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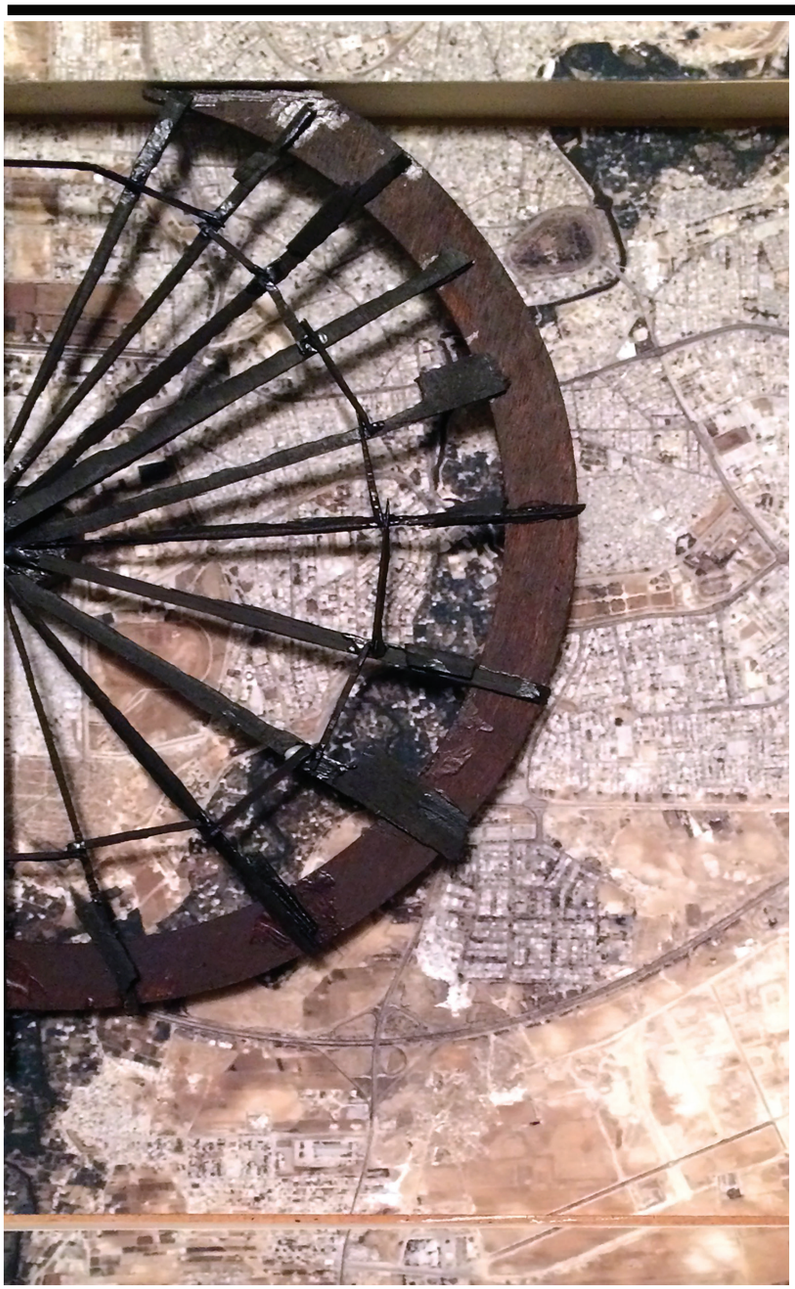


'Encoded Walk: On Beaten Path in Hama' (2015) by Doris Bittar

When a Corpse Becomes an Icon for Syria's Agony and Abandonment!

"For a moment I was in a state of disbelief, thinking sleep had overtaken him," wrote Mr. Ghassan Charbel about Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who died when a boat carrying Syrian migrants to the Greek island of Kos capsized near the Turkish city of Bodrum. "There are neither holes in his clothes, nor signs of torture and nothing appears unusual about this Syrian child lying on a Turkish shore," continued Charbel, Al Hayat's editor-in-chief. News of this tragic death dominated the front pages of the world's newspapers and exploded on television and social media. Many agree that the images of Aylan seared into our psyches, distinguishing themselves from those of other Syrian deaths to which Charbel and much of the world have sadly become habituated during the last four and a half years. Articles show photos of Aylan's death which some have deceptively described as "peaceful" only because no one gassed, barrel-bombed, massacred, or tortured this little boy. a capsized boat. He didn't know that his picture would dominate TV screens and front pages" (The words quoted, like all previous and subsequent quotes unless otherwise attributed, are from Mr. Ghassan Charbel.) Unquestionably, Aylan's image mesmerized much of the world, even touching those who had closed their eyes and ears to dying Syrians.

Aylan Kurdi's death has vividly called attention to the tragic transformation of Syrian lives since 2011. "How difficult to be Syrian in these days, how horrible to be Syrian-Kurd in all days, and how even more painful to be from Kobani, which we Arabs call 'Eye of the Arabs.'"

Assad's real-life reign of terror -- which culminated in 2011 with unprecedented atrocities -- fires the imagination of writers and ordinary citizens alike, allowing for language to stretch in order to grasp meaning. Charbel's prose proves no exception. "I almost accused Aylan of deliberately committing suicide out of desperation [to escape] from a country that

(Artwork: While the photo of Aylan on the Turkish shore is web-based, the other is a calligraphy by Dr. Fayeq Oweis, which reads in Arabic the name of Aylan).

Charbel continues with his captivating prose, "I almost said be careful not to wake him. Try to stop, for a little bit, the pounding thunder of the guns, the roar of aircraft, the shrills of the barrel bombs and thermobaric missiles, the concussion of booby-trapped cars and explosive belts." His words aptly describe the Syrian theater of war. While Aylan died in the sea, other Syrian children have died each day for the past four years, if not from aircraft bombing or from chemical attacks, then from the sheer fear of witnessing brutal, and indiscriminate bombings. "Perhaps he had bet that his brother Ghalib would wake him after a while, and that his mother Rihana would call him to continue the trip in case Ghalib overslept. Perhaps Aylan didn't know that Ghalib had died before he could awaken him, and so had his mother Rihana before she had a chance to call out to him... Perhaps the three-year old Aylan did not notice that the boat with the fleeing Syrians had capsized, and that Syria itself resembled murders its children in its own territory and, frequently, in the oceans. It expels them and then throws them into the teeth of the dream sellers which deliver them to their graves. Perhaps he committed suicide to throw his corpse into the face of this predator world. He wanted to throw his corpse into the face of a clown called world conscience which has remained a bystander to the open Syrian wound." He wanted to throw his corpse "into the face of the supermarket of the United Nations, and the shop of the Arab League, as well as the shops of the decision-making world capitals."

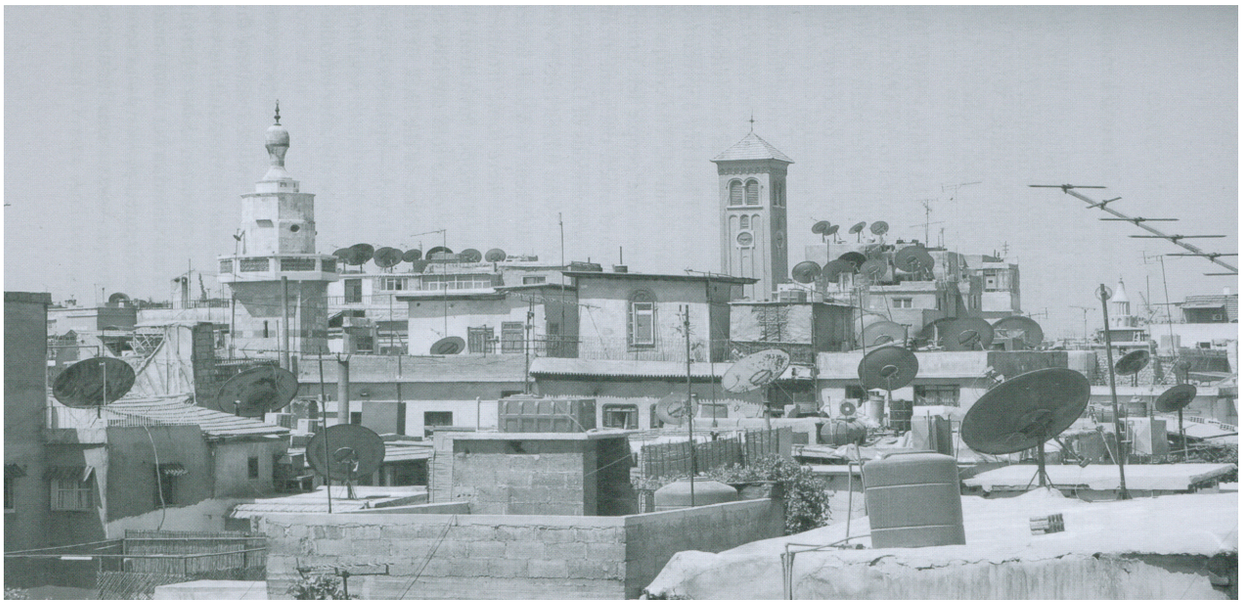
At the dawn of the revolution, Syrians took most of the Arab world and the international community at their words, expecting rescue from an unrestrained, tyrannical regime, especially when the dead reached the hundreds of thousands and the displaced numbered in the millions. Still, no rescue came, neither from their neighboring brothers or from afar. This indifference has fostered a sense of helplessness, gradually

paving the way for the rise of vicious, violent organizations that have damaged the revolution more than the regime. Thus, the notion of forgetfulness and abandonment has become a common mindset among many Syrians, and these sentiments echo in Charbel's essay. "This monstrous world has a fickle memory; tomorrow it will get bored with the corpse of Aylan and will turn the page, and for this reason the corpse needs to be preserved and presented to the U.N. Security Council so that John Kerry is reminded of the "flowing river of corpses in the region, regardless of his frequent visits or his smiles…It should be sent also to his master, the hero of the "Red Line" series." Charbel did not forget to add Sergey Lavrov and his master in the Kremlin to the list, two names which will inhabit a place of infamy in Syrian memory.

Al Hayat's editor-in-chief shares a recent experience in Warsaw, when the tourist guide in the hotel said to him: "It is important to go to Auschwitz to view the effects of the holocaust, the gas chambers and the atrocities committed by the Nazis." Mr. Charbel's answer proved telling, and predictable, given the current tragedy in Syria. "I listened to her words and was tempted by a desire to smile. There is no justification for me, an Arab, to go to Auschwitz. I have no right to examine history's genocides while I am drowning in the holocausts of the present. I am from a region whose armies and militias do not hate the 'final solution.'"

Mesmerized by the corpse of Aylan lying on a Turkish shore, Charbel envisions it to be crying out "against the long season of shame, the season of the fleeing refugee convoys. I have heard them on TV praising the countries which received them with open arms" after their native homelands abandoned them. "It is a long season of shame. The foreign country is more merciful…How harsh these places which we call home."

"Be careful not to wake [Aylan] up. He will tell of the horrors of his journey, and the horrors of his country," warns Mr. Charbel at the conclusion of his painful meditation.



Bab Touma from above, with minaret and belfry, Damascus (Courtesey of "Among The Ruins)

Whatever is Left of the Levantine Spirit?

The Arab world lives in a state of nostalgia for bygone days, when much of the hatred and intolerance of today had not set in, and the demographic minorities of what was once called the Levant were not escaping to Europe and elsewhere. But the Levant of peaceful coexistence between religious and ethnic minorities and the Muslim majority has suffered a physical blow with the rise of the terroristic Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). While most of the world has been using the term ISIS, and major Arab media sources have subsequently reduced the name to The Islamic State, Obama and his State Department have delivered an additional moral blow by using the acronym ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Using the word Levant has raised much curiosity, both intellectual and political. Identifying the vicious and obscurantist ISIS movement with the region called the Levant, a place which historically has represented the polar opposite of ISIS ideology, causes dissonance. While watching Steve Kroft of CBS 60 Minutes' interviewing president Obama, I could not help noticing that Kroft used the acronym ISIS while Obama used the term ISIL in his answers. It further begs the question: what and where is "The Levant?"

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The term Levant refers to where "cultures met, borders blurred, and religions and people cross-bred for better or for worse," according to Adina Hoffman's review ("Writings from the Most Fractured Place on Earth") of four Levant-related books in The Nation Magazine on August 27, 2015. The title of

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Doris Bittar (Cover artwork "Encoded Walk: On Beaten Path in Hama," 2015) is an interdisciplinary artist. Her projects examine decorative motifs and how they intersect with historical and geopolitical legacies. Bittar's art is housed in public collections in the United States and abroad. She is a core member of Gulf Labor, and co-founder of Gulf Labor West. Bittar received a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of California San Diego, and teaches at California State University, San Marcos.

Whatever is Left of the Levantine Spirit!

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the review in the print issue of the Nation is "The L-Word." Thus many question the wisdom of applying the "L-word" to ISIS when the Levant historically refers to what can be called a "melting pot," with different groups living together although they come from different religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. This practice directly opposes those of ISIS, from the beheading of captives to the smashing of ancient treasures and shared heritages in the name of a twisted version of Islam and a false Caliph.

Leaving aside the warped usage of the term, which has incurred the wrath of some scholars, including Ms. Hoffman, and ignoring for the moment the imprecise location of the Levant, the reviewed books highlight a variety of examples. These range from pejorative references to the Levantines, as in the case of the early writings of the British Olivia Manning (1908–1980), to the more inclusive or all-embracing, if sometimes vacillating, inclusion of regional groups, Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims, as advocated in the writings of the Egyptian-Jewish Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917–1979).

Image: Iraq after WWI (www.thetegmentum.com)

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The author of "The Levant Trilogy" and "The Balkan Trilogy," Olivia Manning, used terms like "filth" when describing Levantine Egyptians in the 1940s. Hoffman aptly calls these characterizations "orientalist" and goes even further in saying they sound "utterly squeamish and British." Even as she left Egypt for other parts of the Levant, such as Damascus, Jerusalem, and Beirut, Manning's attitudes towards the Levantines remained unchanged and consistent with earlier "colonialist" and orientalist literature. When she and Smith, her husband, moved to Jerusalem, where they lived for three years, she wrote an explicitly autobiographical essay describing her experience with a "profiteering Levantine population in Cairo," which she termed an "unending nightmare."

Manning's views in the 70s concerning the Levant, as seen in her "The Levant Trilogy," contrast with and reveal a transition from those views found in "The Balkan Trilogy," which she wrote at a much earlier age. As Hoffman points out, "When, in the opening pages of the trilogy, an earnest young soldier enthuses to Harriet about everything the English have done for the Egyptians, she laughs at him: 'What have we done for them?…I suppose a few rich Egyptians have got richer by supporting us, but the real people of the country, the peasants and the backstreet poor, are just as diseased, underfed and wretched as they ever were.'" This clearly contrasts with what the author wrote when a young novelist of 36 years of age.

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The meaning of the Levant becomes clearer when the Nation article reaches the discussion of "Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917–1979), edited by Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh. For those interested in the historical and political context of the term, Ms. Kahanoff, an Egyptian Jew, offers greater clarity and a more consistent view of the meaning of the term Levant.

Born in Egypt of Tunisian and Iraqi Jewish extraction, Kahanoff left the country of her birth in 1940 for the U.S., where she studied at New York's Columbia University. Afterwards, in 1954, she spent a brief period in Paris, then left for Israel in the same year. There, she lived in a working class neighborhood, although it still maintained some aristocratic traditions and attitudes. Despite her strong familial links to the Levant, her command of both Hebrew and Arabic proved weak.

While still in Egypt, Kahanoff developed a great appreciation for the "civilizing powers" of Europeans, a position with which she gradually became disenchanted while in the United States, Paris, and Israel. Upon returning to Israel, she developed a realist appreciation of the idea of the Levantine as something beyond the binary extremes of Zionism and Islamism. Her own idealism led her to call for the Levant in which minorities historically played an important role. Thus her conception of the Levant "seems more important now than ever to," imagining the region as a place "not exclusively Western or Eastern, Christian, Jewish, or Moslem." In describing Levantines, she observed that whether Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, or Jews, though they speak different languages, they understand each other.

Kahanoff's writing revives an important discourse either accidentally buried or deliberately overlooked in contemporary Arab and perhaps Israeli writings. She recalls Ben Gurion's warning of Israel becoming "Levantinized," this from a man famous for his axiom of "us or them," which carried clear political implications for the Palestinians. Some of the reverberations of his positions become evident in the bigoted, anti-Arab attitudes among the Israeli descendants of Eastern and Oriental Jews. What did Ben Gurion fear in Levantinization?

According to Kahanoff, "Levantinization" presented something positive to Eastern Jews, as the concept could bring

them closer to their Arab neighbors and achieve what she described as "dynamically integrated relations with their surroundings." In her idealism, she predicted that "Levantinization" would allocate power more equitably within Israel and integrate the country with its surroundings, meaning her Arab and non-Arab Levantine neighbors. Contrary to the Zionist ideal, Kahanoff attempted to reclaim that Levantine spirit, making Levantine a label to be proud of. She saw "no shame in mixing, crossing over, or in being in-between." She believed this hybridization to be "Israel's only hope." She also added that "the Ashkenazi elite must stop projecting Israel as a bastion of Western enlightenment at the expense of a wider Mideast expanse."

Even as the world witnesses the flight of Assyrians, Kurds, Muslims, and Yazidis, Ms. Hoffman rehabilitates or glorifies Kahanoff's predictions of the character of the region as neither Jewish nor Muslim, neither Zionist nor Arab, but rather Levantine. Considering herself as an Eastern or Oriental Jew, Kahanoff believed Eastern Jews could serve as a bridge or model for natives of the region and the heirs to an older tradition of cultural symbiosis. While she articulated this idea in 1959, her ideas underwent subsequent development, something that became evident when she argued that "Oriental Jews suffered from internal colonialism, referring to domination and discrimination by Ashkenazi Jews."

