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AL JADID

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JUSTIFYING STARVATION: An Intellectual Betrayal of Progressive Ideas

BY ELIE CHALALA

The reaction to the starvation of the Syrian town of Madaya will occupy a central place in the literature about the Syrian revolution for years to come. This does not exclude other horrific events like the many massacres in Syrian towns and villages or the chemical attacks on Al Ghouta. However, employing starvation as a weapon to force civilians and rebels to surrender has touched a nerve more than many other unspeakable events. Using starvation captures so much attention because it touches our shared vulnerabilities more than other forms of fighting. How many of us can claim personal involvement in tank or air warfare for example? Starvation represents a vivid and concrete experience, personal rather than theoretical or abstract.

Image of a young child supplied by activists in the Syrian town of Madaya (Source: The Guardian)

The population of Madaya, a former holiday resort near the Lebanese border, has swelled from16,000 to more than 40,000 due to an influx of refugees fleeing neighboring Zabadani, a Lebanese resort destination which has experienced its own share of attacks from Assad and Hezbollah forces. Zabadani has been under siege by the Syrian army and Hezbollah for six months, part of a campaign to drive the rebels out of the town. This has exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation in Madaya, whose population has reached an unprecedented level of starvation.

Doctors Without Borders, which supports field hospitals in Madaya, reported that at least 23 people have starved to death since the beginning of last December, but the numbers could be much higher, also according to the Times. "Even the little cookie we used to buy for 10 Syrian pounds now costs 4,500 [about $20]," a charity worker said. Videos showed emaciated infants drinking a soup of marmalade and water, and people attempting to fend off starvation by preparing a leaf stew, also according to the Times. A 2-pound bag of rice costs more than $150 in Madaya. People talk about sifting through garbage, eating grass and slaughtering cats to fend off starvation, according to the Times.

The striking resemblance between the images of Madaya's starved population and Holocaust survivors in 1945 has elicited widespread commentary in the world media, especially social media, and will undoubtedly engrave the starvation of this town into the contemporary Syrian collective memory. The key difference here remains the fact while the world, or much of it, could claim ignorance about the 1940s concentration camps, we have been witnessing and watching the brutal genocide by starvation of Madaya before our own eyes, thanks to modern media technology.

I must admit to not being able to escape the association, largely because of my time spent reading and teaching about international politics, wars, and conflicts. The unforgettable and brutal images of wars, whether from WWII or the Bosnian conflict, haunt the recesses of my memory, with Madaya acting as a catalyst, bringing these images flooding back into the forefront of my consciousness.

A boy in Madaya, Syria. Doctors Without Borders reported that at least 23 people have starved to death in the town since the beginning of December.

Further, I grew up socialized into many romantic notions about those labeled "progressives," and therefore believed that they would naturally number among the vanguard of those condemning the use of starvation as a weapon in either war or peacetime. This caused me to suffer great disillusionment when these very people have, instead, mocked the victims, denying their starvation against all evidence to the contrary. This disillusionment has been compounded by the fact that those who used to advocate progressive ideas have chosen to support the Syrian regime and its allies, while they have been actively starving Syrians.

No need to recount the chilling details of the suffering in Madaya, for much has been documented by respectable international and human rights organizations. Thus, I choose

to examine the reactions of those whom I expected to show an avant-garde opposition to the genocide by starvation of the people in this Syrian town. The following account consists of many voices, including my own, denouncing the groups of individuals who used to be considered socially conscious or "progressive," but who forfeited those titles by standing side by side with Madaya's oppressors.

'Madaya: Lebanese Degenerations'

The Madaya siege has become as much a Lebanese affair as a Syrian one, launching a new episode in Sunni–Shiite rifts which degenerated into a dangerous manifestation of sectarianism, noted Sati Noureddine, editor of the Beirut-based Al Modon electronic newspaper.

The reactions and the exchanges over the starvation in Madaya unleashed hatreds and grudges among different Lebanese groups, which in Noureddine's words, reflect "repressed feelings" whose "roots" and "identities" have been passed on from primal sectarianism. This "degeneration" in the Lebanese debate becomes evident in the "delirious positions" of participants who crudely and openly "brag and boast about" those positions. This culture, as described by Noureddine, uses "language and images characteristic of idiotic or mentally backward street people."

Noureddine warns us against considering Madaya as "a special exception." Far from that, he insightfully notes that the whole Syrian conflict in all its phases has included similar "Madayas," starvation being used as a weapon against the civilian population to force the rebels to surrender. Otherwise, "how could we explain the large and horrific casualty numbers, dead and wounded, and the displacement of millions across different parts world?"

Noureddine asks why conflict resolution efforts did not work toward more modest goals such as "neutralizing civilians and their places of residence" as an alternative to comprehensive agreements like Geneva 2 or 3 between the combatants. These agreements would have spared the starvation and suffering of hundreds of thousands. Tragically, the conflict has escalated as direct Russian involvement has resulted in a "scorched-earth policy" with the deployment of more powers and deadly weapons.

When Noureddine describes Madaya as a "small Syrian detail," but not a Lebanese one, he perhaps means that the atrocities against the Syrians in Madaya do not represent a new policy. Still, the manner in which this issue became entangled with the Sunni-Shiite divisions in Lebanon turned out to be a major issue. Since Lebanese politics intertwine with regional politics, the deterioration of Saudi Iranian-relations, the Hezbollah alliance with Iran and its active participation in besieging Madaya, inevitably distanced the different Lebanese groups from each other, especially on the issue of the starvation of Madaya.

The Lebanese "body politic" suffers from many illnesses whose cures cannot be achieved through the act of releasing the country's psychological frustrations. Noureddine refers back to psychology, claiming that "releasing one's feelings is psychologically beneficial, but is horrific politically, socially and security-wise." In other words, the releasing of those repressed feelings, given their hostile reverberations on the street, will only have destructive results for Lebanon.

'Madaya and All this Hatred'

Like many Lebanese columnists and intellectuals, Hazem Saghieh aims his indignation at the hateful discussions and commentaries concerning the starvation in Madaya. Like Noureddine, he levels his criticism at the rejectionist tirades which belittle, deny, and even, "worst of the worst," mock the victims and gloat over their suffering.

The advocates of these inhumane attitudes and unjust characterizations of the starving Syrians, as noted by Saghieh, do not even bother to intellectually dress up their attacks with reasoning, but rather unambiguously and openly describe those attacks as advocating for the "ordinary needs for air and food."

Emaciated survivors of one of the largest Nazi conservation camps at Ebensee, Austria, entered by the U.S. 3rd Army on May 7th, 1945.

This scene of hatred disorients the perceptions of a generation of intellectuals and activists who have not forgotten a nostalgic page of their history, and believe that they belong to a community advocating for brotherhood, common destiny and common interests between the Lebanese and the Syrians. Yet their gloating over their neighboring brother's emaciated bodies gives lie to this mythology. Saghieh attributes this schizophrenic reaction to the high level of psychological disintegration and hatred that beset the Lebanese and many other Arab societies, resulting in a fragmentation that promotes the impulse of non-coexistence over that of coexistence.

While this disintegration requires rethinking, Saghieh writes that the national and social structures, and the formulas being applied in warring Mideast countries, create the background against which these dark facets of human nature coalesce into negative reactions towards the starving citizens of Madaya.

The rejectionist community, with its "gloating and denial," has been dealt a defeat through its loss of the monopoly over the concept of "revolution." The community's rejectionist rhetoric

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CONTRIBUTORS

Farag Bayrakdar ("'In Between the Lines': When 'Nation' Becomes a Weapon!", p. 14) is a prominent Syrian poet.

Imene Bennani (Translated "Weeping Before Zarqaa Al-Yamama (Excerpt)" and "'Exit journey – The Stone Cake Song' "First Chapter", p. 13) is a Tunisian assistant at the University of Kairouan; currently finalizing her Ph.D on contemporary Arab-American poetry. She is also a poetry editor at KNOT literary magazine. Her publications include reviews on poetry collections and translations from Arabic to English.

Azmi Bishara ("On Random Violence," p. 8) is a prominent Palestinian and Arab intellectual.

Doris Bittar ("'Terrace of the Sea': Diana Allan Casts Her Cinematic Gaze on a Palestinian Fisherman," p. 21) is an artist, academic and critic. Her art is housed in several museum collections.

