narratives and bringing them to speak in English, two of which I will engage with in this essay by Syrian Fadi Azzam, including "If you are Syrian these days" and "This is Damascus You Sons of Bitches." I find that these two poems express a "sentimental poetics" (Taleghani "Vulnerability") that may come to disrupt the dominant representations on the Syrian human condition, to facilitate an "insurrection" of the subjugated knowledge and an unveiling of it, and to activate and actualize "a sentimental

education" (Cohen "The Sentimental") in the classroom and beyond. In the translation below for Fadi Azzam, the voice of a Syrian speaks for himself and narrates his own lived reality. As we try to make sense of the Syrian lived experience today, both within the borders of Syria and as part of the Diaspora, I engage these pieces in my classroom and research as alternate readings, as told and written by a Syrian voice and pen, with the hope that this knowledge gives way to an empathetic understanding that may become part and parcel of reading the world–a reading that may bring us to recognize an interconnectedness of all things.

In the classroom, some of the questions that we grapple with before we read these pieces include: What pre-existing knowledge do we hold on the Arab subjects, and what are its limitations?
How have colonial Orientalist epistemological impositions come to shape our ontological views on this subject, and how do narratives written *by* peoples of the Diasporas come to create new possibilities on knowing the Syrian Diasporic subject? (Alatrash "On the Lived"). What are the ways in which the Syrian Diaspora has helped us understand the Diasporic experience as a whole? What does it mean to be a Syrian Diasporic person, and what implication does their new lived reality have on their identity? How has the Syrian subject been inscribed in Western epistemes and knowledge productions, and how may these new translated readings shift our knowledge and allow for a new space to emerge, a third space that speaks a language of hope and possibilities.

I will begin with Azzam's poem "If you are Syrian these days." Azzam begins:

If you are Syrian these days,
You stand shielded and exposed,
you are the awakening and the delusion,
and the dream and the nightmare,
all in one breath.
You are a breath that freezes in the sweltering heat
and melts in the chill of this world.
If you are Syrian these days,
you are a symbol for a tent, disappointment, fear, betrayal,
and the purling of a streaming wound as it runs from your
body, the Tigris, and from your eyes, the Euphrates.
If you are Syrian these days,
you are urged to attend etiquette schools, where everyone is
there to civilize you, to advise and guide you, to speak for you
and silence you, to identify your class and where to classify
you, to put you together and disperse you, and to release and
restrain you-- schools where they teach you lessons about how
God creates heavens and things from carnage;
how the victim should ask to be pardoned by the executioner;
how a country is burnt in the name of the son;
how to kiss the hand that kills, the shot that assassinates, and
the missile that
obliterates;
and how flowers are accused of treason.

Azzam's piece may be read both as witness literature that speaks to the Syrian human condition, and as an aesthetic intervention calling for "the recognition of the human vulnerability" (Taleghani "Vulnerability" 96)--a recognition through which a sense of responsibility for others may be triggered, and where a sentiment of an interconnectedness with one another may be fostered.

Once, immediately after we read Azzam's translated lines in class, a student sent me the following email (I have asked her permission to share the following):

> Dear Dr. Alatrash,
> Today's class . . . touched my soul. I could not keep my camera on [on Zoom] because of the tears that kept filling my eyes. The poem read in the beginning of class [Azzam's piece above] struck a sensitive part of me as it gave words to emotions I have been feeling regarding my Indigenous ancestry. These thoughts are more than welcome to be shared with the author... 'the dream and the nightmare all in one breath' was one of the lines that first caught my attention, because it so directly addresses the true reality of this world for so many. There are so many people who love to be alive, myself included, but we find ourselves caught in a world that works to wipe us out of existence. I am an Indigenous woman, and I have lived in Lethbridge most of my life where racism against Indigenous Peoples is very prominent. Being part Tongan/Polynesian, I just relied heavily on that for approval from people and eradicated myself from Indigenous relations. I never wanted to be known as an Indigenous Person, I oppressed my own culture because the dominant white narrative told me I was less than for something as simple as my ancestry. I suppressed myself because of what Fadi Azzam said in his poem, 'you are encouraged to attend schools... to civilize you' ... I attended schools where I was not written in history except for in terms of a savage. I attended schools that removed Indigenous history because the law worked to assimilate my history out of existence. I believe I wrote the words down correctly that said 'even our hell is our heaven' and that brought up everything I feel. I feel so grateful to be in Canada, but I feel so much pain in being erased. I feel angry at

> 'the maker of our nothingness' while feeling gratitude for existing the way I do today. Just to bring it all together with the readings for this week, Jamaica Kincaid's chapter ended with '[e]ven if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you' (1988). The readings combined with the poem . . . are truly inspiring and helpful as I navigate to find connection within myself and to allow myself to take up space in a world that has told me I am not worthy to exist.

Here, Emily's email becomes a manifestation of a third space in which the Tongan/Polynesian, the Indigenous, and the Syrian found a common ground, an in-between ground on which they met and understood one another empathetically. It is a space that yielded a language of hope and possibilities, a space that unveiled a Syrian reality through a "contrapuntal" reading that revealed an interplay between dominant and marginalized knowledge, highlighting the importance of an interconnectedness of different histories and lived realities. I shared Emily's words with Azzam. He wrote back to the student, and below is his response that I also translated:

> Dear Dr. Alatrash,
> I have a simple message for her [the student], if possible:
> Indeed, the makers of nothingness come in different languages and shapes, but they are everywhere, deeming us inferior, seeing us less civilized than monkeys, animals, and plants. They will try to kill us in every possible way, financially or morally. They will

> try to take us out of history, visit us in novels when they please, and mute our voices. They have done this for hundreds of years to you, and they are doing the same to us today on the pretext of "our terrorism."
> We have no other way but to resist and to broadcast our narrative as a middle finger. The explosions in our narratives are not induced with dynamites but with beauty, strength, reason, and knowledge. We must resist feeling inferior; we must reject their standards of beauty and the "ethical" messages of their greedy businessmen; we must contest their success models.
> We, women and men, East and West, must open the borders amongst one another and dismantle their erected walls, for the unity of goodness and truth in our effort, will indeed make their task more difficult and will help pave the way for a world that is less barbaric and unfair.
> As for you—I hope you will remain as beautiful as the spirit of your great ancestors, and rest assured that on the other side of this world are those who join their voices with yours, who bow to your pain, and who stand with you and with anyone who suffers injustice. Do not stop being proud of the voices of your ancestors.
> Fadi Azzam

It is in the third space (Bhabha *The Location*) as a site of cultural hybridity where Azzam and the student came into contact with one another, a space of negotiation and transformation, and as importantly, a space that could only be made possible through translation. It was through translation that a transformative process was activated, creating new meanings and cultural exchanges, and, as Bhabha suggests, translation gave way for greater visibility to help navigate meanings constituted by the complex interplay of cultural and historical forces and created new "hybrid forms of expression."

Furthermore, when it comes to the Syrian diasporic subject, particularly within the context of refugees, they are more often than not presented as "vulnerable, desperate and in need of saving" (Tyyska et al. "The Syrian Refugee" 7). In trying to show the depth of the humanitarian crisis, the media continues to remove the agency and resilience of Syrian refugees by portraying them as such (Tyyska et al. "The Syrian Refugee" 7). Aseefa Sarang of a Toronto health agency goes on to say, "We often position refugees as lacking, as a burden. Instead of recognizing their resilience, we assume their deficiencies and that we are doing them a favor" (par. 22). However, in his piece, "If You Are Syrian These Days," Fadi Azzam tells a different story about refugees. He speaks a language of resistance and resilience, and through translation, his narrative is given agency that resists categorizations or fixed meanings. Azzam writes,

> This is where I am from.
> My ill-fated and extraordinary fortune has brought me to hold onto a country where there is no place,
> yet I cling to the very place as the country betrays me.
> I am from Syria, an end worthy of history, and a beginning worth living.
> I am from an abundance of pain,
> from blood that continues to run and has not yet coagulated nor become sticky, and I come with an unexplainable arrogance.
> . . . I am from the country of a million stories and one ruler.
> I am from a country whose wounds are demeaned into laughter, and whose similes, metaphors, and rhetoric debased into ugly poetry.
>
> I am from a country of the utmost cruelty, of expired love, and a bounty of looming deaths.
> I am from Syria, my brothers and sisters; but don't you dare pity her,

> for in her dwells enough life to reconstruct the entire
> world and enough graves to accommodate all of you.
>
> I am from a country that will be loved until the end of
> repentance, but has been forsaken to the ends of grief.
> . . . O how fertile, O how majestic, O how wondrous,
> you are my country.

Here, I also turn to Stuart's words in his essay on cultural identity and diaspora:

> [C]ultural identity is not a mere phantasm either. It is something - not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories - and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us . . . It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning (395).

I find Azzam's voice very helpful as we try to make sense of Hall's notion of identity. Through the act of writing, Azzam resists dominant representations on the Syrian diasporic person by engaging language as a means for reclaiming an identity that has been defined by others to serve their interests. Through his writing, he is able to highlight the role of discourse and narrative in the construction of identity. Azzam's Syrian identity is shaped by a history and symbolic systems of meaning and their relationship to history and memory. His language is a language of resistance that outlines the complexities of an identity, where an "insurrection" of the subjugated knowledge takes place, and where anger becomes a language of resistance. It is through translation, as put by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o ("Decolonizing the Mind"), that language becomes a bearer of culture and a carrier of history and allows for movement between cultures, histories,

and languages, and encompassing social, political, and historical factors that cannot be ignored. In his poem, "This is Damascus You Sons of Bitches," Azzam speaks in a prideful and defiant tone of Damascus, a city he explains that was drooled upon, exploited, consumed, raided, assaulted, whose marrow has been sucked out but whose youth seems to "always be renewed." He makes his anger known from the title of his poem, "This is Damascus You Sons of Bitches," maintaining this tone throughout the piece. Azzam writes,

> She is Baghdad's rival sister, Beirut's bait, Cairo's envy, Amman's dream, Mecca's conscience, Cordoba's jealousy, Jerusalem's eyes, the coquetry of cities, and a crutch for every aged caliph throughout history. She is Damascus, a woman with seven wonders, five names, and ten titles; she is an abode for a thousand saints, a school for twenty prophets, and an inspiration for fifteen gods.
>
> She is Damascus, the more ancient and the more orphaned, the beginning of dreams and their ends, the starting point for conquests and their convoys, the moseying of poems, and every poet's trap. From her balcony appeared Hisham wooing a passing Umayyad cloud after having finished irrigating her Ghouta with blood. And it was from Damascus that the Falcon of Quraysh flew dreamily until he faced his death in the Pyrenees Mountains.
>
> This is Damascus. She has tolerated everyone—the pimps and the dreamers, the petty and the revolutionaries, passers-by and residents, those addicted to biting her, those who chewed her nails, the losers, the convicts, the innocent, and the lustful. They fed off her breasts until her Barada dried up, and so she offered her blood, trees, and shade. And when her

> Ghouta was consumed, she offered Mount Qasioun, her beloved mole, while they drooled, raided, assaulted, and invited all kinds of bastards to take their share from her innocence.
>
> But this was Damascus, and each time they sucked her marrow, her youth was renewed.

But Azzam's patience for humanity runs out, his tone escalating to anger as a language of resistance. He rejects any sentiment of pity and raises his middle finger in the face of a disengaged, apathetic, and exploitive world:

> Light a fire under me and awaken me, for the stench of blood has put me to sleep. Bring us back less Syrian and more human.
>
> the one who laughed at us will depart;
> the deceived ones will depart;
> the one who caused us all this pain, the maker of nothingness, the one who unjustly pressed charges and distributed blood shares—
> He will depart.
> And you, O Syria, will rise like a middle finger in the face of this world!
> You will roar at those who killed you and ate baklava while your blood streamed, and you will cry out:
> I am the country who never dies.
> I am the country whose young men and women rise to its skies dancing.
> I am the country who is not fit for mourning.
> I am the country whose tailors sew, with the patience of her mothers, burial garments for every executioner.

The poem becomes a searing indictment of the forces of violence and destruction that have wrought havoc on Syria. Azzam is not

afraid to call out the perpetrators of the conflict directly, referring to them as "Sons of Bitches." He does not shy away from evoking the vulnerability of the Syrian people and their human condition, but through vivid and visceral imagery, he also captures the resilient spirit of the people. He speaks of disappointment and vulnerability, but also emphasizes forms of agency and resilience by way of a narrative that is empowered by history and cultural identity and one that breaks down misrepresentation and stereotypes. Here, translation becomes the medium that helps bridge the gap between culture and language (people's stories told in their own words), and offers a more nuanced and more authentic representation. It unveils the faces of the Syrian peoples by promoting cross-cultural exchange and becomes an act of activism with the goal of attaining empathy, understanding, and epistemic justice.

Conclusion

Often, I choose to play an interview with Syrian political activist and former political prisoner Michel Kilo (Mīshīl Kīlū) on the first day of classes where he tells the story of a child, a bird, and a tree. I pause the interview every few seconds and translate the Arabic into English as there are no subtitles. As some may be aware, the story is about a little child born in prison who does not understand Kilo's story about the bird or the tree because he had never seen one. It never fails that once Kilo's video is finished, and after a few moments of silence wet with tears, students respond with empathy and sentimentality, and notably with complete shock as to their obliviousness to the Syrian human condition and lived reality. Once, after the interview came to an end, a Canadian student raised his hand (he was Caucasian-Canadian) and asked, "Do you know what ever happened to the child?" In that moment, I ran out of words, both in Arabic and English. I took a deep breath and thought to

myself, *where do I begin?* Today, a possible answer to my own question is that a starting point may be from the third-space that emerges as part of the translation process and as a product of reading the poetics of human rights. Perhaps it is from here, from this third-space, that we can continue to unveil and humanize the Arab subject, disrupt the colonial violent knowledge production and Orientalist epistemological impositions that have come to define Arabs, and to recognize more fully their realities. Once this empathetic form of recognition is established, and once there emerges a knowing and understanding of the Other's human condition, then the hope is that we continue with our activism towards movements of social change and social justice. As an epistemic site of resistance, it is here in the third space that the possibilities of transformative work may come to fruition, and where praxis becomes possible.

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3
Syrian Studies Through the Lens of Strategic Studies

Rula Jabbour[23]

Introduction

In March 2011, the Middle East was irrevocably altered by the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings that held the promise for a reconfiguration of power dynamics and new social contracts. Syria was among the nations caught in the whirlwind of change. What began as peaceful protests quickly became a drawn-out conflict that ignited profound human suffering. It was during this period of upheaval that I embarked on my Ph.D. program and a dissertation topic that would be both academically enriching and personally resonant. As I watched the events unfold in my homeland and across neighboring countries, my attention was drawn to the varied responses of the military forces during the Arab Spring. While questions about military loyalty have long been a staple of Strategic Studies, they took on new urgency and specificity in the context of the Arab Spring. Scholars and analysts frequently examined the role of militaries in upholding or challenging authoritarian regimes in countries experiencing uprisings. However, the divergent paths taken by the militaries in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria raised unique and pressing questions. Why, despite similar cultures, organizational structures, and histories, did the militaries in Tunisia and Egypt choose to defect from their ruling regimes,

[23] Nebraska Wesleyan University

while in Syria, they did not? This question became the cornerstone of my doctoral research and my interest in a comparative analysis of military conduct during the Arab Spring.

Whereas the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries reached watershed moments where they aligned with the citizenry and supported the removal of their President, the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) maintained their allegiance to the Assad regime. The SAF allegiance to the regime plunged the nation deeper into warfare. This stark contrast not only highlights the specific context of Syria but also contributes to broader discussions on military loyalty and its effects in moments of political upheaval. What factors contributed to such divergent paths? What insights can this offer regarding the socio-political tapestry of Syria? Moreover, how does this reshape our comprehension of military loyalty and its decisive role in either quelling or fueling revolutions? By situating these questions within the broader discourse on the roles of militaries during uprisings, my research sought to illuminate both the enduring and novel aspects of these inquiries within the unique context of the Arab Spring.

The evolution of the Syrian crisis, marked by complex international entanglements and domestic fragmentation, has profoundly impacted my methodological approach and theoretical perspective toward Strategic Studies. The ongoing conflict has severely restricted access to fieldwork, cultural texts, and a dependable body of research data, necessitating innovative methodological adaptations and a critical reconsideration of once-accepted theoretical models to understand militaries. As a result, I found it necessary to turn to interdisciplinary frameworks to overcome these challenges. Migration studies, cultural studies, and peace and conflict studies provided alternative lenses through which I could examine the persistent influence of the Arab Spring on military institutions and behaviors. These fields offered valuable insights into how socio-political upheavals influence identity, state cohesion, and the dynamics of power, all critical elements in

understanding military actions and allegiances in such a fraught context.

However, addressing this challenge was far from straightforward, particularly given the secretive nature of military operations and the institutional opacity that has shrouded the Syrian regime for over four decades. I had to engage with and take seriously how secrecy impacted my research, as it raised significant questions about how to draw reliable conclusions about military power and violence when the inner workings of state power are deliberately obscured. This secrecy not only complicated data collection but also required a critical examination of how state narratives are constructed and the ways in which military power is exercised behind closed doors. By integrating these considerations, my research contributed to broader discussions on how scholars can navigate and interrogate state secrecy in the study of military institutions and their roles in conflict. In the remainder of this essay, I outline how the uprising shaped my research, how I was able to conduct research in a context of limited access, and what specific contributions I was able to make given the constraints I faced as a Syrian researcher.

My doctoral research was structured around an interest in the role that the SAF played in response to the Syrian uprising. The revolution's immediate aftermath highlighted several key factors about militaries that would prove pivotal to my investigation. One central factor that emerged was the divergent roles that militaries played as either supporters of the regime or allies of protestors. Another factor highlighted the critical importance of the military's role in post-conflict reconstruction and stability. A third related to military behavior under different authoritarian regimes during moments of stability. The nature of regime-army relations during periods of political stability provided insight into whether the military might defect or remain loyal during times of unrest. These three factors helped me understand the contrast between different military positions, such as Egypt's military, which navigated a complex path

culminating in regime change, and the SAF, which demonstrated unwavering loyalty to the Assad government. I sought to try and understand this stark dichotomy through an in-depth exploration of the military as an institution, including its internal sectarian divides and their influence on loyalty and decision-making processes. The Syrian military's relative unity and allegiance became a focal point for understanding the distinct outcomes in these nations.

Navigating a Shifting Research Landscape

The ongoing conflict and ensuing instability in Syria severely limited my ability to obtain direct sources and official military documents. In a state where the military is shrouded in secrecy, as is typical in authoritarian regimes, firsthand information about its inner workings and relationship with the regime and society was scarce and tightly controlled. This obstruction compelled me to rely more on secondary sources such as think tank analyses, reports from international observers, and scholarly works. However, this reliance on secondary sources introduced certain limitations related to the translation and interpretation of materials in Arabic and English. The nuances of language and the potential biases in secondary analyses presented challenges in fully capturing the complexities of the Syrian military's role after the uprising. Additionally, the inherent limitations of secondary sources, which are often filtered through external perspectives, meant that some aspects of the military's operations and its relationship with the regime remained obscured. Despite these challenges, the secondary sources provided crucial insights that supplemented the available data and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the military's function within the broader context of the Syrian conflict.

The revolution underscored the importance of a comparative analysis to discern why military reactions to

uprisings varied. The research adopted a qualitative, comparative case study approach, focusing on Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria between December 2010 and December 2011, utilizing a "most similar" case study design. This method aims to elucidate differences in military behavior across similar contexts. As the Syrian conflict escalated, traditional fieldwork within the country became untenable. I pivoted to remote interviews with experts and Syrian military defectors and employed open-source intelligence to bolster my research. However, reaching key defectors was fraught with challenges. Defectors were either in hiding, had joined other factions, or were unwilling to expose their military past to their new communities. Moreover, their accounts often carried an inherent bias; their defection coincided with the deteriorating Syrian situation rather than stemming from longstanding opposition to the regime. Engaging with former military officers who defected from the Assad regime provided some insight, though it became clear that their predictions of the regime's fall were speculative and not grounded in the realities observed during the conflict. This speculative nature of their testimony reinforces the importance of relying on secondary sources for the current analysis, which focus on what has happened rather than what might happen (Jabbour, 2022, p. 89).