As time passed, Kahanoff's ideas devolved, becoming hopeless, especially in light of the deepening conflict between Israel and its neighbors. As Hoffman notes, "After 1967, she put forth disorienting, unsettling and patronizing notions—for instance, about how Israel's presence in the West Bank and Gaza might benefit Arab farmers by teaching them "new techniques of agricultural production.'" This idea closely echoes early Zionist ideas, which believed that while the Zionists busily converted the desert into a Garden of Eden, the land of Palestine remained agriculturally underdeveloped because of its population. Further, "she was not critical enough of Israel's control of the West Bank." Although not a "card-carrying Zionist," her views and those of the Israeli establishment appeared to come increasingly into alignment.

The article ends on a pessimistic note concerning the Levant and Kahanoff's early vision of it: "The idea of Israel's integration into a kind of open Middle Eastern union seems less likely now than ever." This appears true for many reasons, not the least being the latest spate of clashes between Palestinian youth and Israeli soldiers and settlers, clashes which point to a potential third intifada.

Arab Revolutions Produce Neither New Knowledge Nor Genuine Criticism

Hussam Itani has written a post titled, "Intellectual Production and Criticism." "Since the beginning of the Arab revolutions, no concept has developed worthy of our attention," Itani states. Nor does he believe there exists either a legitimate intellectual discourse on the future of the region, or even one artistic work which provokes serious debate. Rather, we have only received thousands of journalistic articles offering little more than "explanations of repression and the backwardness of Arab regimes." Part of the discourse has taken the form of trading insults between "failed intellectuals and poets."

"The production of knowledge is an immense task indeed." The process of developing ideas and concepts that can be tested and validated exposes the authenticity or fallacy of ideas. "What we have read so far are harrowing testimonies of our conditions," including details of these conditions and how they came to be. But the need "to understand the past and the present does not necessitate knowing the future." The enormity of this "catastrophic reality," and the failure of the current discourse to transcend it, precludes understanding the future. This leaves "a high wall of terror of varied sources and forms of violence and fear" that needs to be transcended.

Faced with the shallowness of what has been written about the current state of things, we find nothing but cynicism. Yet, "even this cynicism cannot be elevated to the level of criticism which could lay down the basis of new consciousness." The inconsequential nature of post-Arab-revolutions writing becomes apparent when the authors of many thoughtless articles refrain from calling things by their real names, or even identifying themselves as the actual writers responsible for these foolish articles. Moreover, several factors stymie the emergence of real literary production, including "the existence of a public relations circle, the apprehension by authors of displeasing those in control of [their] employment, the recruitment of literary hirelings, and an environment already politically dependent upon the varied financial and sponsoring authorities."

Intellectual production, subsequently, "aims to please the financial sponsor, while criticism seeks to settle accounts with this sponsor in order to please another." Thus, whoever talks about producing an Arab intellectual discourse independent from funding sources and authorities describes "a mirage." Mr. Itani concludes that breaking the funding cycle constitutes the first step towards an independent production of Arab knowledge, and the beginning of a path towards new, genuine criticism.

A Persnal Farewell to Sabah Zwein, an Innovative and Haunted Poet

Last June marks a year since Sabah Zwein, a prominent Lebanese poet, critic and translator, lost her battle with lung cancer, an illness known to few of her friends and acquaintances. I knew Sabah in 2002, when Professor Zeina Tamer Schlenoff interviewed her for Al Jadid Magazine. After that, we remained in constant communication. Only her unexpected and shocking death put an end for our e-mails and phone calls. I was fortunate to have had a face-to-face meeting with her during one of Beirut's hot summers in 2010. But sometime in May of last year, I became alarmed when my correspondence went

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A woman attends a mass at Ibrahim al-Khalil church in Damascus on March 1, 2015. Photo Credit: Omar Sanadik, Wall Street Journal, Reuters.

Rescuing Christianity in Syria!

BY SALAM KAWAKIBI

Many factors contributed to the decreased numbers of Syrian Christians before the 2011 revolutionary uprising. These included immigration based on economic or political reasons, and low birth rates compared to other religious communities, with the latter a factor generally attributed to higher educational levels.

At the same time, many countries have facilitated immigration, providing minorities with relaxed visa restrictions in the face of spreading Islamic extremism. Networks of family relationships, widespread throughout the four continents, also facilitated this flow of immigration. These networks, which trace back to the beginning of the last century, ensured the initial phase of immigration from departure to settlement. Other important factors also deserve more in-depth discussions.

Meanwhile, many scholars overlook the impact of political factors, many of which initially appeared to be economic. Waves of nationalizations, introduced as distorted socialist measures, led to the destruction of the Syrian national economy, industrially and agriculturally. This destruction arose from naïve readings of developmental theories and concepts during the 1960s. Since the 1970s, these policies have largely benefited parasitic groups, causing rampant corruption in the ruling authorities. The political economy of the regime served as the primary catalyst in pushing large numbers of Syrians of all sects to immigrate, especially members of the business and entrepreneurial classes. This phenomenon particularly spread among groups who either resisted submission to the regime or accepted the new market concepts.

What began as economic pressure had become political and social. Increasingly, Syrian Christians felt that they had become second class "citizens." Though all Syrians, except those who enjoyed security, partisan and clientelistic protection, felt that they were at a low level of citizenship, this feeling had increased among all Christian sects, especially for those who chose not to support or enjoy the "protective umbrella" of the regime. After the 1980s events, the political exploitation of the religious factor, carried out by encouraging religious reactionary thought in order to control the Islamic street, had intensified the element of fear among Christians.

While the number of Christians has decreased under the Syrian government – a government that claims to be the "the protector of minorities" – from 15% in 1970 to 4.6% in 2008, the regime still insists on exaggerating the percentage to about 10%. The church itself places it at about 7%. The state's rationale in offering a rosy picture appears clear: it provides a convenient propaganda tool from which the regime benefits in its "public relations." According to one Church official I talked with while preparing the study about this phenomenon, the Church prefers to withhold the real figures of Christians in order to avoid spreading fear in the community, as this could lead the last vestiges of resistance to emigrate. Further, immigrants generally travel without official notification, which makes tracking immigration statistics challenging.

Authoritarian regimes have always been successful in exploiting the question of minorities for their public relations campaigns. In a word, the ruling elites take these minorities hostage to serve their own regime interests. If the minorities object, partially or fully, their punishment would be doubled – harder than that applied to the general population. In Syria, the policy of "divide and rule" succeeded in bestowing international "legitimacy" to a regime described as a "securitocracy."

Today, the Russian Patriarch blesses the attacking planes and missiles, considering "the Russian war in Syria as holy." The Catholic Bishop of Aleppo says much the same thing, and considers "Putin to be serving the cause of the Christians in Syria."

"Passports" by Imran Faour

These religious authorities do not know (or they perhaps do), that these statements could cause real harm to those of their community still living in Syria and its neighboring countries. In fact, this in essence constitutes committing crimes against humanity in their own communities, placing their people in a state of "religious" hostility with the majority of the Syrian people. In reality, the statements of these religious authorities risk stigmatizing all of their communities as hostile toward the majority of the Syrian people. This fulfills the wishes of their political masters, while distancing themselves from any ethical or spiritual values. In justifying the Russian killing machines, they make themselves no different from other religious groups who advocate violence against dissenters, and effectively legitimize the tools of destruction, murder, and torture practiced by the likes of ISIS.

Religious figures of this ilk endanger the interests of their communities by implicating them in the defense of regional, international, and local destructive and hostile policies. These religious leaders end up resembling a type of mafia or other repressive authority which orders the deaths and the torture of innocents. But neither their turbans nor their batons can protect them from moral accountability. In a remarkably heated discussion, a daring and patriotic Syrian Bishop became furious before a Western official who inquired about the means to protect Christians. The Bishop said: "Enough. All Syrians are victims, and the Christians are part of the whole Syrian people; protect the Syrians." Who would then protect Syrian Christians from politicians and religious leaders who have stolen their past and who could eliminate their future? ***AJ***

Translated, from the Arabic, by Elie Chalala. The author has granted Al Jadid magazine the right to translate and publish. The Arabic version of Mr. al-Kawakibi's essay appeared in https://hunasotak.com/article/18551

Europe's New Refugee Problem Requires Explanation Beyond War!

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

The scenes of refugees drowning by the hundreds in the seas between Turkey and Greece as they attempt to reach Europe are harrowing. They come from all corners of the Middle East, not only from Syria, but also Lebanon and Iraq. Lebanon recently received the corpses of a family of eight who died when they illegally took a ship from Turkey heading to Europe. All this while the photo of the Syrian toddler, Aylan Kurdi, remains fresh in the minds of the world.

In growing desperation, some refugees, predominantly Muslims, are converting to Christianity in the hopes that they will be welcomed into new societies. Reports indicate that Iraqi soldiers, wishing to take advantage of the opportunities for new lives in Europe, have also begun deserting their units.

A recent article by Professor Walter Russell Mead in the Wall Street Journal, on September 12, throws light onto perhaps one of the most serious refugee crises Europe has faced since World War II. According to Mead, not only have insecurities and civil wars sent refugees flooding into Europe, but some structural causes, specifically "civilizational" failures both in the greater Middle East and Europe, have fueled the crisis. Ironically, almost 20 years have passed since Samuel Huntington's thesis on the "clash of civilizations" transfixed the world. Now, Mead focuses on "clashes within civilizations," specifically between Arabs and Muslims on one hand, and Europeans and Westerners on the other.

Mead cites the general failure of the Arab world to accommodate modernity as one of the most important civilizational factors contributing to the refugee crisis. He writes, "There is no point in rehearsing the multiple failures since Britain's defeat of the Ottoman Empire liberated the Arabs from hundreds of years of Turkish rule. But it is worth noting

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Ibtihal Salem

Ibtihal Salem: Author, Social Critic, and Mentor

BY CAROLINE SEYMOUR-JORN

Ibtihal Salem passed away unexpectedly on August 15, 2015 in Cairo, at the age of 66. Well known in Egypt not only for her prolific fiction production, but also for her role as a social critic and mentor to young writers and artists, Salem wrote four short story collections, and six novels. She worked professionally for the Ministry of Culture, translating programs and stories from French into Arabic for broadcast on State radio and in TV programs. She also served as the executive director of the public sector Samir Theater in downtown Cairo. Salem's commitment to young people extended to her translation work; she translated many children's stories from French into Arabic and published them in book form and in journals across the Arab world. Salem participated widely in Cairo's literary and intellectual worlds, making frequent contributions to conferences and literary circles.

I first met Salem in Cairo in the early 1990s while I conducted dissertation research on women writers in the city. I remember being struck by her passion for her work as a writer, and her commitment to the idea that fiction writing can be a source of inspiration and support to people as they deal with the everyday frustrations of life in Egypt.

Born in Cairo in 1949, Salem grew up in a large family. Her father worked as a university professor and the family lived in Hayy al-Zahir, on the northeast side of the city. In interviews, Salem told me that growing up in this highly integrated area in the 1940s and 1950s proved very important to her own developing system of values, as it allowed her to experience a community in which Coptic Christians, Armenians, Greeks, Jews and Muslims lived together and shared aspects of their cultural and religious traditions. Salem writes about a similarly integrated neighborhood in her novel *"Sunduq Saghir fi al-Qalb"* [A Small Box in the Heart] (2004), which explores the life of a woman who comes of age in the Egypt of the 1970s, and witnesses the deterioration of some of these old and diverse Cairene neighborhoods.

One of her more recent novels, *Al-Sama' la Tumtir Ahibba* [The Sky does not Rain Lovers] (2008) deals with the many economic pressures that Egyptians have faced in recent decades. In an interview I conducted with her in 2007, Salem said this novel "deals with the idea that despite all the difficulties that the Egyptian people have faced in the contemporary period, they nevertheless have the ability to create love and joy, and to change their lives. They do not have to submit to these oppressive circumstances." This comment seems prescient given the revolutionary period that has ensued since 2011, but I think it also represents a feeling that many Egyptians shared then and still share now.

Salem's short stories and novels have garnered significant critical attention both in Egypt and in the West. Critics have drawn special attention to the cross-genre nature of her writing; the poetic prose that characterizes much of her work. Prominent Egyptian writer and critic Edwar al-Kharrat has written admiringly of her use of poetic prose to explore unusual or difficult topics (including sexuality), and to bring into relief the contradictions of contemporary norms and values. Marilyn Booth, who translated a collection of Salem's short stories, has described Salem's short fiction as "meteoric stories" that successfully balance the "narrative demands of story-telling with the immediacy and visuality of vignettes of film takes, and the compressed depths of prose poetry."

Salem's experimentation with incorporating the colloquial Egyptian dialect into the internal and external dialogues of her characters has also brought her acclaim. Therese Saliba has noted that Salem's work delivers a sophisticated representation of gender oppression in Egypt by linking it to a globalized consumer economy, as well as the national and international pressures and policies that have led to war in the region. Saliba also points out that despite her poignant critiques, Salem also maintains an element of hope in her fiction.

I personally witnessed Salem's enduring hope for the future of Egypt, despite all that the country has experienced in recent years. Just weeks before she died, and not long after the Italian Embassy and other bombings in the city, I walked with this remarkable woman to Tahrir Square during the Eid celebrations. She gestured to the large crowd of families celebrating in the Square and said, "Egyptians love life and they aren't afraid. Despite terrorism and the political and other troubles we have been through recently, we will continue to live."***AJ***

"Still Life" courtesy of Cinema Guild

At 83, Acre Still on His Mind

Still Life
Directed by Diana Allan
Cinema Guild, 25 minutes

BY LYNNE ROGERS

The short film, "Still Life" begins with an elderly man aimlessly puttering in his Sidon apartment that has temporarily lost its electricity. With every day of his 83 years showing on his face, the Palestinian Said Ismael Otruk looks through his old photos from his "golden days" in Acre before he left at 12 years old to find refuge in Sidon. Although he has had a shop in Sidon for 55 years, he still aches for his homeland. As Diana Allan's camera slowly and painfully veers from shots of his face to his old photos, the measured tempo of his memories contrasts with the active street noises from moving traffic outside his window. His shaking fingers point out the landmarks of Acre as he describes the local personalities. He remembers the fish they used to catch in this nostalgic paradise. Later, they used the fishing boats to transport the fleeing Palestinians to the larger boats. He compares the huddled Palestinians, loaded with bundles, to fishes. Eventually his family joined the others and he has never returned to the border to see the sea of his childhood.

Like the work of Palestinian artist, Vera Nassir, this short documentary testifies to an innocent childhood disrupted by the Occupation. However, the gentle Said remembers sharing the bounty of fish with the families of Israeli settlers and saves his curses for the Arab government who "pushed us out of our homes" with a promise that the families would be able to return in seven days. At a time when the world is witnessing the growing numbers of refugees, this short film artfully records one voice that echoes for many. ***AJ***

Women of the Revolutions:
The New Faces of Arab Feminism

Feminism Inshallah: A History of Arab Feminism
Directed by Feriel Ben Mahmoud
Women Make Movies, 2014.

Nada's Revolution
Directed by Claudia Lisboa
Women Make Movies, 2014.

BY ANGELE ELLIS

Two recent documentaries directed by women provide connected narratives – in wide-angle and close-up – of feminism in the Arab world. Together, they illuminate not only the uneven history of Arab feminism, but also a few years in the professional and personal life of one contemporary young Egyptian feminist. These films demonstrate the strong parallels and critical divergences between feminism in the Arab world and feminism in the West.

"Feminism Inshallah" encompasses over 100 years of history, starting with male feminists such as the Egyptian Qasim Amin (1863-1908), whose nationalist aspirations for Egypt fueled his assertion that the Qu'ran supported women's rights. A feminist essentialist, Amin believed that women's moral superiority, nourished by education and civil rights, would prove crucial to Egypt's throwing off the yoke of colonialism and thriving in the modern world. (This paralleled Western feminists and suffragists making a similar argument for improving the health and strength of their nations.)

Tunisian nationalist Tahar Haddad (1899-35) adopted Amin's position, and his work greatly influenced Tunisia's leaders. Despite the fact that history credits Egyptian feminist Huda Shaarawi as the first Muslim woman to publicly – and dramatically – cast off the veil, at a Cairo train station in 1922, Tunisia granted more far-reaching rights to women after independence than those Egyptian women attained. When Gamal Abdel Nasser, in a meeting with Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba (who called the hijab a "miserable rag"), praised Bourguiba's accomplishments – public education for all, divorce rights for women, legal contraception and abortion – Bourguiba asked why Nasser couldn't do the same. Many attribute Nasser's "I can't" to his wariness of the Muslim Brotherhood, already a powerful counterweight to pan-Arabism.

Ben Mahmoud, a Sorbonne-educated scholar whose previous films include a history of Tunisia and a biography of Umm Kulthum, acknowledges the liberalizing influence of Kulthum's performances throughout the Arab world, as well as the influence of the glamorous Egyptian film industry of the 1950s and 60s. Performers such as Samia Gamal celebrated the beauty and sensuousness of the female body – prefiguring a contemporary generation of feminists in the Arab world and in the West, who make the liberated body a focus of their work.

Images from 'Nada's Revolution' (Left) and 'Feminism Inshallah' (Right) are both courtesy of Women Make Movies

Today, the satellite dishes that co-exist with minarets in the skylines of Arab cities tune into different channels. Conservatives and Islamicists saw the crushing defeat of the 1967 Six-Day War by a state founded as a religious entity as a turning point, a punishment and rebuke to modernists. (In a similar way, American conservatives and fundamentalist Christians interpreted the United States' defeat in Vietnam as a punishment and rebuke to liberalism, a position that strengthened their ongoing opposition to feminism and women's rights.) The increasing power of Saudi Arabia in an oil-based world economy also propagated that nation's Wahhabism throughout the Middle East.

Historian Sophie Bessis, one of a number of scholars who appear in "Feminism Inshallah," asserts that Saudi influence, as well as the continuing revolutions and struggles for self-determination in the region, transformed "that miserable rag" from a shackle into a symbol of political liberation, and then into a generalized social and religious norm. (Not so ironically, many in the West see this transformation as reversed.)