Elie Chalala ("Justifying Starvation: An Intellectual Betrayal of Progressive Ideas" p. 2; "Madaya: Lebanese Degenerations," p. 3; "Madaya and All this Hatred," p. 3; "A Director of Sorts!" p. 6; "A Small Cameraman!" p. 7; "Hateful Hashtags on Social Media," p. 7;) is Editor-in-Chief of Al Jadid, and associate adjunct professor of political science.

Ghassan Charbel ("Ceasefire," p. 9) is the editor-in-chief of Al Hayat Newspaper.

Angele Ellis ("There's No Place Like Home: Piecing Together Lebanon Divided," p. 18; "Q&A with Director/Writer Reine Mitri," p. 19) is a poet and author based in Pennsylvania.

Nada Ramadan Elnahla ("Visionary Egyptian Novelist Gamal al-Ghitani Dead But Not Forgotten,"p. 12; "'Nefertiti's Daughters': The (Street) Art of Feminist Revolution," p. 20; "Muslim Women Negotiating Identity in the Deep South," p. 23; "Ghada Samman's 'Farewell Damascus': From Damascus to Beirut Becomes a Woman's Journey of Self-Discovery, p. 28) is a lecturer in the Department of English at Alexandria University, Egypt, with a Ph.D. in comparative literature.

Nora Eltahawy ("A Muslim American Response to the 'War on Terror Culture,'" p. 26) is a Ph.D candidate in the English Department at Northwestern University, whose research is Arab-American literature and history.

Bobby Gulshan ("Coming Home to History: New Film Captures Early Days in Yemen's Revolution," p. 22; "How Syrian Bureaucracy Valued Nepotism and Political Loyalties in Shaping Healing Policies," p. 27; "Doris Bittar's 'Cryptographic': Finding Identity and Unity Through Art," p. 35) is an author based in Washington, D.C.

Rana Issa ("Syria and the Politics of Personal Sadness: A Review of Yassin Haj Saleh's Revolutionary Thought," p. 16) is a postdoctoral historian in Arabic literature at the University of Oslow.

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Cover Artist

Huguette Caland (Cover artwork "Summer In Venice, California," 2011) was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1931. Ms. Caland began painting at the age of 16 under the private tutelage of Fernando Manetti, an Italian artist who resided in Lebanon. She then studied art at the American University of Beirut, lived in Paris for 17 years, and spent some time working in New York. Ms. Caland eventually settled in Venice, California, in 1987. Her work is shown in galleries in Europe, the Middle East, the U.S.A., and some of her pieces are now part of major private collections and foundations.

has degenerated into sadistic diatribes that cannot be divorced from this defeat. No wonder it denies the loss of its concept of "revolution": to admit this loss of monopoly over this idea would logically lead to the admission that the community has also lost its raison d'être, the reason of its existence.

Regardless of the outcome of the Syrian revolution, and even if they win militarily, the rejectionist forces will have still lost their monopoly over the concept of "revolution," a monopoly which lasted more than half of a century. Indeed, the moment of this defeat came after the Syrian revolution appropriated the idea of "revolution" from other rejectionist regimes, leftist politicians, and intellectuals.

The ramifications of this loss have proven immense for the rejectionists. They no longer find the idea of revolution as useful as it was before mid-March 2011, when the rejectionists issued revolutionary credentials to the likes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, Mouammar el-Qaddaff, and Hezbollah, as well as other authoritarian dictators and movements. Similarly, this loss delegitimizes old revolutionary slogans concerning the liberation of Palestine, and Arab unity, while also providing ideological cover for shelving domestic reforms, imprisoning dissenters, and misallocating national resources to bolster their repressive military apparatuses at the expense of the social and economic needs of the Syrian people.

This rejectionist monopoly had been struggling to stay alive decades ago, but finally went up in smoke following the Arab Spring, with Syria serving as its burial place. Before the Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians had already stomached their share of the Assads' atrocities and destruction, although those have proven less inhumane and cruel than the practices used since 2011. The difference, however, concerns the fact that the regime which, in the name of its own people, butchered Syria's neighbors, committing massacres against the Lebanese and Palestinians, has now instituted a genocidal war against its own citizens, killing Syrians in all parts of the country's geography. Nor can the regime continue to cover up its crimes ideologically, not through any lack of strategy, but simply because it has lost its grasp on the idea called "revolution."

Not only have the Assad regime's empty slogans debunked their revolutionary claims, but the regime has also proven equally deceptive in its claims of building an army to liberate the Golan Heights. While the regime did in fact squander the wealth of its people to build an army, it has chosen to turn that army and its weapons against the people who subsidized it, barrel bombing and gassing Syrians in ever-growing numbers.

This loss has also had a spillover effect on Assad's allies, who used to hide under the broad umbrella of so-called liberation, resistance and revolutionary national movements. Hezbollah leads those discredited groups, having monopolized the debates concerning resistance against Israeli occupation not only of southern Lebanon but also of Palestine. Many Syrians believed in these claims, and sided with this party during difficult times. Saghieh, however, makes a poignant observation: "When Hezbollah, the party of the revolution and resistance, is the one who is besieging and starving Madaya, the book of lies will have completed its final chapter."

Charbel Khalil

A final ramification concerning the rejectionist loss of "revolutionary" dividends focuses on the frustrations and tensions that, in turn, have stirred up "sectarian feelings." The expression of hate now focused on Madaya serves as the most recent manifestation of these feelings.

A Director of Sorts!

As both Sati Noureddine and Hazem Saghieh have condemned the heartless reactions to the Madaya starvation, another figure, Charbel Khalil, a prominent Lebanese TV producer and director of popular political and satirical programs, has attracted widespread criticism in conventional and social media, attracting the particular wrath of columnist Ali Saqa. Mr. Saqa, who published a critique of Khalil in Al Modon, the electronic newspaper edited by Sati Noureddine, devoted his attention to the director's tweet which mocked the Madaya starvation by posting a picture of starving Somalis, naming them as the mayor and city council members of the besieged Syrian town. Many have found this photo to not only be racist, but to also be offensive to suffering Somalis and Syrians alike.

Khalil's tweet appears to have an unmistakable purpose: to discredit the humanitarian campaign dedicated to lifting the siege on Madaya. To this end, he has mocked the starvation pictures, and exploited some reports of faked images from Madaya. While the identities of those posting the fake images remains unknown, Khalil chose to misuse his talents and abilities, employing sarcasm to discredit authentic images of skeletal and emaciated Madayans by taking a "cheap shot," at images published in some of the most respected publications. This, despite the fact that many international non-governmental and human rights organizations supported the authenticity of those photographs.

The underlying purpose of the director's racist and insensitive tweet clearly remains political. Hardly above the Lebanese political fray, Khalil's satirical programs make it clear that his sympathies lie with General Michel Aoun, a major Lebanese politician and a loyal ally to the Syrian president and his Lebanese and regional allies, Hezbollah and Iran. Both the tweet, and even the controversial reaction to it, will score the director some points with his Lebanese allies, who, in turn, can cash in on these immoral "satiric" investments within the two centers of rejectionism, Damascus and Tehran.

Khalil's politics aside, his lack of minimal moral standards has proven his greatest failure. Even worse, he threatens to block his critics from his page, an attitude that leaves no doubt that Khalil's politics shape his exclusivist policies. Isn't this attitude the same one shared by his direct and indirect allies, who starve those with whom they disagree in Madaya?

The director's tweet possesses all the attributes of a "hollow" street racism. Khalil's racism "lacks any intellectual basis" and amounts to mere "banality," wrote Saqa. He goes even further, considering the director's racism to be "fed by adolescent and naive attitudes where the only link he found between the besieged town of Madaya and starved Africans" was a chauvinism which encouraged and reinforced Khalil's decision to use Africans as dehumanized subjects and tools. His oblivious, and tasteless tweet mocking the starving Madayans constitutes an offense and insult to both Africans and Syrians, one made all the worse by his obvious lack of recognition concerning its implicit racism.