The shifting landscape of military engagement necessitated flexibility in my research questions. My principal focus became the military's actions during mass social protests rather than the causes or outcomes of the revolutions themselves. This shift was essential to maintaining a historical rather than speculative framework, ensuring that the research remained rooted in analyzing actual events and decisions. The intent was to dissect the moment of choice for the military—whether to support the authoritarian government or the people—without delving into the speculative nature of post-revolution regimes. Focusing on quantifiable actions was complicated by the complexity of the Syrian conflict and potential international influences (Jabbour, 2022, p. 105) and the tendency of many

interlocutors to engage in speculation. This approach has allowed my research to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the military's pivotal role during the Arab Spring. Specific findings from this research include the Syrian military’s unwavering loyalty to the Assad regime and its impact on the trajectory of the conflict, contrasting with the behaviors observed in Tunisia and Egypt, where military defections played a significant role in regime change (Jabbour, 2022, p. 91).

The profound impact of fluctuating socio-political dynamics on scholarly work, particularly regarding field research, access to cultural texts, and the availability of diverse research resources, manifested in several interrelated challenges. Conducting research within authoritarian regimes presents inherent difficulties due to the secretive nature of these governments. This is especially true when the research focuses on sensitive areas like military matters. The Syrian conflict introduced substantial political instability, directly impeding the conduct of fieldwork. The unpredictable nature of political developments, alongside governmental restrictions, posed significant challenges for planning and ensuring research reliably. The volatile landscape marked by civil unrest further complicated scholarly pursuits and necessitated methodological adaptations. Impositions such as travel bans and declarations of emergency severely constrained research endeavors, particularly for scholars like me who are Syrian and interested in the military's role. Access to military personnel or facilities became increasingly difficult, often requiring clearances that were seldom granted during times of instability. Contacts within the military, who might have provided valuable insights, frequently became unreachable or reticent due to heightened security measures or the precariousness of their positions in the unfolding conflict.

Despite my Syrian origins, conducting research within my homeland proved impossible. This underscored the personal risks of studying sensitive political issues such as militaries in times of political unrest. The government's clampdown on

information made accessing crucial government and military documents an arduous task. These documents were either classified or heavily secured and reflected the regime's efforts to stifle dissent and maintain control. The challenges I encountered in attempting to gather data highlight the broader difficulties faced by researchers working within authoritarian contexts, where access to reliable information is severely restricted, and the unpredictable socio-political environment continually shifts the landscape of scholarly inquiry.

The Syrian government employed stringent censorship and propaganda in its efforts to control the narrative surrounding the military's actions. This suppression of information was not a new tactic but became more pervasive as the conflict escalated. Pre-revolution censorship in Syria had already established a culture of fear and control, and the revolution saw these efforts expand dramatically. The regime tightly controlled the flow of information to ensure that only state-sanctioned narratives reached the public and the international community. This included censoring media, monitoring communications, and suppressing any criticism of the military or government. The opposition, in response, also utilized propaganda to sway public opinion and garner international support, often framing their struggle in starkly heroic terms while demonizing the regime. Both sides' use of propaganda necessitated a critical examination of sources to discern biases and extract facts from politicized rhetoric (Jabbour, 2022, p. 131). The perceptions of the Syrian military varied widely, shaped significantly by political allegiances. Those loyal to the regime viewed the military as a savior, a bulwark against chaos, whereas detractors saw it as an instrument of oppression and violence. These polarized perspectives posed significant challenges to maintaining objectivity and neutrality in my research. Addressing these conflicting narratives, especially the stark contrasts between local and international viewpoints, underscored the complex and multifaceted nature of my topic.

My research required innovative approaches to overcome these and other hurdles that restricted access. As traditional military archives and primary data sources were inaccessible, I shifted focus to alternative methods such as engaging with military defectors and exploring digital platforms where Syrian cultural and military narratives unfolded. The dispersion of both people and information, triggered by the revolution, required researchers like me to interact with sources remotely or through diaspora networks. This shift was not just a methodological adaptation but a necessary response to the realities of conducting research under such restrictive conditions.

My research methods had to remain flexible, incorporating remote interviews when travel or security concerns precluded fieldwork. I contemplated surveys but deemed them inadequate due to the superficial nature of responses and the reluctance of participants to engage with sensitive topics online. The only viable option was to rely on secondary data and virtual ethnography. With primary sources compromised, my research leaned heavily on secondary data analysis, scrutinizing international news reports, leaks, third-party investigations, and publications by Non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Virtual ethnography became an invaluable tool, allowing me to observe online forums, social media, and other digital spaces where discussions of the military's role were active and revealing in ways that traditional methods could not achieve (Jabbour, 2022, p. 117). My research path necessitated forgoing several grant and Fulbright opportunities. Access to such funding required adherence to specific methodologies that were not possible, such as travelling to research sites. While this limited my access to these valuable resources, I was also pushed to innovate methodologically and frame my contribution around the limitations I faced. This honest reflection on the research conditions highlights why traditional methods were impossible and how virtual

ethnography provided unique insights into the Syrian conflict that other approaches might have missed.

Research Contributions

The shifting research landscape described above also necessitated that I make significant theoretical adjustments. The intricate developments of the Arab Spring and the divergent roles of the military in different states required the reevaluation of existing theoretical frameworks from which to study the role of militaries. My research initially employed an institutionalist approach to elucidate military behavior suggesting that certain aspects of a military's structure, when intersected with societal factors, could predict whether military leaders would support the regime or defect during civil unrest. My shift to virtual ethnography introduced new complexities in conducting institutional research. On the one hand, this allowed for the observation of institutional behaviors and narratives in digital spaces where military discourse was active. On the other hand, it required careful consideration of how these online interactions represented or differed from on-the-ground realities (Jabbour, 2022, p. 107). Virtual ethnography, therefore, became an essential tool in my research that enabled the study of military institutions in a context where traditional methods were not feasible.

My adoption of virtual ethnographic methods allowed me to observe how military narratives were constructed and disseminated online and offered insights into the evolving role of the military that might not have been accessible through conventional fieldwork. However, the shift to this method also required acknowledging the limits of virtual ethnography in capturing the full scope of institutional dynamics, particularly in authoritarian regimes where much of the decision-making occurs behind closed doors (Jabbour, 2022, p. 108). Taking into consideration that the military is indeed the most important actor during times of uprisings, and that it lies at the intersection of

state-society relationships, my research makes two primary contributions that help us understand the role of the Syrian military during the conflict.

The first contribution lies in advancing the concept of the *efficient military*, as contrasted with Huntington's concept of a *professional military*. The term highlights the inherently dynamic nature of the military, especially within authoritarian regimes, and challenges the idea of an apolitical military. The distinction hinges on the circumstances and ways the military intervenes in politics. An efficient military includes variables related to the institution's evolution and organizational structure, which in turn influence its decision-making capabilities. An efficient military is depicted as an independent entity capable of self-preservation without reliance on the regime, and it can ensure stability following an uprising. Such an understanding sheds light on its potential to forsake its position of power by defecting from the regime. The efficient military is posited as both a political actor and a cohesive institution; it operates autonomously and possesses the means to govern the nation, stemming from its structure, composition, and experiences. Crucially, an efficient military is universally recognized as a political entity in all forms of government (Jabbour, 2022, 109).

A second contribution my research makes relates to the impact of coup-proofing strategies on the military. These strategies include the establishment of parallel institutions and economic enticements that are designed to safeguard autocrats against military coups by either marginalizing the military or integrating it into the regime's structure. Scholars such as Albrecht (2015), DeBruin (2014), McLauchlin (1998), and Nepstad (2013) have hypothesized that these mechanisms determine whether the armed forces will defect from a political leader during an uprising (Jabbour, 2022, p. 112). While these tactics failed to rein in the military in Egypt and Tunisia, they proved effective in Syria. My research situated the military's role amidst both internal and external pressures, providing a nuanced understanding of the Arab Spring's intricacies and the

pivotal role of the military. Furthermore, the research expanded into other disciplines like sociology to grasp the military's societal influence, and economics to investigate their interests and decision-making during the Arab Spring (Jabbour, 2022, p. 113). Thus, my research contributions address two important questions about the military's role during conflict: first, what role does the military play in preserving regime power during conflict? And second, what coup-proofing strategies ensure military royalty in moments of civil conflict and unrest?

The peace emerging from the conflict

What kind of peace is materializing from the turbulence of war given the military's pivotal role in both the conflict and the reconstruction efforts? This question directly engages with the role of the military and its influence on the emerging peace. The Syrian military, which has been deeply involved in the country's trajectory throughout the Arab Spring and the subsequent civil war, is now also a key player in shaping the peace process and the narratives that will dominate the post-conflict era. My doctoral research thus also asked how the military's decision-making processes during these pivotal times provides a framework for understanding how memory and history are being constructed by those in power. The concept of the efficient military is critical here. In post-war Syria, an efficient military could help foster a narrative of redemption and reconstruction. However, if the military oversteps into political domains, it might perpetuate a narrative of domination and control, complicating the peace process and affecting national memory (Jabbour, 2022, p. 109). As the Syrian military engages with peace negotiations and reconstruction, it influences which aspects of history are highlighted and which are obscured, thus playing a significant role in the politics of memory.

The peace that is emerging in Syria is not merely the absence of violence; it is an intricate mosaic shaped by the

various ambitions and interests of different actors in the Syrian political landscape. True peace cannot be imported or imposed but must be built on the foundations of Syria's own socio-political realities. Civil society, as a crucial part of this process, must also be engaged in these discussions, as it plays a vital role in shaping the socio-political environment in which peace is constructed. The study of the military as an institution is, therefore, not only about understanding its role in the conflict but also about its influence on the emerging peace and the memory politics that will shape Syria's post-conflict identity (Jabbour, 2022, p. 110). The role that the military plays vis-à-vis other areas of Syrian society will have a profound effect on how the conflict is narrated and remembered.

Furthermore, this research into the military's influence on societal structures and economic interests underscores the multifaceted nature of peace. The military's economic roles and relationships with patronage networks have the power to shape the peace that emerges, potentially prioritizing stability and security over democratic freedoms. Future research in Syrian Studies must, therefore, shed light on several critical areas by exploring how military narratives and memorials contribute to national memory-making within Syria and in the diaspora; the role of the military in a peace process that addresses the needs and desires of diverse Syrian constituencies, including those displaced internally and abroad; and analyzing how the military's economic engagements during and after the conflict shape the reconstruction of Syrian society and its economy (Jabbour, 2022, p.16).

It is imperative that Syrian Studies continue to probe into the nuanced ways in which military actions, transformations, and even ideologies shape collective memory and the country's future. The task ahead is not only to observe and record but also to actively engage in the dialogues that will weave the fabric of Syria's post-conflict identity. Engaging with literature on illiberal or authoritarian peace could provide valuable insights into understanding the unique challenges Syria faces as it moves

toward a peaceful resolution. Distinguishing between the military as an institution and other vehicles of violence in Syria is also essential, as these distinctions will further clarify the military's unique role in the conflict and in shaping the future peace (Jabbour, 2022, p. 22). The military’s role in Syria’s future, both on and off the battlefield, will have a substantial impact on Syria’s immediate political trajectory.

What is Next?

As we confront the unfolding socio-political landscape, Syrian Studies is met with burgeoning research questions. A pressing inquiry revolves around the nature of the peace we envision for Syria. Will Syrians be the architects of a stable and peaceful homeland? Or must we reconcile with the possibility that the emerging peace will be a mosaic shaped by various international and local actors, including militias, civil society, and the military, each harboring distinct visions for Syria's future? These visions may be so disparate that a common foundation for rebuilding seems elusive. There lies a formidable challenge ahead for the Syrian people should stability return soon. This challenge is not only about addressing the palpable aftermath of conflict for those in refugee camps but also for those who remained and had to forsake everything they once knew. The cost is profound; it transcends the loss of land or property and extends to the upbringing of two generations now termed as 'war generations.'

To bridge the gap between quantitative analysis and the rich, nuanced realities behind the numbers, my future research endeavors will focus on directly engaging with former Syrian military personnel who have either defected from the regime or completed their term of service. This approach, stemming from an extensive regression analysis of over forty historical defection cases, aims to bring to light the human experiences and decisions at the crux of military defections. The insights gained from these interviews are expected to not only corroborate the findings from

my quantitative analysis but also to enrich them, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and circumstances surrounding military defections. As this research progresses, it holds the promise of significantly enhancing our understanding of civil-military relations within authoritarian contexts, particularly in the Middle Eastern geopolitical framework.

Reconstruction in Syria raises intricate debates about governance, ownership, and inclusivity. A fundamental task is to define the role of the military in these reconstruction efforts. How can Syrians forge a military that is robust enough to ensure the country's stability and the safety of its citizens without veering into political dominance? Securing the nation and dismantling various militias is a critical first step toward stability and transitioning toward authentic democracy. Here, the concept of the efficient military becomes crucial. Can Syria cultivate a military that remains a stabilizing force without overstepping into political dominance? This is not just a question for Syria, but for any nation grappling with the legacies of conflict and authoritarian rule.

My essay has shown how the Syrian conflict steered my research and how I wrestled with fluctuating socio-political conditions and the enduring pursuit of comprehension amidst the dissonance of war. The essay reflects on the Syrian military's conduct and evolution throughout the conflict and how these reflect wider social and cultural changes. Delving into how the military intersects with peace negotiations and cultural processes provides insights into the lived realities of Syrians, both within the conflict's reach and beyond. It highlights the critical role of interdisciplinary approaches in dissecting the layered impacts of prolonged conflict on Syrian society and further afield. As Syrian Studies adapts to the current socio-political climate, it invites us to consider what insights from the Syrian case can shed light on the behaviors of militaries in revolutionary milieus at large. How can the concept of an efficient military be applied to other contexts where the military must balance between

maintaining order and avoiding political overreach? In our search for answers, we delve into the narratives that emerge from the ruins, outline the shape of a nascent peace, interrogate the cultural responses to perpetual exile, and confront the formidable task of rebuilding a nation marred by turmoil. The exploration of these questions not only deepens our understanding of Syria but also contributes to the broader discourse on military institutions and their roles in shaping the post-conflict future.

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4
Notes from the Field: Methodological Opportunities and Constraints on Research Inside Syria

Sumaya Malas[24]

Introduction

More than 13 years since the onset of the Syrian conflict has led to the collapse of the lira, impoverished conditions, and political instability for the Syrian people. As researchers, these conditions also make it difficult to conduct fieldwork or produce findings without the risk of harm to research participants, local interlocuters, and our own personal welfare. Despite these difficulties, fieldwork, interviews, and other epistemological approaches that allow researchers to physically keep in touch with the places they study are critical to maintain in social sciences. Increasing reflexivity to understand these challenges in hard-to-reach contexts such as Syria requires greater consideration when conducting research; however, these difficulties should not exclude these important cases from study. For current or future graduate students, thinking through these difficulties can help both with research design and perseverance around a meaningful research agenda.

Although there is still a need to generate evidence and conduct studies on insecure contexts, social science tends to

[24] University of Pennsylvania

produce research after the end of conflict due to the difficult conditions that conflict situations present to researchers (Theidon, 2001; Ahram, 2013). A "difficult" environment refers to the complex and coerced political environment (Heathershaw, 2009). Remote options became especially prevalent to reach these difficult contexts, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. Although remote methods have been critical in maintaining research agendas, this research in Syria still has obstacles to ensuring an inclusive and participatory environment (Douedari et. al., 2021). The Syrian regime has signaled since 2017 that it has entered "the start of reconstruction" and is "open for business" (Heydemann, 2018). However, Syria's ongoing conflict reconstruction is occurring concurrently with an insecure political environment (Jabareen, 2013). Several factors create a multifaceted and complex research case: the persistence of political conflict even in a "post-war" era; failed state conditions; a general understanding of regime victory and state reclamation of most territories from a scattered and weakened opposition; and the competing political projects in the Northwest and Northeast of the country.

As a doctoral student in Political Science working on Syria, I have several conflicting demands on my research agenda. Debates surrounding the generalizability of findings from single-N or small-N studies, the need to uphold rigorous methodological standards, and my personal desire to conduct meaningful research presents a difficult balancing act. Additionally, disciplinary standards also emphasize the importance of data access and research transparency (DA-RT), which can create challenges in hard-to-reach areas and, without an understanding of methodological approaches that can be applicable to difficult research contexts, can discourage research projects in hard-to-reach areas for some younger scholars. My recent venture into the field reinforced the significant opportunities and fascinating puzzles that are relevant to continue working on. Hopefully, my insights from my time in

Syria can help other scholars think about how they navigate similar challenges and opportunities.

Some of these issues that I will discuss include managing and overcoming the difficulties of conducting fieldwork, as well as the politics of suspicion – a concern that scholars of authoritarianism are familiar with which is still relevant today. I will also discuss research ethics of interviews with vulnerable populations and the epistemological challenges and considerations of data collection from individuals under the stress of authoritarian rule and low state capacity. Finally, I will address why standards of DA-RT are difficult to apply to research on places as sensitive as Syria and offer my thoughts on the importance of cultural competence around the social and political contexts of hard-to-reach areas.

The Politics of Suspicion: Complications Surrounding Field Research

A persistent struggle in conducting field work in Syria is the political minefields and dangers one can confront as a researcher. Any researcher who has conducted fieldwork in authoritarian states or conflict zones can attest to their need to be creative and flexible when designing their research projects (Ahram 2013; El-Kurd 2022). The deep sense of interpersonal suspicion pervasive in Syrian society makes conducting research difficult if one is not aware of these dynamics. The 'politics of suspicion' refers to an underlying logic that the state is constantly surveying its population and that there is a lack of clear boundaries about what exact discourse could get you in trouble. Fear of what consequences will get administered to anyone traversing these boundaries leads to deep-seated societal suspicion. Syrian citizens might be able to share their personal views interpersonally even if they are oppositional to the government and remain safe from state punishment – but only in limited, well-known spaces. The Syrian state's discursive control shapes what are permissible or impermissible topics of

public discussion (Wedeen, 1998). These boundaries are communicated formally through state or party media, while informal boundaries are found in what a Syrian can consider a trustworthy network. The politics of suspicion means that people are not sure if their anti-government opinions will be exposed to the state when engaging with anyone outside of their pre-existing networks. This environment typically presents researchers with issues of preference falsification (Kuran, 1998) or social desirability bias, both of which obscure the true sentiments of the population and hinder meaningful findings of the truth.

However, there are opportunities to circumvent these challenges and conduct meaningful fieldwork. Doing so requires both an intimate understanding of Syrian history, political culture, and social dynamics, but also a delicate approach by the researcher. Discussions of politics, economics, reconstruction, and foreign policy are not fully off-limits. Depending on tone, diction, and position of power and privilege, researchers can navigate this gray zone of what is acceptable to ask about and what is not, especially by leveraging variation across time and space. For instance, urban centers or colleges present different approaches than a more rural setting, especially in previously held opposition areas. Timing can also lead to the need for varied strategies if research is conducted around major events or in the wake of repression or protest movements. In the current period focused on reconstruction, there is a shift in focus that allows researchers interested in political economy and post-conflict environments new opportunities. By demonstrating extensive background work and expertise on the subject and political context, researchers will be able to leverage networks and build trust and confidence in their research participants. Moreover, understanding one's own positionality as a researcher will also provide opportunities to build networks or manage risk with regards to the research question.

Considerations of how positionality and identity politics shape research design and methodology and affect data,

analyses, and conclusions has become more popular in social science research (Holmes 2020; Berger 2015; England 1993). Interpretivists highlight how social actions are observed, interpreted, and constituted into data through the researcher's cultural and personal position (Schwartz-Shea 2012). Ignoring the effects of identity has become less common now, while concerns over removing bias and subjectivity have come to be understood as somewhat overblown, especially in difficult contexts. Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of the researcher's identity and how to leverage insider or outsider status is a valuable tool to maintain personal safety while also accessing specific spaces and interesting questions. Although the boundaries of insider and outsider are more fluid than previously conceptualized (Merriam et. al., 2001), establishing trust and rapport by utilizing researcher positionality can help access previously hard-to-reach contexts to study (Htong, 2024).

