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Christian Dissent in Syria Loses a Leader: Assad Deports the Noblest Priest — Father Paolo Dall'Oglio

BY ELIE CHALALA

Two interviews with Father Paolo Dall' Oglio, one on Al Arabiya and the other on the Lebanese MTV, led me to recall an exchange I had on a Southern California Listserv almost a year ago. The exchange was spurred by a celebratory posting about the Syrian Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Assistant, Bishop Luca al-Khoury, who expelled the American Ambassador Robert Ford and his French counterpart, Eric Chevallier, from the church. I asked at the time, is this Christian behavior? Do Christians not claim that God's house is open to all? Until the Arabiya news channel interview, I knew little about Bishop Luca, except that he was and still is an apologist for the Assad regime. But after reading and researching, it is clear that Bishop Luca's ties to the regime run much deeper: he was not only an apologist but also an informer for the Syrian authorities.

The activities and affiliations of Italian Jesuit Priest Paolo starkly contrast to al-Koury's. In response to a question about Christians in Syria from Giselle Khoury (the TV host of Studio Beirut on Al Arabiya) Father Paolo debunked the myth of total Christian support for the Syrian regime. Instead, he claimed that Christians, Alawites, and Sunnis are all part of the anti-Assad movement. But what most captured my attention was Father Paolo's opinion of an article written by Syrian essayist and opposition figure Michel Kilo. Kilo's article discussed Syrian Christians and how one particular bishop called on the Syrian security forces to arrest a group of youths peacefully protesting the Church's position on the regime. Even more sinister, the article claims that the bishop encouraged some of his male and female parishioners to celebrate the death of Muslim youths in a neighboring village of Damascus. Father Paolo's response to these incidents was shocking: these religious officials need not call upon the 'security forces' because they are security forces themselves.

"The Dictator" by Yasir Safi

This piqued my interest in Father Paolo, and what I found speaks volumes about the "noble Syrian priest," to use the words of Elias Khoury in Al Quds Al Arabi.

Father Paolo came to Syria as a tourist in 1973 at the age of 19. Then he returned in 1980 to study Arabic, Islamic religion, and Near Eastern Christianity. He joined Deir Mar Musa, an ancient desert monastery, in the summer of 1982, where, according to many reports, he molded the place into a center of Islamic-Christian dialogue. Father Paolo or "*abouna boulous*," as the residents used to call him according to prominent opposition figure and writer Fayez Sara, instantly transformed the community. His efforts resulted in improved relations between Christians and Muslims who lived in Deir Mar Mousa, as Mr. Sara wrote in Al Hayat. Sara also tells us that Father Paolo transformed Deir Mar Mousa into a forum for scholars and researchers to hold debates that transcended religious subjects, with many discussions pertaining to the basic interests and needs of the Syrian people.

Father Paolo, therefore, has been in the news ever since his arrival to the country, although the Syrian authorities hoped to eject him more than a year ago. His latest confrontation with the authorities came last May after the *Shabiha* killed a young Fulbright scholar, Bassel Shahade from Syracuse University, who was documenting the revolution on film in the city of Homs. When friends of the youth came to his memorial service at St. Cyril's Melkite Greek Catholic Church, government "thugs dragged some mourners off to jail and chased away the rest," according to activists interviewed by the New York Times. The leadership of the Church did nothing to allow the service to continue. On the other hand, Father Paolo invited Mr. Shahade's friends to pray at Deir Mar Musa, his headquarters about a half hour drive from Damascus. Both Muslims and Christians attended the service, but "nobody was allowing them to pray for their lost friend" Paolo told the New York Times.

Contrary to the wishes of the Syrian authorities, with their benevolent "guardian policy" for minorities, Father Paolo was asked by Al Arabiya about his mediation in Qusair (a town near the Lebanese border) over the kidnapping of community members. He had to intervene, he said, because the kidnapping was sectarian in nature. And since these kidnapped were probably Christians, the government made no attempt to help them. When Father Paolo telephoned an officer to tell him he was going to mediate the release of the kidnapped, the officer answered: "You have nothing to do with those people...It would be better if you did not go," according to the New York Times story. But Father Paolo would have nothing to do with the officer's advice because he is the "father of all Syrians," opined Mohammed Ali al-Atassi, as cited by Elias Khoury.

The regime, always aware of its narrow social base and its alienation from the vast majority of the Syrian people, has invested considerably in creating support for itself among minorities. But Father Paolo's mending of sectarian differences and healing of communal wounds has done a disservice to the regime in undermining the sense of fear and division the government had tried to sow among the different sects. As a result of this and his various displays of dissent, he was expelled from the country in June 2012.

Father Paolo's expulsion resulted from his break with the position of officially sanctioned Syrian Christianity, wherein a majority of churches have longstanding ties with the repressive Assad regime—ties that are still intact despite the fact that more than 150,000 Christians have been expelled from the city of Homs, with their churches attacked, ransacked, and vandalized. Meanwhile, the question Father Paolo asks is how Christian priests, bishops, and patriarchs justify even their "neutrality," not to mention their defense of the Shabiha and close relationship with a tyrannical regime that has now killed more than 17,000 of its own citizens. The "old Christian presence in Homs is destroyed," Father Paolo told the Times. Michel Kilo raised similar questions: "How does a religious man allow himself to become an informer for the security forces, and how does the Church of man remain silent in the face of children being massacred?"

No one has provided a better account of the actions of the Christian clerical establishment than Michel Kilo, the writer who referred to Bishop Luca al-Khoury as a government informer. Kilo writes that under the current clerical leadership "there is a clear animosity toward the Other: the Church practices a sectarian racism placing the Christian above the non-Christian, while at the same time Church officials are allied with a force of oppression similar to what Rome inflicted upon the first Christians. This official Syrian Christian establishment incites its followers to act against fellow Christians (those who protest against Assad) by portraying them as anti-religious." The conduct of Bishop Luca is a case in point.

Recently, Bishop Luca al-Khoury was invited by the Foundation for Middle East Peace (FMEP) to talk at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an event that also included the Assad-appointed Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Hassoun, who threatened in one of his angry speeches to send suicide bombers to the United States. However, the outcry was such that the endowment decided to cancel the event.

Father Paolo Dall'Oglio

When asked by Al Arabiya about his expulsion and departure, Father Paolo gave quite an emotional answer: "I have not left Syria; I was expelled from Syria...My body is standing on feet that must leave Syria, but I am staying one hundred percent." He added, "I left against my will...I would prefer being silent in Syria to speaking in exile." He was also cited by his friend Fayez Sara as having said: "God is my witness! I would have preferred to rest with the martyrs of freedom in the soil of this loving country, or to have descended to the hell of imprisonment."**AJ**

Come to the Jasmine

BY NIZAR KABBANI

I enter the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque
and greet everything in it,
tile to tile,
and dove to dove.
I wander in the gardens of Kufi script
and I pluck beautiful flowers from the discourse of God.
I hear with my eyes the voice of the mosaics
and the music of agate prayer beads.
A state of revelation and bliss overtakes me,
so I climb the steps of the first minaret I encounter
and call out:
"Come to the jasmine,"
"Come to the jasmine." *

**Come to Prayer, Come to Prayer" is part of the adhan, or the Islamic call to prayer, announced five times a day from mosque minarets.*

Excerpt from Nizar Kabbani's long poem "Ablution with Rose Water and Jasmine." Translated from the Arabic by Ghada Alatrash

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ALJADID
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Cover Artist

Fadia Afashe

Fadia Afash (whose artwork "The Interrogation" appears on the cover) is a Syrian artist, women's rights activist, and artistic scriptwriter. She studied for four years with Kurdish-Syrian painter Adnan Abed al-Rahman and then continued her education at the Adham Ismael Institute of Art. She also earned a Bachelor's degree in criminal law before taking the position of Fellow at the Humphrey School for Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. Fadia says of her own paintings: "I woke up one day with a great touchable chance of freedom. With all the violence in my country, I still see the trace of my dream in the eyes of every Syrian citizen who is fighting tyranny. The road is long, but we will always rise and attain our rights."

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Syria – 'Life from Hell': Blood Images of a Revolution

BY ABDUH WAZEN

The images of murdered men, women, and children broadcast in snippets by Arab and world satellite stations from the battlefields of the Syrian revolution have become almost like a live "exhibition," with images rolling in day after day uninterrupted... It is as if the charred and dismembered remains of human bodies are all identical, regardless of the region or neighborhood. The corpses, particularly those of women and children, cannot be "re-made," "rectified," "adjusted," or edited. They are bodies of children killed in Aleppo, Homs, Al Rastan...the place is not important. The bodies themselves have become "the place" and the place has become, for its part, a metaphorical realm, because the abundance of killings and mutilations has emancipated it from reality. If the spectator is distracted for a moment, he might imagine that what he watched was a scene from a massacre that took place in Gaza, or in Lebanon's Qana as the result of brutal Israeli bombardment. The executioners are one and the same, just as the dead do not differ from each other; for violence is one whether it is perpetrated by us or the Israelis… and so is bloodshed, killing, and destruction.

These primitively and amateurishly filmed "scenes" may trouble many viewers to the point that they are no longer able to watch them on television. How many voices were raised, calling for the deletion of these cruel and inhuman scenes from news programs and investigative reporting? They are truly painful scenes, confronting the viewer with a surreal landscape, a nightmarish reality that cannot be accommodated or rationalized no matter how often they are repeated and how identical they appear.

The spectator cannot avert his eyes from these scenes. He might avert them for a moment, but his gaze will most likely fixate on the obscene spectacle of children slaughtered, stabbed, mutilated, or discarded like worn-out toys, smeared with their own blood, eyes open to the heavens, hands pointing in the opposite direction. The spectator feels that he is seeing himself killed here, his body strewn amidst these corpses. He feels pain for these children as he would feel pain for himself. He is afraid and disturbed. He trembles… entitled to these emotions.

The images impose their ritualism in this open exhibition, but there is no "worship" here, or supplication. Rather, the self withdraws into its wounds, apprehensions, and turbidity. While those women and children are kin to saints and angels, they are also made from blood's sap. The blood burns and wounds… the violence visited upon them by the "butchers" has almost overwhelmed the angelic nature and purity that inhabits their eyes and emanates from their delicate bodies. Violence does not only kill the body, but the spirit, too. Those innocent victims are not strong enough to face the killing machine, the hellish machine that shows no mercy.

"The Chair" by Fadia Afashe

But for pictures like these, painful and terrifying, there would be no revolution; the revolution would not have triumphed or reached its purpose. Revolution needs the constant power of images in order to realize itself and its goals. It is images that "beautify" the revolution with its tragedy, that give the revolution its true meaning, that reveal its symbolism and move it from a metaphorical state to a realistic one, from an existence in thought to one of flesh and blood. These images assure that the impossible is possible and that the possible is merely a form of pain and agony. We have become controlled by images that are always ahead of us, that mock us, that scandalize us, that prostrate us and lay us bare.

When I see on television images of the murders committed by the Syrian regime, I imagine that I hear the murdered women and children; I hear their final screams; I hear their heartbeats and the closing of their sad eyes; I hear the echo of their soft fall to the earth. It seems to me, whenever I have seen their corpses – pardon me, their bodies – that I hear their images; I hear them in my ears as well as with my eyes. My senses become confused from the intensity of terror. Do I truly see what I see? Or do I need to hear and touch…so that I comprehend what I see?

We cannot – or I cannot – get accustomed to these pictures that our screens bring us morning and evening; these pictures are not repetitive, no matter how much they resemble each other. They create themselves continually from amidst the ashes they leave behind them, from the ashes that are the earth, the earth of life lost by women and children, so that others may live this life. Others that are them and us and you…**AJ**

Translated from the Arabic by Lauren Khater

The Arabic version of this article appeared in Al Hayat, July 16 2012

Editor's Notebook/Elie Chalala

Why Assad keeps pounding one Syrian city after the other!

Desecrate the cities...and desecrate civilization

The ruling clique in Syria has always evinced a strong and neurotic animosity toward the urban centers of the country, with special emphasis on the cities of bilad As-sham. Throughout the junta's long reign and domination of the land, it exhibited hostility toward the city while at the same time rebelling against the essence of the city itself. A truly modern concept of the city requires certain indispensable components: an open public environment accommodation of fixed and dynamic identities, pluralism, assimilation, political activism, and coexistence between left and right, Islamists and liberals, poor and rich, give and take, religions and sects, Christians and Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites, Alawites and Druze. This concept of the city is the antithesis of what the Syrian ruling group represents--fanaticism and blood, violence and massacres, exclusivity, boastfulness, idolization, plunder and corruption.

The Syrian countryside has rebelled, and so the poor, the urban youth, the marginalized, the oppressed, all rose up to restore the modern meaning to the city. They wanted their share of freedom and justice, their share in politics, their share in the equitable distribution of wealth, and basic freedoms.

In one respect, the Syrian Revolution is an attempt by the traditional cities, the Syrian countryside, and those who emancipated themselves from their own sects as well as by those oppressed within their own sects, all desire a return to the city in its modern meaning, its vitality that has been destroyed by the single-party system, the deification of the Leader, and the perfidy of sectarian politics.

This criminal system is trying in vain to destroy the cities of Syria, one after the other, but it will certainly have much more difficulty in destroying the city as an idea and as the future.

This is an edited translation from the Arabic by Elie Chalala of a posting by Mohammed Ali Atassi on his Facebook.

"Untitled" by Itab Hreib

"The Earthquake of Houla" – Reading Adonis

Nothing Adonis says or writes on the Syrian revolution seems to appease his critics, not to mention his haters (and there is a big difference between the two, indeed). A large number of Arab and Syrian intellectuals, artists and scholars have denounced him on the pages of leading newspapers, while some political extremist groups went as far as to threaten the poet with acts of physical violence (on social media venues, of course), and while rhetoric of the latter variety has no place in criticism proper, this should not prevent us from taking issue with some of what Adonis says.

In a recent column in Al Hayat newspaper, Adonis concluded with a brief statement under the title of "Zilzal al-houla," translating into "The Houla Earthquake." The same statement was distributed to other media sources, including the London based Al Quds al-Arabi.

"What happened in the village of Houla is a human and moral earthquake, and this is another irrefutable proof this time that Man does not have any value in the land that saw the birth of the first civilized man. It comes in a series of historically heinous acts which confirm that the struggle for power and the lust for domination remain the overarching theme of Arab political history, past and modern." Note here the generality that marks Adonis's statement. Never mind the philosophical tone of the statement, he still declines to come out and name those who are committing these "heinous acts." Without this, we are left to think that both the opposition and the brutal Assad state are equally culpable, not to mention the more than 40 children who were slaughtered in Houla. Generality and

vagueness have been exactly the problem with most of what Adonis has written since the start of the Syrian uprising.

Consider what he says next in the statement: "Regardless of the means of denial of who committed this evil act, and regardless what the investigation would reveal, this crime was committed on Syrian soil, and by Syrian hands that killed Syrian nationals. The responsibility is then Syrian." Adonis is reluctant to even speculate on who the perpetrators are, and keeps his comments vague, the only problem being that the crime was committed on Syrian soil. Let us not forget that Adonis is a great romantic poet. But given the events of the last year or so, this is hardly the time for his romanticism and glorification of the Syrian land, not to mention the subtle undertones of nationalist chauvinism in his statement, in that he is surprised that such evil was committed in his country, as though evil deeds were solely the work of other countries!

Once again, Adonis repeats an old theme he echoed last year and to which some intellectuals responded with outrage. In a letter, he appealed to Bashar al-Assad as an "elected president," asking him "aren't you before everything president of a country and people?" He continues in his statement as if Syria is a constitutional democracy, and perhaps he believes this to be so, thus saying that the Syrian "state bears moral and political responsibility," describing it as "the authority of the Syrian people and the protector of all of them." When I read this statement, I wondered where this man has been during the past 15 months! He leaves me also to wonder about his definition of legitimacy, secularism, and other attributes he imagines to be found inside the house of al-Assad.

A sense of humanity must mean a sense of 'surprise' at inhumanity

I was enthralled by Fawaz Traboulsi's latest column in As Safir. The title Traboulsi gives to his column is "About Aleppo, Its Sisters and Its Surprise."

Troublsi's major concern is with the weakened or absent feeling of "surprise" among some of the Lebanese and Arabs who constitute the bulk of his readership. According to the author, two villains in particular exemplify the callous mentality that permits one to be unperturbed in the face of the crimes currently being committed against the Syrian people. The two culprits are the "globalized media" and the "local fahlawis," as he calls them. Fahlawis is a term that designates those who feign knowledge and expertise that they simply do not have. Examples of such poseurs abound on just about any political talk show on most Mideast TV stations.

While the term "surprise" is quite general and abstract and can be applied in a variety of contexts, Traboulsi's "surprise" is expressed in raising the question of what "surprise's absence" does to our humanity; in other words,

"Touchable" by Fadia Afashe

what would happen when we cease to be "surprised" by the scenes of torture and massacres in Syria. Clearly, Traboulsi is saying that a loss of surprise in reacting to the current violence in Syria is an unequivocally troubling phenomenon, one that should be resisted.

This phenomenon is not without causes, and Traboulsi excels in making sense of them. The lack of "surprise" is associated with common thinking, propagated and reinforced by experts and pundits of all types, and is invariably based on the assumption that "everything is known and understood, is clear and does not require proof, especially when it involves conspiracies," he writes.

Traboulsi offers a good example from what was once known as the Arab Spring. Even the millions who came out to the Arab streets demanding regime change, freedom, bread and dignity in more than a half a dozen countries did not surprise some people. For some it was nothing out of the ordinary; rather than seeing the Arab Spring as a watershed development, a political revolution – the Arab world has never seen anything like it on such a scale – it became something "natural," to use Traboulsi's term. It is a season that comes once in a year, followed by a summer, a fall and winter, and as such it needs no explanation.

We are told that an in-depth or intellectual analysis of the unfolding events, with all their deplorable violence, should be directed toward the search for intentions. But such a search is symptomatic of the authoritarian tendency to ignore what has actually been said and done, and focus instead on the alleged "intentions" behind acts and statements. As the author goes on to say:

"I want to be surprised so I can maintain my sense of humanity. I am surprised in order to say to TV: neither you or your owners could make me accustomed to killing, torture, injustice, oppression, repression and exploitation; my resistance is to keep being surprised and I will stay surprised

not for Aleppo alone, but also for its "sisters – Dara, Raqa, Deir Az Zour, Latikia, Homs, Hama, Damascus and other Syrian cities."

I can only agree with him.