Morally speaking, Khalil demonstrates anti-black attitudes when "much of the West has surpassed it decades ago." His "depiction of Africans was not to condemn starvation or call for their assistance but because starvation is a convenient topic for sarcasm. When empty stomachs, [and] gaunt bodies, which prepare for slow and inevitable death, become topics for satire with Charbel Khalil, he is certainly trying to escape the moral and human responsibility for the starvation in Madaya," Saqa continued. Other Lebanese intellectuals and artists, more sophisticated than Khalil, have also attempted to employ similar moral escape strategies, evident by convenient recall of other political and humanitarian issues, which, though important, they invoke deliberately to detract attention from the immediate one, the Syrian genocide conducted by almost all means.

The criticism leveled at Khalil, while harsh, proves well deserved. By criticizing Khalil, Saqa can cite justification in the director's own programs – "Basmat Watan" and "Douma Kratiye" – which enjoy wide popularity among the Lebanese audience, and also air on one of Lebanon's major TV Stations, LBCI.

A Small Cameraman!

LBCI's Director and Jadeed TV's cameraman share striking resemblances through their shared insensitivities. The Jadeed TV cameraman, Jihad Zahri, works in a pseudo-leftist (reads rejectionist) TV station whose audience remains largely sympathetic to Hezbollah, Syria and their Lebanese "leftist" allies. Like Khalil, who cynically uses pro-Syrian revolution slogans such as "Where is the conscience?" or "In solidarity with Madaya," Zahri wrote a similarly mocking post: "From inside the fridge, in solidarity with Madaya." Zahri chose to show his "solidarity" by standing next to his refrigerator displaying all types of food, a tasteless "creative" gesture one can hardly describe as anything but an act of gloating and revenge directed at the people of Madaya.

This scandalous post led to a reprimand and then an embarrassment for Zahri as well as for the "rejectionist" Jadeed TV station. Fellow reporter and host at Al Jadeed TV, Nancy al-Sabih, rushed to reprimand him on his photo, saying "This is not a pretty picture... Gloating at starvation is like gloating at death. This post is not like you." Apparently this critical comment from a fellow journalist embarrassed Zahri so much that he removed the post. "Though [now] electronically hidden, the picture will remain a stigma which conflicts with morals and questions Zahri's concept of humanity," commented columnist Ali al-Amin.

Like Khalil…Zahri had a similar post: "From inside the fridge, in solidarity with Madaya." …He chose to show his "solidarity" by standing next to his refrigerator displaying all types of food, a tastless "creative" gesture one can hardly describe as anything but an act of gloating and revenge directed at the people of Madaya.avenge at the people of Madaya.

Hateful Hashtags on Social Media

Certain segments of Lebanese society share sentiments like those echoed by Charbel Khalil and Jihad Zahri, thus raising an important, though academic question: whether intellectual elites shape mass opinion or the other way around. Only rigorous academic research can satisfactorily answer this query.

Social media and press reports document a wide-range of hateful hashtags and posts mocking and gloating at the starving Madayans. "Supporters of the Syrian regime are sharing photos of their dinners to taunt thousands of starving civilians in a besieged town," according to the British Independent newspaper. Other "photos showed people with sumptuous-looking spreads of food including kebabs, grilled prawns, whole fish, chips, salad and mountains of bread."

Similar taunting hashtags and posts have proven abundant in the rejectionist online community, a display of hate that has sparked a new wave of outrage as the humanitarian crisis in Madaya continues. While condemned as "sadistic" and

"unbelievably disgusting," it would be a mistake and a misreading of the feelings among the pro-Hezbollah constituency to think of these inhumane sentiments as aberrations. As recently as 2013, when Hezbollah and the official Syrian army occupied the Syrian town of Qusair, Hezbollah supporters celebrated by distributing sweets to passersby in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

Amidst all of this inhumanity, however, voices of reason still remain in the Shiite community. A prominent Shiite columnist, Ali al-Amin, has commented on these hashtags, saying: "I feel ashamed not because I am only Lebanese, and not because I am Shiite, and neither because I am from southern Lebanon, whose youth are starving the children of Madaya, but rather because I have had my lunch before writing this essay. I feel ashamed because I am full. Forgive us the people of Madaya. Forgive us and excuse us for what the stupid or foolish have done to you."***AJ***

Readings

On Random Violence

(This is an edited translation from the Arabic by Elie Chalala of a column by Mr. Azmi Bishara which appeared in Al Araby Al Jadeed newspaper.)

The explosions, which randomly target civilians who have done nothing to warrant an attack against them, push people in general to identify with the victims, imagining themselves in the victim's shoes. Attending a soccer game in a stadium, purchasing domestic necessities from the market, or just hanging around in city plazas, constitute normal activities not confined to the disciples of a particular religion or to the supporters of a given policy.

On the other hand, this does not mean that adhering to a given religion or sect, holding the nationality of a given country, or supporting a given political position offers sufficient reasons to be targeted for violence. Many consider killing for these reasons a double crime: a crime that places the safety of humanity at risk on one hand, and also threatens the freedom of conscience on the other (at least in this historical time). In fact, moralists easily condemn crimes of this nature, as their emotions reach out to the victims even if they do not share their views. Although no one has targeted them, others condemn such crimes simply because they count themselves members of civilization and civilized cultures.

Condemning the targeting of civilian gatherings in work or market settings, or those busy studying or performing normal human activities, has proven easy. Regardless of whether the attack comes from an explosive belt, a booby trapped car, or from an aircraft at a height where the faces and goals of the doomed civilians cannot be distinguished, the act cannot be condoned. The condemnation of such acts is the source of the widespread sympathy with the victims, as well as the public revulsion beset with the fear of the act's reoccurrence.

Unfortunately, this feeling of identification decreases in wars where countries involve their own civilians in the fighting. Three factors explain the resulting lack of sympathy: (1) the death scenes may desensitize citizen soldiers to the horror; (2) bombing civilians may seem mutual and expected actions, as if natural features of the wars themselves, and (3) the enemies in these wars may be Others, appearing to lose their humanity. Thus, for all of these reasons, few citizen soldiers may show solidarity with enemy victims during bombings.

When racist perspectives serve as the basis for violence, the feeling of identification with the victims also declines, as they cease to appear as individuals or even humans. Rather, they come to be seen as creatures which resemble people, while, after attacks, they become mere corpses or limbs. Some racists will often sympathize with the children and women victims, though less from genuine mercy than from a position of purported moral superiority.

According to this constructed background, the need arises to take a clear position against the targeting of civilians by either individuals acting upon private initiatives or on orders from organizations. Thus, a clearly defined position against such crimes will rule out the explanations that come closer to justification than to condemnation.

All great religions prohibit murder, and here, religion and morality come together. Any attempt to justify killing on the basis of religion strains the relationship between the two, dragging religion into a clash with morality, a clash from which the two sides come out as losers. Both religion and morality suffer major damages in any society that attempts to justify killing through religious reasoning. No religious text fails to include both justifications for violence against the other, as well as condemnations of violence against the other. Morality defines how to approach these texts, and becomes the spirit of religion – of the enlightened, as well as of the religiously pious.

Politically, it has been proven that violence against civilians hurts the cause in whose name the innocents are killed. It might be said that random explosions constitute a weapon of the weak, but the question must then be asked: what is the purpose of this weapon? The use of this weapon has not achieved any clear goal for the oppressed, but instead, has achieved the goals of their enemies, resulting in the weak becoming even weaker. When the perpetrators of such violence have failed to benefit from it, some have gone so far as to accuse the "enemy" of nefariously plotting such operations in order to condemn the perpetrators.

But some people continue to surprise us, inspired by reasons that rarely come to mind. They condemn these actions not based upon any preference for the victims' identities, nor do they express concern for the randomness of the victim selection. Instead, their main concern centers on the criminal himself, upon defending him and finding justifications for whatever deed he has committed.

The advocates of just causes often criticize the use of violent means, which they consider immoral, even if employed by parties who share the same causes. On the other hand, the advocates mainly concerned with specific unjust causes tend to identify with the actions of the parties with whom they associate. This allows for the justification of the crimes of dictatorships

or those committed by totalitarian and fascist movements. The resulting imbalance may inflict some discomfort upon the advocates of "the just cause." Why would they condemn those whom they consider oppressed for attacking civilians? This contrasts with the advocates of "the unjust cause," who maintain absolute support for their partisans and withhold any condemnation when those parties target civilians.