The multiple positionalities I hold shaped my research in Syria. When conducting fieldwork, I found that the insider and outsider elements of my identity both facilitated and hindered the research process and my ability to conduct interviews and navigate the field. As a woman, I was able to access female-only religious spaces and investigate practices of civil society organizations. However, this positionality also excluded me from accessing male-only religious or social spaces due to cultural practices of gender segregation. Additionally, my outsider identity as both an American and an individual studying at a Western institution allowed my research participants to open up and explain nuanced political and social phenomena. I found that their assumption of my sympathy combined with my lack of familiarity with the day-to-day lived realities of living in Syria gave me access to rich descriptions within the interviews. Researchers who approach their participants with humility to prevent a large researcher-participant divide while leveraging their identity can gain different insights from participants that others might not be able to access. Positionality was also important when navigating politically sensitive issue areas. The

politics of suspicion interplays differently when conducting interviews from the perspective of an insider versus an outsider. Interviewing within one's own cultural community can create a degree of close social proximity that heightens suspicion (Ganga and Scott, 2006), while outsider status can emphasize power imbalances or ulterior motives. In the case of Syria, either instance might result in your research participants' suspicions of the researcher being an agent of the regime or a foreign state. Researcher discretion is required to navigate more politically sensitive research. When conducting fieldwork, I found that using my outsider identity enabled my discussions with shop owners, drivers, or bureaucrats. However, my shared Syrian identity did make me stop short during my investigations due to the assumption that I am aware of any potential legal ramifications for this research and what would be deemed too suspicious to ask. Regardless, the researcher bears a greater burden in convincing participants that the data and research will be handled responsibly. Therefore, research in authoritarian contexts like Syria are not exclusive for researchers that share a national, ethnic, or religious identity, but political and social competence of the issue area is critical to engage respectfully with research participants, gain meaningful insight for your research, and ensure everyone's safety.

Research Ethics in Difficult Contexts

A looming concern of conducting research in Syria, as well as any authoritarian or post-conflict context, is the ethical challenge of ensuring both the physical and psychological safety of participants. Avoiding re-traumatization of participants is a critical aspect of conducting social science research on sensitive topics (Fujii 2012; Weiss 2023). Not only is it critical to consider the isolated effects of our research on participants, but there is also the general effect of the authoritarian environment on our participants that must be kept in mind (Green and Cohen 2021; Gordon 2021; Roll and Swenson 2019). Researchers should do

no harm to the participants, and failing to account for participant distress can produce significant biases in the data collected. Exposure to authoritarian attitudes and environments can lead to emotional dysregulation in individuals (Lepage et. al., 2022). Interviews with individuals who have left authoritarian contexts demonstrate that their consistent trauma due to inhabiting that environment mostly ends, and healing can begin (Douedari et. al., 2013). However, there is a consistent level of trauma for those that still live in insecure political and economic contexts, which are especially prevalent in authoritarian regimes. These forms of "slow-burn" trauma—such as chronic economic hardship or prolonged political instability—often lead to heightened psychological symptoms like anxiety, hypervigilance, and altered worldviews (Kahraman, 2024). These conditions have been observed to shape responses in ways that may prioritize self-protection or reflect heightened sensitivity to perceived threats.

The collapse of the Syrian economy is also relevant when conducting interviews. Even when investigating questions that are unrelated to the economy, participants' responses reflected the trauma of their consistent financial burdens. This is because individuals facing long-term economic insecurity are likely to experience elevated psychological distress, which can subtly affect interview data. People in insecure socioeconomic positions may respond to questions with heightened expressions of frustration or distrust, often grounded in their need to validate experiences that are typically undervalued or overlooked in stable economic contexts (Lerner, 2019). I found this to be a consistent dynamic to confront when conducting fieldwork, and in my interactions with participants, I had to be sure to try to mitigate any re-traumatization for the participants. I also had to account for trauma-informed responses; a consideration that added to pre-existing concerns with data quality. Given the authoritarian environment, I had to enter a given interaction with the knowledge that participant accounts may be heavily impacted by lived trauma, which is still ongoing in the current

context. In addition to concerns on re-traumatization, considering participant wellbeing and measurement accuracy are important considerations when conducting trauma-informed social science research.

Navigating Disciplinary Standards

Various disciplinary practices which are meant to promote certain standards of research can often privilege certain types of contexts and make others increasingly onerous. Other than the challenges posed by challenging contexts like Syria for fieldwork, new disciplinary standards can deter qualitative fieldwork and innovation in studying authoritarianism (Goode, 2016). Literature taught to graduate students on the disciplinary standards of social science research emphasize DA-RT (King et al 1994; Gerring 2012). This approach tends to treat all data and every field equally no matter the context. However, in the case of authoritarian regimes, which are deliberately opaque and oppressive, ensuring replicability by putting raw data that can potentially incriminate participants online can put the researcher, local interlocutors, and participants in danger. In contrast to less difficult contexts, confidentiality is often crucial in hard-to-reach areas such as Syria. The discipline's emphasis on DA-RT pays little attention to how specific research questions and methods are constrained even by the anticipation of authoritarian control and scrutiny (Ahram and Goode, 2016), and, through its insistence on replicability, can disadvantage rich qualitative research and discourage research in contexts other than advanced industrialized democracies. Requiring research to generate reproducible results is not always necessary to ensure valid and robust scholarship. Proponents of DA-RT claim that these standards professionalize the field and allow for critical policy engagement. However, DA-RT standards can hinder the implementation of critical research strategies such as asking relevant policy questions, generating novel insights, presenting robust and compelling evidence, and communicating those

insights and evidence efficiently (Lynch, 2016). Research on Syria can make critical contributions to social sciences, including work on policy considering reconstruction efforts and controversial UN procurement practices (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Certain disciplinary standards, however, make it exceedingly difficult to carry out research that helps solve crucial issues such as these.

Despite these challenges, there are many standards that certainly should be emphasized in difficult contexts like modern-day Syria. With greater interest in researching authoritarianism both empirically and analytically, meaningfully approaching issues related to data access, transparency, and research ethics will allow a new generation of researchers to maintain robust scholarship. Scholars working on authoritarianism have emphasized the importance of protecting human subjects, building networks of trust, protecting confidentiality, providing precise contextual meaning, and specifying their positionality in generating data while maintaining research ethics in challenging contexts (Bellin et. al., 2018). I found that prioritizing the meaning and benefits of research transparency is the optimal approach to ensure that I am explaining why my data and findings are valid. This includes transparency of method where I explicitly document my research process with extensive field notes, including pictures and a diary to document the difficulties and challenges I faced. I also included transparency in my contextual knowledge. In Syria, there are subtle and nuanced social and cultural differences in specific spaces, dynamics, and even types of speech. This is especially useful to understand when humor is used to convey a sensitive view. Finally, I found that selective transparency in conveying research intentions was the least dangerous form of collecting data. This allows for plausible deniability and overall comfort for research participants when being interviewed. These steps allow for an ethical approach while also maintaining valid and robust research.

Conclusion

Overall, there is no one single way of conducting fieldwork in hard-to-reach contexts with challenging research environments. However, sharing methodological perspectives will allow us to improve our capacity and experiences in conducting research in Syria, other authoritarian contexts, and areas that have either recently experienced conflict or are actively in a state of conflict during the research process. There are many challenges that are necessary to keep in mind as a researcher, including positionality, participant trauma, issues related to replicability standards, and an overall climate of fear that permeates essentially every interaction. However, with the proper preparation, care, and caution, these concerns can be mitigated. Differing methodological approaches are useful and justified when attempting research projects in hard-to-reach contexts such as Syria, and while these contexts may present unique challenges and difficulties for researchers, they nonetheless present important areas for research, both for the benefit of the discipline and, hopefully, for the benefit of the area itself.

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5

Revolution or Familial War: Revolutionary Failures in Khaled Khalifa's *Death is Hard Work*

Rimun Murad[25]

Since the advent of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the subsequent war, the literary scene in Syria has witnessed the publication of dozens of novels by major Syrian novelists, a genre we can term "the Syrian war novel," which are set mainly in war-torn Syria and which offer an extensive treatment of the war, its progression, and its consequences on Syrians.[1] It is also important to acknowledge that some Syrian war novels and their events take place in Syria and abroad, as internal and external displacement became a major cost of the war.[2] Scholars of Arab studies such as Mohja Kahf have argued that Syrian literature has many silences and omissions, since "contemporary Syrian literature is created in the crucible of a tenacious authoritarianism" (235). Meanwhile, Syrian novelist and critic Nabil Suleiman (Nabīl Sulaymān) asserts that the Syrian war novel has been mostly published abroad and written from the perspective of the opposition to the Syrian state (para. 2), thereby debunking the notion of any possible major omissions or oppressive influence. The Syrian conflict has lasted for over a decade now, and Syrian novelists have taken careful note of that. As Syrine Hout contends, "wars have always acted as stimuli for writers" (1), and the Syrian war is no exception. The vast

[25] Temple University

novelistic production about the Syrian war is perhaps an early antidote to any future collective amnesia about the war, as collective amnesia is sometimes implemented as a state policy to move past a disturbing, bloody history.[3]

As we would expect, Syrian novelists have published their work in Arabic, and much of this literary production remains untranslated into English. This body of literature includes several writers, most notably Khalil Sweileh (Khalīl Ṣwaylaḥ), Khaled Khalifa (Khālid Khalīfa) Samar Yazbek (Samar Yazbik), Dima Wannous (Dīmah Wannūs), Nabil Suleiman (Nabīl Sulaymān), Maha al-Hasan (Mahā al-Ḥasan), Fadi Azzam (Fādī ʻAzzām), and Fawwaz Haddad (Fawwāz Ḥaddād), among other novelists and writers. The Syrian war motifs discussed in these literary writings encompass a wide range of issues such as the beginning of the uprising, its causes and development, the war's consequences on ordinary Syrians, and the rise of extremism. For example, in *Taqāṭuʻ nīrān :min yawmīyāt al-intifāḍah al-Sūrīyah* (2012) (*A Woman in the Crossfire,* 2012), Samar Yazbek's journalistic memoir attempts to document the early days of the uprising and the stories of the protestors, as well as their grievances and demands. In *Bayt Ḥudud* (2107), (*Huddud's House,* 2024), Fadi Azzam presents the long-standing corruption of Syrian state officials as a potential cause of the Syrian uprising. Similarly, in *al-Sūriyūn al-aʻdāʼ* (2014) (*Syrian Enemies)*, Fawwaz Haddad recounts narratives of corruption and brutality in the Syrian military and security forces during the Hama events of 1982. Ḥaddad's fictional work implies that such a haunting historical legacy is one of the reasons the 2011 uprising took place. In *Ikhtibār al-nadamm* (2017) (*Remorse Test)* on the other hand, Khalil Sweileh is less political; his focus is the daily lives and struggles of ordinary Syrians who dodge death and find ways to cope with mayhem since the beginning of the war. Nabil Suleiman's *Layl al-ʻālam: Dāʻish fī al-Raqqah* (2016) (*The Night of the World: ISIS in al-Raqqa*) is similar to Sweileh's depiction of the struggles of ordinary Syrians, except it describes the atrocities

that ISIS committed against the afflicted population of the city of al-Raqqa. While *Death is Hard Work* (2019) (Al-Mawt ʻaml sāq, 2016) tackles these same motifs—the early demonstrations, corruption, brutality, and extremism—Khaled Khalifa also turns to the literal semantics of the term *ḥarb ahlīyah* (civil war) to draw a parallel between the ongoing war in Syria and the family dynamics and dysfunctions of Abdel Latif al-Salim and his children.

In *Death is Hard Work*, Khalifa attempts to understand what it means to undergo civil war. The event is no ordinary or mundane occasion, and the novel is trying to make sense of it. Khalifa's semantic approach is reminiscent of the title of a popular 2017 Syrian drama series "*Azmah ʻā'ilīyah" (Family Crisis*), as "crisis" came to signify the war, and the title of the series referred to the trial and tribulations of a Syrian family during the war—the title appearing to parallel and play with the phrase *ḥarb ahlīyah*. Khalifa's novel goes further to describe the war partially as a family or familial war, a conflict between family members, as the word "ahl" is commonly used in spoken Syrian Arabic to refer to immediate family members and relatives. The metaphor is not unheard of in the history of civil wars. David Armitage asserts, for example, that in Roman history civil war "could be thought of as familial" (33) and "fratricide would become the central metaphor of the unnatural dissension at the heart of civil war" (46). Khalifa elaborates on this notion through the Arabic metaphor and draws a comparison between Abdel Latif al-Salim's family crisis and the ongoing war in Syria. As he does that, he observes that in both cases a "revolutionary" mentality underlies the conflictual scene in the country. As such, the strenuous journey Abdel Latif's children take to bury their father is an attempt to bury the very "revolutionary" mindset he stands to signify; for "revolutionary" masks incompetence, escapism and cowardice. Abdel Latif's son Bolbol, the protagonist of the novel, represents an attempt to break away from his father's legacy of sloganeering and big but failed causes. Bolbol's actions advocate a humanist commitment

to family as a potential way forward and away from a destructive family, cultural, political, and partisan ideological heritage that goes back to the 1950s and 1960s.

Abdel Latif al-Salim's story is mostly told after his death, as his children—Bobol, Fatima, and Hussein—transport his dead body to his hometown of Anabiya in the Aleppo countryside to be buried there in accordance with his will. We learn that Abdel Latif joins the uprising that breaks out in 2011, refusing to leave town S in the Damascus countryside, a town he moved to over 40 years earlier. He is supportive of the uprising, repeatedly assuring his son Bolbol that "the children of the revolution [are] everywhere" (48). Abdel Latif is fascinated with the idea of revolutions and revolutionaries, and he reflects on the notion after he participates in the protests and the revolt: "[H]e thought about all the courageous people he had read about in the histories of various other revolutions who had climbed the scaffold without faltering, spitting on their murderers and striding forward into oblivion with total composure and resolution" (88). In fact, he sticks out amongst the protestors, and later insurgents, as "his abundant enthusiasm [about the revolution] made him into an icon" (108). Not only does he admire revolutionaries, but he thinks of himself as one: "he liked seeing himself as a living martyr seeking death at every moment, a man who had truly destroyed the walls of fear" (88). Yet, this rebellious mentality is not without its major flaws. Abdel Latif's figure is revolutionary inasmuch as it seeks to make major, if not radical, changes in Syrian politics and society; He seeks to win the larger war over Syria without fighting and winning the smaller battles in his family first.

Leila al-Shami writes that since 2011 the arts "have become a site of a deep questioning of cultural and social authority and of key notions including individual, community and national identity" (Para.25). In *Death is Hard Work*, Khalifa does not question only the authority of the Syrian state but also that of the cultural and social authority that produced the uprising. Abdel Latif al-Salim's revolutionary mentality hides

problematic traits, characteristics that lead to the disintegration of the family and the weakening of its ties. Abdel Latif has a history of escapism and running away from problems. When, over four decades earlier, his sister Layla refuses to marry a person she does not love, a person who is nonetheless imposed upon her by the family, she "was confident her brother Abdel Latif wouldn't throw her to the wolves of the family" (128), but her brother does not come to the rescue. In protest of this forced marriage, she sets herself on fire on her wedding night, and "not a day had passed without [Abdel Latif] being reminded of his cowardice. His failure to defend her made him complicit in her suicide" (176). As a result of his failure to support her, he leaves his village altogether (105). He is more interested in pretenses than in addressing his reality and that of his family. This is also evident in his relationship with his wife and children: "No one doubted seventy-year-old Abdel Latif's love for his wife. Everything was proof of it: the rarity of their fights, the way they clung to each other—the image of the happy family … that they projected wherever they went" (70). Yet, the reality of this relationship was different: "The image of them tending flowers in the garden in total harmony was a lie," and his wife Um Nabil "had often endured his unjustified rage" (126).

Bolbol recognizes this pretense as he considers his relationship with his father on the way to Anabiya to bury him: "There were many times [Bolbol] would have liked to tell his father that he was cruel to his children and kind only to his students and strangers," and that "the images Abdel Latif presented to the world was paramount; he cared too much about what people said about him" (120). When Abdel Latif's son Hussein gets involved with Russian escorts and drug dealing, Abdel Latif tells him, "He couldn't be both a pimp and his son" (102). Although Abdel Latif wants to help Hussein, he does not have the ability or the know-how to do it. Neither does he care enough to help his son with this ordeal: "When Hussein was in prison, it was his friends who had followed up on his case and interceded as guarantors for his release; none of the family cared

to do it" (143). Instead of facing his reality, Abdel Latif resorts to his fantasies to deal with his problems. In fact, he makes up so many stories about his family and the home village he ran away from that his wife chose to believe that "He was being creative, not that he was simply a liar" (126). The character of Abdel Latif creates a rift between the siblings, as the children lack a positive role model who teaches them how to keep a family together.

Bolbol, Hussein, and Fatima cannot get along well with each other. They get together on this journey to bury their father although in "ten years, the three of them hadn't been gathered in the same place for more than an hour or two during Eid" (22). On their journey, "[H]ere was a real opportunity to talk about whether they could be a family again—but Hussein didn't care, Bolbol actively opposed it, and Fatima was too busy trying to play the role of the noble sister reuniting her family after the death of a parent" (22). In fact, further along the way, "Their silence also made it clear just how little they could stand spending so much time with one another," because "the ties of blood simply weren't enough to sustain the falsehood of family harmony given all the things that now divided them—a lie that in any case disintegrated long before" (120). Abdel Latif has set a bad example for his children, and Bolbol, who realizes his father's flaws, makes an attempt not to follow suit.

Bolbol, who is like Abdel Latif in character, tries to part ways with his father's mentality. We learn that, "Really, all of Bolbol's behavior was an imitation of his father's—an attempt to live longer in his shadow" (46). He is like his father in terms of "idealism" and belief in outdated values. Abdel Latif cannot function properly in (or adapt to) an adulterated world; his world is that of ideal values, free of social or political corruption, opportunism, and oppression for which he criticizes the Syrian state and its officials. Yet sometimes this idealism makes him oblivious to how things are, in favor of how things should be—a weakness that makes it harder for him to handle the real world. When thinking about his father, Bolbol recognizes that his father

is like him; weak, dreamy, and delusional, but his conscious thoughts also show that he is cognizant of his weaknesses, an acknowledgement that would propel him to make different choices in the future. Whereas Abdel Latif's concept of revolution is romantic and idealistic, and much like his character, full of fantasies, Bolbol's conception and views will show a relative change in an attempt to break with his father's old methods. Bolbol begins to understand that his father's romantic/revolutionary mindset is destructive, and that this binary (romanticism-destruction) is applicable at a family and a national level.

In *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas*, Armitage undertakes a major study of the philosophical ideas attached to civil wars going back to Roman times and ending in the 21st century. It is an extensive study focused on the conceptual realm that emerged out of a long history of civil wars around the world. In his book, Armitage acknowledges that it is not always easy to tell the difference between civil wars and revolutions, since the lines between the two can often be blurred. Armitage argues that since the era of the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth century there has been a view "that revolution is driven by high ideals and transformative hopes," while "base motives and senseless violence animate civil wars" (121). He adds that "civil wars have been generally assumed to be sterile, bringing only misery and disaster" (122). However, he asserts that the two concepts are not distinct. He maintains that since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the flourishing of civil war research, "a repressed truth was rediscovered: the heart of most great modern revolutions was civil war" (122). In fact, Armitage believes that the case of the Arab Spring and the Syrian war were no exception to this rule, since the uprising that was motivated by ideals such as freedom, equality, and the eradication of oppression turned into extremism and sectarian violence (121). Bolbol reaches a similar realization about the situation in Syria. While Abdel Latif does not accept that his views are idealistic and destructive, Bolbol realizes the nether side of revolution:

"When Bolbol made his opinion clear [to his father], saying that the revolution was over and had become a civil war" (79), "Abdel Latif was done with the conversation, seeing how it would only corrupt his dreams" (80). Idealism can lead to civil wars and the disintegration of society, much the same way Abdel Latif's idealism has led to the disintegration of his family.

Armitage claims that the metaphor of civil wars as familial wars is ancient and goes back to Roman times. He contends that the warring parties recognized their opponents as all too familiar, since they were both citizens of the same state, country or polity (33). This realization led many to view civil wars as conflicts within the same family. This metaphor characterizes the situation in Abdel Latif's family as well. As previously mentioned, Abdel Latif cannot save his sister from the family conflict decades earlier, he disowns his son Hussein for the latter's unethical behavior, he maintains a dysfunctional relationship with his wife and creates a family where the siblings cannot get along well either. Abdel Latif carries within himself a conflictual mindset, and, at best, he cannot resolve conflicts. Yet, this person becomes an icon of a revolution, which later tuns into a civil war. Bolbol realizes some of these serious flaws in his father's character—and, by extension, in his own, since he is like his father—so he sets out to change course and adopt instead a humanist perspective.