Lebanese author strips "naked" sectarianism of Syrian regime

I have become dreadfully weary throughout the past two years of the rhetorical practices of apologists for the crimes of Mideast dictatorships. A particularly unnerving yet predictable example of this is the conspiracy theory that has been promoted since the very beginning of the Syrian Revolution. As if completely oblivious of the risk that resorting to conspiracy theory could be widely interpreted as a sign of weakness, the Syrian state media, assisted by sympathetic media outlets in Lebanon and the "pseudo leftists" intellectuals and journalists in the West, have sought to distract their viewers and readers with a seemingly perpetual conjuration of remembrances about past foreign plots and aggressions against Syria and the Arab world. One often hears or reads of Condoleezza Rice's vision for a "New Middle East," with its vocabulary of "creative chaos," a "new Sykes-Picot," the impending "Balkanization" of the Middle East. Most if not all of these clichés have been repeated by Lebanese pundits, both on television and in the opinion pages of leading Lebanese and Arab newspapers.

One need not dwell on the unsavory details of this propaganda operation, however, since every mendacious claim regurgitated on Lebanese and Arab media is exposed and discredited by the images of massacres, the cold-blooded knifing of victims, and the uprooting of people from their native villages and towns, scenes out of the Middle Ages. But in the midst of readings and painful viewing of television interviews, I read an article by a Lebanese journalist and author, Ali al-Amin." What follows are some of the highlights and insightful thesis of Al-Amin's article which shed some light on the current crisis in Syria. Al-Amin's ideas were published in the Lebanese newspaper, Al Balad, on August 24, 2012.

The system of values into which Syrians and Lebanese have been socialized is "strange." The populace is frequently subject to manipulation by scare tactics, fear mongering, and the exploitation and exacerbation of sectarian tensions. This system is propagated in defiance of the logic of history and human values.

Some of his ideas desperately promote a future scenario in which "peoples suffering from tyranny, oppression, and despotism" will be able to defeat their enemies, and that "societies living in republics of fear, or their sectarian, Islamic and secular kingdoms" will be capable of practicing their freedom of expression and liberate their territories from occupation. Al-Amin's claim that "despotism produces only defeats, whether they are cultural or military" is supported by

"Mother" byy Fadia Afashe

long-established historical facts. "Internal defeat" presents an advantageous situation to external enemies, be they "Israel" or any other power, as well as to internal enemies like "underdevelopment" which "left Syria behind the modern world" for decades.

Although tyranny is a system of government opposed by all religions (including Islam), and all humanitarian laws "deny legitimacy to such conduct," ideological or political Islam along with other forces attempt at times to "rationalize oppression and justify it" and bestow upon it "holiness" in political practice, if it serves a particular interest at a given time.

The title al-Amin gave to his article, "Rejectionism (*Mumanaa*) at the Moment of its Fall: Naked Sectarianism," is significant in this context. It is no wonder that "the rejectionist-liberationist-religious discourse" always inevitably reveals itself to be little more than a litany of sectarian accusations, often expressed in thinly veiled insinuations of a divisionary nature. In this manner, political deceit is used to reinforce the basest and most antagonistic of tendencies of the popular base. This practice is responsible for unleashing the culture of sectarian animosity and stifling the forces that are legitimately resisting the despotism at home.

When it becomes difficult to dispute the demands for freedom, dignity, and the end of tyrannical control and domination of the Syrian people, the ideologies of conspiracy and religious mysticism are invoked. It is the response of those with failed visions to associate reason as frequently as possible with a form of magical-religious thinking, with the goal of neutralizing to the fullest possible extent any intellectual and religious resistance that may arise. In other words, as reason and logic become marginalized, superstition and sectarian fanaticism are increasingly advanced as the answer to rationalizing the "illogic in our worldly life" and to

justify crushing the oppressed and those who aspire to achieve basic human dignity. Thus, the culture of religious and non-religious despotism becomes useful in expanding the use of force in confronting and managing dissent, as well as in elevating the killing of civilians to the level of a patriotic or even "heroic" deed by the standards of the Syrian regime.

An example of the extension of despotism in the Syrian regime deep into civil society is its elaborate security apparatus whose ostensible goal is the liberation of the Golan Heights, effectively allowing freedom to sit on a shelf. But the reality of this operation is that the "progressive national regime" has simply replaced the occupier with a corrupting and oppressing society. As is painfully obvious, the occupied land has yet to be liberated despite years of solemn promises to the contrary and the deliberate evisceration of state institutions at the behest of this liberation mythology. When the population rebelled, the regime unleashed the machine of killing and destruction. Can any reasonable person remain silent while watching Syrian MIG 23 and Sukhoi jets distribute the regime's vengeance upon the citizens, cities, and villages of its most glorious homeland? This method exposes the extent of the alienation that separates the Syrian people from the state and the unprecedented animosity directed by the state toward the people, an animosity manifest in an oppression of unparalleled scope and criminality against initially unarmed citizens with entirely reasonable demands.

"Vision" by Fadia Afashe

Syrian Stories from 'The World of Ghosts' – Ahmad's Story

Over the years, we have devoted generous space to covering dissent by Arab intellectuals, especially the Syrians. We believed that most of them who were arrested and imprisoned for long periods of time (poet Farag Bayrakdar, 14 years; Riadh al-Turk, 17 years; Yassin al-Haj Saleh, 16 years) had been seen as members of different leftist and communist parties, thus posing threats to a repressive regime. But after reading Michel Kilo's stories from his time in Al Maza Military Prison (the article to follow is based on one of Kilo's stories), it is clear that even ordinary Syrians, who hardly harbor any hostile feelings toward the regime have spent similar periods of imprisonment.

Michel Kilo, a leftist intellectual and opposition figure who spent time in Assad's prisons, has recently decided to share some of his stories from his time behind bars. They appeared in the London-based Asharq Alawsat daily, which has been a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition.

Ahmad's story about "concealing secrets from the Syrian authorities," powerfully narrated by Michel Kilo, hit me on two levels. First, Ahmad's personal tragedy, while expected, was nonetheless powerful; second is the testimony to the sheer stupidity of the Syrian dictatorship, which led some to believe that even though it was authoritarian, represented some sense of order and justice. This false hope of legitimacy ended quickly though as images appeared of MiG 23 and Sukhoi jets bombing the Syrian people and destroying their cities and villages.

While on the upper floor of the notorious Al Mazza Military Prison, Kilo noticed a prisoner had posted on the wall behind him two pictures: one of a red rose with a picture of the Lebanese diva Fairuz and the second of Hafez al-Assad, Syria's former president and, of course, Bashar's father. The prisoner's peculiar choice to place the picture of his jailer over his head intrigued Kilo.

When Kilo asked if that prisoner was an informant and supporter of al-Assad, he was told no. On the contrary, the prisoner distinguished himself during the 1973 October War and was the recipient of a prestigious award. Kilo also noted the prisoner's eyes appeared red, and that at night he was constantly crying and moaning. But when the prison warden passed around at 11 o'clock to shower the prisoners with insults, the prisoner had gone to sleep.

Ahmad, the prisoner, told Kilo that he was asked by his brigade commander to travel from Al Qatifa, the center of his

military base to the city of Qatana, in Rif Damascus to transfer a tank. When he arrived, the maintenance officer told Ahmad to wait in a coffee shop and he would be notified when the tank was ready. He obliged and went to the coffee shop and sat in a far corner. Because he did not know any of the officers then in the restaurant, he put on his headphones that were nearly a part of him and played songs of Fairuz. In fact, he loved Fairuz so much that his tank bore her name. There was a group of officers sitting in another corner, but he hardly noticed their conversation because of his preoccupation with Fairuz. Hours passed and a soldier came and told Ahmad, "the tank is ready," and it was later put on a carrier.

Ahmad was arrested only two days later and accused of keeping secrets. The investigator asked about the officers' conversation in the restaurant, but Ahmad told him that he had heard nothing but Fairuz. The investigator became upset and kicked, slapped, and electrified Ahmad, all on the grounds that he was concealing information. Ahmad eventually concluded that the officers were accused of talking about orders to defend the Euphrates Dam against an Iraqi attack. Then one of the participants complained after hearing the order, and said, "We have the Israeli enemy, and apparently this is not enough, so we have to have an Arab enemy?" Ahmad says that the investigator identified these officers as the "conspirators," seven of them, three of them like Ahmad, recipients of awards of honor. Ahmad also said the Baath newspaper published an interview with him about his award in the October War and reprinted it every year he was in prison for six years. Also, it did not matter that the conspirators said that they neither knew "me nor my identity."

Ahmad also said that the conspirators ridiculed him as a "womanish" officer for wasting his time listening to music.

The accusations of concealing secrets landed Ahmad in prison with the other "conspirators" and subjected him to torture that lasted three months. Kilo said that he did not ask him about the picture of Hafez al-Assad hanging over his head, but Ahmad noticed it as if he is seeing it for the first time and said, "His mercy is the only saving hope.

"I am now 33 years old, and if he pardoned me, I will be able to resume my life, work as a driver, marry and make a family, and perhaps build a home and become happy..." Ahmad's excuse for posting the picture was his hope that one of the prisoners or the policemen would write a report about it and thus the authorities would grant him freedom. One night, Kilo writes, "while we were in the midst of a chess game, Ahmad asked me loudly, apparently intentionally so the others could hear: 'Isn't the president a beast and criminal when he imprisons a person until death, though he would have been able to grant him mercy or issue an order to execute him.'

But the president did not grant mercy upon anyone; he did not release him from prison until after 17 years and two months, when he became a ruin of a human being, "almost blind from crying," wrote Kilo. Ahmad did not marry after his release from prison, did not have children, or build a home, and never tasted happiness. He confined himself to a room, that he never left except to relieve himself. When he died after two years, his brother told Kilo, "He never left Kafar Soussa -- his home town -- to Damascus except once, and during his last days, he refused to eat despite his mother's pleading and constant cries."

This is one of many stories which Kilo describes as "actual stories from the world of Ghosts."**AJ**

On Damascus and Everything Damascene

BY NIZAR KABBANI

My voice rings out this time from Damascus.
It rings out from the house of my mother and father.
In al-Sham, the geography of my body changes.
My blood cells become green
and my alphabet becomes green.
In al-Sham, a new mouth sprouts from my mouth;
a new voice sprouts from my voice;
and my fingers become a tribe of fingers.

I return to Damascus
riding on the back of a cloud;
riding the two most beautiful horses in life—
the horse of passion
and the horse of poetry.

I return after sixty years
in search of my umbilical cord,
looking for the Damascene barber who circumcised me
and for the midwife who tossed me in a wash-basin
underneath the bed,
collected a golden Lira from my father,
and left our home on that day of March 1923,
her hands stained with the blood of the poem.

... I return to the womb in which I was formed
and to the first woman who taught me
the geography of love
and the geography of women.

I return after my parts have been strewn across the continents
and my cough scattered throughout hotels,
for after my mother's laurel scented sheets
I have not found a similar bed on which to sleep.

Excerpt from Nizar Kabbani's long poem "Ablution with Rose Water and Jasmine." Translated from the Arabic by Ghada Alatrash

CONTRIBUTORS

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hybrid instruments to invite new kinds of musical conversation into the world.

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Poetry in Ttanslation

Arabesque of Love
By Maher Kheir, Translated by Raghid Nahhas
Papyrus Publishing 2010

BY JOSEPH SILLS

Raghid Nahhas's translated compilation of Maher Kheir's love poems draws from four of the poet's collections, including "Sparrows of The Nile Palace Bridge" (2008) and "A Sun for a Blue Shirt" (2005). The poems range in length from four lines to over 100, and in breadth from evocative laments of love lost ("Laced Memory") to erotic proclamations of desire ("Dancing on the Eyelashes of the Universe"). Kheir explores the nuances between bereavement and absence ("What Shall I Do with My Wings Now?") as well as arousal and intimacy (Rosella), but he avoids reaching definitive conclusions; his poems are not meant to give answers but to evoke the deep emotion that accompanies profound questions.

In "Arabesque of Love," Mr. Nahhas has penned a faithful and delicate translation of Kheir's verse, adding notes about the original Arabic, and carefully choosing each word to communicate the poet's singularly Arabic style. While the thought behind the translation is evident, it, nonetheless, captures the intensity of Kheir's images, which often depict the natural beauty of lakes, rivers, and deserts in Canberra and

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Prison: Geography of Despotism

BY HALA MOHAMMED

Prison: A Geography of Despotism without a Place in the Nation

A picture of a wood stove warms hearts.

The gas stove in the picture has an odor.

The prisoner never drew a stove on the prison walls or on the screeching iron gates.

The geography of the prison is coldness and solitude.

His prison time had corroded his decayed lifetime with the disease of oppression.

Poetry, the firewood of hope.

In Syria's recent past, most families didn't have enough money to buy a television; they had the nourishment of books and notebooks, bread, music and song, life and lore. Each family would spend its evenings circled around the wood stove.

They would watch the fire, drink tea, nap, dream, study, and from these small, warm, humble, urban rooms and parlors – secular, religious, and diverse – came Circassians, Armenians, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Assyrians, and Palestinians who would become doctors and pilots, scientists and teachers and engineers, poets and novelists and journalists, businessmen and artists, officers and workers and peasants…and the nation's soldiers.

In Latakia, the sea was the outlet for the dreamers of the coastal community, known for their liveliness and slow manner of speech, as if they composed their words before saying them, words emanating from deep inside them, salted by suns of anxiety. Their words reached the calm ports of distant cities, an echo on the gray, absent horizon of the return of the slow-speaking, far traveling man of the house of blue.

One day, the people of Latakia awoke to a strange noise, and on the shore they saw the shadows of gigantic dinosaurs, as if they arose from an age now extinct, upon the shore of the Mediterranean Sea in Latakia, into which all the seas and tears and sighs of lovers in the world poured.

These terrifying figures began to shake the Corniche and convulse the immovable, earthen building made of stone and sand, standing in the face of earthquakes and floods and erosion and forgetfulness. They shook the foundation of the fragile, delicate spirits that precipitated love through the centuries, generation by generation.

"Untitled" by Yasir Safi

The town balcony was demolished in the sea; it became a port that dislocated the rhythm of the sea and the shore; it became engulfed by the sea and the earth, and the mast of the ship did not resurface on the shore.

The blue face of Syria, freedom of history, our endeavors and the footsteps of our childhood and the relationships of the city's people stacked by the foundation of beauty and openness, humor and nobility and fraternity, replaced by transactions of cement and ugliness.

The people of Latakia stopped at sunset, lamenting their city, the fish of the sea fleeing into hiding in the open mouths of crocodiles at the noise of the terror.

They paved the sea…they dusted off the façade of the city, the architecture from geologic ages, a gift from human history to the people of the coast. A gift from generations to other generations.

Silence and emptiness took the place of the roar of the ocean waves that used to race to the distant horizon to reach our shore and rest upon it, leaving what they had gathered on their travels of echoes of civilizations and tales as a trusteeship…then departing.

By Etab Hreib

New cafes opened using new capital that did not run out…Cafes that were not able to be a part of the rhythm of the city. So the city converted to the rhythm of profit, money, and speculative investment.

And the people of the coast did not like their market in quick investment far from their needs and convictions and customs and sovereignty and viewpoints.

Latakians took delight in objecting to subjects, turning them upside down, and consulting each other hundreds of times upon elaborating over small detail – that their meeting was pleasure and consultancy was their excuse for a warm and constant meeting.

Their time was deliberately slow, with an afternoon nap then their evening endeavors in the breeze of the sea and the smell coffee, the shadow and imagination. That is how the city is theirs. The pulse of the city is the rhythm of its people.

....

Now and after 30 years that have passed since the laughs, smiles, walks and the distant of the sea from the history were paved, the old Corniche is still unbelievable. The embroidered stone that we used to rest our hands on its low fence is still unbelievable, it is unbelievable that we will not be able to sob over it because of its beauty. Still this sense of touch stirs in our hands the passing over over the lines of the cracks of age.

Since the time of prohibiting freedoms and assaulting the fabric of nature and history, no one cares about tears or smiles, not even with the wish of the sea's wave that amusing itself as it reaches our shore...its fish would come out to feed on the grass in front of the sky's blue eyes....and then returns back slowly, resembling only the rhythm of the conversations, the conversations of the shore's people. They swallow the last letter of the word like the wave that swallows the step on the sand.....they are pulled to the islands of sand and the fishermen's boats in the depths of the sea to grow there as the sacred weed of life.

From this spaciousness and blueness to this narrowness and cement and blackness.

From writing "my love" on old polar to writing on the walls of prison.

The mentality that bridged the blue, trying now to bridge the fields of freedom and paving it.

The prison is "the mentality of prohibition" that eats the green and the dry of the shores.

Prison: the Geography of Despotism. It is no spot with time or place in the land of the nation.

Prison: the life of the exile and the establishment of a culture of violence. It is an invasion of the culture of peaceful coexistence, law and justice, state, dignity, citizenship by the culture of exclusion, inferiority and fear.

It is the replacement of a tribal civilization by a tribe without civilization.

This other is behind high, noiseless walls of cement, and not least is it ignorance, danger, and nothingness.

An echo of me is deep is in me; the Other; the window.

The people of the coast dip out their tears from the blue sea….and from their smiles and the sweat of their brows.

Syria, I believe in you.**AJ**

The Arabic version of this essay appeared in Al Hayat, 18, 2011

Translated from the Arabic by Joseph Sills

Damascene Alley

BY NIZAR KABBANI

... I roam the narrow alleys of Damascus
while hazel eyes awaken behind the windows
and greet me.
The stars put on their golden bracelets
and greet me.
The doves alight from their towers
and greet me.
The clean Damascene cats,
who were born, grew up, and were married alongside us,
come out to greet me.

Excerpt from Nizar Kabbani's long poem "Ablution with Rose Water and Jasmine." Translated from the Arabic by Ghada Alatrash

Ghayath Mattar: 'Rain Flower' of Syria

BY ELIE CHALALA

Everything I read about Ghayath Mattar confers an image of a young man who was a model activist in the ongoing Syrian Revolution. Ghayath was a pacifist and advocate of non-violence, states the Madrid-based Syrian exiled author Nawal al-Sibai, according to the website Aklam Hurra (Free Pens). She points out that Mattar's legacy is a political will: "Even if they kill us all we should not resort to weapons to defend ourselves." According to al-Sibai, Ghayath's death is even more outrageous due to the fact that he was quite distant from the opposition groups who have recently been calling for the use of weapons. Another respected witness to Ghayath's non-violent character is the writer Abd al-Wahab Badrakhan of Al Hayat: "Ghayath was known in Darayya to have distributed flowers to the soldiers at the beginning of the uprising."