Ben Mahmoud finds hope in the work of younger feminists –including "Dialy," a Moroccan play that recalls "The Vagina Monologues," and a broad social networking project engineered by two Lebanese feminists. She ends "Feminism Inshallah" with a montage of screen shots of smiling young men and women from a number of Arab countries, holding signs declaring their support of women's rights.

"Nada's Revolution" focuses primarily on one face: that of Nada Ahmed, a young woman from Alexandria determined to create political theater for children and to negotiate a marriage on her own terms in the years following the Arab Spring. The film portrays Nada, her face sometimes framed by a hoodie, as anguished and haggard more often than smiling. (Her traditional mother treasures a photograph of a younger, plumper Nada in a hijab.) Lisboa, a Brazilian-born director based in Amsterdam, harbors a fascination for the politics of the body, and filmed her first documentary, Beauty Refugee (2009), as a study of her own rejection of her family's dependence on plastic surgery.

As Nada fends for herself on the mean streets of Alexandria and Cairo, looking for permanent housing and funding for her projects, she could be a struggling young woman artist in, say, New York City or London – but then Lisboa shifts perspective, reminding the viewer that Egypt remains a nation still in revolt, where Nada not only faces harassment, but also lives in constant danger of rape from thugs who now have freer rein after Morsi deposed Mubarak. Lisboa shows protestors in the streets, angry at being denied housing for which they have vouchers, as well as protestors on television. Nada may use actors dressed as lions, frogs, and sheep in her plays, but as political allegory, her work proves sharp and daring.

Equally daring in her personal life, Nada only returns home when ravenous for food and affection, even though her family laces both with criticism of her choices and nostalgia for the past. When Nada, nearly 30, feels she has found love and acceptance in Cairo with a colleague named Mahmoud and his family, she must make a hard decision about what marriage and domesticity would entail, aided by an unexpected and fascinating ally – Mahmoud's mother. Although similar to Nada's mother on the surface, this woman reveals herself to be a quiet revolutionary, even more tough-minded than Nada herself.

"Nada's Revolution" ends with its protagonist – having triumphed with two different plays – on the move again, still committed to her art in an Egypt now ruled by el-Sisi. Nada's future, like that of all women in the Middle East, remains uncertain. ***AJ***

Digging an Alternative Narrative

Exile, a Myth Unearthed
Directed by Ilan Ziv
Icarus Films, 104 minutes, 2014

BY LYNNE ROGERS

The sweeping cinematography and calm, inquisitive voices in the scholarly, yet artistic, documentary, "Exile, a Myth Unearthed," contrast with the film's provocative proposal. This earnest and courageous work uses recent archeological evidence to calmly contest the simplified narrative of the unified exile in 66 AD of Jews from the Holy Land after the failure of a Jewish rebellion against the Romans. Ilvan Ziv's film

asks,"What if today's Palestinian Refugees are the descendants of Jews who were never forced into exile, but flourished in Sepphoris and Galilee in an atmosphere of co-existence?"

Rather than reduce complicated historical events into one single narrative of forced exile, archeologists Mati Aviam and Zeev Weiss's postulate a more complicated landscape. Their findings suggest that some ancient Jews did not rebel against Roman pagan rule and so were not forced to leave their homeland after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. In Sepphoris, recent archeological discoveries of a pagan temple and Roman theater can be interpreted as evidence of a climate of co-existence.

To further untangle myth from history, the film retraces the career of Josephus Flavius whose writings provide one of the major accounts of the "heroic rebellion and exile." Josephus, the son of a Jewish religious elite, traveled to Galilee with orders to incite support for the rebellion. He failed, and the Romans later took him prisoner. In spite of this, he became part of the Roman inner political circle, and his revisionist historical writings of a great war between the Romans and the Jews served to legitimize Roman rule.

The documentary juxtaposes tasteful recreations of the past, with apparently endless throngs of tourists from all over the world reverently listening to tour guides articulating a politically convenient and emphatic version of history. Ziv's camera captures majestic shots of Masada, a UNESCO Heritage site that testifies to the power of the established exile narrative, in order to deftly illustrate the monumental challenge entailed in daring to question this single narrative. Although the film struggles with "the power of legend over reality," it does not confront the Palestinian conflict, and refers to 1948 as the "War of Independence." This controversial documentary, which was pulled at the last minute from the BBC schedule, poses a rational question, and provides scientific evidence, as well as powerful imagery. In the end, Exile issues a challenge to viewers, encouraging them to imagine what a different past could mean for today.***AJ***

CONTRIBUTORS

Continued from page 5

Hanna Saadah ("When Morning Died a Tribute to Sabah (1927-2014)," p. 31) is Emeritus Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. He is also the author of several novels and books of poetry, which are available on Amazon.com.

Zaid Shlah ("A Balanced and Elegant Depiction: Contemporary Arabic Poetry," p. 22) teaches English literature and composition at Salano Community College. His poetry has appeared in literary magazines, journals, and anthologies in both Canada and the U.S.

Director Usama Alshaibi (clevelandfilm.org)

(Un) hyphenated Complexities?

American Arab
Directed by Usama Alshaibi
Cinema Guild, Kartemquin Films, 2013.

BY ANGELE ELLIS

In Usama Alshaibi's autobiographical documentary, the director recalls watching the popular comedy/adventure "Back to The Future" (1985) in a movie theater in Iowa City. He recounts how the appearance, out of nowhere, of a gang of "Libyans" determined to kill Doc, the movie's loveable mentor, forced him to confront his own divided and complicated identity. The event abruptly dislocated Alshaibi from his role as an American teenager (something he longed to be) into the Other – the caricatured, malevolent, and despised Arab.

Watching "Back to the Future" in movie theaters in Pittsburgh and Houston, this reviewer and her brother experienced similar reactions, coming to regard such moments as flash points for those both American and Arab, in whatever ways individuals choose to define themselves. As Alshaibi demonstrates in this personal film, these flash points have become more numerous, troubling, and dangerous for American Arabs/Arab Americans in the 14 years since 9/11.

The son of an Iraqi Muslim father and a Palestinian mother, Alshaibi immigrated to the United States as a child in the mid-1970s. Though he did not become a U.S. citizen until 2002, he is in many ways American – a lover of punk and metal music, a director of music videos, and the husband of a white Midwesterner. In his youth, he found solidarity with a group of American experimental filmmakers, musicians, and artists, and identifies himself as an atheist, who nonetheless feels respect for the "Mother Mosque" in Iowa City and its thoughtful imam.

When his mother encourages him to change his name from Usama as part of his new citizenship, Alshaibi – who can be quite humorous – says, "At least now people know how to pronounce it." In response to being called a "camel jockey," he juxtaposes the slur with a photo of him riding a camel in Iraq and remarks, "That sounds like it could be fun!" Alshaibi

took the shot from his film "Nice Bombs" (2006), the story of his reunion with his family, including his father, who had returned to Iraq after he and Alshaibi's mother divorced.

In "American Arab," Alshaibi leads the viewer down a number of narrative paths, both joyful and sorrowful. The film begins with an emotional family visit to the grave of the director's younger brother, Samer, who died of a heroin overdose at the age of 28. His mother tearfully asserts that this would not have happened in Iraq, and that it would have been less painful to lose her son in a war. Later in the film, Alshaibi connects with a family of recent Iraqi immigrants, particularly the young Wed, who bravely recounts the "bad things" about her life in a war zone – and then he admits that one of the most terrifying moments of his own life occurred when a bomb came close to destroying his grammar school shortly before his family left Iraq.

"American Arab" also incorporates and juxtaposes the stories of Amal Abusumayah and Marwan Kamel. In 2009, Abusumayah, an observant young American-born Muslim, not only confronted but sued a woman who ripped off her hijab in a suburban Chicago grocery store. A different kind of rebel – Kamel, an Iraqi-Polish punk musician associated with "taqwacore," attempts to infuse both the Muslim/Arab identity and a musical genre with fresh meaning.

The film's unexpected climax and denouement occur after Alshaibi and his wife, Kirstie, leave Chicago to settle in a seemingly idyllic small Iowa town, intent on having a child after Kirstie has suffered a miscarriage. The final scenes of "American Arab" encompass chilling violence, anguished self-examination, redemption, and renewed hope.***AJ***

A Day of Dignity: Karama with the Blood of Innocents

Karama Has No walls
Directed by Sara Ishaq
Cinema Guild, 2013, 26 Minute.

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

The heartbreaking film "Karama Has No Walls" recounts the 2011 protests in Yemen's capital against the autocratic rule of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The film relies on extremely powerful first-hand video taken by protestors, primarily by two young cameramen, Khaled Rajeh and Nasr al-Namir, at protests referred to as "The day of Karama" or day of dignity.

The short film opens with scenes of protesters gathering after Friday prayers, confronting a wall constructed by the state security forces to halt their progress. Soon, the protesters begin to light fires on the far side of the wall, while pro-regime thugs fire shots into the air to dissuade them from pushing further. They don't relent. As they breach the barrier, the thugs confront them, opening fire. As scenes of protest turn to scenes of violence, men scramble back and forth, shuttling fallen

Courtesy of Cinema Guild

comrades away from the melee. The film shows a protester screaming into the camera, "How could you Ali," calling out the president directly while clutching his blood-soaked shirt. Khaled, one of the cameramen, can be heard reciting the *shahada* as he pushes further into the breach. As he narrates the events, Khaled tells us that he is certain that he will die that day.

Interviews revealing the story of two young Yemenis, Anwar and Saleem, frame the film. From the outset, they show the viewer that Anwar truly believes in the cause. Anwar's father recounts his son asking, "If you convince me not to go, who will carry on the revolution?" As events unfold, we discover that the son has fallen victim to the violence, and numbers among the dead on that day.

Saleem, the other, much younger boy featured in the film – a virtual child – lives, but a bullet takes both of his eyes, leaving him blind. His family's pain is palpably shown in intimate interviews.

The film ends with the fate of the two camera men, Khaled and Nasr. "Karama" stood against the Saleh regime and continue to struggle for freedom and justice in the ongoing civil war that has engulfed the country since the initial 2011 protests. This short, but important document also demonstrates the atrocities committed by an autocratic regime–atrocities that have gone largely unnoticed in the West.***AJ***

'Stealing Fire': Hussein's Quest for Uranium Centrifuges

Stealing the Fire
Directed by Eric Nadler and John Friedman
Icarus Films, 2015, 95 Minute.

BY D.W. AOSSEY

"Stealing the Fire" is a mildly intriguing film that follows the travails of a little-known 1980's smuggling syndicate allegedly aiming to equip Saddam Hussein with--yes--uranium centrifuges. The story takes a couple of interesting, if laborious, turns as the finger of culpability soon points to none other than the German government, a relentless clan who--the producers would have us believe--continue to harbor a hidden agenda

for exterminating anything that starts with the letter "J".

A mild-mannered German mechanic who once worked at Urenco, the European centrifuge consortium, Karl-Heinz Schaab acts as the face of the syndicate. Motivated by personal gain, he stumbles through an underworld of Brazilian military brass, scientists from the Degussa Corporation, a Nazi-era death gas manufacturer/centrifuge maker, and finally onto a double-dealing Iraqi named Khidhir Hamza. With a wink and a nod--according to Hamza at least--Schaab and Degussa hand over centrifuge blueprints to the Iraqis for a mere 100,000 DM, a stunt that gets Schaab indicted for treason by a meddling prosecutor back home. But as the case grows larger and German corporate figures are dragged into the flap, a panel of federal judges ultimately hand Schaab a slap on the wrist, throwing a blanket over the whole embarrassing affair.

Ignoring for a moment the improbability of the Iraqis ever producing a uranium centrifuge, the film ends in Tel-Aviv with panic-stricken Israelis patiently awaiting a nuclear holocaust--a clear confession that the plot-line had worn thin and was none too convincing in the first place. If you have absolutely nothing else to do, "Stealing the Fire" might be worth a look.***AJ***

Editor's Notebook

Continued from page 7

unanswered, since almost everything about this remarkable woman could be described as atypical except her responsibility and loyalty to her friends. Her death came as a thunderbolt.

Mike D'Andrea's "Sabah Zwein (1955-2014): An Innovative and Haunted Poet," published in Al Jadid's previous issue (Vol. 19, No. 68, 2015), reveals aspects of Sabah's personality perhaps only known to those quite close to her. Although I knew Sabah for some time, I still do not consider myself knowledgeable enough to speculate on how she would have reacted to what was written about her and her literary legacy, some of which Mr. D'Andrea cited in his Al Jadid essay. Given my knowledge of Sabah, I can only speculate that she would have taken issue with some of what was written about her. I cannot imagine her letting characterizations pass that described her poems or state of mind in terms like bitterness, despair, and isolation.

Regardless of her pain and illness, Sabah stood tall in the face of great odds. She did not appear to succumb to depression, and continued a prolific career writing, translating and reviewing books and films, some of which she shared with Al Jadid, granting us the exclusive right to translate and publish them.

Rest in peace my friend; I will always miss your innocence, idealism, generosity, giving spirit, and unwavering support for Al Jadid. I will even miss your "stubborn and uncompromising" positions.***AJ***

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Syrian Booknotes/*By Elie Chalala*

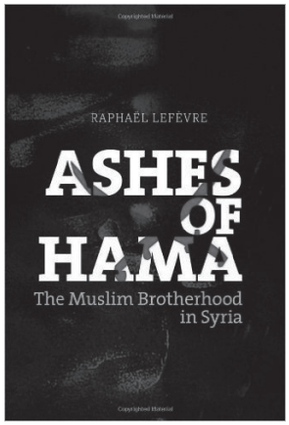
Since the 2011 March uprising, scores of books have been published on Syrian politics, with most written by a new generation of scholars with no longstanding background in what might be loosely called "Syrian Studies." For someone who has devoted years to the study of Syrian politics, first as a graduate student and then as an academic, I admit to not missing many of Syria's "old guard" analysts. Members of this group have attempted to rationalize regime policies and motivations, trying to bestow legitimacy upon the Assad family. Rather than function as a commentary on the old literature, this essay focuses on the new, aiming to survey new ideas and debates as identified by learned book reviewers of the new literature.

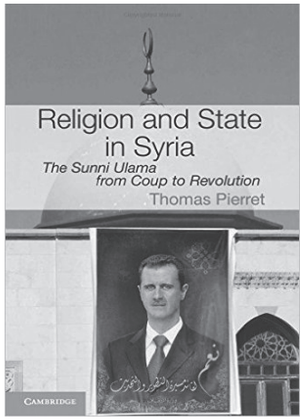
While Syrian Booknotes survey the new literature by drawing on reviews in other publications, Al Jadid continues its coverage of the Syrian conflict, offering original analysis and reviews like those included in this issue, especially the reviews of "Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present" by Christian Sahner, reviewed by Tim Louthan, and "The Plain of Dead Cities: A Syrian Tale" by Bruce McLaren, reviewed by D. W. Aossey. Four new books, reviewed by Gerald Butt in the Times Literary Supplement (TLS) last year (June 20, 2014), debut this new section of "Syrian Booknotes."

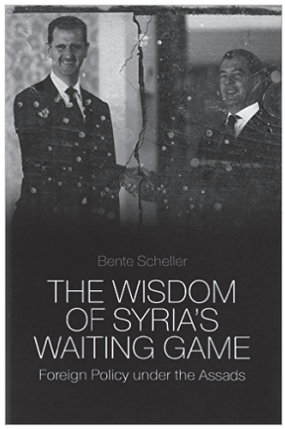
Mr. Butt introduces his review of these four books on Syria by noting that they provide an excellent foundation, despite their limitations. He claims that they lack ideas for resolving the conflict, and that they concentrate on the past more than the future. According to Butt, they detail the failures of authoritarianism, and how repressive policies and events led to revolution, including the Dera'a demonstrations, the arrest and torture of young protestors, and the opportunities lost when Assad spoke to the Syrian Parliament on March 2011, laughing and giggling on the podium instead of showing remorse and promising reform.

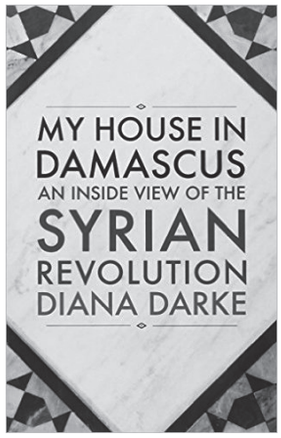
Unquestionably, regime policies have resulted in dire consequences, such as a quarter of a million casualties, the displacement of almost half the Syrian population (internally and externally), and a massive destruction of the country's infrastructure. The "ascendance of jihadist Islam," has proven an equally destructive consequence, with its metastasis, from Iraq and Syria to Europe, posing a grave threat, as does the growing strength of the Islamic State, which remains unrivalled by any moderate rebel groups.

Butt's first reviews Raphaël Lefèvre's "Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria," which seeks to debunk the regime's narrative about the February 1982 Hama uprising, by placing the majority of blame on the Assad regime, rather than the Muslim Brotherhood. During the post-independence era, the Brotherhood participated in the political process, even after the Baathist takeover, and, by comparison, their vision appeared more inclusive and democratic. The bloody events of the 1970s on, including the assassinations of Alawite officer cadets, can be attributed to a splinter group led by Marwan Hadid, and inspired by Egyptian Jihadists









and Palestinian radicals, rather than by Brotherhood doctrine. Yet, the regime ignored Hadid's radicalism as well as the actions of other radical groups who abstained from targeting the Baathists. Instead, Assad used the assassinations as excuses to crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood. Faced with this repressive and violent campaign, the Brotherhood had no choice but to support the Vanguard group, a decision that Butts characterizes as a "catastrophic tactical blunder."

The "experience of Hama" and its massacre radicalized jihadists who took the fight to Afghanistan and Iraq, with the Assad regime facilitating their travels to and from Iraq after 2003. Now, these same jihadists have turned their attention back to Syria "for revenge and to continue the battle…to bring down the Ba'ath."