Bolbol seems to align himself with a political humanist view rather than a revolution-civil war. In *Enlightenment on the Eve of Revolution*, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab discusses the *tanwīr* debates, or the Arab Enlightenment debates, that took place in the Arab world in the second half of the twentieth century. She is more specifically interested in the debates that took place in Syria and Egypt in the three decades leading up to the Arab Spring.[4] She argues that the debates on tanwir that emerged on the eve of the uprising of 2011 in Syria and Egypt "addressed issues of human dignity, liberty, tolerance, reason, education, human rights and democracy" (7). She adds that, "If the tanwir debate in Egypt revolved around the phenomenon of

Islamic fundamentalism, the one in Syria was centered on the state's unbridled corruption and brutal oppression" (7). She asserts that the purpose of the debate in Syria "is not to reject the state in a utopian or anarchical sense, but to call for a state that corresponds to [the people's] agency" (88). Bolbol does not take up arms in the fight against the Syrian state although, "He was far from neutral in his mind: for example, he could not stop himself from feeling cheered whenever he saw a funeral procession for the regime's casualties pass by" (81). He is pleased to see pain inflicted on the state's tools of oppression because he is unhappy with the practices of the Syrian state—practices he suffers from directly. For instance, the novel is generous in describing the agony of Bolbol and his siblings as they go through the Syrian state's check points. The officers at one check point, for example, "arrest" the dead body of Abdel Latif (28) and ask for a bribe they call a "goods-transit document" (32) to release the corpse, as the body is treated by the officers like goods, stripped of its humanity and not a person with human dignity. The corruption of the state agents which threatens the burial of Abdel Latif is a big cause for concern and anxieties for Bolbol who has no control over the situation. Yet, Bolbol insists on a proper burial for his father to preserve the latter's dignity and humanity.

Insisting on giving his father a proper burial despite the adversity of the journey serves a humanist purpose, but it also indicates a parting of ways between Bolbol and his father's legacy. "Carrying out his father's last wish was an exercise of what little remained of his will" (95-96). For Bolbol, burying his father becomes an issue of "will" and commitment to a cause. If Abdel Latif did not show adequate commitment towards his family, Bolbol attempts to part ways with this legacy by refusing to escape from his responsibility towards his father, despite the extreme dangers surrounding them. As discussed earlier, Abdel Latif does not commit to helping his sister who is in a dire need for his support; instead he runs away from his responsibility towards here. He does not support his son Hussein or help him

with his ordeal when the latter goes to jail. In fact, he forbids anyone in the family from helping him. Even in his relationship with his wife, he is more interested in keeping a façade of a healthy relationship than committing to a harmonious marriage with Um Nabil. Bolbol who realizes the shortcomings of his father, tries to distance himself from this legacy by showing a solid commitment to his family as embodied in the figure of his father Abdel Latif.

On multiple occasions Bolbol's brother Hussein falters and suggests that they bury the father on the side of the road or even toss the dead body out of the van (37), but Bolbol refuses to settle for this solution. When Hussein finally drags the body out of the van to throw it away because "[H]is father didn't deserve all this attention; he had turned Hussein out of the house and never cared about him again" (140), Bolbol gets into a fist fight with Hussein to keep him from discarding the corpse (141). Unlike Hussein, Bolbol does not view his father as worthless and refuses to disown his body. In fact, one of Bolbol's problems with Abdel Latif is that he "did not respect his children's weaknesses because he did not remember his own" (120). To subvert this trait, Bolbol, who knows his own vulnerability, will respect his father's wishes despite the latter's many flaws. Shareah Taleghani subscribes to the notion that "recognizing our mutual vulnerability" is essential for the "construction and protection of human rights" (Bryan Turner qtd. in Taleghani 95), and this is the principle that Bolbol acts upon to preserve his father's dignity and human rights to a decent burial, an approach that also conforms to Kassab's form of political humanism.

If the *tanwir* or enlightenment debates in Syria focused on dignity as a human right, as Kassab asserts, then Bolbol wants exactly that. Honoring the final wish of a vulnerable person on his death bed, and later preventing his dead body from being desecrated, is an act of preserving his dignity. For Bolbol, being flawed does not mean one is worthless or should be stripped of their dignity. At the same time, Bolbol's insistence on honoring his father's wishes despite the latter's many flaws, comes as a

result of Bolbol's recognition of his own flaws and vulnerability. He understands the dangers and implications of a mindset that does not respect human vulnerability. Therefore, Bolbol's attempts to preserve his father's dignity are reflective of his attempts to preserve his own dignity as a vulnerable person himself. He is defending his own basic human rights by resisting his brother's insistence on discarding the corpse. He is doing away with a mindset or a mentality that does not respect human rights or basic human dignity. This burial act, however, is also symbolic of further conceptions.

Not only is Bolbol fulfilling his father's final wish, but he is also performing a symbolic act in which he lays to rest a mindset that belongs to the 1960's and which led to many problems in the country. For Bolbol, Abdel Latif al-Salim is "a collection of slogans borrowed from a past era" (160); he is a person for whom "it is hard to admit [his] emptiness after half a century of delusion" (160). Khaled Khalifa's novel accuses Abdel Latif of carrying the same "revolutionary" mentality the Ba'th Party adopted and propagated in the 1960's. We learn that in the early 60's Abdel Latif and his cousin "would distribute Baath Party leaflets and get thrown in jail; they would face the whip and still hold out" (105). This is an era he actively ushered in with his cousin Colonel Jamil. Yet, Bolbol does not think highly of this era that he imagines himself "telling [Abdel Latif] to his face that he was a . . . man with barely a quarter of a dream to brag of" and that he "wrap[s] [his] delusions in big words about the liberation of Palestine, which [his] generation left to rot" (120-121). Again, for Khalifa, this revolutionary mentality, coinciding with the rise of the Ba'th Party and Arab nationalism in the 1960's, conceals an escape from real commitment to family and society. The novel maintains that since this mentality has the same delusions in common with the Ba'th Party, it cannot be productive; therefore, it must be buried too. It is a dead, outdated mindset, and as the saying goes: *Ikrām al-mayyit dafnuhu,*, "to honor a dead person is to bury them."

This phenomenon of the 1960's was popular on both the social as well as the literary scenes. Alexa Firat credits the Syrian Writers' Collective in the 1950's with the notion that the emerging genre of socialist realism should have a social function. She adds that for the next two decades the Collective competed over the cultural production in Syria, and along with the notion of *iltizām* (commitment/engagé) it helped create some of the revolutionary romanticism that circulated in the literary and cultural arenas in the country (154-156). Waed Athamneh argues that *iltizām*, "[is] a concept appropriated from Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of literary engagement," and it "had a major impact on Arab intellectual life in the 1950s . . . particularly his call for literature to be engaged with sociopolitical concerns," and that the idea of *iltizām* was even better received after the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 and the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 (19). This attraction to the idea of committed or engaged literature, she continues to argue, translated into "writing solely about Nasserism, Arab nationalism, and the question of Palestine" (20), concepts that became even more popular in the 1960's and beyond. This is an era Abdel Latif describes as one with "the greatest values and elegance" (46). While seemingly an attack on *iltizām* literature, Khalifa's novel is critical of a literary and ideological moment where such big causes are instead used for self-aggrandizement, as a façade to hide incompetence and the lack of commitment. Therefore, Bolbol's attempt to bury his father is an effort to commit to small, manageable causes and to bury a lack of commitment masquerading as one. The novel critiques engaged literature only inasmuch as it can provide an escape for people who otherwise cannot take responsibility for their lives and the lives of their families, let alone for those of their societies.

What I refer to here as a mentality and Athamneh calls *iltizām,* Hamid Dabashi names "ideology." In his study of the Arab uprisings, Dabashi argues that by the end of postcoloniality "I mean the cessation of ideological production in colonial contexts and terms . . . anticolonial nationalism, socialism, and

[nativist discourses of] Islamism are the ideological formations that historically have confronted European colonialism and shaped the modern nation-states that emerged in the former colonial territories" (139-140). However, he adds, in the events of the Arab spring "dignity is an end in itself, caused and conditioned by the revolutionary uprisings" (127).[5] Dabashi's ideas are well-illustrated by the journey the siblings make through the multiple check points to bury Abdel Latif. The many check points (over ten of them) that Bolbol and his siblings must go through to bury the body represent the ideological schools to which Dabashi refers. While some of the check points belong to the Syrian state representing the socialist and anticolonial nationalist discourses, some other check points belong to religious extremists who drive nativist or Islamist discourses home. To bury the old ideology embodied in Abdel Latif, the siblings need to bury the father. However, to get to his burial site, they need to get through the ideological check points that keep them from doing exactly that. What stands in the way of Abdel Latif's dignity, the dignity of giving him a decent burial, are the very ideologies his generation and himself subscribed to and fought to establish. In this sense, Bolbol and his siblings make the journey from and through ideology to achieve dignity for the deceased father, a basic human right he would otherwise be entitled to.

This journey is significant as the dead body/ideology is made to bear witness to the negative consequences of its actions; it witnesses the disintegration of the country, where different parts of Syria are controlled by different conflicting groups. The dead body of the geography teacher Abdel Latif who loves the geography of Syria silently watches the fragmentation of the geography he often taught and loved. Yet, this geography, through its check points, watches him back and curses him by delaying his burial, which in turn leads to the decomposition of his body. The journey through the check points, which takes almost four days, causes the body to decay almost in symbolic retaliation. In commenting on the novel, Max Weiss notes that

"the decomposition of Abdel Latif's body is compensated for or at least mirrored in other breakdowns: the dissolution of family bonds" (285). The decaying body/mentality of Abdel Latif mirrors the breakdown of the family, and by the same token is reflected in the disintegration of the Syrian geography itself. While this journey leads to the burial of Abdel Latif and what he stands for, it also changes Bolbol in his affirmation of new concepts.

The siblings manage to finally bury Abdel Latif in Anabiya after a long excruciating journey in what proves to be very "hard work." After burying his father, Bolbol decides to be called by his original name, Nabīl. Nabil has gone by Bolbol since his college days because his college crush Lamia liked to call him Bolbol. When he reflects on his name after his father's death, he declares that "Bolbol sounded lighter and more human to him, whereas Nabil suggested some well-adjusted man still dreaming of a grand future" (95). However, after his father was buried, Nabil "liked regaining his original name and resolved not to let anyone call him Bolbol anymore" (176). After completing the journey, Nabil forgoes the name he had for so long associated with a vulnerable, weak, and romantic self. Bolbol, the Arabic word for nightingale, a symbol of romance and delicacy or fragility in Arab cultures gives way to Nabil, the Arabic word for noble. He is determined to go by Nabil because he is an accomplished man now that he has lived up to the big burden and responsibility of fulfilling his father's will. His perspective is forward looking because commitment to a seemingly small but important and essential cause is a noble pursuit, and this is what builds a future—not the backward looking ideological position his father embraced.[6] The journey Nabil undertakes and the change he undergoes is reminiscent of *Usṭūrah* or the mythical in Syrian fiction. In her study on the mythical in the Syrian novel, Maysoon Jarf (Maysūn Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Jarf) argues that in Hanna Mina's (Ḥannā Mīnā, d. 2018)) novels such as *al-Yāṭir* (1972) (*The Anchor*), and *al- Shirā' wa al-'āṣifah* (1963) (*The Sail and the Storm,* 1966), the journey the protagonists take

by sea becomes an occasion for "*al-intiṣār 'alá al-dhāt"* ("overcoming the self") (52). The sea becomes more than a friend, it has become a purgatory to cleanse the self of its flaws ("*wa aṣbaḥa al-baḥr akthar min ṣadīq, aṣbaḥa maṭharan li-ghasl al-khaṭāyā*") (52).[7] By the same token, the journey Nabil takes through war-torn Syria cleanses him of some of his vulnerabilities or at least it sets him on the right course to shed some of his apparent vulnerabilities.

That being said, Nabil is not a hero after making the journey either, as he does not believe in heroic figures. He is a "well-adjusted man" who gets rid of some of the legacy he associates with his father. If he is ever a hero or a revolutionary, then his outlook is perhaps more in line with that of renowned Syrian novelist Mutaa Safadi (Muṭā' Ṣafadī, d. 2016). In his study, *al-Adab al-'Arabī al-Sūrī ba'da al-istiqlāl* (Arab Syrian Literature Post-Independence**),** Sayf Qintar **(**Sayf al-Dīn Qinṭār) argues that Ṣafadī does not subscribe to the notion of the archetypal or stereotypical hero with the exaggerated qualities found in socialist realist fiction, for such archetypes are "*maḥḍ iftirā' wa kadhib,*" (a lie and a fabrication) (241).[8] For Ṣafadī, the hero of a revolutionary story "*laysa rajulan usṭūrīan muḥāṭan bihālati al-raw'ah wal kamal, laysa qā'idan wala fārisan mudalhaman, wala nabīyan qiddīsan*" (is not a legendary man, surrounded with an air of magnificence or perfection, he is not a leader or a brave knight, nor is he a saintly prophet) (qtd. in Qinṭār 241).[9] Similarly, Nabil is far from a legendary or perfect man. His revolution, if there was ever one, is that of challenging small but essential causes. He does not seek to or even believe in his ability to immediately and radically change the reality of his home country, rather he attempts to dispense with a mindset that thinks it is possible to do so, and even that—as hard as that might be—is a small but necessary step towards future change.

In this sense, Khaled Khalifa and his work are not inconsistent with Zeina Halabi's claim that since the 1990's, Arab novelists and intellectuals have steered clear of the former

models of the modernizing intellectual-prophet, political commitment as a literary attitude, and secular nationalism as an emancipatory philosophy (2). Her assertion is not different from the previous claims by Dabashi and Athamneh either. Halabi stresses that many Arab intellectuals and novelists are disenchanted with these earlier political and literary models that dominated the 20th century, and which promised modernity and espoused complex political causes. By the same token, Khalifa does not wish to be a savior-prophet who is trusted with the task of undertaking and successfully carrying out a political revolution in his literary work. Neither does he want to commit to a political cause. Khalifa contributes by coopting the Syrian uprising as another complex political issue on which he or other intellectuals/novelists should avoid taking a strong position.

Khaled Khalifa realizes that it is difficult to understand what it means to undergo *ḥarb ahlīyah,* so he makes a decent attempt to explain the conflict through the dysfunctions of Abdel Latif al-Salim's family. Khalifa has long been associated with the opposition, yet he does not write to appease or please anyone. He reserves the right to criticize multiple parties in his novel. Khalifa's novel locates the disintegration of both family and country in defeatist, outdated ideologies. Although seemingly revolutionary, this mindset hides behind it cowardice, irresponsibility and escapism. Abdel Latif is a revolutionary figure inasmuch as he wants to effect major changes in Syrian society and win the larger war without fighting and winning the smaller battles in his family and immediate circles. Revolutions of this type become obsolete and destructive, leading to backward looking conflicts that double down on nationalist and nativist ideologies. In this sense, Abdel Latif is not different from the Ba'th Party or other ideological parties, literary movements, and intellectual models that belong to the 1950's and 1960's. A good way forward (or a "corrective movement," so to speak) is represented by Nabil's actions and character. Nabil who recognizes his flaws and detects the seeds of this dated mentality—a heavy burden and inheritance he receives

from his father—makes a genuine effort to forgo this societal, political ,and family heritage. His actions emphasize the necessity of burying this old mentality in favor of a humanist approach that constructs better humans and humane relationships. His propensity to honor family bonds and, by extension, societal ones is the way forward. Although by no means delusional about his ability to effect immediate change, Nabil insists on making a change, though incremental, in the hope this small change can materialize in something effective in the future despite how vague this future looks.

Notes

1- In a 2019 Arabic language article published by the *Independent*, Abdo Wazen calls the literary phenomenon surrounding the Syrian uprising "war literature." He claims that over 50 novels have been written about the war. He refers to the uprising as a "revolution," but he also understands that the literary production by Syrian writers is inseparable from a general, international genre: war literature. "مآسي" الحرب السورية أسفرت عن 50 رواية ... وشكّلت مفترقاً في تاريخ الأدب الحديث | اندبندنت عربية (independentarabia.com). In addition, renowned Syrian novelist and critic Nabil Suleiman, who refers to the uprising as a "great earthquake," a "revolution," and "the Syrian hell," nonchalantly terms this genre "the war novel." Suleiman who terms this literary production "the novelistic flood of the Syrian war," estimates that over 450 novels were produced since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011. الطوفان الروائي في الحرب السورية - الموقع الرسمي لجريدة عمان (omandaily.om).

2- In the previously mentioned article, Nabil Suleiman identifies a few novels that fit this category: *The Drums of War* and *Good Morning, War* by Maha Hasan, *A Summer with the Enemy* by Shahla Al'Ujaili, and *The Berlin Papers* by Nihad Sirees.

3- Collective Amnesia is a common motif in civil war and post-war narratives. In *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, Syrine Hout claims that the Lebanese post-war public discourse is “characterized by a collective amnesia” (2). In addition, David Armitage asserts that amnesia and forgetfulness as a means to prevent civil wars from recurring goes back to Roman times. For a thorough discussion of this notion refer to his article “Three Narratives of Civil War: Recurrence, Remembrance and Reform from Sulla to Syria.”
4- Kassab argues that although Western Enlightenment was not the focus of the Arab Enlightenment debates, notions such as secularism, tolerance, rationality, human dignity, and freedom were common topics discussed in *tanwir* (3).
5- In the introduction to his book *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Asef Bayat makes an argument similar to Kassab and Dabashi. He says, “unlike the revolutions of the 1970s that espoused a powerful socialist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and social justice impulse, Arab revolutionaries were preoccupied more with the broad issues of human rights, political accountability, and legal reform” (11).
6- Elsewhere, in “Three Narratives of Civil War,” David Armitage asserts the same concept: “Revolutions were definitively modern, novel, and forward looking; civil wars were archaic, traditional and backward facing, as Arendt and others would argue” (7-8). Published in the anthology titled: *Civil War and Narrative: Testimony, Historiography, Memory*.
7- In the Arabic original: و أصبح البحر اكثر من صديق, أصبح مطهراً لغسل الخطايا
8- In the Arabic original: محض افتراء و كذب
9- ولا فارساً مدلهماً, ولا نبياً قديساً, ليس رجلاً اسطورياً, محاطاً بهالة الروعة والكمال ليس قائداً

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6

Vulnerability, Empathy, and Allyship in Syria: Reflections of an Ethnographer

Christa Salamandra[26]

Introduction

Academics linked to contemporary Syria through research and sentiment have become deeply enmeshed in the country's ongoing tragedy. Anthropologists conducting fieldwork are perhaps most implicated, as the relationships they forge across ideological divisions are intrinsic to their endeavor. The war has hardened these distinctions. Privately-held opinions turn into public stances, often with dangerous implications—ethical dilemmas for which there are no easy solutions. These challenges stem, as I argue, from a vulnerability of position linked to an imbalance of reciprocity. This essay ponders the changing roles of the ethnographer in Syria by presenting my own work as a case study. It raises questions about anthropology's ethos of empathy, which, I argue, implies a position of privilege. I end by suggesting a move towards allyship.

[26] Professor of Anthropology, CUNY Graduate Center

Truths and Vulnerabilities

The ethnography of public culture in urban Syria reveals the structural vulnerability inherent in the building and maintaining of personal and professional relationships, the intricate and fraught processes that anthropologists refer to as "access." Anthropological discussions of gaining fieldwork access often recount a process of bonding with interlocutors, a process that may have been trying at first, but generally remains stable once trust is established. This trope appears most convincing in studies that involve relatively small numbers of subjects located in face-to-face communities such as neighborhoods, villages, or institutions. But it fails to capture the anxiety-laden experience of forging and sustaining ties that are much more important to ethnographers than they are to interlocutors with complex professional and personal lives spread across broad urban landscapes. Such relationships can never be taken for granted; in the case of contemporary Syria they feel ever more perilous as wartime displacement disrupts, or at best reorganizes, long-term anthropological fieldwork (Kastrinou & Knoerk 2024: 3).