When the details of his arrest and the manner of his death became known, there were no surprises, especially in terms of the deception and the deadly tricks used in his abduction. The security forces orchestrated an ambush of one of the opposition leaders, 32 year-old Yahiyya Sharbaji, in his hometown of Darayya. This forced Yahiyya's brother to telephone Ghayath and tell him that Yahiyya had been wounded. Ghayath went along with Yahiyya to help, but as soon as they arrived, Ghayath was surrounded by *al shabiha*, who were reportedly behaving like wild beasts that froth and salivate at the sight of their prey. Their first act of revenge was taken against his vocal chords, which had so often been heard echoing the word "freedom" with a voice that shook the wall of fear in the early days of the Syrian uprising. Ghayath and his wife were awaiting two births, that of a child and that of a nation. While the killers prevented him from celebrating these momentous occasions, they cannot prevent them from happening all the same. This account of Ghayath's treatment is based on several sources including Yassin al-Hajj Saleh's article in Al Hayat, a posting on Ziad Majed's Facebook page, an article by Ghassan al-Muflah in the Kuwaitee Al Siyassah Newspaper, and is also corroborated by reports from Human Rights Watch. Upon returning Ghayath's remains to his family in the manner of throwing his corpse down in front of them, *al-shabiha* told the dead activist's mother and wife to "Take him and make *shawarma* out of him."

In spite of Ghayath's pacifism, he was killed under torture in the city of Darayya. When the time came for the funeral, hundreds of Syrians and non-Syrians gathered to pay their respects, including ambassadors from the U.S., Great Britain, Japan, and other EU countries. Their presence, of course, was

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The Children's Revolution:
Youth and the Syrian Rebellion

BY FARAG BAYRAKDAR

It's okay to cry a little for Syria and her people. And it's also okay to believe freedom is near.

The tsunami of Tunisian revolution toppled Arab dictatorships. Although Husni Mubarak believed Egypt would be immune to the fate of Ben Ali's Tunisia, he soon was overthrown. Gaddhafi, Africa's self-proclaimed "King of Kings," said Libya would be different, as well. There was no difference except that he became a war criminal, who didn't hesitate to blindly bomb Libyan cities with Grad rockets. In the end, he was captured in a drain. So closed the history of the crazed despot.

The former Yemeni president was also mistaken. And now it's the Syrian President's turn. He is the reason Syria evolved from a republic, in name, to a de facto kingship. I wouldn't have opposed him had his kingdom respected itself and its people.

"Fleeing Death" by Etab Hreib

Despite the similar circumstances between these Arab countries, each of their revolutions had its own spark.

The spark in Syria was a group of youth from Deraa, who ignited the Syrian revolution. They were undeterred by their families' fear and by warnings of previous terrors like the 1982 destruction of Hama, where tanks and air artillery bombed the city. The Hama Massacre resulted in the death of over 20,000, in addition to tens of thousands who were arrested or went missing.

One night in mid March 2011, the Syrian authorities arrested several Deraa youth, ranging from ages 10 to 15. These youth had written slogans on their city walls similar to those they heard and saw on satellite channels from the Tunisian and Egyptian protests: "The people want the overthrow of the regime."

The families of those arrested tried to communicate with the security and political officials to release their children. Instead of simply refusing to answer these families, the authorities escalated the situation, insulting the families and cursing their honor.

When leaders of Deraa met with Atif Najib, the head of the local branch of government security and cousin to Bashar al-Assad, said to them, "Forget your children, who belong to me. Go to your wives to have other children. If you are not manly and unable to do so, then my men can take your place." The town leaders, feeling insulted, carried out a symbolic act well known in Syrian culture: they removed their headbands from their heads and laid them on Najib's table as a sign of their humiliation. This showed they would not forgive him unless he apologized for his insult. However, Najib refused to acknowledge or pay attention to this symbolic act. Instead, he continued to insult them by throwing the headbands gathered on his desk in the trash. As a result, the leaders left him with the determination to win back their honor.

After two weeks, the children were released, only for everyone to discover that they had been exposed to terrible torture. Some had broken teeth, while others had fingernails pulled off. After hearing their stories, an uprising erupted in the city. The youth took to the streets, followed by their fathers, mothers,

brothers, and sisters.

The authorities responded with live gunfire, resulting in the death of hundreds of protestors. The gunfire soon spread to every corner of Syria.

For 48 consecutive years, Syria lived under state of emergency. This is the equivalent of three or four life sentences under the laws of some European countries. In my opinion, the new generations in Syria have decided that they won't wait any longer. Unlike the massacre of Hama in 1982, which went unnoticed by the world, this massacre will not pass unheard. These new generations know how to defend their future through the internet, cell phones, and satellite channels.

In the beginning, the Syrian media claimed that there were external forces behind the demonstrations. To validate these accusations, the authorities arrested an Egyptian activist and forced him to confess on Syrian state television that he was a foreign agent.

The Syrian regime was forced to release him after a few days, as he possessed an American passport. When the man returned to Egypt, he said what had happened to him was a trick by the Syrian regime.

After that episode, the regime contrived yet another lie, saying Bandar Bin Sultan was behind the revolution. The trend continued. Next, they accused Hariri's camp in Lebanon of smuggling funds and weapons to protestors in Syria. Then, when those lies gave way, the regime claimed armed Salafist Islamic groups were shooting at the protestors as well as at the army and security forces. But, as I've observed through footage, these armed groups were in fact security forces and Shabiha—Bashar's thugs disguised in civilian clothing.

Do you see who the next culprit will be? Will it be America? Israel? An Al Qaeda operation? The "Allies," whoever they are? Or the "enemies," whoever they are?

Not even a bird can pass through Syria without being questioned or investigated or sometimes having his feathers plucked.

Today there are enough numbers, names, and videos in the global media to show that the Syrian regime and its news reports are and have been lying.

The regime has tightened its grip as the protests continue to spread steadily. Their initial decision to retaliate in Deraa, the mother of the revolution, set the precedent for a prolonged struggle. The regime first sent four military squads to lay siege to the city. Later, the government bombed several neighborhoods and cut off access to electricity, water, telephones, and medicine. Citizens were prohibited from removing corpses from the streets.

Perhaps the regime assumed it could suppress the uprising by force, but the result was the opposite of what they expected; most of the cities came to the aid of blockaded Deraa, whose protests were still growing despite the countless victims of live bullets.

Now after more than 15 months of protest, nearly 10,000 dead (today's numbers exceed 25,000), 10,000 injured (today's numbers are much higher), and hundreds of thousands of arrestees, missing, and refugees, it can be said that there is not a single city, or town or village, in Syria that has not paid its price for freedom. So does the regime want a higher price?

The heavy bloodshed I see in the pictures sent by camera, video, and mobile phones—the large number of children among them—are cases of repression by collective revenge. There is no longer room for justification, no longer room for denial, under the shelling of cities and ruthless gunfire.

These images I have witnessed are so nerve-wracking that I couldn't bring myself to show my European friends.

I have videos that are enough to shake up the unconscionable minds. All the while, the official Syrian media continues its wretched attempts to cover up the sun, to cover up the truth. It spreads its poisons and lies in bullet ridden and tattered bottles.

The regime has lost its battle in media. This is a symbolic victory: for the first time social media has exposed and defeated Syria's official mouthpiece.

Most of the world now knows the bloody and terrible truth of the Assad regime. They know the horrific acts of the security forces and Shabiha against the unified, defenseless, and peaceful Syrian people. Thus informed, the world powers can no longer ignore the reactions of their peoples to the atrocities in Syria.

Until then, the Syrian media will continue to fabricate a Syria that no longer exists.**AJ**

This is an edited translation from the Arabic by Joseph Sills

Ghayath Mattar

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intended to show solidarity with the Syrian people and honor this peaceful activist who was able to survive for a time amid the violence of Bashar al-Assad's *shabihha*. But as soon as the diplomats left the memorial gathering in Darayya, the security forces intervened, using tear gas bombs and firing into the air in order to disperse the hundreds of Syrians who were attending the event.

Ghayath has been eulogized by many Arab commentators. The words of the Lebanese poet Inayeh Jaber in Al Quds Al Arabi newspaper best illustrate the horrific nature of the crime against Ghayath: "The young Syrian man, whose body lay in a heap on the ground, was still breathing when a military man shot three more bullets at his head that silenced him. This scene caused me a deadly horror. I became speechless and collapsed from shock. Had I had the street mentality of the criminals who kill people, I would have gone to search for the murderer and killed him. But since I do not have these vengeful feelings, and am incapable of possessing them, I felt great pain, without knowing its cause- neither the broader nor the more immediate."

The personal narrative of Jaber continues. "I closed the window despite the summer heat, and paced the room back and forth many times. When I finally opened the window, the tears were streaming down my face. I was surprised by how many tears a Syrian event could elicit. I had heard of Ghayath, but had never seen his picture, thus I tried to draw one by writing. I

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Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory

BY WIDED KHADRAOUI

Literature can be a useful tool for confronting tragedies of the past. In their newest plays, Algerian playwright Slimane Benaissa and Lebanese playwright Wajdi Mouawad examine the trauma inflicted by the violent upheavals in their respective countries, exploring ideas of collective memory and rebuilding a society that has imploded.

Incendies (Scorched) by Mouawad and *Les fils de l'amerturne* (Sons of Bitterness) by Benaissa illustrate the importance of politics in everyday life. Benaissa's play confronts a society's collective memory of violence through a dialogue between a terrorist and a journalist. Mouawad's piece discusses Lebanon's civil war through a cross-generational dialogue, during which years of familial secrets are unraveled.

"Untitled" by Yasir Safi

Mouawad writes from Montreal, having emigrated there with his family in 1983 to escape the war in Lebanon; Benaissa writes from France, where he went into exile in 1993. The fact that they both write from exile is relevant to their exploration of conceivable violence and their aptitude for consolation. The real life consequences of war and authoritative regimes allow the authors to examine the histories through a different lens in exile.

Collective memory is a form of remembrance that is part of the communal identity-formation process. How collective memory impacts individuals and collective society as a whole are two separate issues. In the two plays, trauma is mediated through various forms of the collective memory, and the works urge us to re-examine our own past and current circumstances.

It is critical both to understanding Benaissa and Mouawad as playwrights and post-war literature as a whole that we see the plays as odysseys, or journeys back home. Both the Lebanese and Algerian governments have actively sought to erase certain memories from public consciousness. Collective memory, unfortunately, has the tendency to perpetuate these manipulations and falsifications. But by using literature as a tool, people can begin unravelling the truth about the past.

Relying on dramatic features like interspatial manifolds as well as fragmented and analepses sequences, the authors convey the sense of turmoil and continuous pain that these nations share.

Slimane Benaissa "Les fils de l'amertume"

Collective memory has so far stifled the possibility for revolution in Algeria. As the "Arab Spring" sweeps through North Africa, Algeria remains largely untouched. The legacy of the civil war, with more than 150,000 people dead or missing, and the trauma of the war of liberation are still parts of the national collective. With these events fresh in their minds, Algerians seem unwilling to take part in another violent upheaval. The government's ineffectual reforms have not fostered the most creative environment, yet poignant works still seep through the cracks.

Slimane Benaissa's play "*Les fils de l'amertume*" (which began as a novel and was later adapted for the stage) is a dialogue between a terrorist and a journalist. Their conversation is an exploration of the overlap between religion and nationalism. The confrontation between these two multi-faceted institutions, with the subsequent spiral into chaos, is the play's means of exploring the legacy of violence in Algerian society.

Representatives of the second generation after the War of Independence, the play's two protagonists face their country's weariness and devastation. With the background of civil war, economic crisis, and social injustice, the two characters explore the subject of violence and society's attempts to control it. Farid symbolizes fundamentalism, while Youcef is the secularist; yet, their positions are not so cookie-cutter precise. The son of a resistance fighter, Farid is described as "a disorientated soul who becomes a terrorist," while Youcef, in the vein of the author's own multiculturalism, identifies himself as Berber, French, and Arab. The fluidity and multiplicity of identity is a constant theme in the play.

Using literature to explore the effects of violence and the elusive nature of solace is a poignant way of examining the Algerian experience. For example, after growing weary of the corruption associated with the FLN-affiliated government, even secularists voted for the Islamists in the 1992 elections,. Benaissa tries to explain the appeal of Islamism by employing religious mythology, evoking the spirituality of prayer, and showing how the mosque has been a resource for the oppressed. He explains, "I know now what my father has always hidden, that which the institute has never told me. It is the emir who explained that those who govern us are thieves. Then he demanded whether or not I want to resemble them? This question healed me

The text of the play is also chaotic, symbolizing the mind set in Algeria. Dialogue is passed from Farid to Youcef unceremoniously, and it is interspersed with numerous flashbacks that cement the feeling of utter perplexity: "My words are naïve, and my confusion is simple. Who kills? And why? No. Do not respond. I already know your answer, I am looking for my own." (p 265) The hunt to legitimize experiences as a society and as individuals is a constant theme in both plays.

Wajdi Mouawad "*Incendies*"

In Mouawad's play *Incendies* the setting is never named. This anonymous land, however, is clearly Lebanon. The reluctance to identify the location is a vital part of the plot, which centers on distressing secrets and the eventual demystification of the past.

Twins Janine and Simon make separate trips back to the Middle East to fulfil the last request of their dying mother, Nawal Marwan, who fought in her country's bloody civil war and eventually fled to Canada. Nawal instructs her Québécois notary and executor of her will, Hermile Lebel, to tell her children to send off two letters, one to their father and one to their brother, and then to journey 'home.' Janine is sent to find their father, who the twins had thought died before their birth, and Simon must track down the brother they never knew existed.

The twins' journey, something of a Greek myth set in a modern day war-torn Middle Eastern country, eventually exposes their mother's painful past. Their odyssey uncovers an Oedipal twist, with both of their letters reaching the same man: their mother's long lost son is also the twins' father. With the twins travelling through the country, Mouawad exposes Nawal's past in schizophrenic snatches. The irregular linearity pairs with the exposition of torture, shootings, and killings—which are rampant throughout Nawal's country—with the story of her rape gradually unfurling. Their mother's silence about her past turns out to also be her salvation. Nawal's only choice was "to fight against the misery of the world or, perhaps, to fall into it." (p 26) The trick of undoing the past by suppressing it is reminiscent of the actions of both the Lebanese and Algerian actions.

Mouawad also looks at the struggles of immigrants during the war, with the play opening in the bubble of Montreal, where the characters now live. Analyzing the effects of war across

"Shadow" by Yasir Safi

generations, the play juxtaposes the siblings' war memories with their mother's. *Incendies* is punctuated with explosions, and sporadic pieces of flashback dialogue act as an isthmus between the past and present.

The twins, like all survivors of war who seek out the facts, have inherited a world of truth, but "…a truth that is like a green fruit that has never ripened." (p. 69) It is through this forced exploration, Mouawad suggests, that the truth has the opportunity to finally ripen.

Literature functions to remove obstacles, deconstruct the world, and then recreate it. Fiction can serve as a bridge that enables people to travel back and forth between events. History and legend are sometimes presented as one and the same, and disentangling the true past from a fictitious one is a perilous endeavour, especially when discussing the atrocity of war.

Speaking about the Algerian crisis, Benaissa states that it "…comes down above all to the relationship between memory, history, and religion," and we will truly be free "when we can live our history without lying to ourselves." The same can be said for the Lebanese example. The histories and the dramas of the countries reflect the confusion, irrationality, and complexity of the human experience. As the narrator eloquently comments in *Les fils de l'amertume* regarding blame, "…do not say foreign hands, do not say external ghost, stop denying your demons…." (p. 266) Trying to bridge the gap between memory and reality marks the end of denial and the beginning of restorative ownership of the past.**AJ**

Yasir Safi on commercialization of arts, absence of art criticism and artistic security in Syria

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

Painter and graphic artist Yaser Safi, born in Qamishle in 1976, is one of the most prominent up and coming young artists in the Middle East. He has exhibited in Damascus, Amman, Dubai, Paris, Belgium, and Rome. Among his awards are "Honor Prize" at the Cervantes Center in Damascus, the First Graphic Award at the Second Syrian Youth Exhibition, and the Second Graphic Award at the Biennale in Lattakia.

Tell us about how your childhood influenced your art?

As a child in Qamishle, poetry inspired me. I composed poetry in my youth and yearned to become a poet. I also loved visual art, but at that time there were no museums in Qamishle and school art programs were essentially nonexistent. Now, the emotions I felt when reciting poetry as a child are present in my graphic art and painting.

When time came for college, I left Qamishle and attended the University of Damascus. While I studied poetry there, I also studied graphic arts in the Graphic Art Department. After university, I taught for two years at a graphic art institute, and then went on to Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates and founded a graphic art institute where I taught for three years. Then I returned to Syria.

Your lithographs contain scenes of women, whereas some of your recent large canvas paintings are filled with autobiographical images of yourself without a female presence. Can you tell us about this development?

I commenced focusing on woman, since she traditionally has more experience with daily intricacies and difficulties. I depicted her in various situations amidst the bitterness and irony of her struggles. In the beginning, I focused on dreams and imagination, but in recent years I have narrowed my focus to realism. The woman is no longer a victim. In my paintings, she is an individual, just like man. There is no protection for either one in my society. And thus on my canvas I free my individual from the shackles of time and place. And so you see my lithograph of a woman lying in the streets, her body is not one, but scattered; a woman playing a guitar is juxtaposed with a woman with a cup-shaped stomach. Sometimes I focus on negative space, or simply a head in isolation.

My last set of paintings portrays a series of humans in the street and how they react to their physical surroundings. Many have said the central character resembles me, that it seems autobiographical. Perhaps that is true.

Yasir Safi in studio in Geramana

There is a poetic aspect that pervades your work. I notice in your graphics and paintings that you play with time and space, and bodies are distorted. We see emptiness and vulnerability on paper.

Paper is the only place in my society where everything is possible. So I paint people upside-down. I paint the human transformed into an animal. My paintings have become increasingly sardonic in terms of the human emotions they express, as well as the relationships that the subjects have with both themselves and others. I have become more contemptuous toward fear, and there is also more playfulness in my paintings.

We live on a planet full of destruction. We bear witness daily to the injustice occurring in our own society, as well as in Palestine and Iraq – all that enters our daily life; that's our human experience. So I represent my feelings on paper. I see myself as an Eastern artist who succumbs to sadness, a lack of connection to the Other and to the self. I like to give voice to that internal scream. I want to speak to the voices of the East and to our culture before I address the West.

Do you preffer lithography or painting?

I have always composed paintings and lithographs together, and am equally drawn to both. However, I focused on printmaking at the commencement of my career. Painting started as a pastime in my studio. Now I enjoy both forms of art. I delight in both the freedom of that painting with color allows and the catharsis from carving monochromatic images.