The second book, "Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution," by Thomas Pierret, highlights the regime's overarching concern with security versus institution building. This has led the regime to turn away from a tradition dating back to Ottoman times, and still practiced in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, of the state using a religious bureaucracy to control the clerical establishment of Islam. Instead, Assad's Syria has demonstrated more interest in combating its security threats by using the clerical establishment, cultivating the support of clerics – in effect, leaving Islam's day-to-day concerns to the private sector.

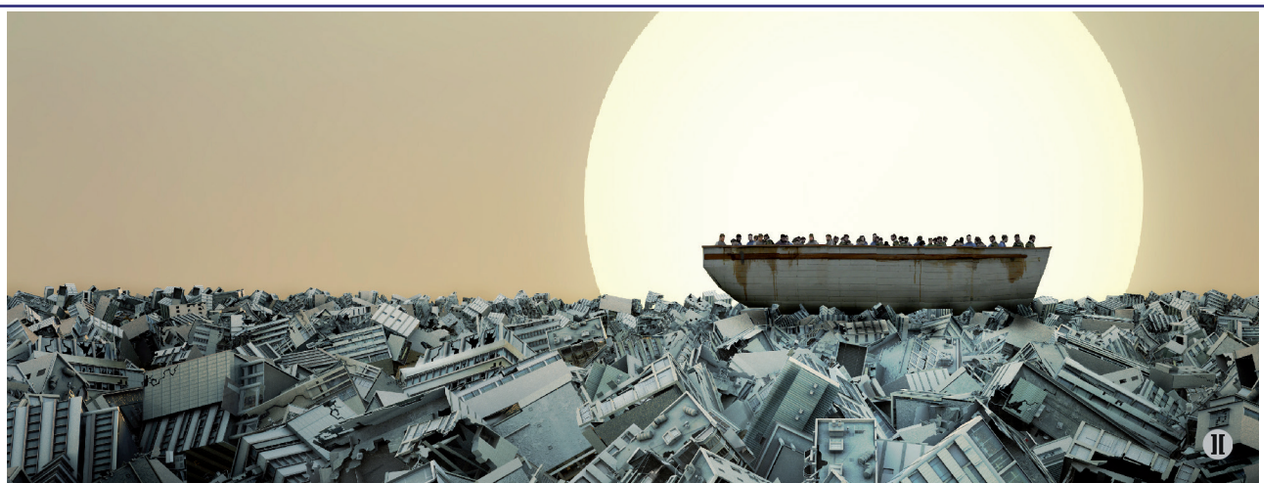
According to Pierret, this has advantages and disadvantages, placing blame on the Ulama if the situation deteriorates, but also liberating them from the heavy hand of the state. The author observes that during the Hama uprising, most clerics did not embrace the anti-Baathist revolt wholeheartedly, forcing activists to recruit from private Islamic schools. Historically, this also proved the case in Damascus, when the Ulama remained loyal to the Assad state, despite the major external and internal challenges faced by the Sunni establishment. These included calls for reform, the assassination of Lebanon's Sunni prime minister in 2005, and a division of opinion with clerics in other towns like Der'a and Homs, who supported the protestors in the revolution of 2011.

The third book, "The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads," by Bente Scheller, focuses upon the pragmatism of Assad the father, which Scheller attributes to "political astuteness," a quality he finds lacking in Bashar. Hafez al-Assad's pragmatism had a ruthless, Machiavellian character (something I wrote about in 1985), as the regime cynically manipulated foreign policy to generate political and economic returns. The regime worked with the United States and other foreign powers in Lebanon in 1976 and then in 1990-1991, and, starting in 1973, even collaborated with Israel to maintain peaceful borders. Yet, in order to cultivate the support of anti-Israeli and pro-Arabism forces, Assad maintained his rhetorical commitment to the liberation of Palestine, rejecting any peace agreement with Israel, and supporting Hezbollah resistance against Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Despite this rhetorical commitment, Assad the father, as Defense Minister in 1970, refused to provide Syrian air support for Syrian troops on their mission to aid the Palestinians in Jordan's Black September. Nor did it hinder his support for the right-wing Lebanese Christian attacks on the Palestinians in 1976.

The fourth book, Diana Darke's "My House in Damascus: An Inside View of the Syrian Revolution," though a travelogue and personal memoir, also offers political analysis. Darke has familiarized herself with Syrian history, Arab culture, language and architecture to the extent that Butt calls her a "learned encyclopedia." She has also befriended many Syrian intellectuals who provided her with enough evidence to identify regime repression as the cause of the revolution.

Darke states that the majority of Syrians stand neither with Assad nor with the rebels, which partially explains why so many have fled the country. The author adds: "Had there been a moderate alternative…a carrot…obviously juicier and bigger than the others, all parties would surely have chosen it long ago."

In lieu of a conclusion, Darke has "imagined a second revolution to secure the middle ground and to emerge from the nightmare." For this to succeed, the impossible must happen, and much that seems unforgiveable must be forgiven. This leads the author to observe that she "might be a hopeless dreamer." Ultimately, Butt agrees with Darke's assessment that a resolution to "the Syrian crisis still resides in the realm of dreams."***AJ***



"Deluge" by Imran Faour

Novel Offers Travelogue Through Syrian Dystopia

The Plain of Dead Cities: A Syrian Tale
By Bruce McLaren
Cune Press, 2014.

BY D. W. AOSSEY

It seems that the catastrophe in Syria, scenes of which have become painfully commonplace, may now be fertile ground for narrative fiction rich in history and corruption. If so, "The Plain of Dead Cities," by Bruce McLaren, delivers exactly that. This intriguing book appears to be a travelogue through a dystopia reminiscent of Dante's Inferno, terrible, yet at the same time fascinating. Still, the story leaves much to be resolved.

The book succeeds in its portrayal of the well related history of the region, otherwise known as the "cradle of civilization." The mere mention of ancient Mari and Ebla, Aleppo and Homs, and the wonders associated with them, ignites the imagination. The 5000-year-old clay tablets of Ebla, cuneiform records of trade and commerce in the Fertile Crescent, as well as the Hashimites, the Assassins, various Islamic sects, the Mongols and the Crusaders, all take the stage. As an archaeologist and historian, the author does an excellent job of bringing to life the mysteries and intrigue of this far-off land.

As a novel, however, The "Plain of Dead Cities" is left searching. Although certainly a gifted writer, Mr. McLaren fails to burden our sensibilities with any plot twists and offers no Captain Queeg's or Billy Mumphrey's to guide us through. An Anthony Bourdain-like figure acts as the main character and narrator, but has little identity of his own other than a brooding interest in politics and history, and a thirst for alcohol in a rather unaccommodating part of the world. Meanwhile, the storyline assumes a predictable path as the narrator travels war-ravaged Syria and Iraq, ruminating on life, death and the sorrows of human

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The Power of History: Reappropriating Syria's Past

Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present
By Christian Sahner
Oxford University Press, 2014.

BY TIM LOUTHAN

Since protests began against the Assad regime four years ago, Syria has descended into a prolonged period of chaos. From the use of chemical weapons to the destruction of antiquities, seemingly every day brings a new headline of the same depressing story. In the Levant's heartland a diverse mosaic of people and cultures has been shattered.

While coverage of the country's sectarian violence has been relentless, relatively little analysis of Syria's long history of diversity exists. Indeed, much of today's discussion about Syria rests on the supposition that the country's sectarian issues simply emerged with the breakdown of the Assad regime. Yet in his recent book "Among the Ruins: Syria Past and Present," historian Christian Sahner offers a prescient perspective on the nation's present crisis. In the tradition of Thomas Friedman's "From Beirut to Jerusalem" and William Dalrymple's "From the Holy Mountain," Sahner's travelogue blends memoir and history to provide a rich and colorful background to Syria's current struggle. Tracing Syria's different religious communities from the rise of the Umayyad Dynasty in the seventh century to the outbreak of civil war, Sahner masterfully weaves personal narrative into a finely crafted tapestry of Syria's minorities today. Sunni, Shia, Druze, Alawis and Christian sects come into focus in Sahner's engaging account.

The crux of Sahner's observations revolves around a universal phenomenon, that "the deep past exerts a powerful influence on the present." The Syrian civil war, thus, represents "the culmination of certain long-term trends" and "the contest over how to properly interpret these trends and their

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Shoman Collection Embraces Broad Spectrum of 20th to 21st Century Arab Artists

Arab Art Histories:
The Khalid Shoman Collection
Edited by Sarah A. Rogers and Eline van der Vlist
2013 Suha Shoman Publication, 2013.

BY DORIS BITTAR

"Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection" is a museum-sized collection mapping artists from Arab lands and the diaspora. It is a tightly threaded collection of images, thoughts and contexts. This book functions as a space for contemplation and refuge, mirroring Darat Al Funun, a vibrant zone for artists in Amman where the collection is housed. It is edited by Sarah A. Rogers and Eline van der Vlist in close coordination with supporter and collector, Suha Shoman. This book is informative, comprehensive, thought provoking, and its innovative structure amplifies the thoughts, struggles and issues of modern and contemporary Arab artists. The Shoman collection represents about 140 Arab artists from the 20th and 21st century – spanning four decades. It embraces a spectrum of artwork including those by forbearers such as Ismail Shammout's surreal painting and Adonis' weavings of poetry and form, to conceptualists Amal Kenway's "The Room," and Gilles Fontolliet's space craft, "The Palestinian Space Agency."

The artists' pages are chronologically ordered from older to younger artists, but the texts are color-coded alternating from chapters that are reflections, conversations among several people, and the thoughts of curators, critics and scholars. The

Nuha Al Radi "Ain Ghazal I" 1996

Samia Halaby's image "Branchings"

format, edited by Eline van der Vlist creates a comprehensive data bank, one that acts as a cross-reference on styles, attitudes and debates. This format makes room for and dovetails with the essays written, selected and edited by Sarah Rogers. The scope of eras in this tome show the overlaps of influences internal to the Arab countries as well as from the trajectory of European Modernism. The more Modernist-like art shows a back and forth evolutionary conversation between Europe and the Middle East, rather than the Arab art playing a peripheral role of mimicry.

"Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection" has a unique underlying objective when compared to other surveys of Arab art. Suha Shoman chose most pieces to honor the creative processes of artists: how their intentions weave, depart, link and build within their own disciplines. It privileges series and process, gathering them into what can be experienced as a studio visit where the art reveals the bones of its own making. Perhaps the artists represented are more inclined to pursue careful, detailed and prolonged inquiries, but most artists actually work that way. This book provides insight into what the viewer rarely sees, the process of fieldwork, data gathering, and poetic journaling.

The Shoman collection shows the trajectories of modernism, conceptual art, and political art. The minimalism may appear clean and manufactured or intimately show a touch of the hand. Figurative examples are in two and three-dimensions, viewed through the lenses of abstraction, surrealism, and the folkloric. Handsome examples of book art, photo-based projects, performance, sculpture, calligraphy, experimental and environmental art are generously included.

Mona Saudi "Homage to Brancusi (The Lovers)" 1968

Individual artists include Fahre lnissa Zeid, pivotal in the forming of the collection.

She is also Suha Shoman's mentor and guiding force. These origins anchored Suha Shoman's impetus to establish a forum of support for artists who eventually contributed to the collection.

Rachid Koraichi "Untitled" 1993

Other pieces such as Ismail Fattah's bronze sculptures and works on paper show stoic figures attached to or burdened by heavy gravitational and rigid forms. A Syrian artist who goes by the singular name of Marwan focuses on the figure, especially the face in low contrast suspended formations that barely distinguish between figure and ground. Thus the emotive aspects come to the fore. Aziz Amoura's delicate watercolor drawings show subterranean emotion related to horrific political calamities. His calligraphic pieces have spatial depth with the text acting as a veil. Rafik al Kamel's mixed media and painting have a collage approach toward spaces that seem entrapping. Gouider Triki's paintings on paper and etchings create a patterned surrealist atmosphere that are textile-like and folkloric.

Additional figurative works include Nasr Abdel Aziz's "Palestinian Woman, and Nuha al Radi etchings of iconic images that work in and out of framing devises. Mahmoud Taha's elegant ceramics are represented. Personal narrative and identity are shown with Abdul Hay Mosaillam's paintings, which chronicle the Palestinian history of struggle through pattern, figure, structure and text into an interlocking puzzle. Ahmad Nawash's discreet and lyrical art explore legends, personal narrative and abstracted portraits.

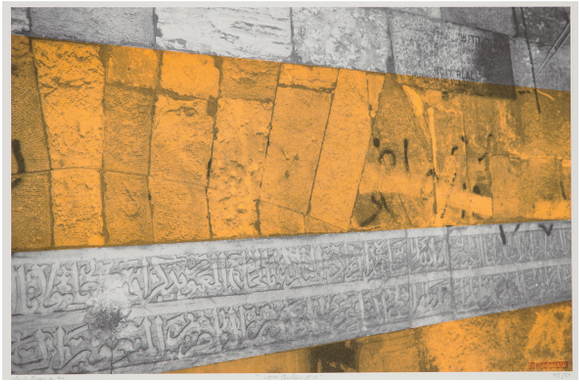
The mix of abstraction and primitivist articulations include Jumana el Husseini's elegant painted stones, Farid Belkahia's inchoate forms based on simple organic foci, and Samia Halaby's breathtaking bramble-like paintings that pull you in close with unexpected color, and depth. Hind Nasser's paintings are cloud-like with nascent forms. Nabil Shehadeh's work captures figuration in varied spaces.

Samer Tabbaa's pieces are reductive and poetic. "Tar" has an unexpected asymmetry mirroring designs that allude to movement, cartoons and perspective. Najia Mehadji's mixed media drawings and artist book investigate geometric forms with hard and soft edges blurring the line between abstraction and the natural world. Maha Mustafa's ribbon-like pieces are polished forms, but they eerily double as segments ripped clean from larger structures, perhaps as an allusion to the manufacturing of weapons.

Tarek al Ghoussein "Untitled" 2005

There is a plethora of artists who work in more than one media. Mona Saudi's figurative drawings, hand-made book and marble statue play off of one another, giving us insight into her train of thought. Rajwa Bint Ali's work combines minimal investigation with organic forms referring to primitive architecture.

Mohammad Omar Khalil's prints have an assemblage sensibility. We experience them as serendipitously measuring space, time and meaning. Nedim Kufi Mohsen's assemblage builds a loose grid to explore man made objects that appear to "return" to their organic forms.



Laila Shawa "Walls of Gaza-12th Century AD" 1994

The Shoman collection displays book art. Most notable among others are Etel Adnan's meandering book displays, which deepen our understanding of how philosophy may dovetail improvisation. Kamal Boullata's book, "Lantern for Granada," and a series of color exploration paintings are included.

Perhaps because the Middle East sits upon ancient lands many of the works reference the history of civilizations. Adam Henein's works on paper and bronze sculptures align to comment on Egypt's iconic past. Hussein Madi's lithograph shows variation and space. Dia Azzawi's work uses abstraction and figuration to show the struggle between the personal and political. Abdrerazak Sahli uses the structure and touch of folk art to investigate emotion and terrain. Ali Jabri's drawings of structures, and ruins in monochrome are descriptive and mysterious. Rachid Koräichi's work employs traditional materials such as silk tapestry, ceramics, etching, lithograph and calligraphy to articulate repeating forms of narratives with subtle perspectives set into a grid. Adonis' poetry-as-vision adds an elegiac note to the collection as it also shows us how to break free of the impositions and confinements of word, sound and

Rayyane Tabet "Fossils" 2006 – ongoing

Gilles Fontolliet "The Palestinian Space Agency" 2010-12

image.

Artists whose traditions originate in the Arab or Islamic world, use calligraphy and text as footholds for art making. Issam al-Said contributes a quiet calligraphic golden etching. Wijdan's paintings and sculpture suggest a return to image from calligraphic text, as if text remembers its pictographic origins. Rafa al-Nasiri's work explores spatial depths with hints of calligraphy. These pieces add to our curiosity about how Arab art may have influenced European Modernism.

Photo-based art includes Laila Shawa's collages, layering a dichotomy of patterned color with historically referenced iconic imagery. Shawa's lithograph, "Amended Resolutions 2" references the wall of Gaza. Dana Ereket's photographs show both horror and humor as humans traverse a "minimalist" dividing wall in Palestine highlighted in a transparent bright yellow. Moataz Nasr's pieces have a painterly touch realized both as hard-edged commentaries and softened portraits. A critical mass of Jumana Emil Abboud's cryptic and confessional photos, permit us to decipher inferred meaning. Ziad Dalloui's work shows a compressed landscape forcing us to note hidden depths of forests, buildings and pathways. Tarek al-Ghoussein's photographs offer unexpected frontal views of forms cutting through a desert landscape both imposing and natural.

Issam al Said "Ya Sattar Ya Alah" 1975

Ahlam Shibli's photos use transitory moments in the urban landscape: on a bus, around a hill, a ruin, or behind a wall. These spaces are bereft of people yet express an anticipation for connection with others. Rula Halawani's wall photos and the "Negative Incursions" seem to defy gravity. Hrair Sarkissian's photographs, "Transparencies," of buildings under construction, or perhaps their impending demise, act as skeletal and haunting vulnerabilities. Jananne Al-Ani's photo-composite pieces of fruit and figures have a film still-like quality lending them a mysterious and exploratory feeling.

The conceptual and performative arts are well represented. Faisal Samra's practice of materials coincide with an investigative work that leaves traces of its original intentions. Halim Mahdi's photographic portraits and paper maché work are understated yet eerily beautiful. Raed Ibrahim has an actual piece in the book in the red and gray pages showing a cartoon sequence of diagrammatic references. Rheim Alkadihi's photo-based pieces bridge or pass through fetishized objects realized as iconic residues of narratives or happenings. Sama Alshaibi's photographs anchor identity within diasporic topographies – related to her body and geographic home as contested sites. Mona Hatoum's diverse practice filters iconic links to the poetic metaphors of utilitarian functionalism and how they intersect with history. Others create the possibility for performance, and fieldwork such as Emily Jacir's "Where We Come From" which is represented in its entirety.