Yet contemporary thinking about the politics and ethics of ethnography presupposes the relative power of the anthropologist, and the corresponding vulnerability of those studied, in the dynamics of fieldwork relationships. The anthropology of elites, now an established subfield, never fully problematized this assumption. Recent conceptual shifts from "rapport" to "complicity" and "collaboration" aim to equalize colonial anthropology's power imbalance (Marcus 1997, 2012; Collins et al. 2017), and—along with "interrogation" and "intervention"—form part of a contemporary academic argot that likely unnerves anyone connected to Syria. Indeed, ethical self-questioning has become on ongoing concern of our discipline, sometimes to the point of paralysis.[i]

Yet for fieldwork conducted among the relatively privileged, I argue, the assumption of reciprocity underlying the new terminology masks an ongoing structural imbalance. Attention has been drawn to some forms of vulnerability, such as the secondary trauma that anthropologists who write about violence must bear (Sanford 2008), and the risk that sharing it may emphasize their own victimhood, rather than that of their interlocutors (Swedenburg 1995). Beyond realms of war and genocide, vulnerability emerges not as a fieldworker's subject position but as a narrative strategy. For instance, anthropologists write of the vulnerability they experience when sharing emotions (Behar 1996) or embracing solidarity (Davids 2014) with their subjects. They are exposed not to their interlocutors but to their readers, two audiences that are generally assumed to be separate, despite passing acknowledgement that those we write about may not only read (Brettell 1999) but also participate in constructing our representations of them (Marcus 1997, 2012; Collins et al. 2017).

Beyond the gratitude towards their subjects expressed in preface acknowledgments, fieldworker's power disadvantage is rarely acknowledged, let alone recognized as a central problem. Yet Bronislaw Malinowski, the quintessential aristocratic, white male colonial ethnographer to whom anthropologists attribute their discipline-defining practice of intensive fieldwork, himself experienced a frustrating disempowerment, revealed in the posthumously published journal written during his 1914-1918 research among the Trobriand Island villagers, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1989). Lurid entries recount the anthropologist's anger over his interlocutors' frequent evasions and out-maneuverings. The diary's appearance prompted a flurry of anthropological commentary, some censorious, some celebratory, but none addressing what it reveals about the difficulties of forging and sustaining fieldwork connections, and the emotional toll of potential failure. Challenges of relating like those Malinowski's recounted in his private writing are perhaps

even more daunting for contemporary ethnographers researching the relatively powerful.

In 1992—long after intensive fieldwork had become the quintessential anthropological practice—I began doctoral research in Damascus among "natives" who had no need or desire for the commodity gifts that Malinowski had traded—not always successfully—for information, and whose social, cultural, and economic capital often exceeded my own. An Oxford professor's piercing question, "What makes you think they'll talk to you?" haunted my early interactions. My dissertation research on heritage politics in Damascus required a wide range of contacts across professions and networks, but it also relied on social circles for inclusion in private, semiprivate, and even public events. Angst over giving offense or simply appearing tiresome filled my notebooks. Time and experience have not fully erased it; my more recent research work on the television drama industry sparked dread of being thrown off film locations as a nuisance. An interlocutor turned close friend once quipped, "She never says no," referring to my eager acceptance of invitations. I felt compelled to grasp every overture, and I worried that existing relationships would turn sour, as they often did among the Syrians I came to know, strained under myriad political and other pressures. My "go with the flow" fear of disappointing led me to participate, as a reluctant contestant, in a humiliating—but also sociologically revealing—beauty contest on the eve of my thirtieth birthday. More recently, it compelled a visit to a wartime Syria for preproduction meetings on a drama serial to be shot in Damascus.

My dissertation fieldwork in Damascus attempted to trace a shift, occurring globally in different ways and to varying degrees, from identities based on kin or production to those based on aesthetics and consumption. What I found was not so much a replacement but a reworking of the former in terms of the latter, as new patterns of consumption emerged with the Syrian state's loosening of constraints on imports and industry. I sought to understand how the waning Ba'thist ideology—

which advocated a classless citizenry—was giving way to new modes of social distinction forged through consumption. Class, regional, and religious differences were still taboo, even as they proliferated. Damascus, its past, and its people featured prominently in new and old forms of public culture—in restaurants, cafés, art exhibits, written memoirs, and television dramas. These celebratory, seemingly apolitical representations of local culture and history were hotly contested. Mention of projects to preserve, or attempts to represent, the Old City of Damascus unleashed a torrent of discourse, a bitter rhetoric of distinction that moved far beyond a discussion of architectural restoration and seemed an overreaction to fictional television (Salamandra 2004).

This vitriol rarely targeted the leadership, and not merely because it was dangerous to do so; the regime was tacitly understood as the ultimate culprit. This was the great unsaid, a silence some analysts read as support for dictatorship. Instead, what I termed a "poetics of accusation" targeted those thought to benefit the status quo, the complicit "other" whose identity shifted from speaker to speaker (Salamandra 2004, 19–24). Truth was here the property of one interlocutor, but it was inevitably turned upside down by another. Agonistic discourse emerged as interlocutors assimilated my seemingly innocuous presence: a diminutive young woman who listened intently and asked few questions. I believe that their desire to be heard, at a time when few outsiders cared to listen, overrode their reluctance to air dirty laundry. It also may have neutralized the fear that much academic literature points to as Ba'thist Syria's most salient feature.

I had entered a realm of cultural intimacy—one that felt precarious—in which unpleasant self-image are shared, and form a basis of belonging (Herzfeld 1996). I bore, I believed then as I do now, a responsibility to convey rather than conceal this multiplicity of positions. If our aim is to depict culture as self-consciously constructed, negotiated, and contested, then we must give voice to conflict and disagreement. What better way

to combat stereotypes of essentialized, monolithic culture than to reveal, for instance, secular Muslims debating the link between Islam and violence, as my interlocutors often did?

In translating this contestation and its logics to an academic audience, I faced an unnerving exposure. Our digital age provides no rarified scholarly cubbyholes; and dissemination is academic survival. Moreover, I had never intended my writing to be accessible only to a specialist audience. My research entered a field fraught with representational politics. Anthropologists conducting fieldwork regularly witness—and are sometimes drawn into—debate and conflict. I depicted such contestation as a poetics of accusation linked to recent far-reaching political and social transformation, and analyzed sectarianism as determined by class, regional, and religious affiliation, citing the latter as its least significant component. I attributed sectarian and other social divisions to the contradiction between the Baʻth Party's project to rid Syria of subnational identities and the al-Asad regime's policies, which exacerbated them. This irony was not lost on the Syrians I came to know, who acknowledged the divide-and-rule policy under whose sway they fell. My writing pointed to the implications of social cleavages, both perceived and real, and suggested that the alienation expressed in popular culture in Damascus evinced the failure of Syria's national project (Salamandra 1998, 2004).

Looking back, my naivete, even if ultimately serendipitous, astonishes me. In choosing Syria for fieldwork, I had thought I was carving a niche; instead, I entered an academic cul-de-sac in which contemporary anthropological concerns did not easily fit. How, for example, could I reconcile postcolonial thought, centered on European imperialism, with a city that remembers colonialism as 400 years of Ottoman oppression? Indeed, initial skepticism suggested that a more strategically chosen place and project might have been warranted. The quotidian experience of sectarianism dissatisfied some Syrian specialists preoccupied with authoritarianism and its persistence,

who deemed my non-regime focus as insufficiently attuned to "politics." Nor did my book jibe with the then current interest in processes of domination and resistance; no easily identifiable oppressors appeared among my vying groups. In addition to complicating academic understandings of sectarianism, I examined the vagaries of what was soon to become ubiquitous: neoliberalism. A chapter on competitive consumption among elite women, in which I analyzed new leisure sites and practices, challenged depictions of female solidarity; it faced pointed hostility as a result.

In hindsight, these reactions to my research seem unsurprising. Extant ethnographies of Arab cities had focused on poor urban quarters, and most resembled transplanted village studies, their field sites confined to a few dozen households. None of these had been conducted in Syria; the implicit expectation seemed to be that I should work to fill this gap. A senior colleague suggested more fieldwork, as I had provided little sense of everyday family life. Assumptions of public and private dichotomies still reigned, and the mass culture that blurs them was not yet considered an appropriate area for anthropological investigation. At a more visceral level, invidiousness makes for uncomfortable reading, no matter how sensitively portrayed.

Syria is no longer the ethnographic backwater it had been in the 1990s. Ethnographies of the 2000s evoked social and political life in pre-war Syrian cities (Anderson 2023; Bandak 2022; Gabiam 2016; Gallagher 2012; Kastrinou 2016; Rabo 2005; Totah 2014). Unsurprisingly, the flourishing of Syria's cultural production during the early 2000s inspired a somewhat disproportionate degree of academic interest. Much like Syrians cultural producers themselves, anthropologists and others focused on or incorporated art, dance, film, literature, music, television, and theater to grapple with this vertiginous decade (Bank 2020; Joubin 2013, Shannon 2006, 2015; Silverstein 2024, Taleghani 2021; Ziter 2015) and the war that followed it (Della Ratta 2018, Joubin 2020, Wedeen 2019). Long-term

fieldworks followed their interlocuters into exile (Shannon 2019).

With the 2010s, a young generation of Syrian scholars—including contributors to this special issue—has emerged to join academic conversations about social life and cultural production (Abou Zainedin 2015, 2020; Alatrash 2018, 2020, 2021; Aldougli 2024; Alhayek 2020; al-Ghazzi 2013; al-Sabouni 2016; Bader Eddin 2023; Daoudy 2020; Ghazzawi 2022; Halabi 2017, 2018, 2023; Jabbour 2022; Khatoon 2022; Murad this volume; Sayfo 2017, 2021; Skeiker 2010, 2020)[ii]. Moreover, contention is no longer controversial; ethnographies of Syria now demonstrate that the battle of narratives about past, present, and future long predated the war. Indeed, fieldwork's Rashomon effect has followed me throughout Syria's uprising turned civil-and-proxy war. Such discord also informs the works of Syria's leading cultural producers, television drama creators, who are the subject of my current research.

Ruptures and Continuities

While researching another country—ideally in a different region—would have been a wise career move for a junior anthropologist, Syria's "drama outpouring" (*al-fawra al-dramiyya*) drew me back for a second book project. After completing my doctorate and first book manuscript, I joined a collaborative research project examining the linkages between the United Kingdom and the Gulf Cooperation Council States. My fieldwork in that period, 1999-2000, included interviews with media organizations, notably the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Center, a pan-Arab satellite entertainment network which had been launched in London a decade earlier. With the new millennium, MBC and other Gulf-based channels began to fill their plentiful broadcast hours with Syrian productions. Syrian drama creators like those I had come to know during my

research on representations of Damascus now found themselves at the forefront of a transnational media landscape. They vied with—and arguably surpassed—their Egyptian counterparts (long the leaders in Arab television production). Both of my research projects had positioned me to tell Syrian drama's story ethnographically.

My fieldwork with drama creators has convinced me that in Syria—and perhaps in much of Arab satellite television's footprint—fictional television is where politics happens (Salamandra 2015, 2016, 2023a). The Syrian industry harnesses critical and creative energies that, in a less draconian polity, might have animated party politics, journalism, or academia. The result is a sophisticated genre imbued with philosophical musings and political positions. Syrians' interpretation of the *musalsal*—the Arabic-language drama serial—offers a local authenticity that evokes a wider Arab sensibility and treats a set of sociopolitical issues that are shared throughout the region (Salamandra 2023b.).

In this differentiated industry, blockbusters like the multi-season costume drama *The Neighborhood Gate* (*Bāb al-ḥāra*) generate enough revenue to fund the equivalent of American "quality drama," a form Arab audiences know as "contemporary social drama" (*al-drāma al-ijtimā'iya al-mu'āṣṣira*) and one in which Syrian creators excel. One such social drama forms my core case study. Originally aired in 2006, Allaith Hajjo's *Waiting* (al-Intiẓār) is now hailed as a classic, even by Syrian drama's harshest critics. Set in the Damascus suburb of Dweila'a, it gave birth to what became known as the haphazard musalsal subgenre, which depicts everyday life in informal settlements, the "haphazard neighborhoods" (*al-ḥārāt al-'ashwā'iya*), as they are referred to in Arabic, which housed an estimated 50 percent of prewar Damascus dwellers. These districts share the afflictions of (sub)urban poverty in much of the Global

South: crowding, hazardous construction, inadequate services, underemployment, and crime. They often house recent migrants from the countryside, signaled in drama through rural dialects, clothing, and the drinking of maté. For many, these settlements become not a first stop to urban integration but barriers to upward, or inward, mobility. Like *Waiting*, dramas of the 2000s depicted haphazard neighborhoods as products of state corruption and neglect, and positioned them as a metaphor for the nation.

Screenwriter Najeeb Nusair recently told me his *Waiting* was an alarm that went unheeded – a claim that some Syrians would treat with skepticism[iii]. Critics of the drama industry see censorship as a smoke screen obscuring relations of near total complicity. The musalsal, they argue, acts as a safety valve; its trivializing critique promotes acquiescence. Yet my ongoing fieldwork suggests that television drama creators see themselves as upholding tenets of a modernizing project the al-Asad regime abandoned, first in practice, more recently, in rhetoric. In 2000, many in the television industry welcomed Bashar al-Asad as a potential modernizer, and over his first decade in power, they worked through state strictures and institutions in hopes of reforming the regime. Yet even those who benefited from the drama outpouring grew disillusioned. The war has fractured the drama world, or the field of art (*majāl al-fann*, as Syrians call it), much as it has all of Syria. As the nation's public intellectuals, television creators have been pressured to take public stances. Nuances of voice gave way to wartime polarization (Ghazzawi 2022). The conflict's early years witnessed a barrage of statements, petitions, interviews, and campaigns. Those who supported the protests, even faintly, were harassed by al-Asad loyalists. Those demanding the regime's demise faced assault and incarceration. Many fled into exile. Those who

backed the regime or failed to show support for the opposition found themselves plastered on an internet "Wall of Shame." A few prominent drama figures have maintained support for al-Asad throughout the war. Yet most screenwriters—the industry's "brains"—have emerged in opposition, though few joined the organized groups that they found either too "Baʿthist" or "Islamist" to endorse.

Anthropologists, like other academics with ties to contemporary Syria, have been drawn into the fray. If I was once critiqued for depicting contention in Damascene social life, I now face accusations of complicity with drama makers alleged to be doing the regime's bidding. Despite years of documenting the al-Asad dictatorship's deleterious effects on Syrian society, my criticism of the regime may now be dismissed as "lip service," given that, as an anthropologist, I attempt to understand rather than condemn antirevolutionary perspectives. A researcher may be associated with a position merely by representing it ethnographically. For instance, acknowledging minority fears of post-Asad Islamization or sectarian retaliation may be read as reactionary. Questioning the opposition's vision of Syria's future elides with support for the Baʿthist regime. Alternatively, unreserved support for the opposition invites accusations of naïveté, of denying the opposition's atrocities and antidemocratic and extremist strands.

Moreover, I maintain that public positions should not be taken at face value. Interior states are notoriously difficult to account for, and behavior—particularly in a police state during wartime—is complex and ambiguous. I vehemently disagreed with those artists who advocated repressing the opposition, but I could not dismiss their expressions of fear as mere rationalizing weapons of the strong. I have mourned the deaths of friends who publicly backed the repressive actions of the regime as I have those

who fought against the regime valiantly. I continue to view most of the drama makers I worked with as honest critics of dictatorship, given the degree of dissatisfaction they often expressed over my years of intense listening. Yet many were wary of protest, fearing post-al-Asad Islamization or sectarian retaliation. Representing their positions without condemning them—exhibiting the anthropological empathy—now appears a problematic analytical stance. What, then, are the ethics of continued engagement or of abandonment?

I hope that the stories I continue to tell convey something real about the Syrians who open their lives to me. That this is both a privilege and a burden is even more obvious amid devastation. After I hosted *Waiting* director Allaith Hajjo in New York in August 2016, he invited me to Damascus during the break between semesters. I hoped this was a polite but insincere "Damascene invitation." I should have known better; Allaith is from Aleppo, a city renowned for blunt "heavy bloodedness." I sent him my passport scan and photos, then gasped at his speedy follow-up. Soon the Syrian visa I assumed would never be granted awaited me in Lebanon. My attempts to wiggle out of the trip—"I might not be able to make it for the New Year"—sparked indignation. The choice was clear, if not simple: I could either travel to Syria during wartime, or risk losing a key interlocutor and offending a friend. I flew to Beirut in late December, still suspecting—secretly hoping—that flaws in the paperwork would stop me at the border. I worried how Syrians would receive me after their world had changed so profoundly, and feared my mere presence might compromise them. I braced myself for potential hostility. Physical safety never worried me. During the filming of *Waiting*, Allaith had forbidden me from coming to the shantytown location on my own in a taxi, forcing me to rise

at the crack of dawn each day to catch the crew van, so I knew he would have canceled my visit if security had been at issue.

It is often assumed that drama creators who left the country sympathize with the opposition and that those who remain are pro-regime. Even before returning to Damascus, I questioned this neatness of opinion. I arrived to find private utterances unsurprisingly ambiguous. The debates I heard in restaurants and cafés, and in the homes of old interlocutors, suggested anything but consensus. Positions fell along a finely grained and unstable continuum. Industry figures dismissed as *shabbīha*—regime thugs—accuse others of being the same. Some adopted devil's advocacy, arguing positions far from their own to unsettle the assuredness of others. Heated argument does not always preclude cordiality or cooperation; many drama makers maintain professional relationships across positional divides. For the serial *We'll Return Shortly* (*Sanaʻūd baʻd qalīl*), filmed in Lebanon in 2015, Hajjo brought together prominent, vocal actors, the pro-regime Durayd Lahham and oppositional Kinda Alloush, as characters exchanging their players' own viewpoints. While such diplomacy renders him vulnerable to attacks from all sides, it provides a valuable lesson. This instance points to cultural producers' capacity to navigate divisions that appear absolute and unassailable in the abstract. A phenomenon that ethnography is well placed to capture.

When I arrived, preparations had begun for a serial that the press proclaimed a sequel to *Waiting*. It was not quite that but rather, as drama critic Maher Mansour put it, a response[iv]. My excitement grew. I had thought of this trip as a courtesy visit, but here was an update of my key case study. The coauthors of *Waiting* and many of its cast and crew members would join Allaith on *Fawda* (Chaos), a

drama tracing the shantification of middle-class Damascus that occurred with wartime displacement. But the production company was not small, congenial outfit of *Waiting*. Instead, the sizable, well-connected Syria International (SAPI) owned this project. SAPI's resources promised high production values and salaries commensurate with Syria's acute inflation. During my brief visit, I attended preproduction meetings, casting, and location scouting. The gloomy atmosphere contrasted strikingly with the gaiety I remembered from the filming of *Waiting*. Budget delays and casting quibbles provoked general anxiety; SAPI's notorious director refused to accommodate creatives' proclivities. Allaith dismissed this obstinance as characteristic posturing, certain that appropriate funds and his own casting choices would come through in the end. I chalked up the team's vexation to the burdens of war and the atmosphere of crisis that very often pervades media production (Powdermaker 1950).

In the months following my visit, preparations for *Fawda* reached a stalemate, and Allaith refused to continue with SAPI. The company held rights to the screenplay and gave it to a lesser-known director for the Ramadan 2018 broadcast season. Social media postings lamented the hijacking of a greatly anticipated project, and the serial's authors were disappointed with the result. Allaith—who had justified biannual filming in Damascus as a means of employment for many facing economic hardship—vowed hyperbolically never to film in Syria again. I had hoped to bookend *Waiting* with *Chaos* in my ethnography, but as the drama's screenwriter Najeeb Nusair noted, the project's failure serves as a more appropriate ending to this story. Narrative symmetry will be sacrificed for something messier and uglier but ultimately truer.

Witnessing, Listening, and Hospitality

For Syria, the representational stakes are higher than ever, and long-term ethnography generates moral quandaries that dwarf a lack of "access" to interlocutors and any "data" they might provide. Whose story do we tell, amid such ideological, experiential, and geographic divides? To maintain relationships across them, should we – can we – set aside our own positions on Syria's conflict? There are no simple answers. True allyship, I argue, involves being open to and telling awkward truths. Our source of inspiration should be the many ways Syrians themselves have found to navigate the divisions wrought by a 60-year-old dictatorship, and deepened by a war that has yet to end. We must accept that telling their stories exposes us to the often ugly cut and thrust of Syrians' own interpersonal relationships. Courage should be balanced with humility. Ethnography may do harm – and publishing on Syria must prioritize security – but we must be realistic about the good it can do. In the era of social media, Syrians no longer need non-Syrian academics to give them voice, and many speak more loudly than anthropologists do. In my case, interlocutors may read my writing, but they are certainly in no need of it. Concerns over committing "epistemic injustice" against media creators whose work appears on Netflix seems self-aggrandizing (Fricker 2007).