"Beauty and the Beast" by Yasir Safi

Please tell us about the happiness and sadness in your paintings.

The emotions in my art are more complex than just sadness or happiness. In each painting there can be contradictory emotion and thought. The heart draws that which makes a person emotional. In my opinion, the heart is the true artist.

For the Syrian artist, there is no copyright or protection. Whereas European artists are allowed creative security, here artists are exceptionally vulnerable to blatant imitation or piracy. There is a lack of morality. Additionally, art criticism as a profession does not exist here. Articles written on artists tend to reflect friendships and animosities more than the spirit of true art critique. Thus, the artist's canvas reflects the bitterness he or she feels toward the world. Many feel emptiness and lack of connection with the self and others in this contemporary life.

In recent years, the price of art in Syria has risen. How has the presence of new commercial galleries affected art in Syria?

The Iraqi war that began in 2003 had a significant impact on Syria's economy and culture. The increased demand of real estate and influx of money created a socioeconomic group of *nouveau riche*.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and Europe, in their search for new art markets, expanded business dealings to Hong Kong, Tokyo, and finally Dubai. The *nouveau riche* took advantage of this opportunity and invested in galleries featuring Syrian artists. In 2006, at the peak of the real estate boom in Syria, a Syrian investor and gallery director from outside the art market approached and promised me a catalogue for my work, offering to help me sell my pieces. I accepted.

All artists have relationships with galleries, and my connection to this director was not peculiar. Like many of my peers, I received a monthly income and was able to sell my own work on the condition that the director got a commission.

Eventually, the inexperienced gallery director began to make unprofessional statements to the press concerning the relationship of the artist to his art. Such statements were insulting, especially those claiming that an "unattractive" artist cannot create beautiful art, and that a beautiful artist cannot create ugly art. When he represented Fateh al-Mudarres, the director stated that al-Mudarres was Syria's most important artist. However, when he ran out of Mudarres's paintings, the director made the belittling remark that the work of younger artists was more significant than Mudarres's. Lastly, the director took undue credit for the fame of the artists he represented. Thus, it was not long before I terminated my contract with him.

Now I search for good galleries in Damascus. My personal favorites are Ishtar, Kozah, Atassi, and Rifayi, all of which I consider to be important. The rise of the internet has facilitated connections between artists, allowing individuals to spread ideas and inspiration. This international lattice has been a boon to connecting an increasingly positive web of influence for artists worldwide.

How has the 2011 uprising and ensuing violence affected your art?

Very little sentiment is needed for the screams of the children of Deraa – the peaceful protests beseeching freedom, equality and justice – to shake the human being. Early on the Syrian streets

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Damascene Spices, Perfumes, and Concertos

BY NIZAR KABBANI

I submerge myself in the Bzurriya Souq*
and I delve into clouds of spices and cloves,
of cinnamon,
anise,
and rose water,
again and again.
And I forget while in Souq al-'Attarine**
all of what was manufactured by Nina Ricci
and Coco Chanel.

What has Damascus done to me?
How can it transform my education and my aesthetic taste?
For the ringing of cups of liquorice has made me forget
the piano concerto of Rachmaninoff.
How the gardens of Sham have transformed me
into becoming the first conductor in the world
leading an orchestra
of willow trees!

Excerpt from Nizar Kabbani's long poem "Ablution with Rose Water and Jasmine." Translated from the Arabic by Ghada Alatrash

*A famous spice market in Damascus
**A famous perfume market in Damascus

Etab Hreib

Etab Hreib on the Art Movement in Syria

BY REBECCA JOUBIN

Critically acclaimed Syrian watercolorist, Etab Hreib, a native of Der-Ez-Zor, graduated from the Graphic Arts Department of the University of Damascus. Since then, she has exhibited her work in various parts of the world. She was the recipient of the Al-Mahros Golden Award in Tunisia, a Golden Award from the Chinese Ministry of Culture, and an award from the Ministry of Culture in Algeria. In addition to working full time as an artist, she teaches at the Fine Arts Department at Damascus University, gives painting courses for diabetic children, conducts workshops for the blind, and has worked as a set and costume designer for Syrian theatre, film, and television drama.

Your canvases are filled with Syrian landscapes from memories of your youth. Tell us about your childhood, family background, and the circumstances that created such a rich stock of inspiration?

My family is from Der-Ez-Zor, but my father's job in the Ministry of Interior allowed us to relocate often. We moved from Aleppo to Tartus, and finally settled in Damascus in the 1960s. All the houses we lived in – the images and scenery – live in my paintings now.

From a very early age, I did not speak much to others. Instead of feigning interest in stories or conversation, I focused on images. I observed people, soaked in the details of my surroundings, then registered the colors and expressions into my imagination.

Later, I studied graphics at the Fine Arts Department of Damascus University and took classes with renowned Syrian artists such as Fateh al-Mudarres, Nezir Nabah, and Ghiyas al-Akhras. Though I specialized in graphics, I preferred using watercolor to depict the colorful images of nature that have accumulated in my mind.

My love of traveling was instilled in me from childhood, and continues to manifest in my adult years. In 1993, I traveled to China and held an exhibition there, then on to America. I believe that travel is the most important gift in the life of an artist. You meet new people, see new places – you gain a lot of vision and love for other cultures.

You've also worked on set designs for theater and television drama. How did your passion for theater and drama begin?

I strongly believe that all art is connected. Knowing one strengthens your knowledge of the other. When I was a child, I told my parents I wanted to be a musician. I used to make boxes and do puppet shows for my family. I would sew clothes for my puppets, make curtains, chairs, and set decoration. During those days, we children did not have many toys – so we built from our imagination.

Even when I worked as a watercolorist, I remained active in set design. In 2004, I worked with renowned Syrian director, Najdat Anzoor, in "*Hour al-Ayn*," a critique of Islamic extremism. Najdat has a true artistic perspective and he allowed me to use my imagination in set design. While he gave me complete freedom, I had a difficult time with the producer. The problem is that a majority of producers are both unprofessional and painstakingly frugal, therefore limiting our artistic perspective. For example, I would ask for real flowers, but would be given plastic to economize.

Please tell us about the art scene when you started.

The art movement in Syria started at the beginning of the 20th century and was supported by the Ministry of Culture. In the 1920s, the Ministry of Culture espoused fine artists such as Tawfiq

Tareq, Saaid Tahsin, and Muhammad Jalal to promote art. The end of the 1940s brought the next generation of artists such as Fateh al-Mudarres, Adnan Rifa'i, Naim Ismael, Naseer Showra, and Adhan Ismael. In the 1960s, artist Mahmood Daadoosh opened one of the first art galleries in Syria. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture held an exhibition for all artists during the fall and spring of every year, and awarded prizes for the best artwork at each exhibition. At the time, art had less to do with commerce and more with national solidarity and pride. People felt a real connection to art.

Thus, when I launched my career as an artist in the 1970s, there were very few galleries. In the 1980s and 1990s more and more galleries began to open. All exhibitions were hosted under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture. The years 1985 to 1995 were a golden age for galleries, with their having been run by intellectuals and cultured individuals who had an eye for art.

In 2006, new, grandiose, and private contemporary art galleries opened in Syria, bringing Syrian art into the international arena. Did you see this new trend in art as driven solely by commerce or is it the beginning of a young Syrian artist's movement?

In 2005, large private galleries opened in Damascus. They were run by uncultivated, often corrupt, *nouveau-riche*, who aimed to disguise illegally obtained funds behind a veneer of cultural integrity. They wooed artists with promises to sell their work and document them in catalogues. The result was an artificial inflation of prices of the work of some artists, which has damaged the Syrian art market. The director of a commercial gallery in West Mezza purchased the art of unknown artists. He then submitted the paintings for auction at Christie's Auction House in Dubai and repurchased the pieces – an internationally known trick used to increase both price and recognition. While these types of investments improved the lives of selected artists, they also damaged the integrity of the market. Moreover, the conversation surrounding art changed; public recognition of artistic value was transmuted from the quality of a piece to its final bidding price. Asking prices trumped originality. This hurt the reputation of Syrian art, and many smaller galleries closed.

At that some artists left the director of the large commercial gallery in West Mezza, and there was a lot of controversy in the press surrounding both his and other galleries.

Initially, this director was able to woo artists by taking them to art fairs around the world: New York, Miami, Paris, Hong Kong, Abu Dhabi. But a slew of unprofessionaal comments to the press caused many of his top artists, like Yaser Safi, to discontinue their relationship with him. Included were claims that older artists are lazy and jealous of new artists, and that younger artists produce a higher caliber of art than do their seniors. He also stated that those who cannot sell their work are amateurs, not

Etab Hreib

artists. Sadly, these are only a fraction of his many insolent remarks, which resulted in the termination of multiple contracts.

Please share your thoughts on the new generation of artists.

The new generation of artists lacks the patience of its predecessors. Their professors ask them to mimic rather than to experiment or work from their imagination. When I graduated in 1978, students were still working off of nude models, but the government prohibited that in the 1980s. My daughter Sorab has recently graduated as a sculptor from the Fine Arts Department, where she was limited to clothed models. How can the sculptor understand the anatomy of a clothed model? We have regressed. Fine arts professors these days are just employees. My daughter Sorab graduated first in her class. Usually such a graduate is hired as an assistant teacher for two years. However, the school denied her that privilege because they did not want a female. Unfortunately, many professors feel threatened by the advancement of their students.

How has the current crisis in Syria affected your art?

I do not feel comfortable exhibiting with the sound of lead flying through our cities. Instead, I have committed my time to volunteering with diabetic children. I teach them art and creative projects, for I feel that guiding children to express themselves creatively amidst this bloodshed will have a greater positive impact than would an art exhibition.**AJ**

‘Arab Song’ for ‘Arab Spring’

Fall of the Moon
by Marcel Khalife
Traditonal Crossroads Records, 2012

BY SAMI ASMAR

Marcel Khalife’s newly released CD, “Fall of the Moon,” and the corresponding world tour in memory of poet Mahmoud Darwish come at a historic time for the Arab people. Finally, the revolution for which Khalife had been metaphorically yearning through song for years has arrived, and the will of the people has a catchy newspaper headline: “Arab Spring.” Lebanese singer/composer Marcel Khalife has been singing the poetry of the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish for decades. According to Khalife, this yearning started before the two men ever met — at a time when the young musician was frequently confined indoors due to the dangers of the Lebanese Civil War, one day happening to pick up a book of Darwish poems at somebody’s house. This reading moved him to compose music on top of which he could sing a few of the poems. The rest is history, as the lives of both men irreversibly changed thereafter. Khalife found the words to describe his feelings and Darwish’s work was given a fresh voice. They met many years later, struck up a friendship, and made joint appearances in many capitals, though they never collaborated directly — Darwish wrote poetry, not song lyrics, and Khalife selected from that work freely without consulting the poet — which allowed both to produce independent and high quality work. In the minds of their countless fans, however, the two “rebels” became an intertwined duo, as Darwish’s poems such as “*Rita”* and “*Ummi”* became staples of Khalife’s worldwide performances.

For a period of time, Khalife struggled to clear his name from a Lebanese state prosecutor’s accusations of blasphemy that sprung from his singing Darwish’s poem “*Ana Yousef Ya Abi*”(I Am Joseph, Father), which contained a line borrowed from the *Qur’an*. When Khalife gathered tremendous popular and political support for his case, the charges were dropped. Shortly after that, Darwish died of heart problems in a Houston hospital. Devastated by the passing of his friend, Khalife spent less time composing poetry and more time on instrumental and orchestral compositions. After a hiatus, he issued the double CD carrying the title of another Darwish poem to once again honor his friend’s memory. “Fall of the Moon” was also nod to the Arab revolutions. Although ruling systems have changed in many Arab countries, no change took place in the artists’ countries of origin. But with Palestinians more displaced and occupied than ever, and with Lebanese “stability” hanging from a thread above the cauldron of sectarian politics and the constant threat of invasion, the words of defiance nevertheless resonate heavily in their home countries.

Defiance aside, however, the listening experience of “Fall of the Moon” feels like a romantic journey through musical history. In addition to the familiar Darwish poetry sung by Khalife who accompanies himself on the *oud*, every other element artistically associated with Khalife is present: instrumental compositions with large orchestral accompaniment, instrumental improvisations, guest vocalists, a Palestinian *mawwal* (with a new instrumental introduction), a song for Damascus, and so on. He also returns to the familiar collaborations with his own family members, with contributions from his sons Rami and Bashar on the piano and on percussion respectively, along with the vocals of his wife, Yolla, as well as those of career companion Umaima, both of whom shine in touching solo performances. Rami’s modern improvisational style is tangibly energetic; barely sitting on the piano bench, he reaches inside the open grand piano to pluck the strings with his hands, typically to the surprise of concert audiences. For those with nostalgia for classic songs such as “Rita,” the track “Waltz for Rita’s Winter” plays its dreamy musical theme from a new perspective.

Surpassing the sum of its individual parts, this album solidifies the collaboration between Darwish and Khalife. It has been a winning formula for Marcel Khalife in the past and he is showing his appreciation, raising a glass to the genius of the late Mahmoud Darwish. As Khalife enters his sixth decade of life a musical legend with an increasingly uncommon style, he becomes the guardian of serious music in the Arab world where lesser quality music often dominates.**AJ**

Interview with Yasir Safi

Continued from page 21

recognized the importance of technology in ensuring that their voice be heard. Amidst the death and destruction, the artist can no longer be neutral. The artist adds depth to the visual dialogue by capturing political oppression and all forms of violence on the Syrian streets.**AJ**

Searching for the elusive, listenable fusion of jazz and classical Arabic music

Swing Hakim
By Swing Hakim
Independently produced, 2011

BY ERIC EDERER

Coming across the newly released album "Swing Hakim" by the Chicago-based band of the same name is like being drawn unexpectedly into a fascinating conversation with an older gentleman in a prim white suit who turns out to be the black-sheep uncle your family has been quietly hoping you hadn't heard of (something about a promiscuously undignified style of assimilation, perhaps). The stories on this all-instrumental album are told in a decidedly nostalgic register, but unlike some other such over-the-shoulder ventures (Pink Martini, Squirrel Nut Zippers, Leon Redbone) here not only is the scope quite broad – anything from Honolulu westward to Beirut between 1900-40 is fair game – but most of the tunes deliberately expose their cross-cultural underpinnings in a way that each constituent part is rarely allowed to.

This is also what makes the project a unique bit of Americana; the layers of blues, swing, *klezmer*, Balkan folk dance, manouche ("Gypsy") jazz, and Hawaiian steel have had a century to get comfortable at the same weird American family reunion, but the surprise that is strangely no surprise here is what your charmingly ignored uncle brought in the form of chief *hakim* Rami Gabriel's *`ud*, which he ably yields both in sophisticated *mashriq*-style *taqâsîm* and to weave equally nostalgic (and cross-cultural) moments from the late-Ottoman twilight composers – atyos Efendi, Yorgo Bacanos, Mýsýrlý Ýbrahim Efendi – into the mix. This new voice adds a fresh beauty and another level of cleverness to the "Americana" conversation, and does it with a completely-at-home attitude that allows the music to take interesting risks in a way that a mere timid attempt at assimilation would likely fumble.

While the overall old-school style of the album perfectly fits its classic cover tunes – hits by Duke Ellington, Ted Snyder, Dizzy Gillespie – it is also most welcoming to the eight original pieces debuted here, showing off the creative chops of the band's core members, Rami Gabriel (*'ud*, lead guitar), Stephen T. Asma (rhythm and slide guitar), and Brian Pardo (clarinet) – all Ph.D.-holding academics, by the way, hence the "*hakim*" backing up the swing. The whole project's musicality is further shaped by hot-on-the scene Chicago musicians Gil Alexander (percussion), Steve Gibons (violin), and Alfonso Ponticelli (guitar), with Beau Sample and Joseph Spilberg alternately holding down the bass end.

Clever, funny, easy on the ear, a definite toe-tapper; if you enjoy any sort of early jazz you'll certainly find much to like here, and the unabashed singing of the *'ud* throughout this album – especially when used as a tool for reclaiming chestnut orientalist titles such as "Caravan," "Night in Tunisia," and "The Sheik of Araby"– brings your black-sheep uncle in from the wilderness and sets him at the family table where his fascinating and strangely familiar tales always belonged. **AJ**

Find more information on the album and the group at http://swinghakim.com/.

Ghayath Mattar

Continued from page 17

imagined him being very handsome with romantic features. My interest in imagining Ghayath's picture was more like a yearning.

This picture of Ghayath later emerges in Jaber's narrative: "When I finally saw his picture on the TV, I felt as though my heart would burst, and the pain was unbelievable indeed… His broad smile in the photograph was just as I had imagined it." Inayeh Jaber concludes her short eulogy in Al Quds Al Arabi asking, "How is it possible for such a true smile to die…"

But Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abd al-Jabbar sees the murder of Ghayath Mattar through a different lens. He writes, "The dead are dangerous!" The danger comes "when they extend their hands from beyond the grave, from glass cemeteries, or from marble graves, to lay hold on the living. For every dead there is

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A Tale of Two Networks

The Battle for the Arab Viewer
A film by Nordin Lasfar
Icarus Films, 2012, 48 minutes

Photo Courtesy of Icarus Films

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

Nordin Lasfar's "The Battle for the Arab Viewer" puts the debate about media bias and political influence center-stage. The film argues that despite pretenses to the contrary, neither Al Jazeera nor Al Arabiya operate in total objectivity.

The film presents an excellent overview of the political dynamics that shape the editorial practices and perspective of both networks. It attempts to unpack the biases at work by following Al Arabiya correspondent Randa Abul Azm, and Al Jazeera's Abdelfattah Fayed. During the Arab revolutions, and particularly during the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, Al Jazeera portrayed itself as a champion of the people according to Lasfar. Furthermore with its overt progressive and even "revolutionary" posture, its detractors accused the Qatari network of actively taking part in the revolution through its intentional bias. In the case of Egypt, the network appeared to side decidedly with the anti-Mubarak protestors. As the commentators in the film suggest, this is not simply a matter of being on the right side of history, but rather is Arab politics in full view. The film presents Al Jazeera as an extension of Qatari state power, a network that emerged – according to political analyst Abdalaziz Alkhamis – from the Qatari Emir's desire to put a public relations spin on his takeover of the country and shield himself from Saudi and other Gulf Arab leaders' disapproval. In contrast, Al Arabiya, the network that allegedly emerged from a Saudi desire to counter Al Jazeera – supported up until the very end Hosni Mubarak. This tension defines the central message of the documentary, and is the frame through which everything else is read, including the brief explorations into the personal histories of both correspondents for Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.