A number of Arab artists in the collection are refugees escaping war in Iraq or the occupation in Palestine. Others are from Tunisia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, or live in the diaspora. "Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection," and its mission to provide a fertile and supportive space for making art, has chronicled Arab artists as they proactively enter the global stage.***AJ***

Continuations

Through Syrian Dystopia

Continued from page 17

nature. The actual Dead Cities, to which the title refers, comprise a collection of abandoned Christian settlements in northern Syria. The area was supposedly decimated by the spread of Islam in the ninth Century. Slowly, but surely, the crocodile tears flow.

Reminiscent of "The Last Refuge" by Gregory D. Johnsen, a tome on the conflict in Yemen floated as investigative journalism, "The Plain of Dead Cities" dissolves into the same style of narrative fiction. More than a few works in this genre, no matter how they begin, will certainly suffer this same fate. On the other hand, maybe that's the underlying message behind Bruce McLaren's book: that, for many of us, the war in Syria has become a fiction.**AJ**

The Power of History

Continued from page 17

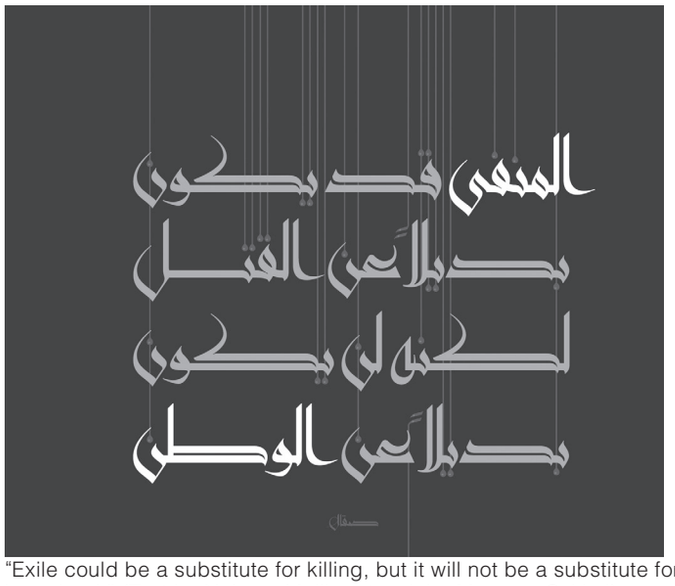
relationship to the present." Not only is Syria's future identity at stake, argues Sahner, but its past is also in jeopardy. His insightful retelling of the Alawis' rise to political prominence demonstrates the power history, whether true or imagined, exerts on a populace. An offshoot of Shi'a Islam, the Alawis successfully reappropriated Syrian history to champion both Arab and Syrian nationalism. To consolidate their power, they co-opted other minorities to offset the Sunni majority. They embraced Christians and Druze, allowing the regime to celebrate Syria as a "supra-sectarian paradise." Now, as the façade of the Assad regime has eroded, new narrow and absolute sectarian histories of Syria have come to the fore. Evidenced by the destruction of Roman temples, Byzantine churches, and medieval mosques, the civil war "is robbing Syria of its connection to a multi-faceted and diverse past."

Although Sahner's primary academic interest lies in seventh-century Syria, specifically with the Christian community, his account of Syria's modern history proves equally fascinating. He has composed an accessible narrative, appropriate for both a general reader seeking a broader overview of the conflict, or an insightful expert eager to find a fresh perspective. It is also a deeply personal book interwoven with accounts of real people caught between an oppressive government on the one hand and the anarchic chaos of a failed state on the other. His in-depth description of Syria's contemporary religious communities and how individuals must negotiate their increasingly fraught social structures furnishes a compelling interpretation of Syria's past and perplexing future.

"Among the Ruins," is not a happy book. Sahner remains cautiously optimistic for a somewhat brighter future. Hesitant to play the role of prophet, he makes no bold predictions. While he suspects a resilient Syria will emerge from the destruction of war, he notes the country is in the midst of another tectonic shift, a shift that will surely lead to a reinterpretation of Syria's past and open the way for a future identity.**AJ**

Europe's Refugee Problem

Continued from page 9



"Exile could be a substitute for killing, but it will not be a substitute for homeland." (Text by Nairouz Malik, artwork by Mamoun Sakkal)

that the Arab world has tried a succession of ideologies and forms of government, and that none of them has worked." In fact, Liberal intellectuals in the Arab world have long lamented the failing of various historical movements and ideologies.

Mead rightly points to the crisis of civilizational identity in Europe and how it contributes to the troubled response greeting the waves of refugees on the continent's shores. As Mead asserts, the contemporary liberalism of Europe wants to "do what is right." However, the compulsion towards what is right confronts real logistical, economic, and political concerns – in short, what is actually possible. A tension exists between pragmatism and the idealism that should be present in the values of Western "Enlightenment." Though it may sound cynical, at the very least, Mead appears a "realist," correctly indicating that while 10,000 refugees on your border may allow you to do what is right and be the Europe of open-armed modern liberalism, that luxury fades quickly when the number of refugees enters the millions.

While Mead makes a succession of valid arguments, in the end, they seem to point to a more robust willingness to engage in military intervention. He believes that part of the failure of European – and ultimately Western – policy involves an uncertain and half-hearted approach to intervention in Syria and Libya.

According to Mead, a decisive military policy might have quelled the tide of strife sooner, thus reducing long term insecurity, a factor which he identifies as equally significant to poverty in driving mass migration from the Middle East. Some in Europe, including French President Francois Holland, have argued for a more aggressive European military involvement in the region. Yet Mead fails to articulate what this means in practical terms. It's easy to label a policy as "feckless," but much harder to say what that security policy ought to entail. Moreover, it begs the question: shouldn't the almost 100 years of foreign military intervention in the region be considered one of the major factors in the civilizational failures that have resulted in the refugee crisis we see today? **AJ**

A Balanced and Elegant Depiction: Contemporary Arabic Poetry

Silencing The Sea: Secular Rhythms in Palestinian Poetry
By Khaled Furani
Stanford University Press, 2012.

BY ZAID SHLAH

Khaled Furani, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Tel-Aviv University, refers to his book as an ethnographic study, in particular, of contemporary Palestinian poetry. Although I do not disagree with this characterization, I find it too clinical and narrow for the fascinating subject matter that he covers. Arabic poetry has emerged from its traditional *qasida* form (*al-a'mudi*), with its emphasis on rhythm and rhyme, to become modern free verse; and, finally, to transform into image-centric prose-poetry. Furani's writing strikes me as an expression of an acutely aware, historically informed, and critically woven poetics which illuminates a space for secular writing in contemporary Arabic poetry:

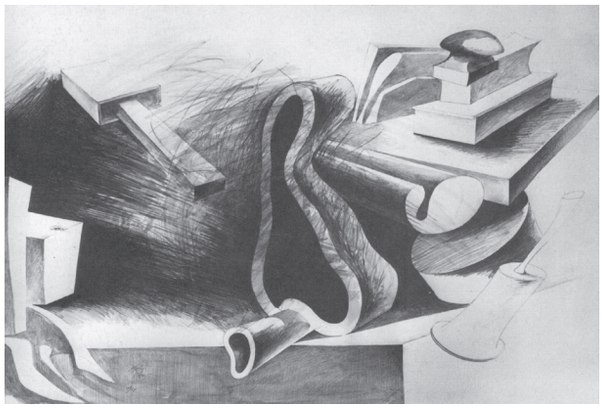
> Prose poets who rose to dominance after the retreat of Arab nationalism say that free verse failed to deliver a sufficiently radical revolution to the Arab world.

Another intriguing aspect of Furani's study can be found in the many interviews spanning years of research with poets, young and old, obscure and highly revered, amidst the stifling conditions of what has been a normalized daily burden for Palestinians. Throughout the intimate details and hardships of his travels through Haifa, Ramallah, Amman, Lebanon and Cairo, not to mention the betwixt and between existences he encounters in several smaller Palestinian villages, Furani remains objective in his treatment of the poets he meets. He humbly defers to their idiosyncratic personalities and personal philosophies, always approaching them with a genuine curiosity, which allows each poet to speak candidly though him:

> It was in the nascent metropolis cafe of Ramallah where I had first met al-Barghouti...Our first conversation, although awkward and embarrassing (due to his confronting me about including "non-poets" in my study), propelled me to pursue yet another one...My pursuit specifically revealed details about the rivalry, dissonance, and estrangement among the different orders of truth.

Yet, no matter the style or bias of the poets interviewed, Furani presents a thorough, balanced, and often elegant depiction of contemporary poetry. Take, for example, his synthesis of the historical figure and grammarian al-Khalil, whose work "repel[led] modernists in their quest for 'plurality'":

> "It is possible to hear how the traditional verse lines can be a simulation of the work of sea waves. No two verse lines, as no two sea waves, are identical. And between the roarings of every two verse lines…there is the interrupting…whooshing silence."



"Souvenirs," 1979, by Christos Caras, Athènes 1982

During the process of building Furani's definition of the secular, with its importance and legitimacy as a vibrant and viable poetics, he reveals how, in comparison to English poetry, Arabic poetry also seems to be at an existential crossroads with respect to our modern condition. Yet Furani does not shy away from differing points of view or counterpoint. Throughout the book's 12 distinct chapters, he allows the readers to form their own opinions. For example, he frames two oppositional positions by the poets al-Manasra and Salim:

> While Salim saw the prose poem form as bearing ideological content that stands in opposition to the authority of Arab tradition and political rule,...al-Manasra...saw the prose poem in a diametrically opposite way: as anathema to a culture of "resistance."

Furani's objectivity allows the reader to approach the text from a multiplicity of perspectives. This book will no doubt please the student or scholar looking to discover the value in secular Arabic poetry, while it also opens itself to anyone with a general interest in the subject. The work covers competing ideologies: the traditional appeal through the quality of "tarab" ("a state of rapture through music"), and the more nuanced arrival of the "silent sea," or prose poem, which in itself offers a brilliant conceit that readers must encounter for themselves. Furani ends his eloquent meditation with a "hymn" to Adonis, whom he sees, perhaps more than any other poetic figure, as the great radical spirit of the secular age of Arabic poetry:

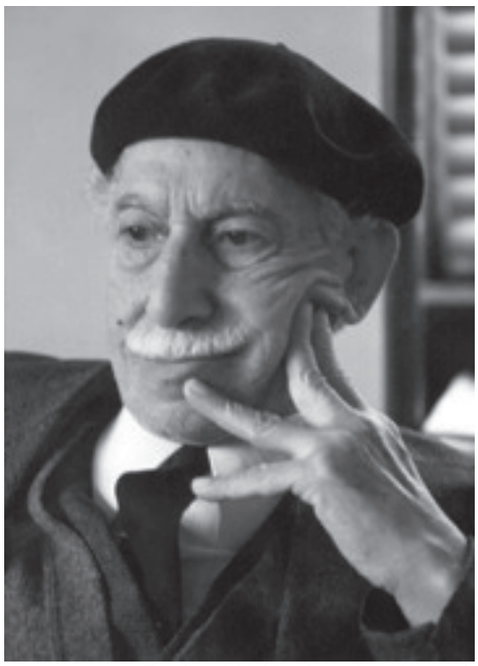
> Adonis's secularity resides in his delivery of metaphors and in his choice of prose over verse, his sense of a poetic self, his advocacy of the ocular as a regnant road to the truth, and his conception of poetry as a kind of reaching to "the beyond."

I look forward to delving deeper into Furani's ideas, and recommend this book to anyone interested or just curious about the ebb and flow of Arabic poetry, its variances and tensions, and its well-worn tributaries, where it continues to flow, or, perhaps, where it quietly waits to sublimate into something new. ***AJ***

Tawfiq al-Hakim's Foretelling of Future Young People's Revolutions

The Revolt of the Young: Essays by Tawfiq al-Hakim
Translated by Mona Radwan
Syracuse UP, 2015, 145 pp.

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA


Tawfiq al-Hakim (goodreads.com)

In 1984, Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987) – a major literary and intellectual figure in Egypt and the Arab world who contributed to the development of Arabic literature, – wrote *"Thawrat al-Shabab"* ("The Revolt of the Young"). The 20 chapters swing easily between al-Hakim's past and present: recalling incidents from his past, discussing their relevance to his present, and examining the concerns of the younger generation. Mona Radwan translated the book into English for a 2015 publication date, four years after the January 25 Egyptian revolution. In the translator's introduction, Radwan explains the importance of the timing of this publication, shedding light on this pioneering figure who predominantly contributed to Arabic literature through his novels, short stories, and plays. More importantly, Radwan discusses the gap between generations which ultimately leads to the young people lighting the spark in most revolutions around the globe. The 20 essays included in the book, most of them relatively short, have proven extraordinary harbingers of issues raised by events that occurred in Egypt over a decade after the author's death.

In his "Introduction," al-Hakim attempts to define the nature of revolutions (*"thawra"* in Arabic), distancing them from upheavals (a term chosen by Radwan to describe *"alhoga"* in Arabic). Young people lead every revolution as the representatives of youthful vigour, and although a revolution ultimately resorts to violence, it should retain that which proves useful, becoming a step in the natural evolution of rising nations. The revolt of the young, however, cannot be easily defined, for it is not based on specific demands, but rather is "the cry of the whole age . . . the awakening of an alarming future." Even though al-Hakim's book concerns the 1952 Revolution led by young army officers, it has equal relevance to other revolutions, such as the popular 1968 French revolt against De Gaulle's regime, and the young Americans' rejection of the Vietnam War. Al-Hakim's uncanny abilities even extend to the foretelling of future youth-driven insurrections, such as the 2011 Revolution against the Mubarak regime, and the June 30, 2013 revolt against the Muslim Brotherhood regime.

Despite the fact that al-Hakim lived in an age of revolutions and coups d'état, "The Revolt of the Young" deals with more than the nature of revolutions, for it also focuses on his concern for the younger generation. Al-Hakim advocates the need to appreciate the works of young artists and writers, and investigates the responsibilities of the older generations, as well as the reasons behind the inevitable widening of gaps between the generations (exemplified in his relationship with both his father and his son), which lead to the eventual clashes and disregard that grow between them. He examines the role of nature in restoring balance, and the disparity between its laws and the attitudes and thought processes favoured by human beings. Furthermore, al-Hakim wonders if the new generation will be able to forsake the disastrous belief that "the end justifies the means."

In the final chapter, provocatively entitled "The Case of the Twenty-First Century," al-Hakim reflects upon the nature of young people's revolutions, which traditionally begin with the youth's "refusal of guardianship over their new lifestyle." He believes that the young need to shoulder "their huge responsibilities to change the face of the world" and to disfigure the bad and ugly features of it. Although Radwan's translation of "The Revolt of the Young" might look like a resurrection of days gone by, this voice from the past really offers counsel to today's generation living in an age of political and social turmoil. ***AJ***

Bread
By Fawzia Alwi

The boy, lost in the streets of Misurata,
Is looking for his mother,
Or for the wheel.
Yesterday, he saw her watering roses.
When he woke up,
He found her hand red:
"It is Arab Spring my son"

Translated from Arabic by Imene Bennani

From Kansas to Beirut: A Tale of Two Women

Fireworks
By Sarah Houssayni
Anaphora Literary Press, 2015.

BY LYNNE ROGERS

Sarah Houssayni's debut novel, "Fireworks," begins at the onset of the Israeli 2006 bombing of Lebanon in retaliation for the Hezbollah kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. This promising novel interweaves the story of two single women, one a 30-year old American nurse from Kansas and one young, 16-year old Lebanese teenager, both trying to negotiate family pressures while searching for love.

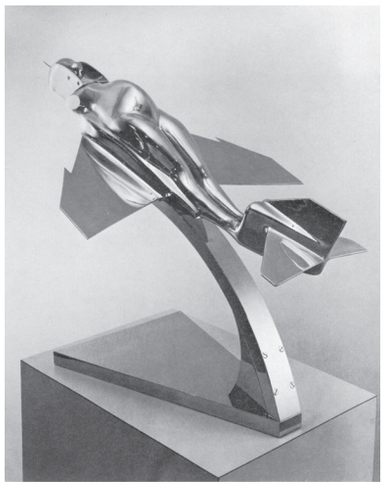
Angela, the American nurse, suffers a painful loss when a baby she cares for dies, and a breakup when David, her Jewish American boyfriend, leaves her due to religious differences. Traveling to the Mediterranean in hopes that the change of scenery will help her to heal, she finds herself in Lebanon, where she sometimes plays the annoying American who can't understand the Lebanese attitude towards Israel. When Israeli bombs start to fall, the young nurse decides to return to the States, and reveals another side of her character when she gives up her seat at the American Embassy to aid a young mother and her ill child.

Before Angela can return to the safety of America, she encounters several stock Lebanese stereotypes, such as the Christian who, regardless of the Israeli attack, only wants to go skiing in the mountains, and the well-to-do Muslims impersonating Christians in order to leave the area. Yet, through her good deed helping the mother and her ailing child, Angela also meets the polite, intelligent and yes, handsome Doctor Nadim, a non-practicing Shiite and gay man who, after studying in the States, returned to Lebanon in the aftermath of 9/11. Nadim's genuine, three dimensional character embodies the empathy and humanity of modern Lebanon.

The second narrative follows Zahra, a perceptive young Shiite woman who wants to finish school, and explores her sexuality when she falls in love with a young neighbor. When the Isreali bombs start to fall, their families flee, interrupting the innocent and furtive clandestine meetings between the young lovers. Houssayni realistically recounts the dangers of traveling on roads flooded with refugees, the panic of not knowing their family members' whereabouts, the tensions rampant in overcrowded safe houses, and the heroic cult status of Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasralleh.

Made vulnerable by the dangerous situation, the death of her father, her family's poverty, and her beauty, Zahra's family pressures her to accept the marriage proposal of the unpleasant ogre of a neighbor whose relatives offer them shelter. While the young woman has no choice but to accept, she cannot suppress her impulse for love and life, which leads to a personal explosion that echoes the falling bombs.