Over thirty years of intermittent fieldwork, I have produced ethnographic accounts of my interlocutors' lives that resonated with many of them and may have foreshadowed the war, but feel to me both now and then inadequate. They seem a paltry offering in the face of the generosity that has enabled them. My career has long benefitted from a Syrian ethic of hospitality that runs deep at personal, familial, and national scales, and one that has come to

the fore of anthropological concern with the growing indifference, indeed hostility, facing Syrians in need. Syria has served as a place of sanctuary for centuries (Chatty 2018). Over the 2000s, I witnessed not only the opening of borders, but also the opening of homes to displaced Iraqis and Lebanese. In a bitterly ironic twist of fate, anthropologists, long recipients of Syrians' hospitality, now document the truncated welcome and blatant hostility extended to Syrian refugees (Alcan 2021; Al-Khalili 2023; Carpi 2021; Carpi & Şenoğuz 2019; Can 2019; Dağtaş 2017, Musmar and Zuntz 2023). While ethnographers wrestle poignantly with the professional ethics of writing about the displaced, research on refugees proliferates, threatening to render the anthropology of Syrians synonymous with the anthropology of Syrian refugees[v].

I remain caught in hospitality's conundrum: the unconditional hospitality my interlocutors extend, which approaches an ideal, and the knowledge that the practice of hospitality is contingent, "circumscribed by law and duty" (Derrida 2000: 135), and involves reciprocity. This even as displaced Syrians themselves reconfigure their practice of hospitality, eschewing formulas of exchange and powerplays of hierarchy, emphasizing community and sanctuary (Kastrinou & Knoerk 2024), while Syrian scholars extend its hermeneutic reach and transformative potential beyond Syria (Halabi 2023).

A consequence of being an anthropologist with a long-term relationship to their field is to endure continual imbalance. To call my interlocutors "collaborators" feels overstated and bears unintended political connotations. Despite the modicum of social capital I may occasionally confer, I still need them far more than they need me. They are central to my professional endeavor; I remain at most tangential to theirs. I recognize the time and attention Syrians offer me as unrepayable favors. The imbalance is appropriate, but it also warrants a shift from empathy to allyship, one rendered easier as the new generation of Syrian scholars,

the products of wartime exile, enable me to “speak along with” rather than “speak for.” It is my hope that, as Fazil Moradi (2024) argues, the ethnographer’s bearing witness, particularly to experiences of trauma and violence, is itself an act of hospitality.

Syrian television’s “field of art” lives on, even as the nation struggles to hold together, and the drama creators’ task, like mine, becomes more difficult; we operate in separate but parallel arenas of representation (Fassin 2014). The drama of everyday life, they say, exceeds anything they can script. They struggle to depict an ugly reality. If they meet that challenge and still pass through the censors, what is their contribution? As an actor put it over morning coffee before *Fawda* location scouting, “either you prettify, or you show things how they are.” The regime’s pyrrhic victory placates no one: every complaint – no water, no electricity, no batteries, no fuel – they punctuated bitterly with “But we’ve won!” (Bas intiṣarnā!). Reconciliation lies ahead, and the roles of both television makers and ethnographers must evolve. Social drama creators frequently evoke an artistic truism: the universal can be attained through fidelity to the local. Listening patiently to them in difficult settings, and proceeding through quiet implication, remains crucial to an ethnographic account of their work. As such, the result however it may appear must remain loyal to our shared labor of representation.

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7 How the Syrian Conflict Shaped Mass Violence Research

Uğur Ümit Üngör[27]

Introduction

Political scientist and Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin opened his book with the epigraph of a reader's letter from 1992, who wrote him that he "painted a very ugly picture of the situation in Afghanistan", but that it was a true one. Rubin responded to the letter by writing: "If the situation in Afghanistan is ugly today, it is not because the people of Afghanistan are ugly. Afghanistan is not only the mirror of the Afghans; it is the mirror of the world."[28] This exchange could have occurred in 2012 about Syria. The conflict has had profound and far-reaching implications that have reverberated beyond the borders of the country and have significantly altered the global geopolitical landscape. The conflict has changed the world in at least five ways: the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Middle East and the transforming of regional power dynamics; the rise of extremist Islamist groups such as ISIS; the unprecedented humanitarian fallout of the conflict; the international community's inability to reach a consensus on

[27] Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Amsterdam
[28] Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p.vi.

meaningful intervention that has highlighted the weaknesses of international institutions in preventing and resolving crises; and the fueling of debates on immigration policies in various countries, contributing to political shifts and shaping public opinion beyond Syria and the Middle East.

The tectonic shifts caused by the Syrian conflict have impacted academic scholarship on these topics. As a profoundly destructive conflict, one major impact was obviously in the field of conflict studies and violence research. The dynamic of the repression and subsequent civil war brought opportunities for research as well as new challenges to how scholars research conflict. Trying to overcome these challenges opened new horizons for research. In particular, the conflict generated substantial and methodological innovation in at least three areas: oral history, perpetrator research, and digital research.

Oral History

For all its tragedies, the Syrian conflict has one, thin, silver lining: never have so many Syrians been able to express themselves and their experiences with repression as they have after 2011. As refugees fled the country en masse, Syria's human stories poured out with them in memoirs, interviews, blogs, social media posts, public discussions, television items, theatrical performances, music, and many more cultural forms. Since the beginning of the crisis, I began interviewing Syrians about their experiences with violence. In 2016, this initiative became formalized in the Syria Oral History Project at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) Institute in Amsterdam, for which a broad cross-section of perpetrators, victims, survivors, and third parties were interviewed, with a particular focus on detainees[29]. These interviews render a

[29] Daniela Blei, 'We Can't Save Syrians Anymore, But We Can Save the Truth', Foreign Policy, 27 December 2018,

complex, rich, and colorful picture of the violence from various actors in the conflict. To gather as many different vantage points on the civil war as possible, I contacted Syrians from different backgrounds, classes, neighborhoods, and political persuasions in various countries and had several long interview sessions with them. Whereas some interviewees were relatively young and well-educated oppositionists, some were fence-sitters, while others were solidly pro-Assad. My interviewees were mostly born and raised in Syria, or had migrated to the Gulf, Lebanon, or Europe as children, and had returned and experienced the uprising. Most were city-dwellers, but some were from the countryside's many small towns or villages. What is relevant is that all of them were direct victims and survivors of violence. Others were eyewitnesses to acts of violence because they had known one or more perpetrators personally; either they grew up with them, went to school with them, or knew them as neighbors or family members.[30]

Most researchers of Syria and its conflict have conducted interviews with eyewitnesses, and there are also several focused oral history projects of the Syrian catastrophe. Pearlman conducted impressive oral history fieldwork, and her thematically structured interviews offer a rich, visceral feel of the lived experiences of Syrians affected by the crisis[31]. In addition, several other oral history projects were launched and conducted, for example by Sites of Conscience, Badael, The Day After, the Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Saydnaya Prison, and others[32]. Some of these interviews have

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https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/27/ugur-umit-ungor-syria-oral-history-project/

[30] See for a similar ethnographic methodology of the 2002 Gujarat massacre: Ward Berenschot, *Riot Politics: India's Communal Violence and the Everyday Mediation of the State* (London: Hurst, 2011).

[31] Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: Custom House, 2017).

[32] 'Syrian Oral History Project', Sites of Conscience, 2014, http://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/what-we-do/connecting/special-

been published online, while others are not accessible to the public. Some critical media platforms also conducted oral history interviews, such as the captivating Syria TV series 'Oh Freedom' (يا حرية), in which each episode focuses on an individual former detainee and her/his testimony and paints a complex picture of the prison experience[33]. These projects and interviews would not have been possible without the conflict having victimized and uprooted Syrians. Paradoxically, their experiences emboldened and enabled them to speak.

My own oral history data consists of about 100 in-depth interviews with 50 people who I regularly interviewed over a period of four years, and another list of shorter interviews with 80 others. These long interviews were conducted in person with Syrians mostly outside of the country (Turkey, Germany, Netherlands, France, Belgium, Armenia, Malaysia, Canada, the US, the UK), and via Skype, WhatsApp, or Facebook with Syrians inside the country (mostly among the paramilitaries themselves). The interviews were predominantly in Arabic, some in English, and very few in Turkish, German, French, or Dutch. Several clear issues emerged between me and my interviewees that reflected the power dynamic between us. These included issues of trust, truth, and authority in testimony. Some asked for favors in return for an interview, others volunteered their support in an attempt to steer the project. I always asked Syrians for input on the project without surrendering to their moral or political agendas. It was in this way that I managed to maintain the relative autonomy of the oral history project. In the long run, this garnered the respect of as wide a spectrum as possible within the Syrian-Dutch and Syrian-German diaspora. With many Syrians now having acquired citizenship in various European countries, oral history is even

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projects/syrian-oral-history-project/; 'Syrian Women Oral History Project', Badael, 2019, https://badael.org/syrian-women-oral-history-project/

[33] See the whole series at: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeMwite1QcQ3JIAdAEsJ_8ySjbjf0weai.

more possible due to the increased feeling of safety many of these people now sense.

Perpetrator Research

Perpetrator studies emerged from the shadows of Holocaust and genocide research, driven by a recognition of the need to understand the individuals and systems responsible for perpetrating mass atrocities. This field seeks to delve deeper into the psychology, sociology, and political dynamics underlying such egregious acts. Initially, focus primarily centered on understanding the motivations and ideologies driving perpetrators, examining factors such as obedience to authority, group dynamics, and societal structures that facilitate violence. Over time, the field expanded to encompass a broader range of contexts beyond genocides, including war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and systemic human rights abuses. The *Journal of Perpetrator Research* stands as a testament to the field's maturation, providing a platform for rigorous academic inquiry into the complexities of perpetration. Today, perpetrator studies seek not only to understand the individual perpetrators but also to analyze the broader societal, cultural, and institutional frameworks that enable and sustain mass violence. If the Syrian conflict has transformed and continues to influence one major research field, it is that of perpetrator research. Never were the possibilities of researching perpetrators in real time so diverse and broad, especially regarding the regime itself.

The Assad regime is structured around an extensive and very well-equipped coercive apparatus consisting of four major pillars: the army, the intelligence (*mukhabarat*), the special forces, and the militias. The standing army is the institution least associated with regime, evidenced by the frequent desertions of conscript soldiers and even occasionally (high-ranking) officers. Even so, certain army divisions and especially loyalist air force pilots have committed deliberate violence against civilian targets on a massive scale. Therefore, much like the myth of the clean

Wehrmacht in World War II, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces are in no way irreproachable when it comes to the destruction of civilian lives[34]. Still, the perpetrator groups more centrally and effectively involved in the targeting of civilians were the other three groups.

A key, prime responsible among those other groups is the *mukhabarat*, a general catchword in the Arab world for the secret police or the intelligence agencies. Under this abstract umbrella term lurk various intelligence services that cover partially overlapping and often conflicting powers, areas, and jurisdictions, as they often also spy and act against each other. Since 1970, Hafez al-Assad built his intelligence empire with four main services: State Security, Political Security, Military Security, and the Air Force Intelligence. All of them operate nationwide prisons and detention centres where torture is routinely applied against detainees. The Syrian intelligence services are distinguished from many of their counterparts elsewhere primarily by their broad powers to use force against Syrian citizens. Like others, they are allowed to wiretap and spy on citizens, but they also threaten, manipulate, arrest, and imprison citizens, often without warrants or due process. Their prisons are characterized by systematic, extensive, and brutal torture conducted by professional torturers, and the *mukhabarat* has tortured detainees to death on a large scale in its gulag[35]. Since research on the regime was traditionally constrained by strict limitations on sources and access, historically we knew very little about the workings of these intelligence agencies. An encyclopedia on Middle Eastern intelligence, published right before the Arab Spring, admits about Syria that "it is impossible to precisely analyze the exact structure of the country's

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[34] *Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring* (Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2018); Philippe Droz-Vincent, *Military Politics of the Contemporary Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 235–246.
[35] Jaber Baker & Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Syrian Gulag: Inside Assad's Prison System* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023).

intelligence apparatus"[36]. The conflict has shifted these limitations significantly and created new ways of accessing research about the *mukhabarat*.

The different elite forces and shock troops that are highly trained and equipped and that form the core of the regime's assault capacity are the third major pillar of the regime's coercive apparatus. The Republican Guard is a praetorian guard charged with protecting the capital Damascus and is composed of approximately 25,000 men. Under the leadership of officers such as Ali Khizam (1966-2012) or Issam Zahreddin (1961-2017), the Republican Guard rampaged through Syria and committed atrocities, including mass executions[37]. The Syrian army's Fourth Armored Division is a similar elite formation that was under the command of Bashar's younger brother Maher al-Assad. This tightly knit brigade has been responsible for many arrests and executions since March 2011. They are also responsible for the use of chemical weapons against civilian areas, such as the August 2013 attacks on Eastern Ghouta. Another unit are the Special Mission Forces that operate under the Interior Ministry and has played a vital role in repression protests in the major cities. Finally, the Tiger Forces are a highly capable militia affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence and led by Major General Suheil al-Hassan. It has offensive infantry units as well as artillery regiments and strong support from the Russian military.[38]

The fourth pillar are those paramilitary forces generically called '*shabbiha*,' a catch-all category for irregular militias linked organically to the regime. From March 2011 on, they carried out storming of neighbourhoods, dispersion of demonstrations, as well as property crimes, torture, kidnapping,

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[36] Ephraim Kahana and Muhammad Suwaed, eds., *The A to Z of Middle Eastern Intelligence* (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 295.
[37] Gregory Waters, *Syria's Republican Guard: Growth and Fragmentation* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2018).
[38] Gregory Waters, *The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2018).

assassination, and massacres. The highest ranks of the regime stubbornly (but implausibly) washed their hands in innocence by claiming that the militias allegedly acted on their own volition and the government ostensibly did not direct or empower them. These forms of moral distancing and plausible deniability were deliberately planted so that the violence could not be traced back to the official authorities. But it was clear that the Assad regime was firmly in charge of the *shabbiha* and remote-controlled them through its extensive patronage system[39]. Due to the informal nature of their organization and the ease with which *shabih* (sing.) could enter and exit *shabiha* networks, I was able to to investigate the *shabbiha* relatively easily for my forthcoming book *Assad's Militias and Mass Violence in Syria*.

These structures of violence indicate that the Assad regime commands a security apparatus with extraordinary destructive potential. In the scholarship on Syria and the Middle East more broadly, none of these perpetrators have ever been studied in any way except for in passing reference. But due to defections of security forces personnel, survivor testimony, and leaked materials, significant levels of information on perpetrators is now available. We now have access to resources detailing the structures and methods of the *mukhabarat* and biographies of its officials at various levels. Access to this material has facilitated strictly empirical contributions to understanding the *mukhabarat*. We now know, for example, that sectarianization obviously plays a role in the conflict but is not in any way mentioned in the regime's own *mukhabarat* files[40]. Yet, the research opportunities created by the conflict also have broader, theoretical implications for how intelligence agencies in authoritarian regimes operate, or how groups of perpetrators

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[39] Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); "Shabbiha: Paramilitary Groups, Mass Violence and Social Polarization in Homs," *Violence* 1, no. 1 (2020): 59–79.

[40] See the CIJA websites: https://cija-syria-regime.org/ and https://cija-syria-homs.org/

within such a regime cooperate, compete, and clash. The destructive and fragmented nature of the conflict has thus, paradoxically, made resources about the inner workings of the state's coercive apparatus more accessible.

Digital Research

The turn of the millennium has ushered in an era in which the rise and widespread availability of digital technology has made a profound impact on contemporary conflicts. Digital cameras and especially smartphones with built-in cameras have changed and continue to change the way that wars and genocides are being experienced, represented, and even conducted[41]. Reporters, human rights workers, and ordinary citizens have access to smartphones and are recording acts of violence to document, advocate, and report them. Indeed, there are digital applications, like *eyeWitness to Atrocities*, that allow individuals to upload video evidence of human rights abuses even while they are happening. The effects of the smartphone on conflicts have been studied fairly extensively[42] and we know that fighters often use these devices for much more than posting on social media. However, both soldiers in combat and perpetrators of massacres use smartphones typically as cameras to record themselves. In these contemporary conflicts, the smartphone is not only a documentation device, but also can be considered a weapon, given its triple use for communication, coordination of violence, and publication of propaganda.[43]

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[41] See the contributions in: Mette Mortensen & Ally McCrow-Young (eds.), *Social Media Images and Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[42] Markus Rohde et al., 'Out of Syria: Mobile Media in Use at the Time of Civil War', *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 32:7 (2016), 515-531; Jacob Shapiro & Nils Weidmann, 'Is the Phone Mightier Than the Sword? Cellphones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq', *International Organization* 69:2 (2015), 247-274.

[43] Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), pp.133-4.

The conflict in Syria is the quintessential war of digital technology. These technologies serve to propagate atrocities and therefore serve as an excellent platform to research questions relating to digital technology use (such as smartphones) and violence. Not only are smartphones widely accessible, but the conflicts are also fought by a generation of millennials and Gen-Z fighters who grew up with them and are familiar with their use. There are, to date, an unknown number (but certainly numbering in the millions) of videos related to the Syrian conflict. Syria is indeed a war of images. Perpetrators create hours of video content, often in the form of 'trophy videos,' or livestreamed violence designed to spread terror. Indeed, video is changing the nature of violence in the modern era in myriad ways that scholars are still trying to understand. One method of sorting through Syria's vast digital archive is to research one massacre or case of mass violence, and search for how videos have been used before, during, and after the event.

Several scholars have detailed the pivotal role that media and digital technologies have played in our understanding of the Syrian conflict. Donatella Della Ratta reviews the aesthetics of the content produced by video activists and argues that all parties turned their smartphones into weapons from the onset of the conflict, since the "mobile phone camera is indeed a gun, the only tool an unarmed protester has to shoot back at his killers."[44] She then distinguishes the videos shot by the victims versus those shot by the killers:

> Only those who commit a crime, in fact, have the time to look for the most spectacular angle, fix the camera, and finally render their violence into an aesthetic performance that can be reproduced and re-enacted for the sake of the camera-eye. The protester, the tortured, the victim, must run away in

[44] Donatella Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 131.

> an attempt to escape death; their cameras are shaky, their images blurry. It's the 'cinema of the murdered' versus the 'cinema of the murderer' – ultimately, the luxury of a static shot belongs to those who perform violence, not to those who risk their lives to document it.[45]

Watching violent footage, whether shot by victims or by perpetrators, is a productive method of conducting academic research into conflict. From a media studies perspective, the focus of analysis is on the staging, dramatization, and other filmic elements of such footage. For perpetrator research, however, this type of footage is highly relevant to understand the dynamic and logic of the violence. By studying this kind of footage we can chart how individual perpetrators operate and understand how a process of mass violence functions and unfolds in practice. Detached observation is one significant method to better understand perpetrators, because, for most cases of genocide, we hardly have any footage. For example, we have no footage of the genocides in Cambodia, Guatemala and Darfur. There is only one proper video of the genocide in Rwanda, and only several dozens of recordings of the wars in Yugoslavia. In other words, since there is scant material in general, we should appreciate that there is so much available on Syria and try to understand what this vastness means for conducting research into perpetrators of violence. Any selection of useful materials for viewing, showing, and analyzing must be based on at least three criteria: the footage should not contain unnecessary graphic scenes, the source must be relatively trustworthy, and the recordings must be instructive and informative.[46]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Uğur Ümit Üngör, "The Tadamon Massacre: Archiving Violence through the Perpetrators' Gaze", in: *Visual Anthropology*, vol.37, no.1 (2024), pp.56-73.

Beyond grabbing video footage from websites like YouTube, digital technology has also facilitated research on social networks by harvesting profiles of particular fighters and mapping relationships via Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. For example, the research of the Observatory of Political and Economic Networks has conducted some fascinating innovative research on the Assad regime's networks of illicit economic activities, such as sanction-busting, smuggling, and drug production[47]. Furthermore, messaging apps such as Skype, WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Vyber, and others have made interviews less intrusive for the interviewee. Whereas walking into a neighborhood or village and asking questions invariably draws attention and potentially makes an interviewee vulnerable in the broader community, interviews conducted through digital methods are secure and discreet. All these avenues of research were made possible through new digital technologies, which not only have shaped the research on Syria, but their collective experiences of research on Syria continue to shape how these digital technologies are being used today and in the future.