This frame effectively sets the stage of the conflict between the two networks, and also does well to describe the poor credibility and ineffectiveness of the pan-Arab networks. As a result, the viewer generates a growing sympathy for the Arab audience at the mercy of these two fundamentally political organizations. That being said, the film presents little substantial evidence and instead, depends on the authority of media analysts and professionals from both networks. The viewer is forced to decide the case based on association and accusation alone. In one particular moment, former Al Jazeera presenter Lina Zahreddine accuses the network of not spending as much time covering the abortive revolution in Bahrain. The ruling family of Bahrain is favored by the Emir of Qatar, so the logic goes, while Mubarak had "tense relations" with Al Jazeera. While this statement may be true, no evidence is actually presented to substantiate a purposeful editorial decision to ignore Bahrain's troubles. A cursory search through Al Jazeera's website will reveal coverage of the events in Bahrain, as well as a documentary about the Sulayman hospital, where doctors and nurses were eventually jailed for their supposed anti-government activities. If Zahreddine is making a claim on the amount or substance of Al Jazeera's coverage, it is absent from the film. What we are left with is an interesting and thought provoking picture of an Arab world split between competing Gulf forces and their respective media arms, but little in the sense of deep political analysis.

The most powerful sequence of the film depicts an Al Arabiya former news presenter, Hafez al Mirazi, openly challenging the Saudi regime on television. The clip from Al Arabiya shows Mirazi state on air that he "will see if we can say anything about Saudi Arabia. Then we will see if Al Arabiya is independent." Mirazi then goes on to tell the filmmakers about his subsequent ouster from the network. It is well known that Al Jazeera does not provide any news or commentary that is critical of the Qatari regime. Clearly both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are compromised news agencies, even if the degree of compromise cannot be accurately gleaned from the scope of the film. Mirazi, however, displays a moment of journalistic integrity that cuts through the accusatory back and forth that generates the films primary argument.

The film has high production value and a well-paced narrative, though it could have benefitted from a lengthier, more detailed analysis. Those familiar with the origins of both networks, and specifically their political and financial sponsors will find the film perhaps lacking further insight. However, even then, the final act of the film speculates on the future of both Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, and more interestingly, the future of Arab media in general. Hafez al Mirazi speculates that the era of the official, state sponsored media will eventually give way to a local, independent one. It's an optimistic thought, and one that millions of people across the Middle East no doubt hope will come true.**AJ**

Photo Courtesy of Icarus Films

Faces, Conversations, and Camaraderie in the Egyptian Revolution

Tahrir: Liberation Square
By Stefano Savona's
Icarus Films, 2012, 90 min

BY PAIGE DONNELLY

The revolution documented by Stefano Savona's "Tahrir: Liberation Square" is not the sexy revolution of the media. Instead, Stefano Savona captures an organic Egyptian revolution – one of patience, uncertainty, and fraternity. The film is shot in Cairo on January 30, 2011, six days after Egyptians took to the streets.

It is clear that the common people of Egypt are the spirit of both the film and revolution. Savona pauses on countless portraits of faces. A skilled cinematographer, he harnesses the raw emotions of doubt and hope in the creases of foreheads and the twinkle of eyes. Politics, old and new, are at the forefront of everyone's minds. And in addition to the intimate snapshots of faces, Savona unobtrusively films political exchanges between friends. Their conversations range from the abolition of the Egyptian constitution to the ruling capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Eventually, these opinions boil down to one voice; the people want the fall of the regime. The rest of the documentary is filled with camaraderie: infectious chants, cheers, and slogans – repeated, over and over – until the words and sounds become the pulse of Egypt.

As a viewer, the film will be frustrating to watch. The pulse of the movement is both fascinating and contagious. However, the repetitive sounds also give the plot a stagnant and cyclical tone. In place of a storyline, Savona gravitates to the passion of the revolutionaries. He offers little guidance in terms of character backgrounds and narration. He, instead, lets the scenes speak for themselves.

While this technique exhibits the resilience of the Egyptians in Tahrir Square, the film would benefit if it left a trail of breadcrumbs for the audience. In its present format, Savona's documentary is a series of poignant symbols, rather than a compelling story.**AJ**

The Road to Revolution *Goodbye Mubarak*

Goodbye Mubarak
Directed by Katia Jarjoura
Icarus Films, 2011, 72 min

BY JOSEPH SILLS

Though "Goodbye Mubarak" begins with a shot of Cairo's Tahrir Square full of protest, director and writer Katia Jarjoura focuses on rising political tensions three months before the Egyptian revolution.

Jarjoura explores the efforts of activists and politicians leading up to the December 2010 elections, using their words and stories to narrate the growing frustration among Egyptians in several key sectors of society. The film first follows Mahitab el Gilani and Gamila Ismail, from the April 6th Youth Movement and Doustour Party, as they canvas the streets for the upcoming election, emphasizing voting as a means to fight corruption. Then Jarjoura interviews Ayman Nour, the jailed leader of El Ghad party, who dared to run against Mubarak in 2005. His interview succinctly presents opposition opinion toward the regime, leveling accusations of dirty tactics, corruption, and sham democracy.

The film then inspects the regime by following Abou Elainein, a wealthy businessman turned politician who epitomizes the relationship between the regime and elite business. His interview runs differently than Nour's; he boasts of progress and economic development. However, the camera takes viewers to Mahalla, a working class city where many tell of their hardship in slums, unfair wages, and suffering at the hands of regime nepotism. Through unscripted discussions and interviews, Jarjoura captures the frustration of four decades in the rants of disgruntled workers.

Photo Courtesy of Icarus Film

After liberal and regime politics, the film examines religious opinion in Egypt, interviewing two Muslim Brotherhood candidates for parliament and a Coptic priest. The Muslim Brotherhood's charities and clinics bring legitimacy to its cause, while Copts express their discomfort with Islamism and reluctance to oppose the regime.

The documentary climaxes with the outrage and protest that follow the rigged results of elections in December, confirming in many Egyptians' minds the regime's unwillingness to allow true democracy. They finally lose patience.

Jarjoura's interviews of key figures and video footage that conveys conditions in Egypt are a refreshing approach to pre-revolutionary Egypt, though her conclusions match conventional wisdom. The fact that the footage was shot without the foreknowledge of the revolution, however, does not satisfy qualms that it was biased in its editing and presentation. Translations of conversations and interviews in Arabic are sometimes incomplete and run the risk of misrepresentation. Ultimately, however, Jarjoura covers the major factions in pre-revolutionary Egypt and identifies the sources of tension that boiled over in January, rendering it an effective and quite intriguing work.**AJ**

The Legacy of a Martyr

Rouge Parole
Directed and written by Elyes Baccar
Cinema Guild, 2011, 94 minutes

BY PAIGE DONNELLY

The late Mohamed Bouazizi was a butterfly for Tunisia. In life, he went unnoticed by society's radar. But in death, his small wings blew tremors throughout the Arab world; his self-immolation on December 17, 2010 was seismic for the region. His death epitomizes the butterfly effect.

Bouazizi may have been the first martyr of the Arab Spring, but he was not the last. Elyes Baccar pays homage to the Bouazizi spirit in all Tunisians with his film "Rouge Parole," a documentary about the Tunisian Revolution. He diversifies Bouazizi's story, applying it to the mother who has lost her son, to the rap artist who protests the regime, to the budding filmmaker who records the revolution, to the fisherman who finds freedom in the sea but loves his homeland.

In the beginning, Baccar orients the viewer to Bouazizi's tombstone. The camera gives more detail to the setting as it zooms out to the graveyard, and then out further to the capital, Tunis. This backdrop is poignantly juxtaposed against the echoing voice of Ben Ali, whose words ignore grievances of the poor and unemployed.

Baccar spans the entire country. He documents stories from the Kerkehnah Islands, Redayef, Kasserine, and Thala. As a good documentary should be, the filming is unobtrusive. It even captures the amateur cinematographers: the young people who are filming the spectacle with mobile phones.

In a beautiful circle, one of Baccar's closing images is the funeral of Wajdi Essaihi, the last martyr of the Tunisian Revolution. Here lies the tragedy of the movement: the young lives lost. A tragedy indeed, but the lost youth are also the movement's awakening. A hopeful song and gathering follows the funeral scene. It describes Tunisia as one—without divide—under their red flag. Together, the people feel pain; together, they feel the flutter of butterfly wings. "Rouge Parole" is integral film for those trying to understand the spontaneity and collective nature of the revolution.**AJ**

Ghayath Mattar

Continued from page 25

a lover, a bereaved mother and father, sisters and brothers, cousins, fellow villagers and townspeople. The dead are part of a fabric of kinship that is among the oldest in the world. Our Syrian brothers call this the *mujtameh ahli* (roughly translated as "civil society"), which exists in the villages and towns. It is a collective fabric that gives a meaning to life and death," wrote al-Jabbar in Al Hayat on September 18, 2011. What this means, perhaps, is that the killers, regardless of their ferocity and because of their inhumanity, will eventually face justice, and, as al-Jabbar commented, it doesn't matter if this occurs in a tribal, religious or international court. Thus it is the strong and enduring traditions of *Al Mujtameh al-Ahli* and kinship that may eventually bring the killers to account.**AJ**

Poetry in Translation

Continued from page 12

Cairo. With images, Kheir has indeed become a master and when performing, the poet uses visual imagery such as light and choreography to accompany his readings. His written images, however, stand alone in their vividness, and they give his collections of love poems an air of individuality and innovation.

All told, Kheir's careful examination of memory and beauty in relation to love leave the reader musing well after turning the last page.**AJ**

The Poet Milton and Islam: A Tale of Mutual Influence

Once Upon the Orient Wave
By Eid Abdallah Dahiyat
Hesperus Press, London, 2012

BY HANNA SAADAH

The *Aphorismi* by the ancient Greek physician, Hippocrates of Kos, (B.C. 460-377) gave us this precious Latin saying – *Ars longa, vita brevis, occasio praeceps, experimentum periculosum, iudicium difficile* – which translates into "Art is long, vitality brief, occasion precipitous, experiment perilous, judgment difficult." What Eid Abdallah Dahiyat tries to do in his book "Once Upon the Orient Wave," is to delve into all segments of the above aphorism in an effort to show us that great literary art knows no boundaries, intermingles with all aspects of life, and belongs to everybody.

Literary art, the fauna of humanity, permeates all cultures, influences them, and outlasts them – as Lord Byron (1788-1824) so aptly versed it in "Don Juan":

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think;
'Tis strange, the shortest letter which man uses
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
Of ages; to what straits old Time reduces
Frail man, when paper - even a rag like this -
Survives himself, his tomb, and all that's his.

Of all the arts, literature is the most immediately inclined to dissemination, but is also the only art that requires translation, and 'there's the rub.' For as the French proverb declares "*Les traductions sont comme les femmes. Lorsqu'elles sont belles elles ne sont pas fidèles, et lorsqu'elles sont fidèles elles ne sont pas belles*," which translate into – "Translations are like women; when they are beautiful, they are not faithful and when they are faithful, they are not beautiful." In this ebb and tide of world literature, "the idea of an imaginary journey to the other world is a universal theme," states the author, E. A. Dahiyat. Indeed, he shows us that – from Homer's "Odyssey" to Virgil's "Aeneid," to the *Quran*, to Al-Ma'arri's "Epistle of Forgiveness," to Dante's "Divine Comedy," to Milton's "Paradise Lost"– this recurrent theme transcends historical epochs with remarkable facility.

Milton's "Paradise Lost," the greatest literary epic in the English language, is subjected to meticulous, scholarly study by the author, with the noble intention of placing it into proper historic prospective. Without favoritism, this literary historian examines the influence of the Islamic cultural renaissance in Syria and Spain during the middle-ages, and on Milton's opus magnum, "Paradise Lost." He then examines the influence of Milton on the Arabic literature that succeeded him and concludes with the Iraqi poet, Jamil Sudqi Az-Zahawi's long poem *Thourah fil Jahim* ("A Revolution in Hell"), which, he claims, "is probably the most courageous poem in Arabic literature and the one which bears the strongest similarities to Al-Ma'arri's *Risalat-ul-Ghfuran* and Milton's 'Paradise Lost'."

"Untitled" by Yasir Safi

"Once Upon the Orient Wave" is a scholarly work, suffused with enlightening historical facts, circumspect in its assessment of literary exchanges, profound in its analysis of intellectual dimensions, and terse in its presentation (only 136 pages). It represents a powerful expose of the sublime yearnings of the human soul throughout recorded history. For the literati with analytical minds and citizen-of-the-world spirits, it is *necessaria libro pro bibliothecis* (an indispensable book for their libraries).**AJ**

A Voice of the Voiceless

Vocabulary of Silence
By Veronica Golos
Red Hen Press, 2011

BY JOSEPH SILLS

In "Vocabulary of Silence," Veronica Golos brings the atrocities of war and violence from Iraq and Palestine, as well as the drug wars in northern Mexico, to the reader's consciousness in a powerful yet respectful way, avoiding heavy-handedness and accusations. The book is divided into two parts that both address these heavy topics, but in very distinct ways. Part I opens with a dream depicting war-torn Baghdad, followed by protests of the horrors of Abu Ghraib and Ciudad Juárez. Golos focuses on giving a voice to the voiceless – prisoners of war, children, and abused women factory workers – striking a delicate balance between the importance of using words to express the complexity of their pain and the recognition that in the face of unspeakable acts, only silence fully dignifies. Part II, titled "Broken", unfolds at a starkly faster pace, alternating between a series of seven short "veil poems" examining the veil's effect on the wearer and the beholder – an issue to which the author has devoted much of her work – and seven longer poems examining the responsibility we all bear in perpetuating violence, challenging the reader's notion of assumed innocence. "Vocabulary of Silence" gathers threads of different accounts of war and artfully weaves them together, then follows by taking them apart to reveal the nuances of the individual's experience.**AJ**

The Syrian Crisis: Can Dialogue Still Prevail Over Violence?

BY NIKOLAOS VAN DAM

Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances. Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring
By Carsten Wieland
Cune Press, Seattle, 2012, 336 pp.

This is a fascinating and highly readable book, providing one of the most detailed accounts of the dramatic events in Syria over the past decade and before. Carsten Wieland gives an original and critical in-depth analysis of modern Syrian history with a refreshing approach.

Since the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011 various other relevant books have been published on Syria, but none of these has thus far dealt with Syria's past decade so much in detail and in-depth as the book under review. If you really want to be well informed about why things did not go well, or went wrong, time and again, during the epoch of Bashar al-Asad, Wieland's book is a must. It is a rather comprehensive work, tackling a high diversity of most relevant Syrian subjects. It portrays Syria from both its negative and positive sides, leading sometimes to conclusions that may surprise its readers, particularly where Syria is placed in a more positive light, when compared to other countries in the region, for instance in the field of secularism, the position of women, its hospitality to receive huge numbers of Iraqi refugees in the past, and so on. Wieland's main line is, however, strongly critical, and could hardly be otherwise, because of the severe dictatorship of the Syrian Ba'th regime and its bloody repression. Wieland has noted in this respect that well before the unprecedented street protests started in March 2011, "the regime in Damascus had launched a new wave of suppression at home against human rights activists and mostly secular opposition forces," but that "many Western governments did not see – or did not want to see" this.

"Untitled" by Yasir Safi

This is not only an academic reference work, helping us to better understand Syrian history; it could also be used as a tool for future policy-making, and to help evaluating what foreign governments might have, or should have done differently during this past "decade of lost chances."

One of the key questions is whether there would have been any use in directly communicating with the Bashar al-Asad regime, at the highest level, with the aim of helping achieve a peaceful solution in Syria, ever since the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011.

When looking for an answer in the study of Wieland, I am inclined to conclude that the Syrian regime has indeed missed one opportunity after another to seriously implement political change and reform, or to improve its international relations, or to put it differently: it almost never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Taking that conclusion as a point of departure, it would have seemed useless to directly communicate or negotiate with the Damascus regime on how to find a solution to this bloody crisis that has already lasted for over a year and a half. David Lesch concludes in his most recent book "Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad" (2012) that Bashar al-Asad refuses to negotiate from a position of weakness. We have seen, however, that President Bashar al-Asad is not either prepared to negotiate from a position of strength. This implies in fact that there is a vicious circle which in all cases means that the Syrian president is not going to give up, and that he will fight "until the end," which from the perspective of most foreign parties or observers means the end of the regime of President Bashar al-Asad. Whether or not this is wishful thinking in the shorter term remains to be seen. One thing is clear, however: it would be unrealistic to expect the Syrian president and his regime to resign out of free will and to sign their own death warrants.

Whereas it is true that the Syrian Ba'thist regime has lost many opportunities or chances, Western countries have occasionally done the same. They could, for instance, have made an effort in the past to achieve a better understanding with Damascus, which later on could have been used as a basis to help solving the present crisis. Wieland notes that after the Anglo-American attacks on Iraq in 2003 "it was the West that missed a

great opportunity to focus on common secular values and the tolerance of religious minorities, on the fight against militant Islamism. This would have strengthened the pro-Western actors within the Syrian bureaucracy and political elite." President Bashar al-Asad was well received in France in 2008, and if Paris would, as a result, have had any extra possibilities of personally influencing the Syrian president, these clearly went lost when France chose the side of the opposition in 2011.

It has been a missed chance of Western countries not to engage in any kind of serious dialogue with the Syrian regime after the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. With such an extremely serious and bloody crisis at hand, it would at least have been worth, both morally and politically, to make a genuine effort. At the beginning of the Syrian Revolution a dialogue with the Damascus regime might have been less difficult than later on, once the bloody confrontations got further out of hand and reached the dimensions of a civil war. The European Union did not seriously engage the Damascus regime, however; neither did the United States nor most other countries. Western governments instead cut themselves off from the possibility of playing any serious role in helping bring a solution based on political dialogue.

It is rather safe to assume that the Western governments that rejected any kind of dialogue with the Syrian regime did not do so because Syria experts had told them that such a dialogue would have been useless. After all, who could have predicted early on that a dialogue with Damascus would not lead anywhere? Western policies rather emanated from the fact that it was much easier to issue strong declarations and warnings against the Syrian regime through the media and international institutions like the United Nations Security Council, and to impose sanctions, than to be seen communicating with the so-called "murderous al-Asad regime." That would have been politically less attractive, certainly from the perspective of Western internal politics. The easier way was chosen, in various cases under the false presumption that the regime would fall rather sooner than later. What counts most, however, is not whether or not these Western policies were morally justified (which in fact most of them were), but rather whether they had the desired effect. This they did not. The violence did not stop, but only increased. The regime was not brought down to its knees by the sanctions; neither did the sanctions induce the regime to introduce serious political reforms, let alone that the president stepped down. The sanctions did not only cause a lot of problems to the regime, but also led to immense suffering, hardship and misery among the Syrian population. As has happened more often than not in the past with sanctions imposed elsewhere in the world, the sanctions were unable to force the regime into taking the steps for which they were intended.

