Introduction

Trends in Syria Studies in times of internal war

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Introduction

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

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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 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.[3] 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

[3] Stefan Malthaner, "Fieldwork in the Context of Violent Conflict and Authoritarian Regimes," in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella Della Porta (Oxford University Press, 2014), 173–94, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198719571.003.0008.

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."[4] Conflicts are "messy"[5] 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.[6] 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

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[4] Rachel Julian, Berit Bliesemann De Guevara, and Robin Redhead, "From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: Exploring the Inclusion of Local Experiences in Understanding Violence in Conflict," *Peacebuilding* 7, no. 2 (May 4, 2019): 210–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1594572.

[5] Suda Perera, "Bermuda Triangulation: Embracing the Messiness of Researching in Conflict," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 11, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 42–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2016.1269528.

[6] Berit Bliesemann De Guevara and Roland Kostić, "Knowledge Production in/about Conflict and Intervention: Finding 'Facts', Telling 'Truth,'" *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 11, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1287635.

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.[7] 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".[8] As researchers from/of

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[7] Al-Jumhuriya https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/; *Return to Homs* (2013) directed by Talal Derki follows local soccer player turned armed revolutionary Abd al-Basset al-Sarut and his cohorts fighting against regime forces in the battle for Homs; *Syria Speaks*: Art and Culture From the Frontlines, ed. Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, London: Saqi Books, 2014; *The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution;* https://creativememory.org/

[8] Suda Perera, "Methodology of the Excluded: Conspiracy as Discourse in the Eastern DRC," *Peacebuilding*, February 27, 2024, 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2024.2321837.

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.[9] 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

[9] Richard Jacquemond and Felix Lang, eds. "Introduction" in *Culture and Crisis in the Arab World* (I.B. Tauris, 2019), 1-11.

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.[10] 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

[10] miriam cooke, *Dancing in Damascus*. NY: Routledge, 2016.

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 (*'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,[11] 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

[11] See Shayna Silverstein's fascinating and relevant study of the intersection of politics and dabke dance music *Fraught Balance: The Embodied Politics of Dabke Dance Music.* CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2024.

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.