If you condemn deplorable acts committed in the name of a cause you support, and then discover that the other party fails to condemn any crime committed in the name of its cause, do not panic or be surprised! Be certain that you support a just cause, rather than an unjust cause which refuses to condemn dictatorial regimes which attack civilians with barrel bombs, or condemn sectarian and fascist militias that commit massacres in oblivious villages. Remember that these actions embody the natures of the causes they support. This moral difference, this refusal to justify the bombings, poses a burden worth bearing, a sense of discomfort that derives from the fact that you have ultimately chosen to champion a truly just and good cause.**AJ**

Readings

Ceasefire!

(This is an edited translation from the Arabic by Elie Chalala of a column by Mr. Ghassan Charbel, editor-in-chief of Al Hayat newspaper)

Ceasing to fire has proven no less dangerous than the fighting. The hell of battle obscures vision and conceals the image. It inflames hatreds and hopes. The impossibility of a decisive defeat reminds us of bitter balances. The silence of guns and barrels opens our eyes. They thrust he who once was called a citizen before the remains of that which used to be called his country. The delight of the people with the intermission taken by the killing machine does not cancel a destructive truth: The first martyr in Syria is Syria itself.

The ceasefire is required, but dreadful. It allows citizens to start counting assassinated cities, vanished towns, and villages pervaded with the smell of death, inhabited by disappearances. A family will recall a son who left and did not return, a son who will never return. A family will remember its lost half, members who wander in Europe or haunt the refugee camps in neighboring states. A mother will hold the photograph of a kidnapped son; will pray for his return, all while knowing that the sunset of her life will arrive before she hugs him again.

The ceasefire is dreadful. Among the ruins of their homes, Syrians will speak about rivers of death, an ocean of wounded and shores littered with the disabled. They will consider the refugees who seek the sympathy of Merkel, as they flee the hardships of the Umayyad country. They will discuss the displaced, whose exile will last too long, as the cost of reconstructing Syria bankrupts the resources of those who selfishly blocked war's resolution.

The ceasefire is dreadful for this war will not die, but will continue under different names. ISIS will shed no tears if what remains of Syria lies in ruins. Nor will Al Nusra blink back a tear. Then, the negotiations, manipulations, and intrigues will birth a new Syria, an unworthy successor to this sea of blood and rubble.

The moment the battles end proves stressful. In the height of war, fighters do not desire a ceasefire, which proclaims by its nature their inability to achieve victory. Perhaps it also reveals the truth that the results of this war will never justify the losses.**AJ**

Readings

Aleppo: A Catastrophe Defying Poets' Powers of Description

(This is an edited translation from the Arabic by Elie Chalala of a column by Jordanian poet Amjad Nasser. Mr. Nasser's column appeared in Al Araby Al Jadeed.)

When talking about what is happening in Syria, I face the inability of language to express reality. My vocabulary remains limited. My ability to describe reality, the basic forms of literature and writing, remains limited. Nothing I have written or read could be elevated to the level of one moment of the reality experienced by Syrians in their disastrous country, or in their great Diaspora into which they were unmercifully pushed.

Who could put into words this displacement into the bitter cold of tens of thousands of families who fled from aircraft attacks and bombardments along their grim road as a murmuring river rushes toward a safe refuge? Where does the language and the power of description lie, the passion which could transmit to us the suffering of these masses who leave their homes, human dignity, and family histories to flee toward a refuge, a scene, the equivalence of shame, being absolutely unthinkable only a few years ago? As authors and poets examine the Syrian tragedy we discover the inability of the language itself, its limitations, not only due to a constrained vocabulary when describing reality; but also due to the scope of the tragedy. This enables us to examine the paralysis of the world when faced with the need to stop an unfolding massacre, as well as the lethargic consciences that populate it, and which now turn away from what is happening, or say: "They deserve it!"

Those barking on TV like mad wolves in defense of Arabism, religion, sect, or resistance, forget that these remain unimportant without humans. In fact, these ideas have no existence without people.

Aleppo remains a catastrophe. In size, scope, and wounds, it surpasses the catastrophe of Palestine. What the world witnesses today, human cleansing broadcast live on home TV screens, was not available during the Palestinian catastrophe. History tells us that Tamerlane, the dreadful Tatar leader, occupied Aleppo and murdered whoever he pleased, and then left the city after 80 days, plundering its resources, ruining its buildings and murdering its inhabitants.

This time the new Tamerlane will not leave after 80 days. But he will eventually leave. Aleppo will record this in its millennial records.**AJ**

Our Telephone and Fax:
Tel: (310) 227-6777, Fax: (310) 602-6222
e-mail address is **aljadid@aljadid.com**

Readings

How One Broadcaster Liberated Her Emotions with the Written Word

Image by Owen Freeman from The New York Times

(This is an edited translation from the Arabic by Elie Chalala of a column by Rima Assaf, of LBCI, which appeared on her Facebook page.)

While preparing my report on the Holocaust of Aleppo, I felt the customary format of broadcast news did not allow me to express my feelings. Thus, I have resorted to these written words in order to release my unbearable pain after watching a father breaking and clawing at stones with his bare hands in search of his children, entombed under mountains of rubbles.

Through these words I repeat those of a wounded child in Al Sukari suburb hospital as she cried out: "Mother, help me! May God support and comfort you. My heart hurts me."

Also, through these written words, I can release my unshed tears, repressed while watching and reporting on two children weeping over the corpse of their mother as she lay on a stretcher, a baby removed by unfamiliar hands to an unknown destination, the crumbs of bread scattered over meals of blood, and a woman, whose white hair I could not confidently attribute to old age or to the dust powdering her features.

In this space of free expression, we excuse field reporters in Aleppo who abandoned the conventions of their profession when they cried, yelled, experienced the pain and personally interacted with what they witnessed.

In this space of free expression, a legitimate anger exists because the killer shamelessly marches in the victim's funeral and feels no remorse while reasoning about the war on terror over the lifeless limbs of his victims.

In this space of free expression, I want to offer a tribute to those enduring under fire, and disgrace to the indifferent nations of shame.***AJ***

Yasar Kemal: Champion of Anatolian Literature and Social Justice

BY ALEX SOLTANY

On February 28, 2015, the world lost a literary hero, Kurdish-Turkish writer Yasar Kemal. The novelist died at the age of either 91 or 92, as his birth year of 1923 remains uncertain due to his village lacking proper record keeping.

Notable as the author of popular memory and the collective tales of the Kurds, the Nobel Prize nominee promoted reconciliation between the Kurds and the Turks. Known to be a comrade of the birth of the Turkish Republic, whose primary buyers included Kurds, Turks, and Turkmen, the author won Turkey's highest cultural award, the Presidential Cultural and Artistic Grand Prize in 2008.

With over 25 novels translated into more than 40 languages, Kemal also enjoyed international recognition. The French, in particular, enjoyed his works, and awarded Kemal the title of Grand Officier of the Légion d'Honneur in 2011.

Ibrahim Haj Abdi of Al Hayat newspaper names Kemal as a pioneer of rural literature and the father of the "village novel." Before becoming a writer, Kemal worked as a poor laborer for many years, toiling in the cotton fields, operating tractors and threshing machines, and even working in the construction industry throughout his young adult life. During these early times, the writer relied on oral presentation to share tales and loveable stories relating to village life.

After publishing a book of folk ballads locally, Kemal's subsequent writings centered on everyday Turkish countrymen: peasants, farmers, and laypersons, all suffering from bureaucratic hardship. He didn't publish his first short story until a year after his military service in Ankara. Each of his novels takes place in his home region of Cukurova, a coastal province in southern Anatolia that borders the Taurus Mountains.

Kemal received global acclaim for his most famous book, "Memed, My Hawk" ("Slim Memed"), written in Turkish in 1955 and translated into English six years later. This led to the sequel, "They Burned the Thistles." The novel chronicles the journey of Slim Memed, an iconoclastic farmer who clashes with his oppressive landowner, Abdi Agha. In the novel, Memed retreats into the mountains with his lover, Hatche, and only faces down Abdi and kills him after Abdi betrays him and murders Hatche. American author and New York Times correspondent Stephen Kinzer posits that through his characters, Kemal urges his readers not to idly endure oppression, but to fight it, and exact justice. Themes of social discrimination and environmental destruction, coupled with descriptive imagery of the Cukurovan plain and Taurus Mountains, figure prominently in the author's works. He also cites human greed as the reason for the clearing of forests and the slaughter of animals. However, though Kemal expresses himself as a progressive and leftist novelist, he does not

subject his works to the confinement of dogmatic Marxism.