Russia and China clearly have a rather different vision on how to help solving the conflict in Syria. They support a political solution, including the possibility of a compromise between the Ba'thist regime and the opposition. Most other countries are also in favor of a political solution, but only if this includes a regime change. In practice this means that these countries want to keep supporting the opposition until the Ba'th regime collapses. Seen from that perspective, the support of most Western countries for the peace efforts of Kofi Annan has at most been half-hearted; and the same applies to the efforts of his successor Lakhdar Brahimi.

The Russians do not want the Libya scenario to be repeated, in the sense that they refuse to authorize, directly or indirectly, any military intervention in Syria through the UN Security Council. Also important is that Russia does not want an Islamic fundamentalist regime at its southern flank in Syria, which might be the outcome of military intervention or of a civil war there.

It has often been suggested that if Russia and China would not have vetoed but would have endorsed the respective UN Security Council resolutions against the Syrian regime, the situation would have been quite different on the ground. It is doubtful, however, that the Syrian regime would act much differently as long as it really thinks its position is in danger. Having a UN Security Council resolution does not automatically imply any positive change.

Russia and China may one day be blamed by a Syrian successor regime for having unnecessarily prolonged the crisis by their refusal to support any solution that explicitly or implicitly took as a point of departure that the al-Asad regime had to be removed.

Western and other countries that have been supporting the Syrian opposition, may later on, however, be blamed just as well, notably for not having given enough support for helping to speeding up the fall of the regime. As a result, the severe suffering of the Syrian people has, according to the view of the opposition, been unnecessarily prolonged. Most of the Western countries that want the al-Asad regime to be removed have taken all kinds of measures, but they do not (yet) clearly support any military intervention to bring the regime to an end. The background is that they are only too much aware of the negative and costly consequences of such an operation, particularly after having seen what happened in, for instance, Iraq. Deposing the regime of Bashar al-Asad without military intervention may, however, be a very long and bloody affair, if possible at all in the shorter term.

As long as there is not any kind of political dialogue leading to a political solution, developments appear to be moving slowly in the direction of foreign military intervention of one kind or another, directly or indirectly. In that respect the regime's "security solution" is being reciprocated by another "security solution" instigated by the Syrian opposition with help from the outside world.

Wieland ends his book by concluding that "the Syrian people cannot afford and do not deserve another decade of lost chances. If the most grim scenarios unfold, however, the next decade may be much worse for many Syrians than it was, prior to the Arab Spring, under the rule of Asad." It appears as if these most grim scenarios have already started to unfold. The big question is whether there might still be a possibility to get out of this situation through dialogue instead of bloodshed. The answer is in the hands of the Syrians.**AJ**

Author's 'Concern': A New Complete View of Prison Experience

Salvation O Young Men: 16 Years in Syrian Prison (in Arabic)
By Yassin al-Haj Saleh
Saqi Books, Beirut, 2012

BY ABDUH WAZEN

At the outset of his recent book *Bilkhalas Ya Shabab* "Salvation O Young Men: 16 Years in Syrian Prisons" (Saqi Books), Yassin al-Haj Saleh addresses the difficult question of his book's genre. He claims it is certainly not "prison literature" and in a way cannot be categorized. He rejects the labels of other intellectual disciplines and artistic genres such as sociology, and autobiography..

Rather, he suggests a somewhat more unconventional and thought-provoking label for his work: "a matter of concern." This phrase reflects the author's belief that, in order for the prison to evolve into a subject of cultural discourse and public scrutiny, writers and artists must protect their work from the confines of categories and labels, which inherently distract the reader from the actual content.

However, one may be forgiven if he or she does not agree with the author's judgment, especially considering that some chapters bear the hallmarks of "prison literature," such as the crudeness of language, and the absence of rhetorical pretension...In these chapters, the author attempts to be a narrator who is aware that he is neither novelist nor storyteller, which is rather peculiar. It is from this ambiguity that Saleh's text derives its originality and ability to embrace and reject literary tradition simultaneously.

"Nightmare" by Yasir Safi

As for Saleh's "matter of concern," the book is concerned with all sides of the prison experience be it the literary, sociological, autobiographical, or historical perspective. It is important that these fields do not conflict with each other because one of the book's principal aims is to make its multi-topic focus an incentive for harmony. The author approaches the world of the prison through the eyes of a literary author, just as a sociologist or a political scientist approaches the prison with their respective viewpoints. Saleh also writes from an architectural perspective, comparing the prison to a building that includes rooms for prisoners and places for jailers. Saleh is no stranger to Arab and Syrian prison literature for he acknowledges Sanallah Ibrahim's novel "The Committee," which influenced his powerful statement "eat yourself," and also Mustafa Khalifa's *"Al Qawqa"* (The Shell), a story considered one of the finest examples of the genre "prison literature" — Syrian, Arab or worldwide.

"Forgetting is forbidden"

Like many imprisoned writers, Saleh sought initially to write from behind bars but later became disillusioned by his early efforts. Starting in 1988, eight years into his incarceration, he began writing about intellectual and political issues. Eventually, he would return to the subject of prison and life behind bars, although he insistently rejected the characterization of his writings as literature. But After spending 16 years and 14 days in prison, the process of "remembering" became difficult, and he adopted the attitude that "forgetting is forbidden." Motivated by this belief, Saleh wrote his texts to stop "running away" and to relieve himself from the "burden of telling." Saleh's writings in the post-prison period are an act "against betrayal," against himself, and his friends who died in prison or after their release.

When Saleh was detained on July 12, 1980, he was in his 20s, a third year Medical student at Aleppo University, and a member of the Communist party. In this "new" world, Saleh rediscovers his childhood, or, as he puts it, lives a "second childhood" that produced an intellectual and writer, rather than a medical student. In prison, the doors to the outside world were shut and the doors to another world, the world of the political prisoner, were opened. Saleh immediately realized that "prison is a beast with which a person can't live unless it was tamed and put under control." And his life in prison was nothing if not a continuous attempt to subdue this "beast," to fill spare "time," and to get as much use out of it as possible. Like many prisoners, it was necessary for him to forget that he was a prisoner.

The ways to forget are varied and numerous: reading, bead work, drilling of copper in wood, making rosaries with the seeds of dates and olives, and making a chess board using cartoon paper and dice from dough ….for him, books were his only means of confronting the agonizing passage of time. Saleh realized that prison was an ideal environment in which to read encyclopedic books that require much patience: Hegel, Freud,

Abd-Allah al-Arawi, Samir Amin, Edward Said (Orientalisim), George Corm, Hussein Mureweh (Materialistic Trends in Arab Philosophy) and many others. Books were allowed into prison in 1982, and in many instances, they were brought in secretly. Saleh said that reading is "a good companion;" it didn't kill like an enemy, but it instead "prolongs life and gives us a life outside of our own." For prisoners like Saleh, reading created "a record of existence, a new perception and an additional memory."

But reading was not always easy in prison. Saleh admits that he had a great deal of difficulty focusing at times and would often spend six or more hours on a mere 40 pages. It took several months for his concentration to improve, which helped his understanding and comprehension. He returned to books that he had read previously to re-discover them.

"Home" by Fadia Afashe

In the early drafts of his book, Saleh describes his prison experiences in places such as Aleppo prison, Adra prison, and Tadmur prison the most notorious for its horrific cruelty. In all of these places of detention, the crimes of the Saleh's fellow inmates varied but, the majority were jailed for ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Saleh, who retains his individuality while writing, reflects upon the details of his experience and its hidden aspects: its pain and the emotions of prisoners and jailers alike. It is a life of torture, degradation and humiliation, a life of disturbed silence, a life of oppression, and, finally, a life of necessary hope.

As for the worst thing that the individual faces in prison, Saleh claims it is "the consumption of privacy," because the prisoner finds himself "exposed" in front of his friends. Now one's defects are quickly on display: lying, greed, cowardice, stinginess and depression…..the individual becomes exposed to the others' 24 hours a day. "No secrets in prison," Saleh wrote and then wonders, "Does prison expose our real selves?" But soon he differentiates between "internal" and "external" privacy. "External" privacy fades away quickly: "we change our clothes in front of one another, snore close to one another's ears, and get sad and upset….they see us and we see them in conditions and situations that we would not like to be seen in." As for "internal" privacy, it is the stuff which makes of fragility and human weakness a "human power." It is the "personal sphere" that resides within, and becomes the source of freedom, morality and personal autonomy.

Nostalgia

Despite his suffering, Saleh "longs" for prison. After the painful and inhumane experience, the (former) prisoner found himself longing for his old confines after being released. But he explains that this longing is a "masked" celebration of his release from captivity: "as if I am saying that I encountered the beast and here I am with the strength and courage to confront it again." This longing is an achievement that distinguishes him from other prison-authors, and also goes beyond the "the celebration of survival," as he puts it. This sentiment highlights a more complex and transformative or "sacrificial" characteristic of the prison experience, an experience that occurs when the prisoner begins to take comfort in the absence of the "burden" of freedom.

This longing does not focus on the prison as a place but on the experience within it. And perhaps the prisoner who overcomes the "sacrificial ritual" acquires a very precious thing, which Saleh describes as "the new beginning," "the rebirth" or "the other birth." Saleh admits that the prison provided him with three things in his new life: a caustic break from his past and its failures, avoidance of the confusions that had always hurt him, and a new positive field to test his powers. He concludes: "the outcome was that the person who went to prison in 1980 was taken as a sacrifice to that person who was released from it after 16 years. One died for the other to live."

It is truly hard to summarize Yassin al-Haj Saleh's book, which is more than a book. It incorporates work from different academic fields,new perspectives, and a variety of angles, but also makes out of the prison a cultural topic that stands out on its own. This is a foundational book in the field of prison literature because he aspires to take the marginalized culture of prison and incorporate it into the heart of mainstream culture. This is a comprehensive book about the literature, politics, knowledge, and sociology of the prison…..it is a book that documents dates, gives the portraits of political detainees, records the horrific Tadmur Prison, and vividly portrays the Syrian prison experience, prisoners and wardens alike.

Saleh dedicates the book to his father and mother, "who couldn't stand her three sons jailed. She died before her sons could bid her farewell." His mother is the mother of many young men and women who could not say goodbye to their mothers before their passing, when they died, and not even allowed to mourn them after their death.**AJ**

The Arabic version of this article appeared in Al Hayat, 23 June 23, 2012

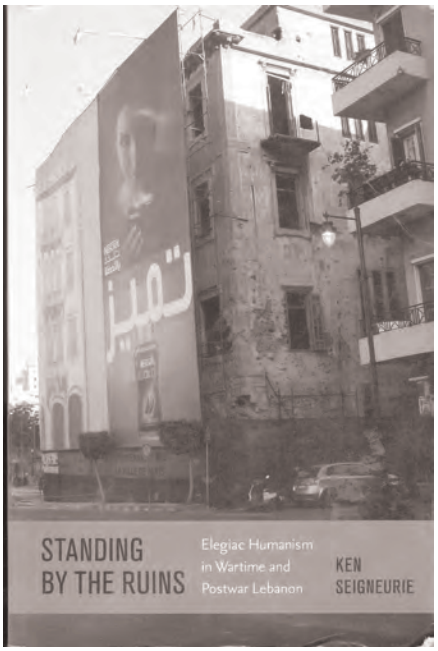
Translated from the Arabic by Basma Botros

Learning to Listen: Lebanon's 'Ruins' Testify on Enduring Tragedy

Standing by the Ruins:
Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon
By Ken Seigneurie
Fordham University Press, New York, 2011

BY MICHAEL TEAGUE

The *Taif* accord of 1989 is best known for its signature accomplishment – bringing the Lebanese civil war to an official conclusion. However, the accord had other important functions as it was sold to the Lebanese public, warring factions, and foreign-interest groups alike as an interim arrangement with the purported goal of doing away with the confessional political system. Furthermore, the document stipulated that this be accomplished in an expedient manner, so it made quick concessions such as giving legal immunity to the militias, and even rehabilitating their blood-soaked leaders as politicians. Although the militias were disarmed, with the "security situation" entrusted to the Syrian friends next door, and the economy shocked into life by obscene amounts of money, the sectarian issue was ritually sidestepped at every opportunity.



All the same, one must consider the possibility that even the successful dismantling of the confessional system would not be capable of soothing, much less healing the deep scars the war left behind. Nor would it automatically preclude the possibility of renewed violence, sectarian or otherwise. In a recent book titled "Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon," author Ken Seigneurie outlines, in painstaking detail, the most viable means of engaging the lingering problems of trauma, sectarianism, and violence in Lebanon.

A fresh and somewhat daring work of criticism, it traces the presence of a minor but undeniable aesthetic trend in Lebanese literary, artistic, and cultural productions from 1975 to the present. The author perceives this trend as a particular form of humanism (a philosophy or intellectual discipline that concerns itself primarily with the well-being of individuals), one that he qualifies as "Elegiac," an adjective that signifies deep mourning. Seigneurie's thesis states that the outbreak of civil war was accompanied by the gradual emergence of a pervasive theme across different Lebanese cultural productions of "stopping by the ruins" in order to mournfully contemplate the irrevocable losses wrought by war. Moreover, in the last quarter-century, the elegiac-humanist aesthetic has been developing into a not-uncommon and quite powerful means of resisting the disastrous premises of sectarian enmity.

A brief digression is necessary here to explain that most forms of humanism throughout history, like the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Cartesian philosophical movement, have been dismissed for their shared tendency to disguise moral, ethical, and intellectual limitations in the language of concern for humanity. Mercifully, we can spare the reader the convoluted details of how these forms of humanism were, particularly in the 20th century, deconstructed from a multitude of intellectual perspectives. Suffice it to say that the limitations in question are all similarly problematic because of their objectification of the individual and their attempts to circumscribe subjectivity with preconceived metaphysical notions, rather than apprehending it through empirical observation and scientific empathy.

It is important to understand this point if one hopes to grasp what differentiates elegiac humanism from its nominal relatives. Seigneurie succinctly explains in his introduction: "The 'humanist' profile of the ruins-centered aesthetic will be lost on no one by now. An aesthetic that denies the comfort of identitarianism in the name of human dignity is a kind of humanism…" In terms of Lebanon, however, elegiac humanism is a minor trend not because of its competition with bygone historical forms of humanism, but rather because of the prevalence of discourses about the civil war and sectarianism.

The secular-progressive politics of the Lebanese National Movement gave rise to social realism and the literature of commitment, which the work of the late Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani exemplifies. For Seigneurie, this type of discourse contains many of the same coercive tendencies of the aforementioned historical forms of humanism. Its rhetorical progression begins with a fallen society, riddled with festering maladies and injustices, and passes through hellfire and tribulation before arriving at a promised vision of redemption. But when the secular political trend collapsed (in large part as a consequence of the Syrian intervention on behalf of the Phalanges, but also as the result of internal contradictions), the trappings of this literary style were transferred over to the ascendant sectarian militias, resulting in what the author calls "mythic utopianism." A derivative of commitment literature, mythic utopianism exacerbates the patriarchal longing for order

and stability of its predecessor by linking it to the sacred mythology of religion. Thus, while the militias may have used Kalashnikovs and mortars to physically destroy Lebanon and its citizens, mythic utopianism was the underlying ideology that provided them with the justification to do so. As Seigneurie points out, and as we have been reminded most recently by the fighting in Tripoli, mythic utopianism is still fully operative in Lebanon today.

In terms of function, elegiac humanism is the photonegative of mythic utopianism. If the latter is the usher of death and destruction in the service of impossible ideals, the former is the witness left to account for what has been lost. This explains Seigneurie's observation that the rhetoric of mythic utopianism has had no significant presence in Lebanese artistic and cultural productions over the last 25 years, despite its overbearing role in war-making and political propaganda.

To demonstrate this, Seigneurie selects five war-era and postwar novels by different Lebanese authors that give a fairly exhaustive picture of the essential characteristics, possibilities, and limitations of elegiac humanism. Hassan Daoud's "The House of Mathilde" (1983) and Hoda Barakat's "The Stone of Laughter" (1990) embody, in a positive and uncomplicated way, the potential of elegiac-humanist aesthetics. In both of these novels, the ruin of an apartment building is the protagonist's only link to a past that is forever lost and mourned, and the only reprieve from the insanity of war. In Rashid al-Diaf's "Dear Mr. Kawabata" (1995), the nostalgia of ruins is resisted by the protagonist before being embraced, while in Najwa Barakat's "Ya Salam" (1999) and Rabi Jaber's "Beytus: City Underground" (2005), the main character has more complicated and even harmful relationships with ruins. These novels are distinctly different from those produced by their immediate realist predecessors such as Tawfik Awwad and Ghada Samman (with "Beirut '75" providing a literal punctuation), not by accepting or rejecting ruins, but by the very fact that ruins are always the backdrop for encounters, or potential encounters, between characters and their traumatic memories.

The image that begins to emerge out of Seigneurie's reasoning is that of a dynamic contradiction. The loss that is evoked, if not always mourned, is irrevocable. But the act of remembrance, in conjunction with how a given character reacts to ruins, contains powerful presuppositions all the same: it implies a willingness to at least recognize the painfully incongruent facts of history, and unlike the militia-speak of mythic utopianism, a rejection of the artificial and unethical nature of sectarian entrenchment. Mourning before the distorted and damaged image of the past offers no political solution and promises no mythic-utopia, but it does at least provide the opportunity for a uniquely humanist approach to make its case.

While the author does not focus on the *Taif* accord in any significant way, it is evoked here because it provides an instructive contrast that helps to explain his original concept of elegiac humanism, and its potential to help the continually beleaguered and traumatized Lebanese populace make sense of its horrific history. In this context then, the *Taif* accord represents

Allegorical ruin in a Christian militia poster: *in the flame of the torch,* "Lebanon"; *in the torch,* "Faith"; *on the map,* "The Lebanese cause;" *banner underfoot,* "Barbarous Arab tribes;" *bottom,* "All eyes of the world go to sleep, but Ain al-Ramaneh stays awake." Image courtesy of the American University of Beirut Archives. (From "Standing by the Ruins")

the obscene victory of a cacophony of militia ideologies and their bankrupt promises of a better world that instead re-established the religious identity of politics that it promised to abolish.