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[47] https://opensyr.com/

8
A Narrative in the Making: Syrian Lives Through Traditional and Applied Theatre

Fadi Skeiker[48]

The Lure of Television

I grew up in the Middle East, in Syria, to an intellectual middle-class family in the suburbs of Damascus. During my formative years in the 90s, the Syrian television drama was reaching its regional heights. There were one or two television channels at that time and I still remember when my whole family would eagerly wait for the time of *musalsal* (serial dramas) usually around nine at night. Over time I started paying attention to the names of the actors. Then, to those who wrote the musalsal and then who directed them, and I started to notice that the world of the *musalsalāt* (plural form of musalsal) was a superior reality, one in which the majority of characters were solidly middle class, living in urban environments, driving cars, exploring hobbies, and most importantly communicating effectively and expressing their emotions. Musalsalat at the time offered a safe haven to imagine what a Syrian life could look like, and to this day they are vital sites where Syrians engage in the social act of spectating on characters who speak their language and share their cultural references, but with slight differences. For example, most of these characters live in urban settings,

[48] Professor of Theater, Fordham University

depicting lives distinct from the majority of Syrians who prior to 2011 mainly resided in rural areas with aspirations of moving to the city. These musalsalat also provide teenagers on the brink of transitioning to university life in Damascus with an opportunity to rehearse and envision the lifestyle awaiting them in the city.

Today, Syrians in the diaspora continue this tradition, eagerly anticipating new musalsalat to recreate that communal act of social spectating. Actors, directors, and writers involved in these productions wield significant power—transforming lives and showcasing different possibilities for living. The idea of working in musalsalat has felt akin to being a public intellectual, capable of influencing public discourse on various issues. In that context, as a teenager I was inspired to become part of that transformative scene, and began fantasizing that I would become a Syrian TV megastar and feature in my own musalsal. To achieve that dream, I had to navigate the traditional path of acceptance into the highly selective Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Damascus. Due to Syria's prominent TV industry, the institute attracted students from across the Arab region who were eager to study theater and become familiar with the flourishing Syrian TV industry, which at the turn of the millenium was beginning to dominate many Arab countries, especially in the Gulf states. Opportunities to study theater in the Arab region were limited at this time; apart from the Higher Institute of Theatrical Arts in Syria, there were only two other similar institutions in Kuwait and Cairo. However, the Syrian Institute was particularly sought after due to the distinctive expertise of its professors and their connections to Syrian TV industry.

My professors were a mix of faculty with Russian training and Syrian TV superstars with professional expertise. As a student, I was pulled between a professor who prided himself on being "the student of the student of the student" of

Stanislavsky[49] and a faculty member so famous that he couldn't even walk in the street without causing a scene. I excelled in the context of the theater institute, focusing on the connection between theory and practice, and I was well on my way, as were many of my cohort, to either do theater or television.

Turning Point

Instead of becoming a superstar of Syrian drama, a writer, or a director in musalsalat, I received a Fulbright grant and was accepted into a master's degree program at Emerson College in Boston. There, I took a couple of classes with theater professors such as Robbie McCauley,[50] and suddenly the idea of returning to Syria and becoming a star started to fade. Instead, I began to think about theater and how it can change the lives of the oppressed and empower people on the so-called margins of society. My classes with Robbie were complemented by puppetry classes with John Bell,[51] and where I was introduced to the political power of theater and the importance of blending the activist world with artistic work. While there, I had an opportunity to participate in a workshop with the Living Theater Company.[52] In that experience, we reflected on the socio-political elements of representing diasporic identities in Western contexts in the name of fostering dialogue. I remember during

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[49] Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavski was a seminal Soviet Russian theatre practitioner. He was widely recognized as an outstanding character actor, and the many productions that he directed garnered him a reputation as one of the leading theatre directors of his generation.

[50] Robbie Doris McCauley was an American playwright, director, performer, and professor. McCauley is best known for her plays *Sugar* and *Sally's Rape*, among other works that addressed racism in the United States and challenged audiences to participate in dialogue with her work.

[51] John is a performer, writer, and teacher who started making theater seriously with Bread and Puppet Theater and was a company member of that troupe for over a decade.

[52] The Living Theatre is an American theater company founded in 1947 and based in New York City. It is the oldest experimental theater group in the United States.

that workshop experience they asked me to consider the political future of Syria. In response, I developed a scene in which the sky was filled with war planes. First one, then another and another until there were so many planes in that sky that they shielded the sun. Suddenly, they began dropping bombs all over. Though this was in 2005, I recall this clearly and question my own foreshadowing of what would unexpectedly come just a few years later. But in my active imagination, it must have been a reflection of the only other television programming we received in addition to musalsalat, dedicated to building a sense of national unity in the face of an ever-impending war.

Immediately after Emerson, I went to the University of Texas at Austin to pursue my PhD in Performance as Public Practice, a unique program that focuses on connecting theater practice with active citizenship and social justice. After receiving a foundation from both McCauley and Bell, I was certain that I wanted to expand my work in the area of theater for social change. Two memorable projects from my years in Texas involved directing a series of short plays written by Susan Lori Parks[53] using Arab shadow theater techniques and leading a series of workshops with international students at UT-Austin to encourage them to be civically active during their studies. I later wrote my dissertation on applied theater and liminal citizenship where I made a case for the efficacy of applied theater in activating notions of citizenship and civic engagement. This time as a graduate student in the US shaped my new vision of what theater was and what it could do. I no longer saw theater as purely product or performance driven. Instead, I began to see my discipline as a series of practices and ideologies that could be used for a variety of purposes beyond entertainment.

After completing my PhD, I returned to Syria for a time before taking on a teaching position at the University of Jordan

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[53] Susan-Lori Parks is an American playwright, screenwriter, musician and novelist. Her play *Topdog/Underdog* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002. Parks was the first African-American woman to receive the award for drama.

in Amman. Returning to a culture that values traditional theater, I began maintaining two lives: one as an applied theater artist and another as a theater scholar. Taking on an academic role allowed me to merge the two sides of my practice in ways I hadn't anticipated. In my traditional academic life, I had been hired by a university to teach regular theater courses such as acting, directing, script analysis, and theater collaboration. In my other life, I was wearing my applied theater hat and leading applied theater programs. While in Jordan, I began to write and reflect on my work in this relatively young field.

As my tenure at the University of Jordan continued, I served as both assistant and then associate professor of theater and as assistant dean twice, once for student affairs and once for quality assurance. I taught acting, directing, and theater education while being an active player in the Jordanian professional theater scene, serving as a panelist and judge for most of the theater festivals in Jordan. It has always been important to me to inhabit the life of an arts professor, focusing on artistic expression in my professional work while publishing in peer-reviewed journals about my work. While teaching purely artistic forms, I carried with me the ethos of my applied theater practice and empowered my female-identifying students to write, direct, and act, hiring them in my applied theater projects outside the university. A memorable project from that time was a shadow theater workshop. I used devised theater techniques to collectively script a series of scenes that focused on the themes of child labor, attitudes toward refugees, and women's empowerment. The workshop lasted for a month, during which I trained the group on how to build a shadow theater, and we toured all over Jordan in a traveling show style.

I was leading what seemed like an eventless but beautiful life as a young professor who was also directing and doing applied theater in Jordan. Then 2011 came, and nothing was the same. Thousands upon thousands of Syrian refugees started coming to Jordan, the Zaatari camp was built on the border, and

a rapid shift began in how Syrians were perceived in Jordan[54]. I felt this shift firsthand, having lived in Jordan both before and after the influx of refugees. The same organizations I was working with as an applied theater artist started doing work with Syrian refugees and asked me to join forces to use theater as a tool to address the social and psychological well-being of Syrian youth.

From here my life, research, and work changed dramatically, and I found myself increasingly drawn, directly or indirectly, to working with Syrian refugees. Perhaps equally important, I began to drift away from traditional theater and more intensively engaging in applied theater practice.

Applied Theater

Applied theater is broadly defined as the use of theater techniques among a specific community to encourage the members of that community to collectively rethink and embody a specific issue. Applied theater helps facilitate dialogue, heal emotional wounds, or process significant issues within a community. Most scholars and practitioners who write about applied theater agree that its function is not necessarily to create a performance at the end, but rather to create dialogue and opportunities for the community to reflect upon the issue or concern being discussed; the focus remains on the process and the journey of learning and discovery, although a final product may be produced. It serves as a means of giving voice to those who are not heard and offers them a platform to process their situation and advance their psychological and social well-being. Within my applied theater workshops, I continually ask questions rather than presenting answers.

The dichotomy between process and product in applied theater is a contested idea favoring one over the other, often

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[54] The Zaatari refugee camp is a refugee camp in Jordan, located 10 kilometers east of Mafraq, which has gradually evolved into a permanent settlement; it is the world's largest camp for Syrian refugees.

depending on the geographical area where it is practiced. For example, applied theater in the Middle East is more focused on the product, emphasizing the sharing of the presentation with members of the larger community. There, applied theater is closer to the Western understanding of community-based theater in which a group of community members gathers to put on a show. In the West applied theater takes on another dimension where the focus is on the process rather than the product to the degree that the product is not even part of the applied theater work. Applied theater in this context is similar to our understanding of drama therapy, where whatever happens in the session stays in the session with no desire to share it publicly with an audience or community members.

When I started working in Jordan in 2009, almost all applied theater projects focused on theater devising: the artist goes to a community, leads a workshop, and then creates a performance with community members to share. There are no professional actors or stage lighting, just a social story meaningful to the community members. Most of the work I practiced or observed at that time focused on gender equality within the Jordanian community. A typical story devised in this context was that of a woman who wanted to study a "masculine" discipline such as engineering but faced difficulties from community members who tried to push her to study nursing or education to become a teacher. These were the kinds of projects within the scope of applied theater in Jordan before 2009.

Within the framework of my applied theater practice in Jordan, I also led several programs with and for Syrian refugees, addressing their unique challenges and aspirations. One such program in Zarqa[55] involved twenty Syrian refugees navigating education and the job market in Jordan. The workshop culminated in a community theater performance that highlighted their narratives, allowing them to share their struggles and resilience with a broader audience. In another project, I

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[55] A city in the northern part of Jordan.

collaborated with director Rana Kazkaz[56] while she was preparing her feature film *The Translator*. Together with Rana and Anas Khalaf[57], we led what initially appeared to be an acting workshop for Syrian refugees in Jordan, aiming to identify a refugee actor for the lead role of *The Translator*. However, the workshop quickly evolved into an embodied political dialogue, exploring the meaning of "Syrianhood" in the context of diaspora and displacement.

Additionally, I facilitated a program in the Za'atari refugee camp with Syrian youth, focusing on imagining and reimagining their futures. Living under difficult conditions, these young participants dreamed of accessing proper education and leaving the confines of the refugee camp. The project aimed to provide a creative outlet for their aspirations while fostering dialogue about their lived experiences and hopes for the future.

Another Turning Point

The shifts in my and other theatre artists' approach to applied theatre was a response in part to the evolving trauma of the Syrian refugee crisis. After the Arab Spring, we began to see applied theater experiences focusing on public presentations featuring Syrian refugees, most notably the work of Nawar Bolbol[58], who staged *King Lear* in the Zaatari camp. Gradually, applied theater in the Middle East and elsewhere began to adopt a therapeutic approach, focusing on the well-being of those involved, with the notion of diminishing the element of public sharing.

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[56] Rana Kazkaz is a Syrian-American filmmaker and professor. Her films have received numerous international awards and selections, such as at Cannes, Sundance, TIFF, and Tribeca. She is also an associate professor at Northwestern University in Qatar where she teaches narrative filmmaking.

[57] Anas Khalaf is a Syrian-French filmmaker and actor. He co-founded Synéastes Films, focusing on Middle Eastern films through international co-productions.

[58] Nawar Bolbol is a Syrian theatre director, actor, playwright, and founder of Al-Khareef Theatre Troupe in Damascus, Syria.

My own practice bounced between both approaches. Through the intensity of my work, I began to feel the suffering of the people firsthand, especially migrants and refugees from Syria and other affected countries. When I started with a product-oriented practice, my work became more reflective, and any simple presentations were part of the workshop format and not shared with the wider community. During this time, I became a research fellow at the Interweaving Performance Cultures at the Free University of Berlin in Germany. By the time I began working with refugees in Berlin, I understood that I could not ask participants to share their personal trauma in public performances, recognizing that they were simultaneously living and processing the ongoing trauma of war and displacement, whether in my workshops or in various venues. Asking them to bare this trauma for German audiences would be damaging and counterintuitive the healing that the applied theater workshop aimed to provide.

In the time between after 2011, I could detect a shift in the rhetoric regarding the perception of Syrians both in the West and the Arab world from before 2011when Syrians were welcomed, appreciated, and described as "cool or smart" to after 2011 when they had become "a burden and problematic."[59]. At the same time, I entertained the idea of leaving Jordan and starting a life in the West. This shift was a surprisingly excellent catalyst that allowed me to focus and reflect on my work on applied theater and refugees, provided me with the opportunity to observe theater artist Alexander Schroeder in Berlin, who was working with and for refugees[60]. Observing Schroeder's practice helped me conceptualize how Western practitioners conceived of our shared understanding of the applications for applied theater and how I might envision my own practice differently within the Western context.

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[59] Targeting my "Syrianhood" often took the form of microaggressions, subtly conveyed rather than directly expressed.
[60] Alexandar Schroeder is a German theatre artist/educator who started working with Syrian refugees in Berlin in 2016.

Still holding true to my commitment to a more therapeutic application without public sharing, I continued to lead theater workshops in refugee centers around Berlin, working closely on the artistic aspects of performance such as character signature and blocking. During these workshops, I developed what I would describe as an "embodied poetics practice," where the bodies of the spectators became the site for presenting and reflecting on a traumatic moment. I recall an example of this practice from a workshop I led in Berlin with Syrian refugees housed in a refugee transition center. One focus was on the hope for a better future, where a group of three participants—a mother and her two children—recited a poem they had developed in the workshop:

Tomorrow will be better
We cannot forget the hope
The future is for us
We will forget the trauma
And tomorrow we will succeed
I am hopeful
We are hopeful

They recited this poem against a backdrop of music, while touching each other's shoulders and holding hands, which extended to form one big, connected formation. This beautiful scene lasted for about a minute and a half but took approximately six hours to execute in a room with no audience other than the participants themselves. The hours of practice for this scene resulted not only from rehearsing the choreography but also from reflecting on, discussing, and remembering the trauma they had experienced until they arrived at that moment. The work on this private piece had an emotional impact on the participants; I still remember how they left the workshop that day holding hands. When they returned the next day for the second day of the workshop, I recall them arriving early and welcoming me as if I were an old friend.

My work in Portugal, where I had received a second visiting appointment, revolved around the intercultural dialogue between East and West. Carrying my experiences from Germany, I knew that the negative perceptions of Syrians would follow me to another European country. I made it (in part) my mission to highlight manuscripts written by Syrian playwrights as, I returned to teaching purely performance-based theatrical courses, such as acting in English. However, my limited Portuguese and my Portuguese students' inability to act in English presented a unique challenge. Somehow, I needed to coach them!But how? This experience allowed me to fully embrace applied theater aesthetics and its core artistic tool—the "frozen image," where the body becomes the medium for storytelling. The use of the "frozen image" in both teaching and directing became an integral part of my artistic identity, emerging out of necessity as it provided me with effective tools for communication.

My work in Portugal was also interdisciplinary because it enabled me to collaborate with professors from different departments. One particular collaboration involved translating *The King's Elephant*, a play by prominent Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous[61] into Portuguese[62] and directing it with my advanced acting students. Reflecting on my time in Portugal, I see my professional work there as a continuation of my digging into the work of Syrian playwrights and attempting to introduce them to Portuguese audiences, a country with few migrants or refugees at that time.[63]

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[61] Saadallah Wannous was a Syrian playwright, writer, and editor on Arabic theater.

[62] I collaborated with graduate students at The University of Minho who were pursuing their degrees in translation and generously offered their expertise in both English and Portuguese to translate the English version into Portuguese.

[63] That has changed, and now many migrants from Brazil and other former colonies live in the country, as well as tens of thousands of Western lifestyle migrants who have benefitted from Portugal's flexible long-term visa and residency laws.

In 2017, I moved permanently to the USA. This time, I moved for a job that seemed at the outset to revolve around traditional theatrical skills: teaching directing and directing student productions in a university setting. During that time, I was invited to direct a play called *I Want a Country* by Andreas Flourakis[64]. The play is flexible and can be read symbolically as it reflects on a group of people leaving their country in search of a better one. I quickly decided to make my directorial adaptation of the play about the Syrian diaspora, collaborating with the designing team to reflect on what it means to develop this story in a refugee tent, or delivering the lines while actors are on a boat in the middle of the sea. Being in the US had helped me to develop a critical perspective on the Syrian war that I just didn't have the luxury of fostering while actively in the Middle East or while in transition in Europe, particularly in a country that was also being heavily impacted by the migrant crisis. This distance allowed me to shape *I Want a Country* into a multisensory performance, seemingly reflective of the jarring nature of displacement itself.

My work on Flourakis' text later led to an opportunity to direct a play called *Kiss* in at regional theater (The Wilma Theatre in Philadelphia). *Kiss* is a play written by Chilean playwright Guilermo Calderon[65] about a group of Western actors who are interested in performing a Syrian manuscript they found online. Their intention is to bring attention to the Syrian cause. Later in the play, they interview the playwright, only to discover that they have misinterpreted the play.

Kiss examines the role of Western theater artists and performance makers during crises, exploring how solidarity is

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[64] Flourakis is an influential Greek playwright and director. He has written more than thirty works for theater that have been translated into many languages.

[65] Guillermo Calderón is an influential Chilean playwright, director, and screenwriter.

imagined and performed. The play holds space for people impacted by crisis and war, theater artists, and the audience. The play also examines a central notion in applied theater related to the narratives of the marginalized, the migrants, and the Syrian voices—both those living inside Syria and those who are refugees. It addresses the critical question of who has the right to tell a specific story. Is a Western theater company entitled to tell a Syrian story simply because they "care" about Syria and have the resources to do it? Does putting the Syrian voice in the public sphere by non-Syrians to bring attention to the Syrian cause carry the same merit as waiting until a Syrian story is presented in public by Syrian artists?

The play takes the audience on a journey similar to that of the Western actors in the play, who initially believe they are witnessing a Syrian drama about love and romance in the first act, only to discover in the second act that they were wrong. This empathetic journey is meant to implicate the Western audience and make them wonder what went wrong. *Kiss* also asks us to consider the line between political solidarity and cultural appropriation, asking ourselves when the notion of solidarity actually becomes cultural appropriation and if this connection is inevitable. What about the way we perceive the other—are we doomed to be lost in translation every time we try to present a work by someone else?

A key question I typically pose while I direct is: What will the audience think about right after the play, five years after the play, or ten years after the play? *Kiss,* in particular, serves as a reminder that the Syrian war is still ongoing, and that millions of displaced Syrian migrants and refugees still exist. However, the play also reflects on presenting stories from conflict zones, prompting the audience to consider what it means to be in solidarity with a specific displaced community. The play challenges audiences, especially Westerners, to reconsider their relationship with others and with stories from the Global South.

As of now, and this might change tomorrow, I have stopped identifying myself solely as a theater artist. Instead, I see

myself as an enabler who uses theater as a tool to expose the narratives of the oppressed. These oppressed individuals can be Syrians, but they can also be any group that shares the feeling of being marginalized by the dominant culture. If Syria had remained unchanged since 2010, I would have defined myself simply as a professor and a director. I would likely have never left Jordan and perhaps would have taken on new or different roles within the theater community there. Perhaps, even, I may have returned to Syria to reinvigorate my ambitions of working on musalsalat. What I do know, however, is that the war happened and my life and those of millions of other Syrians changed irreparably. Today, with a majority of us living in diaspora, we are working fiercely to simultaneously understand the implications of the war on our understanding of nationhood, culture, and the future that stand before us and our children. As a theater maker and scholar, I will continue to engage in work that lifts Syrian voices as well as ensuring those voices carry on into the future.