Although he won a slew of honors during his life, he also faced his share of obstacles and discrimination. In one instance, the producer of a Hollywood movie adaptation of his novel "Memed, My Hawk" stopped production after being told by Turkish authorities that Kemal was a communist. Nor did the novelist receive the Nobel Prize after being nominated in 1973. The response to his eligibility for consideration of the prize sparked a controversial divide between his fellow Kurds and the Turkish government. Critical of his admiration for modernist Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, many Kurds at first reacted negatively to Kemal's nomination. The Turkish government, on the other hand, responded to the decision by accusing the Swedish committee of racism. According to Ibrahim Haj Abdi, the denial of Kemal's award deprived the Nobel institution of a high-stature author, emphasizing that the decision proved the Nobel's loss in the end.

Kemal received additional criticism because his inability to write in Kurdish meant that he published all of his works in Turkish. This decision made him the subject of intense ridicule. Haj Abdi writes that many Kurds felt Kemal's choice did Turkish literature too much of a service and, consequently, "disrespect[ed] his mother tongue." Yet the novelist remained an outspoken supporter of Kurdish rights throughout his life. In fact, Kemal published articles in Germany's Der Spiegel and the London journal Index of Censorship that denounced the Turkish regime and expressed the belief that Kurds had the right to leave Turkey. These articles ultimately led to a suspended sentence of 20 months in jail for "inciting hatred."

A humanist by nature, Kemal also advocated against the persecution of the Armenian people. The novelist protested and "played a key role in stopping the planned destruction of a historic Armenian shrine, the Holy Cross Church on Akhtamar Island in eastern Turkey," according to the New York Times. For his efforts to preserve Armenian cultural heritage, and his commitment to the universal values of freedom, justice, and human dignity, the Armenian Ministry of Culture awarded Kemal the "Krikor Naregatsi" prize in 2013.

Certainly, the writer brought honor to two different ethnic groups, the Kurds and the Turks, through his works. Fellow Lebanese novelist Hassan Daoud of Almodon, a Beirut-based online newspaper, wrote that Kemal injected his own life story into his novels. He became a "seller of tales," reciting inspiring stories of poor peasants, struggling farmers, social injustice, and the rolling plains of Cukurova, themes which echoed in his later works as well, adds Syrian author Subhi Hadidi. According to Reuter, the late filmmaker Elia Kazan, also born in Turkey, described his friend Kemal as "a storyteller in the oldest tradition, that of Homer, [a] spokesman for a people who had no other voice." These tales of localism not only provided insight into the lives of the Anatolian working class, but also offered critical views against Turkish authorities and institutions.

The son of Kurdish peasant farmers Sadik and Nigar in the small Anatolian village of Hemite, Kemal Sadik Gokceli who would later adopt the pen name Yasar Kemal, entered the world mere weeks before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. His parents had fled World War I, trekking across present-day Turkey's southern border and settling in a small village devoid of other Kurds.

Yasar Kemal

Unfortunately, misfortune marred Kemal's childhood. At age five, the boy suffered through the trauma of witnessing his stepbrother murder his father. This left Kemal with a serious stutter which haunted him for decades. The news agency Reuters asserts that this violent event became the basis of the author's 1980 novel, "Salman the Solitary." Only a few years later, a knife accident rendered Kemal blind in his right eye.

However, the boy also experienced some good fortune. At the age of eight, Kemal escaped into the world literature and discovered an appreciation for the arts. This marked the beginning stages of his writing career. He began writing poetry, as well as reciting oral histories and Anatolian folktales. Subhi Hadidi wrote in Al Quds Al Arabi newspaper that the future novelist would wander along the ridges of the Taurus Mountains, retelling legends he heard from other storytellers in Cukurova. Kemal once stated that if he hadn't become a writer, he would have become a bard, a singer of epic poems. Often, he would speak about peasant life, highlighting hardship and impoverishment, two central themes found later in his works.

After various stints with manual labor, as well as his

Continued on page 13

Visionary Egyptian Novelist Gamal al-Ghitani Dead But Not Forgotten

In the 'The Mahfouz Dialogs,' al-Ghitani recorded a collection of conversations over half a century between himself and the Nobel laureate

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA

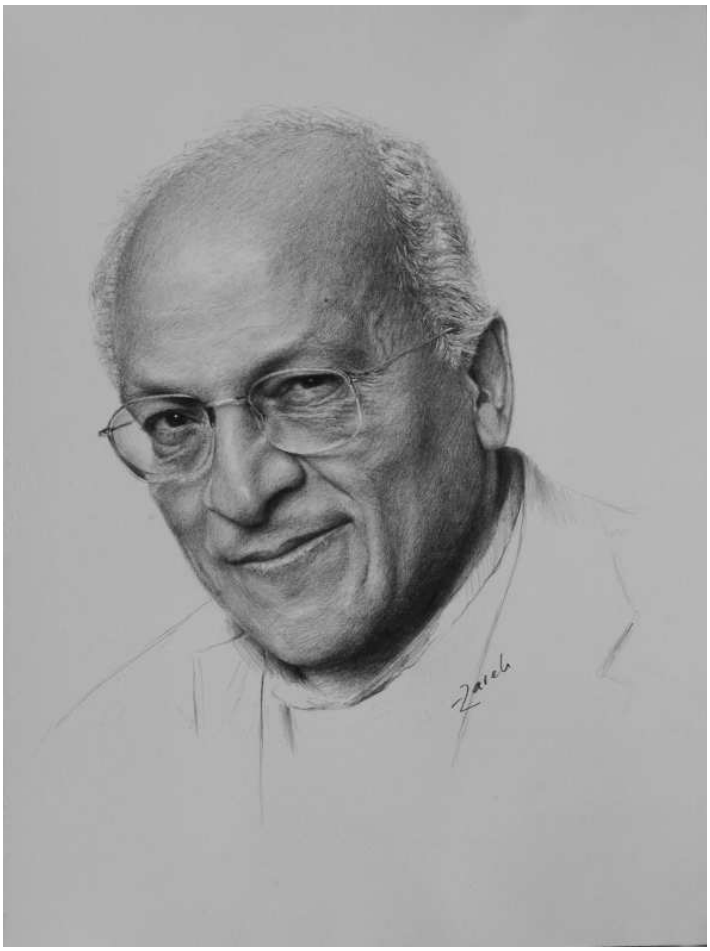
On the 18th of October, 2015, the Arab world mourned the loss of one of its major literary figures: Gamal al-Ghitani. Born to a poor family in Upper Egypt, al-Ghitani published his first short story at the age of 14, then joined the staff of Akhbar al-Youm (Today's News) newspaper in 1969, after a stint as a carpet designer. His writings include historical and political novels – frequently published in English translations – as well as cultural and political commentaries. He also served as the editor-in-chief of the leading literary periodical, Akhbar al-Adab (Literature News), from 1993 to 2011.

Al-Ghitani wrote more than a dozen novels, chief amongst them: "The Zafarani Files" (1976), the semiautobiographical "The Book of Epiphanies" (1983-86), and "Pyramid Texts" (1994). He also published collections of short stories and "The Mahfouz Dialogs" (2006), a collection of conversations recorded over half a century between him and the Nobel laureate. He published his most acclaimed work, "Zaini Barakat" (1974), in response to the oppression and suffering he endured at the hands of the police in the 60's when president Gamal Abdel Nasser had him jailed five months for public dissent.

In his novel set in the 16th-century Mamluk era, al-Ghitani depicts how Zaini Barakat, a market inspector, intimidates local merchants by forcing them to watch the torture of peasants. Since its publication, the scorching allegorical narrative has become a critique of totalitarianism which challenges the legitimacy of political leadership. To al-Ghitani, the similarities between Egypt's defeat in both 1517 and 1967 only prove the unity of human experience throughout the ages.

As a writer and editor, al-Ghitani always acted as an outspoken and fervent advocate of artistic freedom, defending not only his artistic choices, but also those of others, such as Alla Hamed, whose 1992 novel was found blasphemous to Islam. Al-Ghitani also defended the reproduction of Gustav Klimt's painting of Adam and Eve in 1994, and stood against Islamic jurists who tried to forbid the exhibition of statues at home. "It's time for those placing impediments between Islam and innovation to get out of our lives," he declared.