The ruins aesthetic is not prevalent by chance. The "ruins topos," Seigneurie's favored expression for this phenomenon in Arabic literature dates back to Imru' al-Qays's pre-Islamic *mu'allaqa*, about which the author makes the following observation: "The speaker-poet evokes suffering that can be aesthetically contemplated but not eliminated. Indeed, the ache of absence is intensified in a heroic effort to embrace the full range of heroic experience." Seigneurie maintains that the elegiac humanist aesthetic is a minor trend in terms of the history of Lebanese culture since '75, while at the same time demonstrating that its development represents a seismic event in terms of the history of Arab literature.

"Standing by the Ruins: Elegiac Humanism in Wartime and Postwar Lebanon" is ultimately a work of striking originality, and occupies a place of privilege within an increasingly well-defined trend of literary and cultural criticism in the Levant. Seigneurie is intellectually and philosophically imaginative, but never wonders from logical thought. This book will be of interest to those who are involved in the humanities, particularly the field of comparative literature, as well as anyone exhausted by the hydra-headed farce that has dominated the recent characterizations and caricatures of the Lebanese political system for longer than anyone can remember. Finally, the author's greatest accomplishment is the recognition that no political or sectarian discourse can ever measure up to the burden of devastating and irreversible loss that has been visited upon Lebanon with such persistence and cruelty since the days of the civil war. **AJ**

Author Struggles to Articulate Women's Struggles

Always Coca-Cola: a novel
Alexandra Chreiteh
Translated by Michelle Hartman
Interlink Books, 2012

BY THERI ALYCE PICKENS

Always Coca-Cola follows the lives of three women contemporaries as they navigate their young adult years. Abeer Ward, the protagonist, is a student at Lebanese American University. Her friend, Yana, is a Romanian divorcée and Coca-Cola model living in Beirut on a visa. Yasmine, a pugilist, rounds out the trio. Within the novel, Yana discovers she is pregnant and subsequently, finds herself dumped by her boyfriend. Abeer is raped by Yana's ex-boyfriend and worries over the possibility of pregnancy. Yasmine does not experience much, other than a brutal practice fight, but guides the other two through their trials – somewhat. The novel is told from Abeer's perspective, which remains fraught and worried throughout most of the action, partially due to her pregnancy scare and partially due to her natural frenetic energy. As a result, we receive little information about Yana or Yasmine's interiority, only witnessing their decision-making.

Chreiteh's strength lies in the honesty of her prose and her desire to confront the details of marriage, menstruation, and pregnancy scares in a straightforward manner. However, that unflinching gaze comes across as didactic and, at times, too heavy-handed to be relatable. For instance, Abeer notes that she can smell when other women are menstruating. My concern was not with the validity of the statement but that her commentary added little to the novel or her character development. Abeer's concerns about Yasmine's unfeminine musculature (because of too much exercise) appear naïve in their ignorance and childish in their articulation. Abeer struggles to articulate the rationale for her objections to Yana's provocative behavior and Yasmine's fitness goals, but she only gets as far as parroting cultural norms or drily repeating clichés. It is possible that the author left these concerns unvoiced so as to foreground their pervasive and problematic nature, but there is little irony to create the narrative peek-a-boo necessary for this interpretation. The only times that the narrative communicates a multi-layered set of concerns are when the discussion turns to Coca-Cola or other commercial products. Here, the ideas are complex and provocative.

Perhaps what will be most significant for Al Jadid readers is the translator's afterword. Michelle Hartman details the difficulty she had with putting the novel into English. First, the novel's specific location is "constantly invoked and satirized" making the specificity of people, phrases, and places difficult to translate. Second, Arabic has multiple registers that have no equivalent in English. Certainly, certain words are more formal than others but there exists no formal language that approximates Modern Standard Arabic. Third, the characters themselves are translating from their respective languages into English. This linguistic difficulty does come across in the English version as their conversations are sometimes awkward and clumsy, but it does not register as difficulty to an English speaker because the surrounding text is English. Hartman's note illuminates why translating from Arabic is so difficult and how that difficulty surfaces in the novel. Since this is such a useful enumeration, I would strongly suggest that readers begin with Hartman as an avenue into the novel.

...unflinching gaze comes across as didactic and, at times, too heavy-handed to be relatable.

"Syrian Village" by Yasir Safi

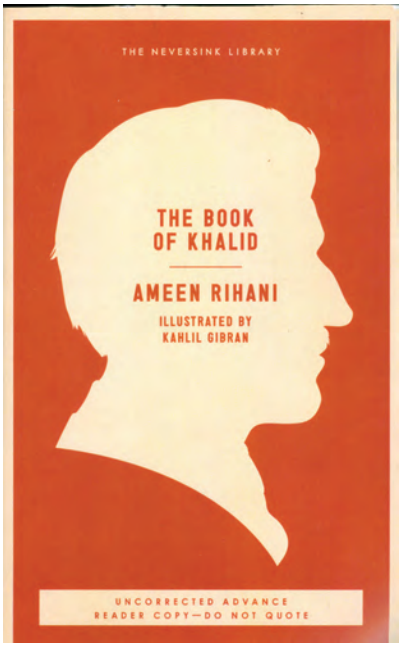
Chreiteh's novel probably communicates more about the life surrounding LAU in Arabic, but the English version languishes because it cannot capture that kind of specificity. As the translator has already made explicit, this is an issue fundamental to translation. I would add that this is also part of a larger concern with character development. Abeer's transparency denies her the multi-dimensionality of a fully realized character. The lack of interiority and thoughtfulness from Yana and Yasmine, even in speech, relegates them to being stock characters. Though I praise Chreiteh for her honest voice and clear critical concern with commercialism, I take her to task for not allowing the specificity of the place to help her weave a richer narrative tapestry than is present.**AJ**

The Immigrant Returns

The Book of Khalid
By Ameen Rihani
Illustrated by Kahlil Gibran
Afterword by Todd Fine
Melville House Publishing, 2012

BY MICHAEL NAJJAR

Ameen Faris Rihani returned to his home in Freike, Lebanon (then part of Syria) in 1905 after his second journey to America. By that time the so-called "Philosopher of Freike" had worked in his family's business, joined several literary societies in New York, contributed regularly to Arabic newspapers, and toured with a Shakespearean theatre company. He completed his novel "The Book of Khalid" in 1910, which was published by Dodd, Mead and Company a year later. In 2011, for the book's centennial anniversary, scholar and researcher Todd Fine created "Project Khalid"– a commemoration of the novel that included a symposium at The Library of Congress, a paperback publication of the work with a new afterword by Fine, and published an e-book.



Rihani's influence as an Arab-American writer cannot be overestimated. He wrote the first Arab-American novel ("The Book of Khalid"), the first Arab-American play (*Wajdah*), and helped found the Pen League (which included writers Kahlil Gibran and Mikhail Naimy). "The Book of Khalid" has now been republished by Melville House Publishers with the original illustrations by Kahlil Gibran included. This republication, and the events surrounding the book, is yet another example of the contemporary Arab-American literary movement gaining momentum after years of indifference from both publishers and academics.

The novel chronicles the life of two young Syrian immigrants as they cross the Atlantic, pass through Ellis Island, struggle as peddlers on the streets of New York City, and delve into the political intrigues of Tammany Hall (landing one of them in jail). Had the story ended at that point, it might have been considered a classic American immigrant tale in the tradition of Nabokov, Roth, or Sinclair. However, Rihani follows his protagonist Khalid back to Beirut, Damascus, and finally, Cairo, where he settles and earns the name "the apostle of Buhaism." This unusual treatment of the immigrant narrative, along with Rihani's contentious political views, complicated the novel's reception by making it difficult to categorize and less accessible for American readers.

Rihani's desire to behold a "World-Temple" between the spiritual Orient and the materialist Occident is the central focus of the novel. Khalid is an insatiable seeker of knowledge and wisdom, but eschews "the Sacred Books of the World" for a deeper spirituality. In the process, Khalid is excommunicated from the Maronite Church; driven from a mosque for admonishing Islam for its "stupefying traditions, its enslaving superstitions, its imbruting cants"; and heard proclaiming the superiority of the "Semite Syrian" over the "Semite Jew." Khalid's "reformation by emigration" offends nearly everyone he encounters, save one American woman who loves him (Rihani himself married the American artist Bertha Case). Fine urges readers not to condemn Rihani's views based on contemporary political divisions between Arabs and Jews, but he should also caution readers to consider Rihani's condemnation of Islam within similar historical circumstances.

Along with Gibran's "The Prophet" and Naimy's "The Book of Mirdad," Rihani's novel offers a more complicated view of early Arab-American literature – one that defies the booksellers' traditional classification as "spiritual" or "inspirational."

The "found book" structure of the novel, its poetic interjections, and its convoluted writing style make reading it both fascinating and frustrating. Rihani utilizes words like "dereligionise," "sororiation," and "everywhither" in conjunction with pseudo-Shakespearean parlance and transliterated Arabic. Unfortunately, with so little commentary to explain many of the anglicized words and Arab locales, understanding the novel could prove difficult for those without a passing knowledge of Arabic or Middle Eastern geography. The editor would have better served the project by including more footnotes to assist readers.

Despite Rihani's proclamations of "Arabia's Spring," "a great Arab Empire in the border-land of the Orient and Occident," and "the resuscitation of the glory of Islam," it is clear that Khalid is more interested in his own transcendental journey than any great pan-Arab movement. Along with Gibran's "The Prophet" and Naimy's "The Book of Mirdad," Rihani's novel offers a more complicated view of early Arab-American literature – one that defies the booksellers' traditional classification as "spiritual" or "inspirational." Rihani's inconclusive ending to "The Book of Khalid" includes a nod to Shakespeare, with Rihani asking readers to "judge us not severely." It will be interesting to observe how, as century later, a new generation interprets Rihani's ideals, given the world's religious and political upheavals since the novel's first publication. **AJ**

About Books

ATTA
By Jarett Kobek
Semiotexte, 2011

By D.W. Aossey

Even as the yet-unthinkable attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11thhave taken on a mythological, semi-religious stature in the minds of the American people, we are left in a strange state of confusion. The events of 9/11 were certainly mind-boggling on many levels, but what we do not know about the attacks and the deranged minds behind them is just as vexing. Most accept the findings of the 9/11 Commission Report – namely that 19 Arab men representing the Al Qaeda terrorist network were the culprits; their motive being nothing other than a hatred for Western ideals and values. And yet, commentators and writers of fiction and non-fiction alike continue to weigh-in on the subject as we struggle mightily to understand how an act so heinous could have occurred.

Add to this growing list of books the short novel "ATTA," by Jerett Kobek. As the title implies, this succinct and engaging story is an attempt to get behind the mind of the man believed to be at the controls of the jetliner that hit the North Tower that day; the dark, sinister face of 9/11 itself -- the Egyptian architect, Mohammad Atta. "ATTA" is an interesting novel, well-written and texturally tuned to the short, choppy thoughts of a possibly madman. It sets out a countdown to the morning of 9/11 while, in parallel, delves into the thoughts and personality of the title character, Mohammad Atta. The reader is thrust into the operation first in New York, then Florida then Afghanistan, while at the same time observing Atta as he suffers through a middle class upbringing in Cairo, and then architecture school in Germany -- all the while espousing a seething anger toward the corrupting forces of industrialization and Western culture.

The fuzzy nature of Atta's character is a bit of a problem. At times it is not clear if the author is promoting him as a lunatic hell-bent on destruction, or an otherwise normal individual frustrated to the point of irrationality. There is indeed a difference between the two and the character often seems confused. Is he driven to obsession over things like the 60 cycle buzz of the electrical grid or the architectural bastardization of the ancient city of Aleppo? Or is he angry by nature -- an anger exacerbated by his low-level bureaucrat father who takes his frustrations out on his wife and family, and especially on his son, Mohammad?

The true motives of Atta's character are a little hard to grasp, and if one looks at the novel simply as a terrorist operation and the psychology of the man behind it, then the story becomes predictable and mimicks the well-worn media narratives of 9/11. On the other hand, if viewed from a slightly different angle, "ATTA" truly redeems itself. Indeed, from a metaphorical perspective the story takes on a deeper meaning as the voice of Mohammad Atta, instead of the deranged Islamist intent on striking at the core of Western values, becomes the mourning voice of the modern Arab nation - a voice of despair and frustration that contains nostalgia and longing.

While the book is unconvincing in connecting Atta's anger at the West to a destructive but senseless suicide mission aimed at America, it is much more compelling when seen against the backdrop of a defeated people and a shallow father, vanquished by Western values, whose only concern is upward mobility. Industrialization and modernization, as portrayed in the novel, are hardly things that would drive young, educated, middle-class Arab men to the violence witnessed on 9/11. Yet, these things could easily represent the despair of the Arab nation as a whole in the face of endless Western hostilities.

Ultimately, the power of fiction comes from pulling the reader into something they had not before imagined. The depiction of Mohammad Atta as a crazy Arab whose hatred of the West drives him to unthinkable acts is not very inspiring. However, as a metaphor for the frustration, hopelessness and despair that has throttled the Arab and Middle Eastern people over the prior decades and centuries - feelings brought about by the endless aggression of colonialism, imperialism, racism and predatory capitalism – "ATTA" succeeds. Whether that was the intent of the book or not, it is in this context that it rings of truth, and it is in this setting that the voice of Mohammad Atta truly resonates.

Egypt in the 70's
Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing
By Caroline Seymour-Jorn
Syracuse University Press, 2011

By Lynne Rogers

In her "Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing," Caroline Seymour-Jorn takes both a literary and anthropological approach in her exploration of five major women writers of the Egyptian 70s. For each writer, Jorn gives a brief biographical sketch, comments about their role as a writer, a summary of the critical response to their work, and an examination of how each author manipulates the tension between classical and colloquial Arabic to provide a social criticism of Egyptian policy, society, and culture.

In her chapter on Salwa Bakr, Jorn cites the author as stating "that [Bakr's] ultimate goal is to develop a style that meets with the standards of *fusha* but at the same time conveys the ways in which women (particularly uneducated women) experience the world." Another chapter examines the Ibtihal Salem's empathetic portrayals of women who are ultimately left on their own as well as the nostalgia that expresses her disenchantment with the consumerism and capitalism initiated by Sadat's "Open Door" policy and the rise of the religious fundamentalists. Discussing Nemat el-Behairy, Jorn points out that the author's own struggle with

"Heads" by Yasir Safi

poverty and sexism inform her work which also celebrates women's "creativity and initiative to try to overcome the social, personal, and economic limitations imposed on them." Then, Jorn moves on to El-Behairy's frank treatment of sexuality provoked some surprising response such as the beloved novelist Ala al-Aswany's charge of obscenity.In another section, Jorn analyzes Radwa Ashour's "cause conscious" historical fiction that parallels political changes with the domestic life of women. Finally, for short story writer Etidal Osman, Jorn highlights her combination of Sufi spirituality with the folkloric tradition.

Jorn appreciates the contexts, concerns, and innovations of these five major authors and "Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing" provides an accessible and thorough introduction to their work and milieu. In doing so, Jorn exposes her audience to the myriad ways that social, political, and cultural contexts that influence literary analysis.

I Haven't Understood You (*Ma Fahemtakom*) (In Arabic)
By Mar'ee Madkoor
Egypt, Dar al-Hilal, 2011

By Nada Ramadan

In 2010, the Arab world was hit by a Tsunami wave of demonstrations and protests, culminating in revolutions, periods of civil unrest, violent clashes and power shifts. Not only is it impossible to predict the outcome of such tremendous changes – on political, social, and economic levels – but there are also debates about whether these uprisings were entirely genuine or the result of the subtle manipulation of peoples' grievances by the West to serve a long-term political agenda. If there is no clear definition of what constitutes the so-called "Arab Spring," no wonder it is more difficult to define what constitutes "Revolution Literature." Writers, in a form of protest, have described brutality and increasing social inequality long before the waves of revolution reached the Arab shores; they did not stand on the sidelines. Yet since the outbreak of the "Arab Awakening," many works carry a more straightforward image of the political and social upheavals. Nevertheless, is a mere publication date reason enough to categorize some literary works as Revolution Literature? This is one of the foremost questions that come to mind when reading Mar'ee Madkoor's latest novella, "I Haven't Understood You."

Madkoor, an Egyptian writer and journalist, directly draws the reader's attention to the revolutionary nature of his narrative on the cover page, where the title "I Haven't Understood You" is a play on the last words of former Tunisian president Ben Ali before fleeing his country. Contrary to Ben Ali who could finally claim to "understand" the reason behind his people's uprising, Madkoor's characters do not grasp why they have been inflicted with diseases, humiliated and forced to suffer for over 30 years. The mere fact that he dedicates his work to various journalists, writers, public figures (known for their anti-Mubarak writings), martyrs, and an army general (remember, the novella was written way before public opinion started changing concerning the role of "revolution protector" played by the Armed Forces) clearly states where Madkoor stands in regards to the 25th of January revolution.

The four-chapter novella opens with the story of an impecunious man who sets himself on fire in imitation of Mohamed Bouazizi, swiftly moving to the protagonist's shock: discovering being infected with hepatitis C. Yet Madkoor's treatment of that theme is not restricted to its being a creative necessity, for the novella becomes a sort of manual for patients, and a direct criticism of Egypt's health system that provides only the rich and those in power with a decent health insurance. Scenes from the narrator's quest for unattainable healing are interweaved with scenes from Tahrir square, the iconic locale and the primary destination for demonstrations. Yet one must marvel at the analogy between a corrupt government that has systematically weakened the nation and a vicious disease eating away at the narrator's body. Is he waiting for a miracle, a revolutionary medicine that will keep the disease at bay? And if such a comparison is valid, how can readers who, a few months after the publication of the novella, are already disillusioned with the revolution and the new political power players – mainly the West hiding behind various Islamist political fronts – perceive the outcome of the protagonist's fight against hepatitis C?

"I Haven't Understood You" is a heart-wrenching narrative that follows the life of its unnamed narrator through a mix of classical and Egyptian colloquial Arabic, his dreams and nightmares through events and fictitious characters, all while capturing childhood memories and folkloric traditions. There is definitely much to appreciate about this work, however, the fast pace of the novella is hindered by the excessive use of footnotes; though witty, entertaining and well-researched, they tend to distract the reader from the main narrative.