9

Visual Narratives and Lens of the Youth Collective: Framing the Revolution and its Afterlives

Alexa Firat[1]

"It's often argued that photography is a kind of fiction—if imagination is to fiction what belief is to the truth, then photography is the act of taking fiction closer to the side of sheer fact. Art is a reflection of the world, and the camera is ostensibly a recorder of time and space, and that's probably why the images we see become the truth." Adam Rouhana

Introduction

Lens of the Youth [collective] ('adsat al-shābb, hereafter LYC) are loosely coordinated Facebook pages of photographs that initially appeared in Damascus 2012 approximately one year after the start of the uprisings.[2] The impetus for the collective,

[1] Associate Professor (Instructional) in Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Temple University

[2] For media coverage of the collective, see: "*Shabāb ''adsat shābb Ḥumsi' bayna khiyārī al-qaṣaf aw al-'idām*", www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/30/241074. Last accessed 30 Oct 2023; "*'Adsat shābb Talli*" https://syriauntold.com/2014/02/28/. Last accessed 10/30/2023; "'*Adsat shāb Ṭībānī"* syriauntold.com/2014/02/24/. Last accessed 30 Oct 2023; "*Al-taṣwīr al-fūtūgrātī hiwāya shaghafat al-Dimashqiyyīn wa-ḥamalat fī al-thawra ism ('adsat shābb Dimashqī)*" 29 Jan 2014, www.alquds.co.uk. Last accessed 1 Nov 2023.

comprised of amateur and professional photographers, was documentary (for archival and evidentiary purposes) and communicative. Risking arrest and injury, photographers ventured out to document events: demonstrations, the aftermath of blasts, the deportation of civilians, etc., and also at the request of locals to check on the condition of a house or street, and to see if it was safe to pass and/or return. The images were typically accompanied by a date and location, and sometimes a brief description. Other cities soon followed suit [ʻadsat al-shābb al-Tal; Dayr al-zūr; Ḥums; Ḥama, and sometimes devoid of place like al-tāfih (silly)].[3] At the moment of capture, the images communicated a disruptive and unpredictable present-time, yet, over the years they have become an accidental archive of historical and personal moments, material objects, people, sites, and memories long past. As much as this essay is an attempt to read the images connectively, as chapters of a long narrative in a protracted war, it also argues that these images both contributed initially and continue to contribute to the active work of community-making that is one of the outcomes of the revolution.

True to their logo "nāfidhatak ʻalā al-ḥaqīqa" (your window to the truth), LYC has been a vital connective tissue to Syria for me over the years, but especially during those early explosive and unpredictably violent ones when as outsiders we had little but our screens to stay connected, not wanting to bother friends and acquaintances there for updates. Notably, the LYC sites marked a turn in the visual language coming out of Syria, and like other cultural collectives at that time, LYC was reacting to the urgency to create and disseminate, i.e. to produce culture from the frontlines.[4] Their visual language was not the language of war

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[3] Only three remain on Facebook at the time of writing (fall 2023), Lens Young Dimashqi, Homsi, Dayri.

[4] I am thinking specifically about Abou Naddara film collective, al-Kartoneh, The Syrian People Know Their Way, all of which are discussed in the incomparable collection *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline,* an

photography, but rather a vernacular expression of visual communication, and it is a project I have thought quite a bit about over the past few years.[5] I use the term vernacular to define the logic of the visual expression. Vernacular is a local articulation, one that – to take from the architectural use of the word – is concerned with the domestic and functional rather than monumental. In post-colonial studies, the vernacular was language associated with the street, the colonized, the sub-altern.[6] To think about vernacular knowledge is to orient away from the transnational, the modern, and the hybrid toward the local, the traditional, and the culturally autonomous. While the images circulated outside a Syrian environment, the first level of communication was for and between Syrians. As war protracted, the images not only serve as sites of memory, but also as progenitors of futures still to come.

At the onset, the images marked a new grammar of Syrian life; of acts of resistance that not only countered the regime's official narrative, but that also signaled to Syrians that revolution was under way, posting daily on Facebook with date and location. Just as the act of photography for Palestinians in 1968 became a watershed moment for the burgeoning fedayeen (fidā'īn) movement, for Syrians, capturing moments between resistance

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assembly of contemporary artistic expressions and essays related to culture and citizenry (including LYC). Edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, Saqi Books, 2014.

[5] I presented on LYC at the Global Arab Seminar at Northeast Modern Language Association annual conference (2017) and prepared to present at the annual American Comparative Literature Association conference (2020), but it was cancelled due to Covid. Also, I refer to their work in the following essays that discuss the shifting cultural field in Syria since 2011: "Re-formed Discourse: *Awraq*, Journal of the Syrian Writers' Association" in *Alif,* vol. 37, 2017, pp. 1-26; and "The Symbolic Power of Syrian Collective Memory since 2011" in *Culture and Crisis in the Arab World*, edited by Richard Jaquemond and Felix Lang, I.B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 53-72.

[6] See, for instance, Guyatri Spivak's essay, 'The Burden of English'. In G. Castle (ed.), *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 53–72.

and destruction was a way to see their own aspirations (as well as devastations) represented not by outsiders, but by their own actors.[7]

I want to start by framing the images within the work of Ariella Azoulay and in particular her text The Civil Contract of Photography which focuses on photography and Palestinians in Israel, the occupied territories, and in history.[8] Azoulay demonstrates how photography can deterritorialize citizenship, reaching beyond conventional boundaries to plot out a political space in which the plurality of speech and action is actualized permanently by the eventual participation of all the governed (24-25). She writes about how various and new uses of photography can create a new community, in part actual and in part virtual. Notably, this was not a community of professionals or members of any particular church, party, or sect, but rather a new political community of people between whom political relations where not mediated by a sovereign ruling power that governed a given territory (emphasis mine) (22-23). In essence,

Azoulay's work shifts the practice of citizenship away from state power and erases the discriminating distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. In the context of the Syrian revolution and ensuing war, the images posted by LYC across the Syrian landscape generated synergy for unmediated encounters

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[7] In the chapter "Toward a Palestinian Third Cinema," Nadia Yacub outlines the trajectory of the Palestine Film Unit, demonstrating, among other things the impact and resonance of images and seeing one-selves. She gives the example of the Karamah exhibit of 1969 when as Palestinian spectators would see themselves, their sons, the resistance fighters, they would also see their own aspirations in their own revolution (48-87). In this vein, it is worth mentioning one of PFU's founders Hani Jawhariyah's comment, "[that] the act of photographing by itself was, for us, an act of revolutionary resistance" (56). *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution.* University of Texas Press, 2018, pp 48-83.

[8] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography.* New York: Zone Books, 2008.

between individuals, communities, events, locations, neighborhoods.

Unlike Sontag (whose work I will discuss below), Azoulay is concerned with the gaze of the one who is photographed, the agency of the gaze. She argues for a civil political space that the people using photography – photographers, spectators, and photographed people – imagine everyday. This is a space of political relations that are not mediated exclusively by the ruling power of the state and are not completely subject to the national logic that still overshadows the political arena (12). Before the revolution, Syrians were not able to actualize citizenry in the common sense of the word. While they were members of a political community, i.e. the nation-state that carries with it rights of political participation, the state was in practice an authoritarian regime and never acted like a nation-state, and as such Syrians were and to a certain degree continue to be essentially "non-citizen citizens" of Syria.[9] So, if according to Azoulay photography forms a citizenry, a citizenry without sovereignty, without place or borders, without language or unity, and has a heterogenous history, a common praxis, inclusive citizenship and a unified interest (131), then perhaps the narrative of citizenry captured in the array of images by the Lens of the Youth contingents registers a durable practice that eludes the sovereignty of the regime.

The Images Now and Then

Lens of the Youth Dimashqi (Damascus) is the only contingent to still continually post timeline images since its inception. It has become the repository of Syrian memory of the hardships and destruction over the years, and since 2020 has been posting and reposting images from Homs and Idlib, especially of the camps

[9] Syrian cultural theorist Hassan Abbas (d. 2021) breaks this down in the context of the revolutionary moment in his essay "Between the Cultures of Sectarianism and Citizenship," *Syria Speaks,* (48-59).

for internally displaced persons. The more recent posts and images are markedly different from the first few years, most of the posts have turned into a kind of digital graffiti; a digitally spray-painted message on a wall or a photo. The first of this kind is a message of solidarity to Nablus aka Little Damascus (10/25/2022) [Image A]. By this time, the kinds of communications LYC would transmit shifted to reflect the environment and conditions of protracted war. Using the form of graffiti —spray painting messages on public spaces—the editorial managers of the Facebook site have cleverly turned to digital walls to speak out [Image B]. There continue to be dated shots of daily life, but more and more digital graffiti appears. Many of these posts express pain, suffering, solidarity, and recognition of shared experiences of trauma and violence, especially, but not exclusively with Palestinians. Notably, there is more editorial commentary that accompanies the images rather than the initial typical practice of posting only date, location, and on occasion a brief exposition. This content shift follows logically from what life had become to live within the confines and routine of protracted war in Damascus. The mission to communicate had become a mission of connection.

Moving chronologically backward through the site's timeline, the images are a hodgepodge of "aftermath" shots that reflect the ways in which violence disassembles recognizable life, turning it into variations of rubble and resilience; piles of bricks, burned out cars on empty streets, destroyed stuffed animals, the cracked glass of a wedding photograph, the remnants of lives scattered and shattered, but also glimpses of sunlight seeping through bombed out buildings, children playing or wearing school backpacks, or sparrows alighting on a pipe (Images C, D, and E). Sited and dated these photos whether of destruction or durability, rays of sunshine or post-bombing dust storms anchor the past into a Syrian collective memory where viewers may engage in acts of commemoration and remembrance with these visual narratives.

Lens Young Deri (Dayr al-zūr) and Homsi (Ḥums) have stopped posting since 2017 and 2021 respectively, though many images of Homs are also posted on LY Dimashqi, as noted above. One of the last posts from LY Deri is dated Jan 15, 2017. Titled "On the Shores of Death," it depicts a calligraphic design by Syrian artist and calligrapher Munīr al-Sha‘rānī (Munir al-Sharani) that reads "No" to prison, killing, bombing, blockade, among other daily atrocities (Image F). The previous post on June 1, 2017 is a collection of undated old photos, postcards, envelopes, and newspaper clippings of nostalgic and iconic images from a bygone past, such as of the Euphrates River, suspension bridge, buildings, markets, stamps, and individuals.[10] Like all Lens of the Youth images we do not know who posted this collection and whether they are in Syria, Dayr al-Zur, internally or externally displaced. Either way the poster reproduced and shared a collective visual history of the region that grants the viewer a peek through a nostalgic lens to a past that may also stand in for the future. Take, for example, the numerous images of the building of and the suspension bridge itself. Although a product of French colonialism, to see the various stages of building and usage of the bridge is to witness a time of Syria's global productivity and connectivity. Those who built and used the bridge and those who have recently witnessed its destruction are intractably linked by an image that was made in 1924 and continues to exist as an existential mechanism that asserts not just an image, but all types of labor, existence, and activities not governed by any sovereign power in the space of viewing, i.e. the allowance for a civil contract delineated by Azoulay.

LY Homsi stopped posting in 2021.[11] The last posts are of the logo and requests that people contact them to use a photograph

[10] 303 images are in the collection, and it has been shared 12 times as of the writing of this essay.

[11] While writing, I saw a post was made on January 25, 2024. The image consists of a chair on a grassy hill next to a body of water. The caption reads in Arabic and English: We are returning once more, January 2024.

or the logo. This is preceded by a repost from 2014 of a caravan of busses (May 9, 2021), 7 years to the day after the event. The caption reads:

One of the last photographs of the siege on the old city of Ḥumṣ seven years ago. These were such difficult moments when approximately 2000 revolutionary fighters of Ḥumṣ were forced to accept leaving the neighborhoods of Old Ḥums, Jūrat al-Shayāh, al-Qarābīṣ, al-Qūṣur and al-Khālidiyya, after 23 months of defending these parts from the armies and militias of Bashār al-Asad.[12]

The image and caption inscribe into collective memory both the armed resistance movement and the sites of battle without succumbing to victimization or defeat. There are no posts after June 14, 2017 until June, 9 2019, which is an image of the soccer player turned armed revolutionary leader ‘Abd al-bāsiṭ al-Sārūt's shrouded corpse.[13]

The heavy price the people of Homs paid is captured with devastating, aesthetic care in two posts dated December 20, 2015 and August 30, 2015. The sepia-toned image of a decrepit ferris wheel foregrounding a desolate building evokes an eerie disquieting quiet (Image G). Bab al-amr, the site of some of the most intense bombing and fighting, stands like a cemetery in the landscape, a synecdoche of Syrian resistance (Image H). The 65 or so images between 2019 and the last post in 2021 are mostly shots of buildings that appear to be functioning, or at least are not in ruins, until the repost of the 2014 forced departure of the armed revolutionaries. Within this cluster, there are a few images of lone vendors, children playing, and a handful of street

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[12] www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4262768097091417&set=a.890210257 680568. Last accessed 30 Oct 2024.
[13] To learn more about al-Sārūt's involvement in the revolution and the battle over Homs, see the harrowing and rich depiction in the film *Return to Homs* directed by Talal Derki, 2013.

scenes with cars, people, cafes, but the majority capture a lack of life, of solitary architectural structures that despite the violence, remain standing. The death of al-Sārūt marks a narrative shift from a city that breaths (with revolution) to one that has come to a standstill.

We can only wonder what happened to the photographers who stopped posting, to the LY sites that suddenly ended one day. Was it that their mission no longer felt urgent? Or that there were no photographers left? Or those with a connection to LY? The sites do not tell us what happened after the last post, but they do tell us about what came before. That the people of whichever region were there witnessing, capturing, and communicating, and their aftermath is the visual narratives they left behind.

Lan nuṣāliḥ/We will not reconcile

In the very first pages of Susan Sontag's influential essay "In Plato's Cave," which begins her exploration on the power of photographs and photography, she makes two important observations:

"To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power (my emphasis)."

She continues making an acute comparison between print and image:

"A now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic drama needed to build modern, inorganic societies. But print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images, which now provide

most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire (my emphasis)" (2).[14]

These two passages from Sontag turn our attention to the actor and agency of taking pictures and the narrative possibility those images produce. The photographs of LYC do not help us understand the Syria war or revolutionary activity or resistance through photos. While the photographs do inarguably "fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the past and present," (Sontag 17) they also provide an interpretative space for reflecting on the current state of the Syrian

revolution. Within the Dimashqi collective, Idlib had become both the physical and cyber site of revolutionary life. This is not a practice of revolution by and of itself, but rather, as per Azoulay, the practice of deterritorialization of citizenship outside regime sovereignty. Photography is one of the instruments which has enabled the modern citizen to establish their liberal rights, including freedom of movement and of information, as well as her right to take photographs and to be photographed, to see what others see and would like to show through photographs (Azoulay 125). Idlib, under the weight of thousands of internally displaced people and continued regime violence, lives and breaths (Images I and J), posted under LY Dimashqi, the capital city, i.e. seat of power, in name only. Turning again to Azoulay's formulation of citizenship beyond sovereignty, she writes:

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[14] "In Plato's Cave," *On Photography.* Farrar, Struas & Giroux, 1973. Electronic edition, New York: RosettaBooks, 2005, pp. 1-20.

Whereas the nation-state is based on the principles of sovereignty and territorialization, the citizenry of photography, of which the civil contract of photography is the constitutional foundation, is based on an ethical duty, and on patterns of deterritorialization. In principle, photography is an instrument given to everyone, making it possible to deterritorialize physical borders and redefine limits, communities, and places (processes of reterritorialization). The citizenry of photography is a simulation of a collective to which all citizens belong (128).

When the Lens of the Youth initiative started out in 2012, the photographers were responding to the urgency of documentation and communication in a time of violent uncertainty. The geography and production of revolution has changed since then, shifting from the major cities (Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Raqqa, and Dayr al-zur) to stake out new territories that challenge the authority and legitimacy of the regime. The collection of images amassed by LYC since that time are a unique repository of anonymous gazes connected by the immediacy of the experience and recognition of a shared Syrian identity, one that embodies the capacity to recognize these buildings, bridges, streets, etc. as part of their collective experience. Photography "bears the traces of the meeting" (Azoulay 11). Photographer, place, and time stamped into Syrian history—whether a building in ruin or still standing, anti-regime graffiti, an aesthetic framing of armed fighters walking arm-in-arm down a desolate alley, street scenes, children at play, mourners in a cemetery—the gaze of the photographer and the photographed meet our own as we consider the kinds of relations that made the event possible. As such, if the photograph suggests a truth, as noted in the epigraph, then perhaps the truths that are exposed by LYC are those that help sustain the impulses of revolutionary acts from the past into the future.

Post Script

This essay is being edited early January, 2025, almost a month after Bashar al-Asad fled Damascus and thousands of prisoners have been freed from prisons, but was written in 2023-24. Many of the LYC sites have been re-initiated engaging in visual and written conversations about this new era.

Image A - post to Nablus (oct 25, 2022) https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=519687593502589&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

Image B - https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=729761542495192&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

Asad's face superimposed over bombed out building - eyes/doctor play

Image C https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=123423263129026&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000

al-Khalidiya, Hums, March 2020, reposted on LY Dimashqi, March 23, 2021

the caption: The clouds and plants combined try bring life back here. But how can it return? How, when the spirit that composed it has left?

حاول الغيوم.. والزرع مجتمعة أن تعيد الحياة إلى هنا.. ولكن كيف لها أن تعود؟ كيف وقد غادرتها الروح التي ألفت؟

Image D https://www.facebook.com/LensYoungdimashqi/photos/pb.100063840574765.-2207520000/3254594297942871/?type=3

Harasta, Eastern Ghouta, May 2020, reposted October 17, 2020.

caption: رُبوعٌ خلتْ مِن أهلِها وديارُ ... دموعي على أطلالهنَّ غزار

quarters are empty of people and homes...my tears on their ruins in abundant flow

(check if line of poetry)

Image - sparrows on piping (Nov 2, 2014) 25/2022

https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=704689982933328&set=p.704689982933328&opaqueCursor=AbrNUCNjeJ87UYJxZbxLeQ3V8HGxtQIRQ8nRbVc34Ie3ytZqX8CIeEZzS9TQB3KkPJUy1j8Yf8hdRpcHxto8aO7bPFXY9w0Wi-0DDgLXuBo7rD9wY8F5-vDazyY07fQ-kLDh_q_1884SUCKrHSa6wCMyEb0dr50E3my-EQvGoVUqEaaRLdj0fzFG1Hwx5hAte5nrw_mmsbxew8AmTKLM7wy_QACWZMYLzNG1lX1IZ_hEtC6H9SPK12gGmbi1wXjEJSCGXryrGEWb_fP01mikFksKQK0dqWHYB5X0C870vVUMOFnRGjfm6Ek5GxxLeVumUJ5KIhkK44Gw3YkvoMCBecrlJ8sSlzLjV1J_Z0jA-Ko2fG2oPdetJaBQHT2ffSJrIrxp2enhT7pbVMJEp-i0on0SdcQCI5SNth8yoU_apYDDUndfxCgWroI3hC4a7c4XSjLs8NeTtuv35yw_89CV5u99VeUMcwbmQZ4P2DYxkCzf1fQ2GAwymqdQNe-svdfUD711xffDM4WeJTucXYXEZqEh2B3vKUmnsNVp1ocflRDVPRrPZuYv6_4tHIyo3ZAKN6ljtvFNQItvCrMQAUPSV6pw4ex7frfG2dxvdphDFzr54N3pY2B359ozj4fFhb8CqGPS4WShDzdPPQdPQd_yewTO

Image F - https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1209925259076745&set=pb.100069474685391.-2207520000

(al-Sharani)

image G - https://www.facebook.com/LensYoungHomsi/photos/pb.100064569046764.-2207520000/1064340863600839/?type=3

Homs, sepia-toned, dec 20, 2015 - empty building, ferris wheel

image H - https://www.facebook.com/LensYoungHomsi/photos/pb.100064569046764.-2207520000/1011074348927491/?type=3

Homs, sepia-toned Bab al-Amr neighborhood, in ruins, , August 30, 2015

image I - Idlib - demonstration - lan nusalih

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=583622797109068&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

Image J - little girl IDP camp Idlib

https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=557796873024994&set=pb.100063840574765.-2207520000&type=3

[i] See, for instance, *American Ethnologist* forum "What Good is Anthropology" (2024). Yet it is outside the discipline that the ethical dimensions of fieldwork among the privileged are most directly addressed (Gosovic 2020).

[ii] This list is far from exhaustive. It must be noted that structural constraints such as disciplinary recruitment bias and funding exigencies have thus far precluded Syrians from becoming professional anthropologists.

[iii] Personal correspondence, January 2017.

[iv] Personal correspondence, February 2017.

[v] The English language ethnography published on Syrian refugees far outweighs that published on pre-war Syria.