In 1993, after a series of terrorist attacks in Cairo, al-Ghitani said, "In the battle between a religious extremism and terrorism seeking to bring down a corrupt and basically repressive government, the choice for many of us, lamentable though it may be, is to side with army and regime." No wonder he fervently opposed Islamic fundamentalists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, openly supported the army since the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, and defended the ouster of Mohammed Morsi in 2013.



Gamal al-Ghitani by Zareh for Al Jadid Magazine

In 2015, al-Ghitani received the Nile Award, Egypt's top literary state honor, after having won the French Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, the Egyptian National Prize for Literature, and the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for his novel "Ren" (2008). Humphry Davies, the translator of many of his novels, once described al-Ghitani's writing style as rooted in the "history of Arabic literature, but also areas such as Sufism and magic." To Edward Said, "The finest, leanest, most steely Arabic prose that I have either read or heard is produced by novelists (not critics) like . . . Gamal al-Ghitani [gifted with] . . . a razor-sharp Aristotelian instrument, the elegance of which resembles Empson's or Newman's." Al-Ghitani's wife, Magda al-Guindy, editor of a children's magazine, survives him, as do his two children, Magda and Mohamed. ***AJ***

Yasar Kemal

Continued from page 11

experiences offering his services as a public letter writer, Kemal took a job at an Adana library. According to the New York Times, he instantly fell in love with world literature, "especially the works of Stendhal, Cervantes, Tolstoy, and Chekhov, whom he called 'my master.'"

In 1951, Kemal moved to Istanbul, where he accepted a job as a journalist for the prominent Turkish newspaper Cumhuriyet. Around this time, Kemal began to disseminate his newfound love of Marxist ideals, which led to several months of imprisonment under the suspicion of spreading communism. After that, in order to conceal his identity, he coined the penname Yasar Kemal, which he used for the rest of his life.

Kemal joined the Turkish Workers Party in 1962 and served in key leadership positions until the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia six years later. In Moscow, he formed a companionship with the popular Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, who later died in 1963. From 1950 to 1952, the Turkish military junta that temporarily gained political control of his country forced Kemal to move to Sweden.

While Kemal had indeed created a global name for himself, as the 21th century approached, his era as a leader in the world of literature began to fade due to with the increasing popularity of modernist writing with the Turkish youth. However, a new generation of rising Turkish novelists, such as Elif Shafak, credited Kemal for the lasting themes in their works. The New York Times cites a quote by Shafak describing Kemal as "one of the few writers who can deftly blend the compassion and love he feels for his characters with astute irony, morbid criticism and sharp social observations." Thus, even as his star faded into the background, Kemal retained great admiration and respect for his works.

Kemal's marriage in 1952 to his first wife, Turkish Jew Thilda Serrero, proved to be one of the most important decisions of his life. Serrero, the granddaughter of Jack Madal Pasha, a private physician of Sultan Abd Al-Hamid, remained Kemal's wife for 50 years until her death. Having suffered from poor vision after his knife accident as a child, the author depended upon Serrero to function as his eyes and ears for everything related to world literature and new publications. She also proved to be of great help translating all of Kemal's books into English. Her most important translation, "Slim Memed," brought her husband's novels to the world stage. The novelist's other works include the trilogy "Wind from the Plane," which Serrero translated in 2001.

Iman Humadan, of the Lebanese As-Safir newspaper, cites Kurdish writer Mohammed Azn who insists that "without Thilda Kemal, the world wouldn't have heard about Yasar Kemal." Humadan agrees with this sentiment, arguing that without the help of this talented wife, Kemal would have only been a local Turkish writer.

After Serrero died in 2001, Kemal no longer wrote as prolifically. The novelist did eventually remarry, however, and is survived by his second wife, Ayse Semiha Baban, and by his two adopted sons, Rasit and Rait Gokceli. ***AJ***

TWO POEMS BY AMAL DANQAL

Weeping Before Zarqaa Al-Yamama (Excerpt)*

Holy seer
I came to you
Covered with stabs and wounds
Crawling through the coats of the dead
On the huddled corpses
My sword broken
My forehead and limbs full of dust
Asking Zarqaa
About your ruby mouth
The virgin's prophecy
My amputated arm still holding the fallen flag
Photos of children in helmets…tossed in the desert
My neighbor who is about to drink water
But a bullet pierces his head
At the moment of encounter…
Mouth filled with sand and blood

**From "Weeping Before Zarqaa Al-Yamama" (1969)*

Excerpt from the 'Exit Journey– The Stone Cake Song' "First Chapter"*

You
Who stand
At the edge of the massacre
Take up arms!
Death has fallen
The heart undone like a rosary.
Blood flows over the scarf!
The houses are shrines
The cells are shrines
And the horizon…
shrines
Take up your arms
And follow me!
I'm tomorrow's and yesterday's regret
My flag: two bones and a skull,
My slogan: morning

**From "The Coming Ages" (1975)*
Both poems translated from the Arabic by Imene Bennani

Farag Bayrakdar

Farag Bayrakdar's 'In Between the Lines': When 'Nation' Becomes a Weapon!

BY FARAG BAYRAKDAR

I belong to the 1950s generation, having been brought up socialized by Nasserite, Baathist, Communist and secular cultures. The meaning of nation for me gradually changed through time, although I have felt privately inclined to the term my good folk used, which wasn't politically and ideologically loaded. In a word, I preferred to use *"albalad"* or country instead of *"alwatan,"* or nation. This usage explains why I understood and liked the *"biladibiladi"* (my country my country) national anthem more than *"mawteni"* or my nation or greater nation.

According to the dictionary, nation means a place where man lives, resides, and belongs, whether born in it or not. When defining "nation" politically, the term has different goals and many more implications. Except in dictionaries, the Arabic language did not include the term "nation" as a modern political concept until the beginning of the 20th century.

The various military coups in the Arab world after WW II produced tyrannical leaders dreaming of eternal thrones. Tyrants started exploiting the concept of nation, working on it through the media, politics and security, broadening its usage, and employing it as a propaganda and coercive weapon against whoever disobeyed them. Each tyrant, in turn, has reduced his nation and nationalism to himself. If you oppose him, his statements, or his regime, you become an enemy of the nation. Thus, the media, controlled by repressive regimes, subjects the politically defined term "nation" to the broadest possible "demonization."

In my youth, I learned some of the platitudes of the "father-leader," a title in my generation recognized as referring to Hafez al-Assad. I used to feel shame in describing that man as a father because I already had, and still have, a father whom I love and respect and who is, in every way, more than adequate. Still, I would not have allowed my father to be my leader, so how would I have allowed someone else to adopt that role? The "father-leader" confusion numbered among the many difficult issues I faced in my youth, in addition to the numerous problems with society, state, and religion.

In the speeches of the "father-leader," he exploited the nation, and the citizen, destroying the relationship between them. I recall this quote almost verbatim: "A free nation means a free citizen."

The promise by the "father-leader," who enslaved me and exploited the nation for his own interests, that I would be free when he liberated the nation, still remains the biggest lie or fallacy I have known in my life! By this logic, I would remain a slave until the Golan Heights is freed from occupation, an act of liberation which, it has been proven, the "father-leader" does not want. As a result, there can be no escape from slavery.

When I started to turn towards secularism and read about societies that preceded us not only in cultural, scientific, and technological development, and living standards, but also in guaranteeing their citizens rights and duties, I became convinced that anyone calling himself the "father-leader" will prove to be nothing but a swindler. Facts and events throughout history set the idea of nationalism in its proper place: "A free citizen means a free nation." Free citizens throughout history have possessed the capacity to create a free nation or "country," while those who have surrendered to enslavement have proven unable to either create or maintain a free nation or "country."

When I subsequently read a definition of nationalism that indicted Hafez al-Assad, I felt comfortable. In essence, this definition shows that "nationalism means achieving independence from imperialism, politically and economically." When Assad did not accomplish this independence, he became non-nationalistic, or unpatriotic. Because I stand against the tyranny of al-Assad, I believed this deceptive definition, which has proven its deficiency and shortcomings, as well as its dogmatism, over time. This led me to fall under the influence of the then Soviet thinking, even though I used to belong to a party which has issued many criticisms of the Soviet system.