Houssayni deftly outlines the emotional layers and types of family pressures that exist in both Lebanon and the American Midwest, while her medical background adds touching sincerity to the hospital scenes. Despite Angela's occasional grating self-indulgences, "Fireworks" provides an accurate portrayal of civilian life during the Israeli bombing, and stresses the grief experienced on both sides of the ocean due to the loss of children to both natural and man-made causes.***AJ***



"Falling Man Study: Flying Man #60," by Ernest Trova, 1968, International Art Exhibitions arts magazine yearbook 10, The Art Digest, Inc., 1969.

Child on a Shore

By Massoud Akou

My father told me:
We will sail in the sea.
There behind the waves,
A large garden lies,
where I will play soccer,
and go to school.
My mother will buy me a bar of chocolate,
and a biscuit,
and a juice.
There, behind the waves,
Lies a playground,
With a beautiful swing.
But my father didn't tell me
that the sea is rough,
and waves don't distinguish between the large and the small.
I drowned
in the depths of the sea,
until the sea tossed me,
like foam onto the soft sand.
My mother saw me,
And said: Sleep, my love.
The angels are like you;
They sleep and never die.

The Arabic version, which appeared in Al Quds Al Arabi, was translated by Al Jadid staff.

The child in the poem refers to Aylan Kurdi, 3, a Syrian toddler who died while boats carrying desperate Syrian migrants to the Greek island of Kos capsized, near Bodrum, Turkey, Sept. 2, 2015

Sin, Redemption, and Visions of Female Illness in Modern Arab Literature

The Female Suffering Body, Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature
By Abir Hamdar
Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY, 2014.

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

"Scattered Words in Arabic" by Fayeq Oweis

Edward Said opened the space, Homi Bhabha articulated the next steps forward, and subsequently other scholars have emerged to take up the call. They desire to reckon with texts that examine specific regional or local traditions within the context of their own histories and cultural trajectories. Abir Hamdar's examination of the female body in illness and suffering presents a compelling contribution to the body of literary criticism of Arabic Literature. She invokes strains of critical thought – like Foucault and the idea of discourse – using them to map the development of the image of the female body in recent Arabic literature.

At the center of Hamdar's thesis lies the presence or absence – and indeed, at points the presence as absence – of the female suffering body in Arabic literature, from the 50's on. She begins the text by outlining her project, and then providing a survey of the basic literary trajectory of the female suffering body. Using the lens of a New Historicist approach, she keenly argues the connection between the changing image of the female body and its role in text, as well as the changing social conditions of the social space in question. Hamdar finds early visions of female illness and disability use the female body as a site for examinations of sin and redemption. She cites the work of Miriam Cooke, who suggests that the literature of the 1950's "ended up locking women into a new set of stereotypical representations," namely that of the fallen woman, or prostitute.

Hamdar then examines the short story *"Wa Usdilla al-Sitar"* (And the Curtain is Lowered), the tale of an unknown woman, suffering from an unknown illness, who recalls the events of her "sinful" and "dark" life. Illness becomes a means for her to experience a kind of purification, a spiritual redemption. Hamdar's main point – one that runs through the entire text – concerns this process of representation, which uses the female suffering body as a locus of discourse. Here, the body is injected and conflated with historical, cultural and even religious constructions, thus stripping the female subject in these works of a sense of agency and individual essence.

Hamdar carries this forward into examinations of Arabic literature in the 60's and 70's. She argues that writing from the period employs the female body symbolically, such that the "ill or disabled female body becomes the privileged sign of sick, wounded or fractured nations." Her discussion of Ghassan Kanafani's *"Rijal fi al-Shams"* (Men in the Sun) proves quite impressive, and renders a compelling analysis of the character Shafiqa as a symbol of the shattered nation.

Shafiqa, according to Marwan, is a woman whose leg had been 'amputated at the top of thigh,' leaving her as a 'burden.' In short, Shafiqa is a 'deformed woman' whose physical imperfections are, to society, signifiers of an imperfect character as well.

Hamdar emphasizes the reader's discovery of Shafiqa through Marwan and others. Shafiqa does not represent herself or speak in her own voice. In this way, Hamdar goes on to argue that the people suffering from illnesses constitute the "others," they exist in their exteriority as subjects with agency. As she proceeds, Hamdar makes the case that Shafiqa, in her state of fracture and otherness, symbolizes the loss of Palestine, and perhaps even the inability for it to ever be regained.

In the remaining pages of the first chapter, she examines the trope of docile and traditional women, and then, in the second chapter, turns to representations of female illness in Arab literature by female writers. Hamdar points out a curious irony, that "it is arguably even more difficult to find representations of female illness and disability in women's writing than it is in writing by men." She does, however, find persistent themes in representations of suffering women. Exploring one such theme, that of barren women, she discusses Colette Khoury's *"Layla Wahida"* (Lonely Night). The protagonist of the story, Rasha, is infertile. Hamdar argues that "For Rasha, infertility constitutes less a physical defect than a failure to live up to her prescribed role in society." Again, crucially for Hamdar, the body becomes a site for the discourses of others, for social, even national, constructions and aspirations. She reminds the reader here of a point she makes earlier, the idea of Palestinian women expected to literally be the mothers of the nation, giving birth as an act of resistance against disappearance. Infertility then emerges as a social failing as much as a physical one.

In her third and final chapter, Hamdar unfolds contemporary works in which the female suffering body finally achieves agency and presence. The author uses a style and material of analysis that reflects, and remains consistent with her commitment to root literary analysis in historical and cultural context. Her reading of texts proves nimble and insightful, and provides an imminently useful corpus of decoding. It represents the type of scholarship that can expand people's understanding of the Arabic literary tradition in its complexity and depth, while providing an important perspective on the image of women within that tradition. ***AJ***

Reconstructing the Disastrous History of the Lebanese Famine

Safer Barlik: Famine in Mount Lebanon During World War I
By Louis Farshee
Inkwater Press, 2015.

BY ANGELE ELLIS

Despite his almost uniformly dry and scholarly tone, Louis Farshee's painstaking reconstruction of the famine that may have claimed as many as 375,000 Lebanese and Syrian men, women, and children out of a population of four million represents a labor of love.

100 years after the perpetrators, survivors, heroes, and villains of this desperate course of events have all disappeared, Farshee has combed and analyzed conflicting records and testimonies so that attention may be paid to the Famine, as to other atrocities of the era, such as the Armenian genocide.

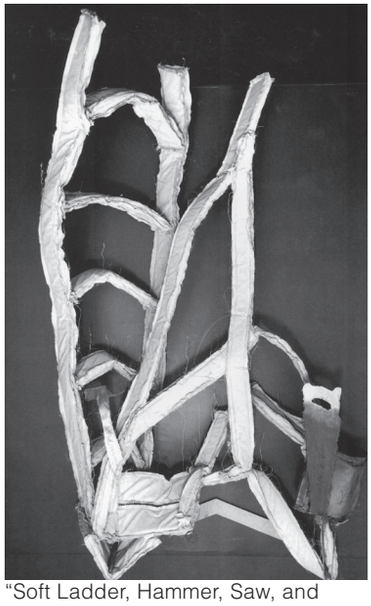
"Safer Barlik,"– the phrase for the Famine – translated as "The Exile" in a 1967 Lebanese feature film, traces its roots to the longtime practice of abducting and pressing men in Lebanon, then part of Greater Syria, into Ottoman slave labor gangs. (*Safer* means voyage; Barlik, Anatolia in Turkish Asia Minor.) Being pressed into these gangs proved tantamount to receiving a death sentence; even if a laborer survived his harsh work term, his masters would release him into the Anatolian wilderness with no resources to return home. Farshee's research leads him to estimate that only three percent ever did make it back. During the Great War, common usage extended the phrase to cover forced military conscription into the Ottoman army, while at the same time the Ottoman labor gangs expanded to include women.

The 500 year Ottoman rule of Mount Lebanon featured a combination of institutional cruelty and shrewd compromise that, in its last years, tightened its doomed grip to create a series of catastrophes for its subjects. The Ottomans had allowed the indigenous peoples – Christian, Druze, and Muslims – limited self-governance, which created a caste system of *shaykh* (lord) and *fellah* (peasant), but kept the area relatively stable until the fall of the Shihab dynasty in 1842.

Internecine violence, a peasants' revolt, and the 1860 civil war between previously co-existing Maronite Christians and Druze characterized the next 20 years, resulting not only in deep and bloody losses for the less well-organized Maronites, but also the formal assumption by Western nations of the "protection" of religious groups:

> …Orthodox Christians were favored by Russia, Druze, Protestants, and Jews by Great Britain; Maronites, Chaldeans, and Nestorians by France; Latin Catholics by Austria. Armenians, the largest Christian minority in the Ottoman Empire, had no Western protector, although the Russians were their geographic neighbors.

This history created the climate that led to the Famine. Farshee delineates the five events that put "the perfect storm" in place: "Turkey signing a mutual defense treaty with Germany, the unprovoked and deliberate attack by Turkey on Russia and Russia's subsequent declaration of war, the halting of all maritime traffic between Egypt and Syria; [the 1915] invasion of the locust, and the Allied naval blockade."



"Soft Ladder, Hammer, Saw, and Bucket" by Claes Oldenburg, "An Anthology," Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1995.

It dazzles the mind to think of the effect that Turkey's neutrality in World War I might have had – no hostilities with Russia or the Allies; no maritime blockade of money, supplies, and food to the region (supplied by émigrés, foreign governments, and relief agencies such as the Red Cross) – aid that would have limited the losses from the ravenous locusts and from the greed of some money lenders and suppliers; no need for the Ottomans to tighten the screws through increased conscription and punishment of crimes from sedition to food smuggling with execution, no Sykes-Picot agreement to partition the Ottoman Empire after the war.

But the Young Turks overruled the Sultan and his advisers, leading to the 1915 genocide of Armenians (with many of the survivors fleeing to Beirut and Mount Lebanon), and to a slow genocide by starvation for the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon.

Farshee attempts to round out his portrait of the hated Jamal Pasha, Military Governor of Greater Syria 1914-1917, by quoting the writings of Halide Edid, a Turkish feminist and educator. Jamal enlisted Edid, with limited success, to establish an Ottoman school system (replacing schools run by the Allies and their supporters), as well as to reform an overcrowded Lebanese orphanage.

Edid also lauded Jamal's flimsily justified hanging of 11 men (convicted on evidence of treason gained by raiding the abandoned French Embassy and breaking into documents with diplomatic seals) – a 1915 event so burned into Lebanese consciousness that they commemorated every August 21 as Martyrs' Day.

In addition to his brutality, Jamal proved a poor administrator. In just one example, freight cars of grain intended for Mount Lebanon rotted on Syrian train tracks while to the west, thousands were dying.

Farshee's narrative becomes most human when he discusses the heroes of the Famine, those groups and individuals who rose to the challenge of mitigating its effects. These include the Druze under Nasib Jumblatt, singled out for the values of cooperation, communality, and hospitality that allowed them to minimize deaths among their people, as well as to save others who came to them for help. Farshee also praises the close-knit Maronite Christian village of Zgharta and one of its leaders, Sarkis Naoum, a generous and gifted smuggler who used his knowledge of the mountainous terrain, Ottoman patrols, and safe routes to distribute thousands of pounds of grain, until his death in a shootout with bandits in 1917.

Farshee includes moving reported details of the struggling and dying: a young mother making a paste out of the bitter berries of the meliaazedarach tree – which even locusts would not eat – to feed

her baby; people stuffing their empty bellies with the raw husks of carob pods, until the inedible residue felled and killed them.

These images from long ago linger in the mind of the reader living in a world still beset by malnutrition and starvation, by oppression and injustice. Louis Farshee has added a necessary chapter to the narrative of Middle Eastern history.**AJ**

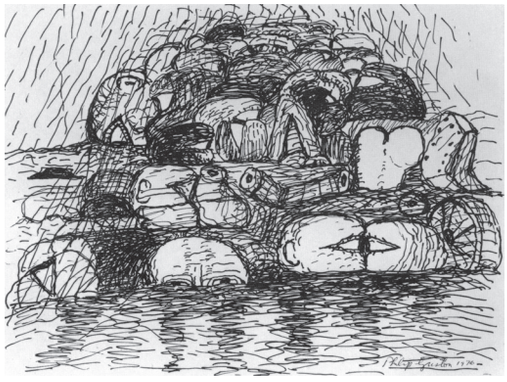
An East/West Dialogue Concerning Sexual Taboos and Gender Biases

What Makes A Man? Sex Talk in Beirut and Berlin
By Rashid al-Daif and Joachim Helfer
Translated by Ken Seigneurie and Gary Schmidt
Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas Press, 2015. 300 pp.

BY LYNNE ROGERS

"What Makes a Man? Sex Talk in Beirut and Berlin" by Rashid al-Daif and Joachim Helfer blurs the boundaries between fiction and essay, while questioning the possibility of meaningful cross cultural dialogue. Initiated by a grant from the German government as part of its East/West Divan program, the narrative contains three sections. In the first section, "How the German Came to His Senses" al-Daif, a well-known Lebanese writer, recalls his experience as the recipient of the grant and his relationship with his fellow grantee, Joachim Helfer, a younger, gay German writer. Both grantees visit with and host each other. The second section repeats al-Daif's narrative with inserted comments by Joachim Helfer. This strategy of narrative intervention juxtaposes the two distinct perceptions of their encounters and ultimately surrenders the final word to the 'enlightened' Westerner. In the third section, five progressive academics discuss the tensions between the two narratives surrounding issues of sexuality, gender and culture.

Al-Daif assumes one of his more likeable narrative postures in his memoir, which begins with the phone call informing him that he has won a grant to encourage East/West dialogue. Almost immediately, the caller informs al-Daif that his fellow recipient is gay, which inspires biographical memories which reveal al Daif's own heterosexual biases, as well as his rather comical fear of becoming an object of desire to the young Helfer. Al-Daif's posture as a naïve, middle aged writer allows him to relentlessly pry into Helfer's complicated sex life, while reminding the reader of his previous literary assertion that "the bed was the site of the real battle between East and West. The bed is a frontline between Arab 'tradition' and Western 'modernity.'" Helfer's sex life involves his life partner, a man 17 years older than himself, and his younger lover, who moves in with his girlfriend, but still remains friends with Helfer, as well as a German journalist with whom he has a child, and a young Lebanese gay friend. All of this provides an abundance of material for the 'hetero-normative' curiosity of al-Daif, whose own sexual activity seems limited to verbal voyeurism and ogling young women's breasts. When Helfer, who has already fathered two children whom he has never seen, agrees to impregnate the journalist with a child she intends to bring up alone, al-Daif insensitively assumes that Helfner has "come to his senses." Upon the advice of his theatre director friend, he even goes so far as to throw the couple a mock wedding.

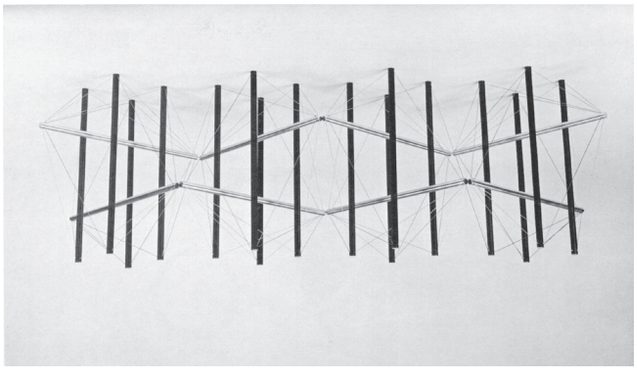


"Pl. 52 Lower Level," by Philip Guston, 1976, Philip Guston, George Braziller, Inc., 1980.

Underneath this ostensibly 'honest' exchange of sexual exploits lurks the sexual politics of history. While Helfer has no problem discussing his own sexuality, he hides the fact that his life partner is Jewish until they come to dinner at al-Daif's house in Germany. Later, their host's reaction to the Jewish museum disappoints Helfner, who doesn't wish to explain his own tears. While Helfer spends much of his narrative lamenting the treatment of homosexuals and transgenders, al-Daif's narration never mentions his own struggles to survive during the war in Lebanon, nor his activities as a left wing Communist.

While al-Daif may be one of Lebanon's most talented writers, he also proves to be an unassuming man who has the courage to live his convictions. In Lebanon, when al-Daif repays the museum visit with a pilgrimage to the legendary al-Khiyam prison, Helfer refrains "from commenting that the record of only two dead (honored there as so-called martyrs) among more than 10,000 prisoners captured during several years of war, did not exactly attest to their Israeli adversaries will to annihilate them. Sometimes you just have to hold your tongue in order to continue a dialogue." Nevertheless, armed with the awareness of honor killings and the persecution of homosexuals in Lebanon, Helfer appoints himself judge, as one familiar with Lebanese culture, observing that Beiruti men "drive their cars everywhere whenever possible, like to grab their sex organs demonstratively when...in front of a restaurant, and display a lot of gold on their black-haired, brown chests." While their adopted tones may differ, neither writer gains any humanistic insight into the culture of the "other." This transforms their subsequent proclamations of tired paradigms into the narrative focus.

In "What Makes a Man?", a conversation intended as a cultural exchange deteriorates into a malevolent subtext that reaffirms, rather than deconstructs, stereotypes. Each of the closing academic essays begins to unravel the threads beneath the tapestry of seemingly benign exchanges, highlighting the underlying power struggles and cultural assumptions. The essays not only prove informative, but extremely readable, and in his narrative, al-Daif once again reveals himself to be worthy of his creative and intellectual mantel. This intriguing new compilation will be of interest to any reader attached to gender and gay studies or contemporary Lebanese culture. **AJ**



"Key City," by Kenneth Snelson, 1968, International Art Exhibitions arts magazine yearbook 10, The Art Digest, Inc., 1969.

Broken Dreams: Love, Corruption, and the Plight of Foreign Workers in Israel

Murder Under the Bridge, a Palestine Mystery
By Kate Jessica Raphael
She Writes Press, 2015.