Nevertheless, the novella outlines a clear historical and socio-political background against which the problems

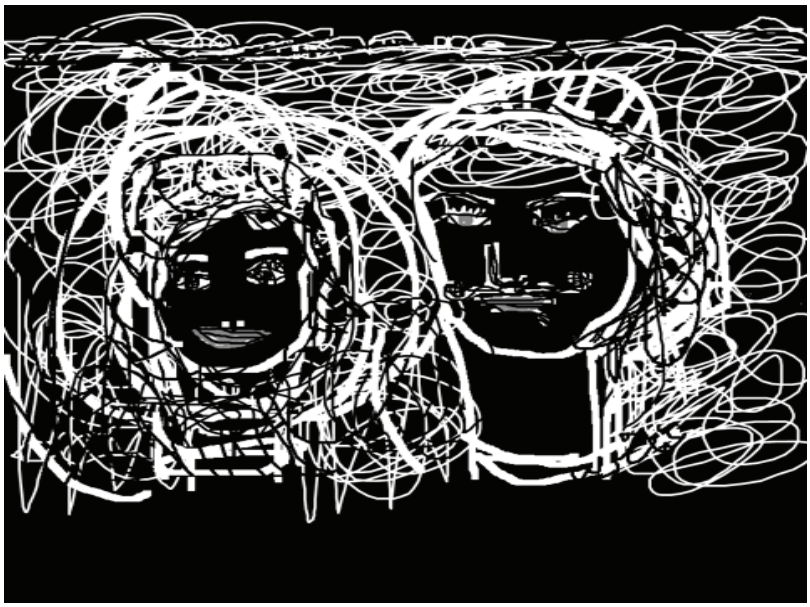
plaguing Egyptian society emerge. In the closing scene, we get to see the narrator returning to Cairo on the 28th of January, 2011, asking his body to hang on until the bleeding of the nation is stopped. He could finally understand and hope for a better future.

The World Through the Eyes of Angels
By Mahmoud Saeed
Translated by Samuel Salter, Zahra Jishi, and Rafah Abuinnab
Syracuse University Press, 2011

By Rebecca Joubin

The 2010 winner of the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies translation of Arabic Literature Award, "The World Through the Eyes of Angels" by prominent Iraqi novelist Mahmoud Saeed, tells the story of a young boy in Mosul in the 1940s and 50s. In the preface to his novel, Saeed writes that despite the poverty of his childhood years, he recalls an extraordinary harmony between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. He recollects with nostalgia how in the summer months there was constant interaction between Jewish, Kurdish, Aramaic, Yezidi, Shabak, and Armenian peasants. However, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent battles, divisions, and bloodbath, he faced writer's block and wasn't able to put his memories on paper. It was only after a summer in Mexico, where he observed a poor, barefoot boy happily nibbling on the small apple that was his payment for a day's labor of delivering fruits and vegetables, that Saeed remembered his own childhood of working barefoot and free from harassment and harm as an errand-runner in his father's shop. Saaed noted the pitiful disparity between his childhood sense of security and the total absense of this feeling in contemporary Iraq, where no child or adult can safely leave the house or travel even a quarter of a kilometer down the street alone. This contrast was the inspiration behind his new novel.

Narrated in the first person, "The World Through the Eyes of Angels" is the story of a poor boy who works in his father's shop running errands throughout the day. The youth is powerless against his oppressive older brother—whom he calls the "mad dog"—who constantly curses, starves, and strikes him for no reason. And yet, not withstanding the fraternal oppression, the boy lives in a society that is more diverse and harmonious than present-day Iraq. His entry into adolescence is sensitively portrayed through his friendships with three girls, one Muslim, one Christian, and one Jewish. Selam is an impoverished Muslim who lives with her emaciated mother. Starved and dressed in rags, both mother and daughter disappear from his life one day, leaving the boy feeling guilty that he never asked his father to help them. Then there is his friendship with the ravishing Madeleine, a young Christian who gives herself to her fiancé only to be abandoned by him. Knowing that no man will ever accept her, she starves herself beyond recovery and dies surrounded by priest, family, and friends. Finally, there is Jewish Sumaya (tragically fated to die of bone cancer), who flirts and shares intimate moments with him, introducing him to the world of manhood.



"Antar and Ablah" by Etab Hreib

Beautifully translated, the story brings to life the city of Mosul in the 1940s and contains a rich assortment of background characters, such as the tea seller, the butcher, the kebab maker, the cobbler, and the seamstress. The enchanting stories of Sheikh Ahmad Al-Shahdi enrich the boy's childhood and decorate the novel. Small details of the child's life are depicted with tremendous sensitivity. For example, the description of the way he put his first pair of shoes, with their "strange and repulsive smell," close to his pillow at night so he could see them first thing in the morning is simply magical. The superb translation so naturally renders this important novel that it is easy to forget that we are not reading it in its original Arabic. "The World Through the Eyes of Angels" is a must read in any college class on contemporary Arabic literature in translation.

Sarmada
By Fadi Azzam
Translated by Adam Talib
Interlink Books, 2012

By Lauren Khater

In a personal introduction to his novel "Sarmada," Fadi Azzam tells of the power of words, stating that "letters seem…to shine even as the world grows dark." This compelling idea echoes throughout Azzam's novel, which begins with the emigrant Rafi Azmi encountering a compatriot in France and subsequently plunging into the history of his village and people through the narratives of three women. While Rafi serves as the narrator of a frame tale, the voices of these three women represent the true core of "Sarmada." Their stories bring light to a forgotten corner of the world, evoking the deep complexities of life: passion, loss, fantasy, and faith represent a mere few of

hundreds of personal emotions that Azzam infuses into his novel.

The first story belongs to Azza Tawfiq, the woman whom Rafi Azmi meets in France and who instills within him a desire to return to his village in Syria and delve into its mysteries. Azza's story draws Azmi and the reader into Sarmada by introducing the topic of "transmigration": the idea that souls travel from one person to another. Azza's connection to Sarmada lies in her transmigrated soul's past life: Hela Mansour, a young woman who is brutally killed by her brothers upon her return to Sarmada after running away with an Algerian wanderer. This heartbreaking tale of courage and love compels Rafi's return to Sarmada, which arrival heralds the second village's second story.

Upon his return, Rafi learns that of the death of Farida bint Fawda, a pivotal woman in Sarmada's—and Rafi's—history. Where Hela Mansour's death left the people of Sarmada with a guilty emptiness, Farida's sudden arrival revives the village as she establishes a life embodied in intense passion and fantasy. But while Farida's presence invigorates Sarmada—especially its teenage boy population—her own life is enshrouded in death and loss. In spite of the tragedies that continue to plague Farida, her story reveals an enduring strength and self-sufficiency, culminating in the birth of her son, Bulkhayr.

This son ties Farida's story closely to that of Buthayna's, whose narrative completes "Sarmada." The two stories are inextricably linked, first by Buthayna's utter hatred of Farida, in whom she "found the cause and the causer" of the death and loss that ravaged Sarmada. Later, Buthayna finds herself irresistibly longing for Farida's son, cementing an ironic bond between the two women. This bond brings together the various threads of Sarmada, interlacing personal experiences, desires, and journeys with the words of intellectuals, regional movements, and Syria's rapidly evolving politics.

Ultimately, the reader and narrator are left with an intimate view of the lives lived in a small village called Sarmada. Fadi Azzam's writing evokes powerful emotions and delicate details that cause "Sarmada [to] become Scheherazade, weaving the story of" a place that is familiar and strange, wondrous and exotic, and joyous and tragic for all those who encounter it. Indeed, these words reveal the light of life, even in history's darkest moments.

Not Just A Soccer Game: Colonialism & Conflict among Palestinians in Israel
By Magid Shihade
Syracuse University Press, 2011

By Noah Bricker

The scoreboard at the end of the April 11th, 1981, soccer match between Julis and Kafr Yassif indicated Julis the clear winner, but in reality both teams had lost through a tie. The real score was one to one: one dead for the predominantly Christian town of Kafr Yassif and one dead for the Druze town of Julis. The ensuing weeks made this simultaneous loss even more apparent as tensions continued to grow between the two neighboring Palestinian-Arab towns in northern Israel and ultimately resulted in a violent attack by the citizens of Julis upon the city of Kafr Yassif.

On the surface, the violence may appear to be just another example extremely passionate soccer fans, but Magid Shihade in his "Not Just a Soccer Game" critically examines what he believes are the true roots of the terrible violence. Using the soccer game as a case study, Shihade explores the topics of ethnic and religious violence, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the role of the state in intercommunity violence. Shihade makes a case for why the violence escalated so quickly and what prevented the two towns from finding common ground.

Shihade organizes the book into four sections, although there is substantial overlap in content from one section to another. In the first section, he uses his personal insights, as a resident of the town of Kafr Yassif, to paint a vivid picture of the violence between the two cities. The following section explores the dominant theories of communal and ethnic violence as understood by contemporary political and social scientists. In the last two sections, Shihade focuses on the history of violence between the Druze and Christian sects of the Levant region, with a specific emphasis on the role he thinks Israel has played in fomenting the violence between different Palestinian groups.

Applying the research methods of the great Muslim historiographer, sociologist, and economist Ibn Khaldun, Shihade builds his case for why the state of Israel deserves the vast majority of the blame for the ensuing violence and not the Palestinian Arabs of Kafr Yassif and Julis. Ultimately, he concludes that Israeli officials nurture a close relationship between their state and the Druze to create a larger conflict and further divide the Palestinian Arabs of Israel, which he argues is no less than official policy.

While Shihade's work reads like an academic paper—less a human interest story and more a piece likely to be found in a political science journal—readers will easily discern that he is a former resident of Kafr Yassif (which raises interesting questions, given Ibn Khaldun's emphasis on impartiality). Whether the reader agrees with his conclusions or not, Shihade nonetheless presents the story almost entirely from the perspective of only one of the three players in the conflict. Nevertheless, his book has much to offer for anybody generally interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and more specifically in the interaction between the Israeli state and its Arab citizens. **AJ**

Two Letters from Syria

Our Serene City

BY NAJAT ABDUL SAMAD

At first glance, our city seems serene, as if protected by God's blessed hands... as if spared from the fate of those other tortured cities… cities that have been flattened by invading tanks… tanks that shoot bullets and hatred… tanks that mow down people, homes, and trees.

Yet, it only takes one closer look to see that silent wars gnaw away at the flesh of our city's inhabitants. These are opinion wars, poverty wars, and hunger wars… these are never-ending wars that will only worsen even after bombers fire their very last lethal morsel.

What we forget is that there are no winners in war, for war makes us all losers. What we also fail to bear in mind is that these wars against injustice are silent… they are wars where the people are voiceless; their cries are drowned out by the loud noise of opinions.

We stand silent in the government's absence. The government hides behind its cement barriers… barriers that only reinforce a separation that had existed for decades between the regime and its people.

The cries of the public are left unanswered here as they are in afflicted cities, unheard by both the government and a beseeched God to whom they say, "we have no one but You!"

Their shared pain brings the city together. But no one can escape poverty. And not only does poverty starve people, but it suffocates their dignity as well.

Thus broken, how can we build a new a homeland?

One glance at our internal make-up will reveal to each of us that much more remains to be accomplished.

Perhaps we should rethink our narrow views.

Perhaps we should learn how to listen better.

Perhaps we should compromise and apologize for old mistakes.

Or perhaps we should learn to stand by one another.

For this injured country, from East to West, is my country! Its people are my people...

Perhaps those who are still able to stand can begin to sacrifice some of what they have – for this is the lowest possible measure of faith in one another, especially when there is no government to protect anyone; perhaps a blanket to cover those who are broken, ones whose voices and pleas for help are not heard from behind the doors of their homes, doors closed onto emptiness.**AJ**

Translated from the Arabic by Ghada Alatrash
April 2012.

From the Back Window
Raghad

Raghad was thin and her appearance was as spare as the room that had become a new home to her and to her mother, her six brothers, and her uncle's family.

Her thinness resembled the stem of basil she carried with her to the refugee camp. Her mother had yelled, "We have no place for the basil. Leave it!" But Raghad didn't listen. "If I leave it here it will die, ma!" She carried it in one hand and a bag full of possessions in the other… no toys.

She didn't brush her hair today. She was sad. Her hair was the color of coal, and, like her, it was sad. It touched her shoulders but didn't cover her waist – a waist like an hourglass. Everything about her was tiny, except for her large eyes.

Her mother announced, "We`re having guests."

Lost in thought, she hid behind the curtain to change clothes – a new blue sweat suit, her gold dangling earrings, and her sister's slippers. Moving to the corner of the room, she dipped her hands in the basil leaves and came back to welcome us.

Her hand was cold and there was a restlessness in her almond eyes. They were the same color as the dark black fabric covering the floor. They seemed nostaglic for the warmth she might have known in a previous life… she sat across from us and looked our way, but her mind was somewhere else.

One of the visitors from the rescue team photographed her. She didn't mind. She sat still as she posed before the bright flash, and then softly whispered, "Hand me the mobile for a minute. I will only touch it. I won't ruin it. Take a photo with it in my hand and I will return it to you right away."

Her mother was embarrassed. "Where does this little girl get her ideas from?" she said. "When we used to sit for dinner, the entire family ate from one plate on the floor. But *she* would go into to the kitchen and use a plate, knife, and fork that I only brought out for guests. She would daintily dish her food onto the plate and divide it into bites. She then would hungrily eat without noticing the spark of anger in her father's eyes," complained the mother.

She continued, "once when I gave the children watermelon seeds, she took her a couple and gently cracked the shells with her teeth and placed them on the plate. She ate each seed with the fork and wiped the corners of her mouth even though there was no trace of food. She never tired of it. I swear she's giving me such a hard time.

"Fatima" by Etab Hreib

"Her father is no longer with us, so she has no one to fear now. He was taken by *them* months ago, ever since "the terrorists" took shelter in our home. We have heard no news of him since. And now stranded here without plates or a father, Raghad's sadness has doubled, and she will not eat."

Raghad left the room. Carrying the stem of basil, she slipped away towards our car and stood admiring it. Her hands explored the metal and stroked it as a spiritual man would touch his Holy Book. She opened its rear door, staring at the leather seat. She caressed it with care before sitting on it. Like a Hollywood star in front of the camera, she gave us an averted glance and slipped into a daydream. She didn't exactly know what she was imagining, but as the dream ripened she opened her eyes and placed the basil in the front seat. With that, she exited the car as elegantly as she had gotten in.

Turning to us, she said, "Water it every day… Don't neglect it!"

Raghad was a young daydreamer. She found little consolation in her family or school work; her notebooks were not filled decorative stars from teachers. Her heart was not in her studies or with her family, but instead was with her first love.

"Saif" was his name. He was her cousin, two years older than her. But he was no longer with her. His life was taken in a bombing two weeks ago. And her sadness had now tripled: no plates, no father, no Saif. Her fourth sadness was the new exile.

A few days before their exile, they had gone together to their relative's wedding. Many relatives were there, although their numbers had begun to shrink. In the courtyard of the wedding they danced for a very long time. They didn't even notice when most of the dancers left upon hearing about the death of the groom's brother; they hardly noticed the electricity outage which followed shortly after. The courtyard was empty except for the two young dancers. No one noticed them, nor did they notice anyone else; they couldn't hear the news or see the darkness.

Saif held her hand, supported her waist, and soothed her by saying, "Aah Rughaida." He taught her to stomp her foot and move her waist as she danced. He said, "Rughaida, dance like this… stomp your foot like that… come on Rughaida, again, from the beginning."

…On the ground, in the courtyard, stomp it! With a resounding step, stomp it! Let it scare away the vermin of this earth and its dormant worms.

On the journey of exile, stomp it, so that it can awaken the frightened faces behind their windows of silence and fear.

Continue to stomp it in exile so that the refugees never give up their dream of reuniting with those detained and returning to the front porches of their homes.

Stomp it resolutely so that Saif can hear you from there, *and so that he is happy to reap the fruits of his lessons, and to reward himself with a star in his school notebook, the one he was to receive next September.***AJ**

Translated from the Arabic by Ghada Alatrash
August 6, 2012

"Alphabet of Freedom" by by Fadia Afashe

The Museum of Contemporary Torture

To the young Syrian filmmaker

BY OSSAMA MOHAMMED

I do not like parallel montage--this is just how god of cinema designed me
And who can argue with the gods?
But I do not like the parallel montage...for another reason:
While I was speaking at the other end of the world
(at the Museum of Modern Art in New York)
The young filmmaker Ali al-Sheikh Khudr was thrust into
A museum of torture in Damascus.
Ali al-Sheikh Khudr disappeared a week ago,
His body and soul abused in an anonymous prison
Where someone spits on his camera even now.
In the parallel montage, it is a farce to be at the podium without him
Because Ali now exists or does not, is alive or is not.
The cannibals will destroy him now, tonight, at dawn, who knows when? given the vast time difference between Ali and his killer
Between two imaginations and civilizations.

...

While I am here he is here.
While he is there I am there.
Time is time, both in New York and Syria.
Balanced perspectives offend few and change nothing.
Ali saw an infinity of evil when he was blindfolded by the ignorant gang.
I believe he also saw me.
"Where are you my teacher?"
This was his last message to me, sent a few days before his disappearance.

...

A year ago, the ringing phone woke me at three in the morning…I thought it was the ring of fear and loss.
It was Ali… and it was a call of love:
"My teacher. I fell in love…I have lost my virginity."
Refusing to hoard his happiness, he shared it with me.
And crying with joy,
"Where are you my teacher?"

...

Ali has been arrested.
This is a lie.
There are no arrests in Syria.
Language shrivels before the horror of Syrian prisons (where thousands are caged). Words collapse under the hell this moment might visit on a young filmmaker.
Investigation??? Ha hah!

Untitled" by Yasir Safi

What sculpture are the executioners making out of you my little brother? Oh, Ali!
He stares at his killer with eyes seemingly closed—like one who does not sleep yet just awoke—confuses one vision with another, confuses wakefulness with sleep.
Ali searches for a new expression to explain what he sees.
Ali al-Sheikh Khudr has a delicate frame; the breeze could carry him away and leave not even a trace of bones.

...

Camera.
Two eyes.
But he is the grandchild of Andrei Trakovsky, David Lynch and Omar Amiralay.
The executioner — that inverted Don Quixote — will relentlessly hammer blows like a tidal wave of shots in a film.
And when murder undoes Ali's body, his great soul will defiantly rise and rejuvenate even the dead.
Ali.

...

Suddenly my friend opens his beautiful eyes and begins to chide me about a film he did not like-- as if I had been its maker.
He cautions me against detached analysis:
It will squelch the voice of Syria's youth — its new, incandescent stars—who thunder "freedom!"
Ali, my young Syrian film teacher...where are you?**AJ**

Edited translation from the Arabic by Elie Chalala

This text was presented in the Museum of Modern Art in New York on October 1, 2011 as an introduction by Ussama Mohammad to his film "Nujoum al-Nahar" (Stars of Light) as a tribute to Ali al-Sheikh Khudr, who was arrested by Syrian authorities. The Arabic text appeared in Al Hayat, October 26, 2011.