The classification of "nationalist" in those days used to imply positive characteristics such as activism and the struggle against injustice. Determining whether an individual, a political party or a regime qualified as either nationalist or non-nationalist became a standard by which one could judge individuals or institutions positively or negatively.

Over almost 30 years, my vision of politics has changed. I have returned to what has proven closer to my intuition, that the humanist remains more noble and superior to the nationalist. I have discovered how the commercialization of the concepts of nation and nationalism, especially when exploiting the Palestinian wound, has proven a profitable business for the merchants of politics and the tyrants who control their peoples under the banner of Palestine. While Palestinians have suffered disasters at the hands of the nationalists, nationalist rulers, numbering among those who have traded most with Palestine, have declared "rhetorically" that Palestine stands as the central cause of the great Arab nation, thereby centering nationalism around the slogan of Palestine.

Only after witnessing the repression, incarcerations, massacres and many disappointments at the hands of regimes claiming nationalism, did I discover Hitler to be a nationalist, but not a humanist, as were other tyrants such as Mussolini, Pol Pot, Assad, and Kim Jong-Un and his father. According to this view, the question relates to the perspective from which we judge the nationalist, and his expected political conduct,

not only upon the partisans of nationalism, but also on the citizens whose rights and duties were abolished. With these implications, it became evident to me that no nation exists without its citizens, while the opposite is also true.***AJ***

The Syrian War Has Taken Us Prematurely to Hell!

BY FATHER GEORGE MASSOUH

The crimes committed in Syria have surpassed what the human mind can imagine in terms of horrors and atrocities. Undoubtedly, in our cruel East, we have become accustomed to living with this reality, which plunges us down to the depths of hell. This horror lies in our acceptance of what occurs in our countries while we continue our daily lives as if nothing is happening, and justify the violence as a defense of central causes or as wars against terrorism. As if some want to convince us that terrorism can be defeated by "counter" terrorism.

The fertile imaginations of artists, novelists and poets have excelled in portraying Hell in their paintings and writings. Similarly, religious texts have offered horrific descriptions of hell and its fires, from its worms to its venomous snakes, while illustrators of icons and murals have painted visions of unbearable suffering. However, no one's imagination has achieved the level of creativity reached by the criminals in Syria, who came from all corners of the world, to make Syria into the reality – not the fiction – a real Hell surpassing any imagined inferno.

We would not have reached this terrible inferno had we not accepted the many atrocities committed throughout the years. What takes place these days remains a direct consequence of years of silence over crimes committed by dictatorial regimes, and totalitarian parties, "secular," "religious," or "sectarian." It remains the product of years of silence over wars waged in the name of God, Sharia or in the name of defending this or that minority. We all participate in feeding this raging inferno.

We would not have arrived at this inferno had we not made excuses for stabbings, murders, displacement, and barrel bombing… Whoever becomes accustomed to justifying one crime will become accustomed to justifying all crimes. We have become addicted to crime and thus have become "desensitized"…

How can someone who prays, fasts, and invokes the name of God daily, remain silent, not to say complicit, as he watches people starve to death before him?...

Hell has come to us; we don't have to wait until the end of the world to face it. It has arrived prematurely. Had we wished, we possessed the ability to bring paradise to our present world instead of waiting until the final day. We chose Hell over paradise. Thus, fires consume us, we perish from starvation, tremble in the cold, and fall victim to oppression.

We have witnessed walking skeletons hovering between life and death, skeletons without flesh, covered with withered, dry skin. We have witnessed skeletons whose bulging eyes still carry a spark of hope and promise, refusing to die. That flame of light will restore life to such skeletons before they decay. No one can quench the wonderful sparkle, the longing for life in those eyes. Instead, those eyes will quench the fires of the Syrian hell.***AJ***

Father George Massouh

This article appeared in Arabic in Lebanonfiles.com and Father George Massouh's Facebook page. An edited translation from the Arabic is by Elie Chalala.

My Sunrise

BY HANNA SAADAH

The moon's long fingers gently tap my door
Before the sun intrudes upon the sky
The yellow morning yawns, the calm clouds snore
I wrap myself with silence and I cry.

The sun awakens to my timid tears
Alerts the atmosphere, the birds, the trees
Her warming hands unravel all my fears
Her smile, vast, cosmic, puts my soul at ease.

Then heaven's windows close to hold the night
Who gently rocks my tired eyes to rest
Again, I see your moonlit face ignite
Escort the morning sun from east to west.

Long have I lived and waited for the light
Long have I slept and wasted in the night.

Sunday, March 13, 2016

Syria and the Politics of Personal Sadness
A Review of Yassin Haj Saleh's Revolutionary Thought

BY RANA ISSA

"We do not gain a reality if we lose a dream." With those words the Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh ends his sad analysis on the destruction of Tadmur, Palmyra, at the hands of Daesh, or IS, (the Islamic State) in late May 2015. Although known as the site of a famous ancient city, and a popular tourist destination, Palmyra, or Tadmur as the Arabs know the place, (Palmyra will be used from now on), holds different associations for the locals. Rather than thinking of archeological ruins, they tend to think of it as the location of a prison, which the Islamic State slowly and brutally destroyed.

In 1980, Hafez al-Assad ordered the massacre of 1500 prisoners there, and since then, Palmyra has symbolized the kind of nightmarish hellhole that forces Syrian and Lebanese tongues into silence. When I traveled to see the ruins of the ancient city for the first time as an adult, I hallucinated the wailing of prisoners, and, after a short hour, could no longer tolerate the oppressive August heat that pressed itself on my imagination. Still, my touristic paranoia cannot compare to al-Haj Saleh's horrific experience in Palmyra. Unlike me, he spent his first visit to Palmyra incarcerated in its penitentiary for one year out of the 16 he languished in Assad's prisons.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh by Mounira Bdeir al-Solh for Al Jadid Magazine

Al-Haj Saleh confesses to a "great and private sadness" when he heard news that the Islamic State destroyed Palmyra prison soon after they took over the town. This sadness, which al-Haj Saleh likens to the destruction of his own home, provides a good entry into examining the location of the political in today's Syria. Against Assad's collectivization of the people as a *"sha'b,"* a folk, al-Haj Saleh has been seeking politics in highly personal experiences. After his release from jail in 1996, he has been using a combination of personal narrative and general observation to subvert the system. Since the outbreak of the revolution in March 2011, this idiosyncratic combination has become the hallmark of his political writings.

Syrians know Al-Haj Saleh as a consistent and subversive critic of both the cult of Assad and of political Islamic groupings. For him, these two political types have shared similar strategies, engaging in a campaign against the Syrian people consisting of violence, theft, silencing and bullying. Needless to say, his powerful critique has gained him enemies inside Syria, hell-bent on liquidating him.

By November, 2013, al-Haj Saleh no longer feels safe living in Douma, in the Ghouta of Damascus. He leaves the city and makes his way to his hometown Raqqa on the northern border with Turkey, which, at this time, has been liberated from the regime. His wife, Samira al-Khalil, stays behind, intent on following him upon his safe arrival.

On his way to Raqqa, a journey movingly captured in Mohammad Ali al-Atassi's documentary film "Our Terrible Country," al-Haj Saleh receives news that an emerging Islamist group, the Islamic State, recently installed in Raqqa, has kidnapped his brother, Firas. With Raqqa no longer a viable place to live, the refugee intellectual reroutes his journey towards Istanbul. In Turkey, the news reaches him that his wife Samira has been kidnapped in Douma, together with the human rights lawyer and journalist Razan Zaitouneh, her husband Wael Hamadeh and colleague Nazim Hamadi. Al-Haj Saleh suspects an Islamist group, The Army of Islam, led by Zahran Alloush (who died in regime attacks last year) to have kidnapped them.

Since then, al-Haj Saleh has reformulated the autobiographical elements in his life, in their poignant particularity, into a political space that he shares with other Syrians. This has personalized the space for politics and made it the primary strategy of struggle. This personalization has created a truly radical

process of thinking about political relations in the global age of mass human movement – of refugees, but also of migrants.