BY LYNNE ROGERS

Kate Jessica Raphael describes her novel, "Murder Under the Bridge, a Palestine Mystery," as "the product of my imagination and experience – the experience and imagination of a white, Jewish American who spent around eighteen months in Palestine, with brief forays into Israel." Her cast of characters also crosses the green line in the pursuit of love, which results in grave consequences. The mystery opens with the discovery of the dead body of a young Uzbekistan woman who traveled into the occupied territory to meet her Palestinian lover. Unfortunately, another man followed her to that fatal rendez-vous.

In trying to solve the mystery, Palestinians, Americans and Israelis not only learn about themselves, but also about each other's lives. Chloe, an American Jewish lesbian, befriends Rania, a loveable Palestinian policewoman, and, later, falls in love with a beautiful Australian Palestinian, Tina. Regrettably, in keeping the quick pace of the novel, Raphael never takes the reader into Tina's consciousness to examine the pressures experienced by Palestinian lesbians. In contrast, Rania discovers a great deal in both her professional and domestic life, and learns to trust others. Her efforts to identify the murderer also teach her to assert herself.

While not all of the details ring true, such as Rania's removal of her head scarf in order to be treated like a colleague in the office, or the villagers' need to become educated on the ramifications of the wall, these constitute minor quibbles in an otherwise engaging novel populated with strong, empathetic female protagonists. In addition, although a Palestine mystery, "Murder Under the Bridge" presents readers with a crime that exposes the harsh plight of illegal foreign female workers in Israel and the corruption that leads to their abuse.**AJ**

Yemen: Land of Contradictions, Epicenter of Jihadism and Rebellion

The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al Qaida, and America's war in Arabia
By Gregory D. Johnsen
W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 352 pp.

BY D.W. AOSSEY

How would one describe a border war in a land without borders? "The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al Qaida, and America's War in Arabia," by Gregory D. Johnsen, may provide a good starting point. The conflicts that have emerged in Yemen have, of course, proven more than border wars. Some would even argue that Yemen, with its fiercely independent and devoutly Muslim tribal culture, represents the epicenter of Jihadism; the spiritual home of Al Qaida and the likes of Anwar al-Awlaki. In "The Last Refuge," Johnsen provides interesting insights into the history, politics, and geopolitics of a nation that continues to elude outside control and fuels the flames of rebellion.

The author starts by providing a historical look at an unmanageable land; one divided by geography, history and tribal loyalties that defy national unity and organization. He soon reveals a complex set of tribal interests, delineating important factions, who they're fighting and why. Bin Laden, the Houthi's, the Zaidi's and the case of Anwar al-Awlaki all come into play, along with many others. The Yemenis clearly intend to force the Western powers out of the Arab world, and towards that end, they supply fighters in the various regional struggles. Johnsen's analysis of the threat posed to the House of Saud right next door proves of particular interest, a soil money from Gulf Arab states counter balances and skews tribal allegiances in favor of Western interests.

The author describes the frustratingly elusive stability needed to keep the country under control as the overarching dilemma of Yemen, and weaves this theme throughout his book. Here, President Ali Abdullah Saleh proves a prime example of a leader willing to work with the West, who then discovers that his compromises have alienated him from the tribes. The resulting violent coup nearly costs him his life. The bombing of the USS Cole in Aden harbor provides another example of the loyalties that define Yemen, as the 13 individuals convicted and jailed for their roles in the attack found themselves released or managed to escape and remain at large.

The "Last Refuge," reads like a novel with plenty of intrigue, and that may be the one aspect of the book that leads to some skepticism. Details of secret meetings and clandestine plots might raise some eyebrows as they firmly support the Western media narrative regarding "radical Islam." How could the author have reliably sourced such information? But, assuming that the narrative involves some degree of non-fiction, "The Last Refuge," does provide an interesting view into a world of politics and ideology that remains little understood.**AJ**

Philip Metres: Life, Love, Loss, War and Torture

Sand Opera
By Philip Metres
Alice James Books, 2015.

BY ANGELE ELLIS

In a February 2015 interview in The Los Angeles Review of Books, renowned poet and translator Fady Joudah describes Philip Metres's latest volume of poetry, "Sand Opera":

> [It] is ultimately a book about love, its loss and recapture, and the struggle in between. Many will completely misread it as another political book of poems, in that reductive, ready-made sense of "political" which is reserved for certain themes but mostly for certain ethnicities. So part of that misreading is due to the book's subject matter or its Abu Ghraib arias, and also because it is written by an Arab American. (LARB)

Metres – an award-winning poet, translator, and university professor – has in "Sand Opera" expanded his stunning chapbook "abu ghraib arias" (Flying Guillotine Press, 2011) into a five-section meditation on the intersections of war and institutional torture, as well as the struggles and blessings of ordinary life, including married love and fatherhood. In "Salaam Epigrams," written for his yet-unborn daughter, Metres uses a stylized version of the Arabic word for peace to punctuate the poem like a fetal heartbeat:

سلام

Star jiggered from the sky
to green ground, you
beeline toward its bloom.

سلام

Apostrophe of a womb –
fetal you – and the line you will become.

Metres juxtaposes "Salaam Epigrams" with "War Stories," in which the small battles of caring for an infant in privileged America are contrasted jarringly with the bloody wars that continue 'outside the zone / of ground zeroes":

> Our fathers and brothers wear the flak jacket
> of metal and shrapnel. We don the softness
> of palms, the odor of baby wipes. Somewhere
> outside, someone's brother's buried
> a box he won't tell us where.

Metres, a third generation Arab American of Lebanese Christian descent (whose father was a Vietnam War veteran), proves keenly aware of the complex issues surrounding agency, identity, and loyalty. In The Los Angeles Review of Books interview, this artist hurt into poetry by 9/11 and its aftermath, reflects:

> The recent events reminded me how dismayed I was by American representations of Abu Ghraib. Take Errol Morris's documentary "Standard Operating Procedure." Here was this careful examination of how the prison scandal unfolded, through the eyes of the perpetrators, and NOT ONE of the victims was interviewed. Their presence was merely fodder for the exercise of imperial remorse…I should make it clear, at the same time, the important work of American veterans standing up and speaking out not only against acts of abuse or atrocity, but owning complicity with larger structures of oppression…American veterans carry a particular burden of grief and guilt that makes it complicated for them to speak publicly…So the war continues for our veterans, something I broach in Sand Opera in a handful of poems: "The Blues of Ken Davis," "The Blues of Joe Darby," "War Stories," "Home Sweet Home," and "Breathing Together." (LARB)

In "Sand Opera," Metres's use of contemporary poetic techniques, including redaction (here representative of the blacking out of official files as well as of individual memory) displays and enhances his empathy for a range of voices. The book also has several vellum inserts containing schemata of torture chambers of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and black sites, which overlay brief yet poignant poems. In "Black Site (Exhibit I)," the poet reveals the prisoner's testimony beneath/surrounding his cell:

Whenever I saw
a fly in my cell
I was filled
with joy
though I wished for it
to slip under the door
so it would not be
imprisoned itself

Metres brackets the five sections of "Sand Opera" with two poems that draw upon Catholic imagery: "Illumination of the Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew" and "Compline." In legend, St. Bartholomew, one of the Twelve Disciples, was flayed alive. In Metres's poem, he becomes both a symbol of torture and of the ability of saint and artist to transfigure it:

...& if
the body's flayed & displayed

in human palms / & human skin
scrolled open / the body still dances

& if the flesh is the text
of God / bid a voice to rise /

& rise again. ***AJ***

Ghostly Performances: Arab-American 'Otherness' and Haunted Stereotypes

Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study, 1908 to the Present
By Michael Malek Najjar
McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015.

BY ANGELE ELLIS

In 2002, a battered historical marker emerged from the rubble of the World Trade Center: the bulldozed cornerstone of St. Joseph Maronite Church, once the heart of New York's thriving late 19th and early 20th century "Little Syria." Washington Street's diverse residents included members of The Pen League, a group of writers and dramatists – most famously, Mikhail Naimy, Ameen Rihani, and Kahlil Gibran.

In this comprehensive and scholarly, yet engaging study, Michael Malek Najjar, a playwright, director, and professor, follows Arab-American theatre (including stand-up comedy and film) from its beginnings to the wave of contemporary works created in a number of cities in the wake of the destruction of the Twin Towers built on "Little Syria's" ruins.

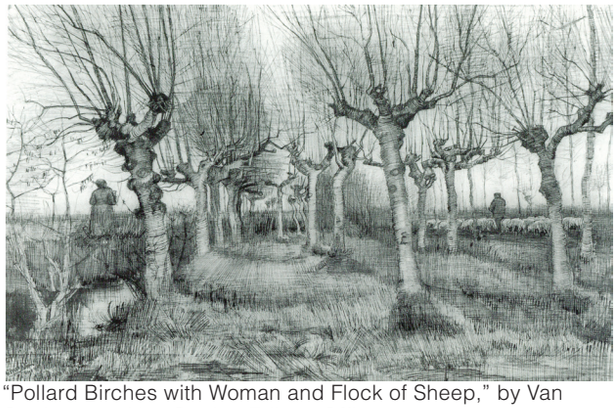
Najjar explores the tensions and contradictions that existed in Arab–American drama from the start. He eschews use of the hyphen in this umbrella term that dates from Arab-American activism of the 1960s, except when quoting other writers:

> …I believe that the connection between these two words is more of a gulf than a bridge. Arab Americans live in this space between these two identities in a state of constant negotiation. It is from that interstitial space that I believe these writers and performers create their works.

At the same time, the divided Arab American has to contend with his/her "Otherness" in the prejudiced society in which s/he lives – perhaps a more keenly felt oppositional barrier for the modern Arab-American writer (first, second, or third generation) than for the members of The Pen League. Najjar more than once references Jewish American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler:

> …Arab American identity formation was, and remains, a reaction to the post-1967 and post-9/11 derealization of Arab Americans. Derealization is a term deployed by Judith Butler to describe the condition that renders the Other as neither alive nor dead, but "interminably spectral."

Yet out of these agonies of divided consciousness, danger, demonization, and haunted stereotypes has emerged a continuing tradition of vibrant and innovative performance. Najjar is at his most fascinating when describing and analyzing individual (and collective) works, both past and present. A few of the many highlights include:



"Pollard Birches with Woman and Flock of Sheep," by Van Gogh, 1884, Van Goghs, Editors Office, 1998.

• Kahlil Gibran's 1916 one-act play "The Colored Faces"(aka "The Chameleons"), published in the Arabic language newspaper As-Sayeh (The Traveler). Here, the writer best known for lofty aphorisms excoriates the Syrian/Lebanese Americans of his time as crass, closed-minded, and envious. They condemn the writer "Salim al-Marjani" (a Gibran stand-in) because of his opposition to the Church, his Western ways and associates, and the praise he has received from American newspapers. Miss Warda, who Najjar describes as one of a number of powerful female characters in the history of Arab-American performance, becomes al-Marjani's only defender. When al-Marjani arrives with a money order for those in the Old Country (whose starvation under the Ottomans is of intense concern to Gibran), the group fawns on him; he leaves quickly. Miss Warda – whom her compatriots have marginalized because of her cultivation and unmarried status – has the last word, skewering the group's hypocrisy before the stage directions tell her to flee "like someone who is running away from hell."

• Comedian, comic actor, and philanthropist Danny Thomas's hallmark nightclub routine "Ode to a Wailing Syrian/Lebanese," which in 1944 put him on the cover of LIFE Magazine. This enormously popular piece—also performed on radio and television—combines comic punchlines and stage bits (pounding the microphone with a dinner roll, draping a table cloth over his head to represent a keffiyeh/hijab), with remarks in colloquial Arabic, and its centerpiece is a tragic ode composed on the gallows by a man hanged by the Ottomans for singing anti-Ottoman propaganda. Although Thomas's later work, as Najjar says, was co-opted—erasing or Orientalizing his Arab influences—"Ode to a Wailing Syrian" demonstrates Thomas's kinship to today's successful Arab and Muslim stand-up comedians, including Ahmed Ahmed, Maysoon Zayid, and Dean Obeidallah.

• The 2002 staging of Sajjil, a play in multiple voices, by Nibras, with an ensemble that included then-emerging playwrights and performers James Asher, Leila Buck, Maha Chehlaoui, Omar Koury, Omar Metwally, Najla Said, and Afaf Shawwa. "Though in the mode of a documentary drama like 'The Laramie Project'…the central question of the piece is 'What comes to mind when you hear the word 'Arab'?" Najjar notes. "According to [Najla] Said, Arabs who were asked this question responded with words like 'love,' 'food,' 'home,' and 'family.' Non-Arabs used words like 'desert,'

'camel,' 'terror,' 'angry,' and 'Muslim.'" Najjar asserts that Nibras—although not the first Arab American theatre ensemble—"was the first post-9/11 theatre ensemble to confront the misrepresentation of Arab Americans." This central confrontation proves a thread in the work of other contemporary playwrights, performance artists, and filmmakers as diverse as Yusef El Guindi, Betty Shamieh, Jamil Khoury, Ismail Khalidi, Heather Raffo, Kathryn Haddad, Andrea Assaf, Cherian Dabis, Sayed Badreya, and Rola Nashef.

The current flowering of Arab American drama leads Najjar to end his study on a hopeful note: "Arab Americans will no longer play the 'tiny, marginal, and unimportant role [s]' Edward W. Said believed they had been assigned to playing for over a century in American culture." The next century will tell. ***AJ***

"Ghassan," by Fayeq Oweis

Does TV Belong in the Bedroom?

Who's Afraid of Meryl Streep?
By Rashid al-Daif
Translated by Paula Haydar and Nadine Sinno
Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 2014, pp. 112.

BY LYNNE ROGERS

Once again prominent Lebanese author Rashid al-Daif crosses cultural divides in his recently translated novel, "Who's Afraid of Meryl Streep?" Hoping to understand his own painful isolation, al-Daif's confused narrator, ill at ease in his own culture, looks to connect with another by focusing on one of its iconic figures. In a stinging jab at Lebanese consumerism, the narrator originally buys the TV as a means to be sexually closer to his wife, yet ends up watching it alone. The novel opens as the narrator watches an old re-run of "Kramer vs Kramer" without subtitles. In an overt period piece, the narrator, who doesn't speak English, actively translates the film to himself from the visuals and his own psychological muddle. Fantasizing that Meryl Streep, who is too good for Dustin Hoffman, would have been better off with a male like him, the narrator's pathetic and mundane day dreams of the unattainable actress begin to unravel the reasons behind the sinister failure of his own marriage and his wife's "sleeping at her mother's." Justifying his brutal obsession with his wife's virginity, the narrator explains, "I am just a simple man asking that life give me the minimum: a virgin." Al-Daif examines the conflicting male desires to adore and to possess in graphic and violent sexual details. Despite his wife's marital defiance and ultimate escape, the narrator's gender assumptions remain unperturbed and steadfast. Subsequently he fails to arouse even an inch of sympathy from the reader, an unusual strategy that allows al-Daif to bare the marital bed, exposing the destructive underpinnings of male-female relationships in Lebanon, "the land of public and personal liberties."

Unlike his previous novel, "Dear Mr. Kawabata," here, the war does not play a major role in this unreliable narrator's loneliness and demise. Instead, this unlikeable character engineers his own misogynistic hell, reaffirming al-Daif's artistic role as a serious and creative interrogator of culture and personal ethics. ***AJ***

When Morning Died

A Tribute to Sabah (1927-2014)

BY HANNA SAADAH

When Morning rose to wake the Arab eyes
From long colonial sleep, tears turned to smiles
And country song-and-dance redeemed the skies
And dabki arms, entwined, stretched out for miles.

When with blithe voice, Sabah, our Morning, sang
The crescents flickered and the church bells rang
And music fluttered far with wings of light
Stretching the festive eves into the night.

When Morning died, the sunrise wore a shroud
And tears washed off the smiles in every crowd
And country music scurried home to mourn
Because its flapping wings of light were shorn.

Four score and more, the Arab's Morning shone
Now that she's gone, the sun is all alone.

Creating New Narrative Space in Traditional Arab Tales

Chronicles of Majnun Layla and Selected Poems
By Qassim Haddad
Translated by Ferial Ghazoul and John Verlenden
Syracuse University Press, 2014.

BY JOSEPH SILLS

"Chronicles of Majnun Layla and Selected Poems," brings together a translation of the Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad's "*Akhbar Majnun Layla*," with a sampling of his poems spanning 40 years. Haddad's version of the ancient legend of Layla and Majnun functions as the centerpiece of the book. The legend deals with a tale of virgin love between the possessed poet Qays (given the name Majnun) and his beloved. Haddad infuses the tale with contemporary visions of love and storytelling without departing from the rich tradition of Majnun Layla Arabic literature.

From the first poem of the chronicles, Haddad does not shy from eroticism. Layla "sing[s] of Qays" and how she "straightened in his hands, bore fruit." Haddad continues his forays into erotic language in the next accounts – particularly in his prose sections – often cautiously implying a consummation of the characters' love. Other times, his language becomes explicit – he casts Layla as a woman in charge, ordering Qays to come to her at night and then sending him away in the morning after their amorous exchanges. Haddad thereby undermines the traditional narrative of a helpless Layla, while Qays' transformation into a "majnun" comes not only from an emotional devotion to Layla – or to the Divine, as some works interpret it – but also from a madness caused by physical desire.

Qays' madness becomes a focal point near the end of the work, as Haddad challenges the very notion that Majnun's emotional state qualifies as "majnun." He accomplishes this through the use of eyewitness accounts like that of Ibn Salam, who avers to the truth of his assertion that Majnun is not mad. Haddad continues by arguing that Majnun's verse contains no "thread of madness," by which he means insanity, preferring instead to differentiate between the effects of love and actual madness.

This example illustrates Haddad's attempts throughout "Majnun Layla" to challenge the traditional narrative and create space for new interpretations of this ancient tale. Haddad uses "historical" and "eyewitness" accounts, particularly those which he begins with chains of oral transmission, to play with the concept of historicity. He casts doubt on the credibility of these sources, all while weaving his own narrative in other sections. Thus, Haddad's purposeful ambiguity challenges the reader to question the very foundation of his chronicles.

For the most part, the poems that follow reflect Haddad's playful style while arousing serious queries. Some even appear to be references to "Majnun Layla," a tale that, no doubt, takes the lion's share of one's

Confusion

BY FAWZIA ALWI

…And Tunis is:
When all cities look the same.
The road to my mother's bosom.
Tunis…
When scents become mixed,
The features of my soul,
A daffodil on every spur.
Tunis…
Is my country,
Whenever I counted countries.
Her trees,
My heart's destination.
Tunis is:
My name,
An icon
For every nation.

Translated from Arabic by Imene Bennani

attention. In "Majnun Layla," Haddad composes a rich and provoking restructuring of an otherwise antiquated legend.

Translators Ghazoul and Verlenden should be applauded for their efforts to bring this work to English. They balance faithfulness to the text and subtext with a fresh style that avoids clutter both in-text and in the endnotes. The use of italicized Arabic terms proves appropriate insomuch as it highlights the breadth of denotation and connotation of these words, and thus avoids simplified English equivalents bereft of the Arabic's full initial meaning.***AJ***

Dying to Reach Europe: The African Immigrant Crisis

African Titanics
By Abu Bakr Khaal
Translated by Charis Bredin
London: Darf Publishers Ltd, 2014.
(First published in Arabic by Dar al Saqi, London, 2008.)

BY AISHA K. NASSER

Media accounts normalize the tally of illegal African immigrants drowning while crossing the Mediterranean. Eritrean novelist Abu Bakr Khaal disrupts this false sense of normality by giving voices to these immigrants. His short novella, "African Titanics," offers accounts of the journeys of three African immigrants, among numerous other minor characters.

The sardonic title, "Titanics," which the Eritreans have given to the shabby boats that cross the Mediterranean overloaded with illegal immigrants, emphasizes the slim chances of survival and the miserable state of the boats at the onset of their voyages. With barely 40% chance of surviving, passengers seem destined for tragedy. One may then wonder why immigrants venture into these boats if they know beforehand that they probably will not survive? Why do they venture across the great Sahara Desert and face the Hambata, brutal robbers who loot vehicles along the roads? Why do African immigrants venture into the sea and the desert knowing perfectly well that "one's a devil, while the other's a demon"?

Khaal's answer to these questions, while referencing the 'immigrant bug' that infects the minds of young Africans, demonstrates how that mythical bug has its roots in more mundane circumstances. Intertwining local politics with colonial and postcolonial histories to produce a narrative deeply rooted in African cultures and histories, Khaal recounts some of those roots. They include senseless wars between 'identical' battling parties who 'couldn't be told apart'; political corruption (where the authority figures 'abuse their position'); police corruption (where the khaki uniform wearers amass exceptional power); and colonial histories (which drained the continent of its human and natural resources, and deprived it of its cultures). Khaal's narrative emphasizes the linguistic, cultural, and historical diversity in Africa, highlighting the paradox of its current marginalization.

As the novella opens, we follow Khaal's protagonist-narrator, who travels from his native Eritrea to Sudan, crossing the great Sahara Desert into Libya, then journeying to Tunisia. On his journey he befriends Terhas, a fellow Eritrean immigrant, and Malouk, an immigrant from Liberia. The two Eritrean immigrants are arrested in and deported from Tunisia, while the Liberian drowns on board of an African titanic attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Malouk, however, survives as a legend, wittingly portrayed in the solemn ending.

In this intriguing novella, Khaal cannily avoids pedantically preaching about the grim intertwining circumstances that expel people from their lands and that will soon turn Africa into "a hollow pipe where the wind plays melodies of loss." Instead he disperses such factors throughout the narrative, carefully enveloping them within the emotional and humane personal narratives of the immigrants. Khaal also sheds light on African folktales, poetry and music, providing the reader with a feast of characters, languages, tales, and a balanced political view. The personal narrative in "African Titanics" deeply touches the reader, while the author's capacity to use minute details to humanize the immigrants and the rich, diverse heritage of the African continent alternately surprises and fascinates.***AJ***

Faten Hamama, an Arab Icon

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melodramatic, political, crime, and comedy movies, as well as psychological thrillers. Moreover, she played many roles advocating women's rights and condemning social injustices. Considered one of the best 10 films in the Egyptian cinema, "Al-Haram" ("The Sin," 1965), written by the renowned novelist Youssef Idris and directed by the legendary director Henri Barakat, focused on the oppression of struggling peasants. Other films, including "Oridu Hallan" ("I Want a Solution," 1975), criticized marriage and divorce laws in Egypt, encouraging the government to abrogate a law that forbade wives from divorcing their husbands. At the Moscow International Festival, Hamama received the Special Award for her pro-democratic role in "Imbratoriyat Meem" ("The Empire of M," 1972). Other international accolades included: the Best Actress Award at the Jakarta Film Festival in 1963 for her role in "al-Bab al-Maftooh" ("The Open Door," 1963), the Lebanese Order of Merit in 1984 for her role in "Laylat al-Qabd 'ala Fatimah" ("The Night of Fatma's Arrest," 1984), the Best Actress Award at the Carthage Film Festival in 1988 for her role in "Yawm Mur… Yawm Hilu" ("Bitter Days, Nice Days", 1988), and lifetime achievement awards from the Montpellier Mediterranean Film Festival in 1993 and the Dubai International Film Festival in 2009. In 2000, the Egyptian Organization of Critics and Writers honored Hamama's lifetime of achievements in the Egyptian cinema with the "Star of the Century" Award. "Ard al-Ahlam" ("The Land of Dreams"), directed by Dawoud Abdel-Sayed in 1993, would prove to be the star's last film. Hamama married three times. After her first marriage to director Ezzel Dine Zulficar ended, the actress became entangled in one of the most famous love stories of

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Faten Hamama, an Arab Icon

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the Arab world. Hamama met Michel Demitri Shalhoub, later known as Omar Sharif, in "Sira' fi al-Wadi" (Struggle in the Valley," 1954), the film in which she consented to her first ever on-screen kiss. The two also acted in more than 15 films together, including "Nahr al-Hub" ("River of Love," 1960), an Egyptian production based on Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina," directed by her first husband, Zulficar. Yet Hamama's marriage to Sharif in 1955 did not survive his move to Hollywood, ending in divorce in 1974. Coincidentally, Omar Sharif passed away in a Cairo hospital seven months after Hamama's death, on July 10, 2015.

Her third marriage to the intensely private Dr. Mohammad Abdel Wahab Mahmoud, who shied away from the cameras, proved successful. Hamama is survived by Dr. Mahmoud, as well as a son and a daughter from her first marriages.

A pillar of Middle Eastern cinema whose career spanned seven decades, Hamama provided a positive force for change in Egypt, not a small accomplishment considering the fact that acting was still considered a less-than-honorable profession at the beginning of her career. Her films parallel the progress of Egyptian women in public, cultural and political life during the 20th century. Moreover, in 1996, when, to celebrate Egyptian cinema's 100th birthday, experts drew up a list of 150 of the best Egyptian films, they included 18 of Hamama's films. With her well-researched roles and strong cultural background, the star undoubtedly helped to change the image of the Arab woman on screen from a marginal, defeated being to an empowered, strong, and responsible woman.

Although Hamama earned many accolades and titles, one best characterizes the star's influence and impact. Acknowledging this title, the banner carried by some of Hamama's fans on the day her body was laid to rest read, "Egypt says goodbye to the 'lady of the screen.'" ***AJ***

Unmasking the Assad Regime

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nature, these scenes raise questions at a time when most of the world believes this regime killed more than a quarter of a million human beings. Once again, the credit goes to Martin Smith and his crew for creating a film that demands attention to nuance, as well as critical evaluation from its audience.

The need for intelligent viewing continues, when, after the death of al-Aljalani, Anzour places Smith in the care of a new fixer, a colonel in the state military intelligence apparatus. As he has done with others in the film, Smith points this relationship out to the audience. This warning makes it incumbent upon the viewer to see every turn in the tour as an effort by the regime to show its best face to Smith.

This becomes particularly evident when Smith travels to Homs and meets a representative from the Ministry of Information. The slick, well dressed ministry man, who speaks adequate English, tells Smith that Homs has served as the site of a recent tourism festival. The journalist remains understandably incredulous, and the viewer should share his skepticism. Smith's visit to Homs--the third largest city after Damascus and Aleppo--stands as a major high point of the documentary, offering an intelligent, and subtle indictment of the regime. The program juxtaposes the ministry man and his tour of a luxury hotel with archival footage of fighting, and scenes of ruined neighborhoods throughout the once bustling metropolis.

The film does have its problems, of course. Some of his interviews conducted in Damascus and Lattakia lack the context or background essential to allowing viewers to judge their credibility or usefulness. I stress here the word "some," because the piece introduces interviewees in the Alawite-dominated Lattakia as refugees from Sunni areas, while failing to do the same with others in Homs. The teenagers who speak so passionately about their bleak futures in Homs offer misleading images as the audience does not know the neighborhoods from which they hail--details that prove especially important with the sectarian and religious lines drawn in the city between Alawites, Christians and Sunni Muslims. While their answers speak for themselves, alerting native viewers to their pro-regime nature, Western audiences will be less likely to understand the implications.

Other questionable moments come when Smith interviews subjects under conditions which make them feel vulnerable or threatened. Many individuals, whether they be Sunni or Alawite, have spoken for the regime while in a regime-controlled area.

Moreover, the issue of refugees should have figured more prominently in the documentary, particularly in terms of its magnitude and how the crisis has altered the social fabric of Syrian society. Aside from the four million displaced externally, seven or more million remain displaced internally. The goal of making current Syrian reality accessible to the viewer requires this vital context.

As the documentary comes to an end, Smith visits Assad's heartland, the coastal region which consists of the two major cities, Tartus and Lattakia. None of what Smith encounters there feels surprising. Alawites offer genuine sentiments about what could happen to them if Al Nusra or ISIS takes over. Yet, the film appears to invite the viewer to listen to a familiar tune in regime-controlled parts of the country, naming the U.S. and Saudi Arabia as the supporters and creators of ISIS.

Though Smith does not hide his coordination with regime contacts, they cannot help him when the journalist fails to secure his goal of sitting down with President Assad, due to a supposed scheduling conflict. But his account of what follows suggests additional irony. Instead of meeting Assad for an interview, the regime presents the journalist with tickets to a concert by the Syrian National Symphony, which he attends, but leaves before it ends. The regime also denies Smith's request to visit a hospital to interview the injured, something also pointed out in the documentary.

In the film's last frame, Smith's team offers one final, clever, sarcastic clue as to the true nature of this subtle documentary. They drive by a sign on their way out of Syria which they translate and place into titles. That sign, brimming with unconscious irony, reads, "Thank you for visiting!" ***AJ***

A Subtle Approach to Unmasking the Assad Regime

Inside Assad's Syria
Written and Produced by Martin Smith
PBS Frontline 2015

BY BOBBY S. GULSHAN

I struggled a bit to know what to say about PBS Frontline's "Inside Assad's Syria." Searching the internet for reviews of the film, I found a rather uninteresting piece in a Hollywood business daily, as well as a blogger who felt that PBS had finally abandoned any pretext of truth in favor of outright propaganda in order to sell Assad to the American people. Clearly, they weren't paying attention to the fact that Smith registers his frustration throughout the program, wearing a purposefully tired expression while being carted along on an obvious pro-regime tour. Their inability to identify this clue made me wonder if the blogger and his approving commentators proved equally oblivious to the fact that Frontline obviously recognized the dog and pony show being provided by the regime, and could see just how easily people could fall for such tactics. In the end, Martin Smith's efforts do not represent pro-Assad propaganda, but rather stand as a thoughtful, albeit subtle, and, at times, frustrating indictment of Assad's regime and methods.

The apparent normalcy of life strikes Smith immediately upon his arrival in the Syrian capital. The fact that life, as reported by the journalist, appears so normal in Damascus strikes a dissonant note, contrasting with what Western viewers usually see on their nightly television screens. This carries a subtle message--one not necessarily in support of the regime. History abounds with similar scenes from previous theaters of war, where groups of people--Others--were gassed and massacred, while the majority of people went about their daily lives. In fact, it makes you wonder if that majority in Damascus might not dance, drink, and sing harder and louder knowing that death looms only few miles away.

As far as the scenes of nightlife in the capital, Smith makes a valid argument in pointing out that the Assad regime has restricted Western media access to territories under its control. Those scenes may have even represented a gamble on the journalist's part, a hope that he might encounter a scoop by reporting on the under-reported.

Still, Smith obviously wants to go beyond scenes of nightlife in Damascus. Those desires appear to have been thwarted when, and this is just a guess, something went terribly wrong with the journalist's media guide or fixer, Mr. Thaer al-Ajlani. Smith candidly introduces al-Ajlani as a regime loyalist, but does expect the man to take him to the front, to see the battle from the perspective of the Syrian Army. Unfortunately, al-Ajlani dies while covering the fighting shortly after Smith's arrival.

Affected by his guide's death, Smith and his crew attend the young journalist's funeral, only to witness a much grander scene than they had anticipated. Rather than a mere family affair, al-Ajlani's funeral becomes a demonstration of state support and loyalty. This leads Smith to admit he had underestimated the strength of the tie between al-Ajlani and the Assad regime.

Some critics of Smith's "Inside Assad's Syria" say that the film ultimately acquits the regime of wrongdoing and paints an overly sympathetic picture of life in regime-controlled Syria. This interpretation has proven short-sighted and incorrect. Any journalist in a foreign land can expect to be subject to restrictions, and the quality of the resulting reportage ultimately depends upon the worth of the fixer or media handler who guides the reporter through the country. Smith needs permits to venture outside Damascus, and he accomplishes this with the help of Najdat Anzour, a filmmaker and self-proclaimed Assad supporter.

Smith's critics protest his giving air time to some of the pro-Assad apologists, including the aforementioned filmmaker Anzour. Yet when attending a conference of regime supporters, the journalist clearly points to these men as apologists for the regime. Again, we have to look deeper and take note of what Smith and his team have included in the final cut of the film. While the journalist obviously needs Anzour's contacts and help in order to produce the documentary, viewers can easily notice Smith's indifference toward the director and his inflammatory films about the Saudis, featuring the strict, and inhumane punishments they give to dissenters, adulterers, and thieves.

Critics make a gross mistake when they underestimate Smith's intelligence, and neglect to note the subtle messages he offers, such as those included with the inclusion of Anzour's rabble-rousing cinematic scenes. Although intended to discredit the opponents of the Assad regime, by their very

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Faten Hamama (1931-2015): The Loss of an Arab Icon

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA

The pinnacle of fame!
The scepter of art!
The throne of the cinema!
. . .
To her, life is art.
To her, art is life.
And between the two, she is the link, an unbreakable chain.
. . .
(Abd al-Salam al-Nabulsy describing Faten Hamama in 1967)

On the 17th of January, 2015, the Arab world lost the iconic Egyptian film star Faten Hamama, who died at the age of 83 after a short-term hospitalization. Known as the "Lady of the Arab Screen," Hamama starred in almost 100 films, working with masters of Egypt's massive film industry. The Egyptian presidency mourned her, issuing a statement: "Egypt and the Arab world have lost a creative and artistic talent who enriched Egyptian art with her sophisticated performances."


Faten Hamama by April I. Decker for Al Jadid

Born in the Delta city of Mansoura to a father who worked as a lower middle class clerk in the Egyptian Ministry of Education and a mother who worked as a housewife, Faten Hamama graduated from acting school at the age of 16. Her career, however, began much earlier, at the age of seven, when a school talent contest "discovered" her. This resulted in a role alongside the legendary singer and composer Mohamed Abdel Wahab in "Youm Sa'eed" ("Happy Day," 1940). After the success of the movie, Hamama became known as "Egypt's own Shirley Temple." Four years later, she appeared next to Abdel Wahab in "Rosasa fi al-Qalb" (Bullet in the Heart," 1944). Following her third film, "Donya" ("Donya," 1946), Hamama moved with her parents and siblings to Cairo, where she commenced her studies in the High Institute of Acting.

In the 1950s, Hamama played a major role in the golden age of the Egyptian cinema industry, beginning with her starring role in "Lak Yawm Ya Zalem" ("Your Day Will Come, Oppressor," 1952), a film nominated in the Cannes Film Festival for the Prix International award. In a time renowned for its many major Egyptian cinema stars, her contemporaries included Magda, Shadia, Hind Rostom, Taheyya Kariokka, Samia Gamal, Najwa Fouad, Farid al-Atrash, and Abdel Halim Hafez, among others. Some of her most famous works on the silver screen include "Baba Ameen" ("Ameen, my Father," 1950), directed by Youssef Chahine, and "La Waqt Lel Hob" ("No Time for Love," 1963). Hamama also made it to Hollywood, where, in 1963, she took part in the crime film "Cairo" with George Sanders.

A political conservative, Hamama expressed dissatisfaction with Gamal Abdel-Nasser's socialist changes, especially the nationalization of factories, the confiscation of land, the arrests, and what she believed to be the oppressiveness of the regime. The actress would later confess that the frequent attempts to recruit her into working with the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate, as well as her desire to avoid the harassment of its director, Salah Nasr, prompted her frequent travels to Lebanon and London in the period between 1966 and 1971. Although Abdel Nasser called her a "national treasure," awarded her an honorary decoration in art in 1965, and asked leading artists and writers to convince her to return to Egypt, Hamama chose to remain abroad until after Nasser's death.

Her conservative politics also influenced her artistic style. Hamama's roles shied away from those favoured by seductive actresses like Hind Rostom, the woman known as the Marilyn Monroe of the East. Nor did Hamama depend upon her good looks for recognition, as in the cases of Layla Fawzi or Madiha Yousri. Rather, according to the Lebanese critic and poet Paul Shaoul, the actress's petite posture, and the inner attraction manifest in her ambiguous and glowing eyes, became Hamama's trademarks. She also shunned the limelight, rarely giving interviews and avoiding involvement in the usual controversies.

In addition to romantic movies, Hamama starred in

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