Using personal narrative as a subversive weapon that resists Assad's undiscriminating war machine, al-Haj Saleh fosters a pressing Syrian need to resist the reality of Syria as patchwork of mass-graves crammed with human anonymity. Personal narrative defies anonymity. As the intellectual writes in his superbly elegant recollections from his life in prison, "We are the family of the deceased." This means "we" have no choice but to assume the responsibility of identifying "the corpse of the deceased." This desolate metaphor for considering the struggle in Syria has become more explicit in his more recent work. In his article on Syrian exile, al-Haj Saleh demands that political struggle in Syria must be "formed through its sensitivity to the condition of persons and their choices and the catastrophes of their lives. It must be human."

In his book, al-Haj Saleh tells readers that he never saw the faces of his jailers in the Tadmur prison. There, they would torture prisoners for the offence of trying to meet their jailers' eyes. Above, from the ceiling of each overcrowded cell, a hole circulated the air as well as provided the jailers with a Foucauldian pan-opticon[1] from which to terrorize their victims. Doomed was any prisoner who dared to look up. Palmyra embodies the dehumanization that al-Haj Saleh tirelessly resists. The inertia of the prisoner's life and the abject conditions of bare existence has made him label the place a concentration camp.

In addition to the heat, the torture, the overcrowded cells, and the underground darkness, Palmyra completes the proliferating image of the "president" in public spaces. All pervasive, he always watches you, and any forgetfulness on your part can doom you to Palmyra. This mechanism of domination has long prevented the Syrians "from expressing the truth about almost every important case. It is not only that most of us have not lived a political life, but we also have not lived a moral life. Not only were we forbidden from doing what we believed in, but also many of us were forced to do the opposite of what we believed in." In this world of deformation, gazing back in open defiance offers one form of resistance.

Through gazing back, al-Haj Saleh has achieved his greatest successes. The act of seeing, as he writes, provides, "not just the spoon for speech, but also a medium for communication, for acknowledgement, collaboration, and prediction; in short, for human relations." Through his candid gaze, al-Haj Saleh has brought talkativeness back to the Syrians. The necessity for banter has, perhaps, been the most underestimated need of the Syrian revolution. We tend to forget that the revolution broke out in a regime that, for more than 40 years, thrived on the death of the word.

In al-Haj Saleh's continued reminder of the importance of speech in political life, he has made it impossible to go backwards in time to a pre-revolutionary and silent Syria. His commitment to a more talkative Syria has embodied a principled position of liberal political thinking, as ancient as it is fragile. His position on speech recollects Hannah Arendt's basic definition of politics, especially in her work on revolution. For Arendt, politics exists in the space between men. It consists of an "argumentative and talkative interest in the world." Yet, whereas al-Haj Saleh has acted as a crucial figure in fostering such talkativeness, his self-reflexive position on intellectual power remains significantly radical. For him, the intellectual vocation does not rise above its function in the division of labor.

The online journal, *Al-Jumhuriya (*The Republic), which al-Haj Saleh participates in editing, has created a space that has made it possible for Syrians to share their experiences with other Syrians. After 10 articles written mainly by new writers, the dossier on exile has now come to a close, to be replaced by a new dossier, produced by, and about women. In the intensely talkative energy that al-Haj Saleh generates today for Syrians around the location of the political, the revolutionary potential lies in the auto-narrations of ordinary civilians struggling to find meaning in their terrible losses. Al-Haj Saleh, perhaps more privileged in his ability to write more often than most Syrians, nonetheless never allows his intellectual qualifications to transcend into elite credentials.

Through social media, he has managed to overcome Edward Said's privileging of intellectual distance, which Said learns from Julien Benda.[2] In his uncontroversial, and completely ordinary commitment to the fate of his wife, al-Haj Saleh's personal losses make the small privileges enjoyed by Said's intellectual an impossible luxury. One need not be al-Haj Saleh to realize how narrow the privileges of intellectual work have become in a competitive cultural and academic universe. Nor need one be active on Facebook to realize that writing in the age of social media no longer constitutes the purview of the few. Al-Haj Saleh's point, however, represents something more radical than attention to context, for he continues to contribute to a form of critical ethics that resists intellectual elitism.

Often embarrassed, al-Haj Saleh repeatedly thwarts any attempt at turning him into *al-hakim*, or the wise man, as many of his followers like to call him. Although to many of us, he stands as a sage, whose eyesight has been clearer than most, such a title encourages the suffocating reality that al-Haj Saleh daily struggles to change. And for that dream of change, his work in Al-Jumhuriya allows us to dare to think of Syria as a republic of letters, and of free speech. Al-Haj Saleh has championed the critique as a viable and productive weapon to be used by people facing great violence.**AJ**

1. In "Discipline and Punish," Foucault uses the structure of the panopticon in a prison, where one guard controls all the prisoners, as a metaphor for the economy of surveillance.
2. French philosopher and novelist known for advocating objective intellectual abstinence in dealing with the troubles of the world.

There's No Place Like Home: Piecing Together Lebanon Divided

BY ANGELE ELLIS

In This Land Lay Graves of Mine
Written and Directed by Reine Mitri
Djinn House/CDP, 2014

"It's better we don't talk about what happened," says an interview subject in Reine Mitri's subdued, yet startling documentary, currently banned in Lebanon. Mitri's gentle probing—like a tap on a door pitted by old mortar fire or a sympathetic gaze on a face long ravaged by grief—encourages a range of ordinary people to speak about the repeated violent displacements of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90), and to reflect upon the sectarian tensions that continue to divide their country.

The film takes its title from a speech by a Shiite Muslim cleric, referring to Shiite graves in Jezzine, Christian territory. Still, as Mitri, a Christian Beiruti who defines herself as leftist and secular, says:

> …[I]t's also about, 'What ties me to this land and not another one?' It's where my ancestors are buried. When my father died in 1986, we could not bury him in the village. I think this is something in common among all those who were displaced during the war; all of them were not able to bury their dead in their land. And so far many people are still buried elsewhere. So it's also more symbolic than the direct meaning. (Interview with NOW Lebanon, 29-6-15.)

Mitri moves through the film like the family photographs (one of a toddler Reine incongruously cradling a rifle, her late father in a Lebanese Army uniform) that she affixes to her house's stucco walls. She dresses in fashionable black, also symbolic of mourning—like the ghostly curtains blowing in her family house in the village of Ain-al-Mir.

When Mitri's mother decides to sell this house to Sunni Muslims—to her cousin's dismay, as he believes that Christians are becoming an uneasy minority in Ain-al-Mir—that decision provokes her conflicted feelings and those of the other witnesses in "In This Land Lay Graves of Mine." Despite her initial denial of attachment, Mitri feels unexpected sorrow and guilt, recalling how proud her father felt to buy his own land, as well as her childhood trips to the village to pick olives before the roads became impassable, before the echoes of guns and bombs (reproduced in the film's soundtrack) became the background of her dreams.

"In This Land" shuttles between dreams and realities, between past and present, as Mitri layers her own recollections with the recollections of other women and men—Lebanese Christian (including Maronites), Druze, Sunni, Shiite, and also Palestinian. (Palestinian leadership gained power within Lebanon after massive displacement by Israel, whose 1982 occupation of Lebanon exacerbated the civil war's divisions and damages.) The interviews, filmed in color close-ups that reveal every expression, and every wrinkle, interweave with black-and-white stills from the war. These photos are both classic and horrifyingly immediate in their depiction of barricades and prisoners, of huddled bodies of civilians, and of shattered houses and razed communities.


Still shot from the film. (Photo: Alain Donio)

Again and again, "In This Land" shocks and surprises. Mitri admits that she doesn't really feel at home in a rebuilt Beirut, stifled by her unsuccessful avoidance of being pigeonholed into a religious "canton." As the camera pans over the city skyline, it pauses on a poor neighborhood—among whose inhabitants, Mitri says, are the descendants of Armenians displaced into Lebanon by the 1914 Turkish genocide of their people.

A Christian man who survived the massacre of Damour testifies that while Palestinian fighters for the most part took prisoners, the neighbors who lured Christians out of their houses by calling their names—and then shooting them—were "our own people—they were Lebanese!" and identifies them as Muslims from the neighboring town of Haret Name. A Christian man from Bhamdoun, displaced during the Mountain War, recalls that while he was being herded into a bus, a former Druze schoolmate yelled at him: "You deserve more than what happened, go to Cyprus!" A Druze interviewee states that the Druze prefer to have Christians as neighbors, even though—with a shrug—"every fifty years, they shoot each other."

A woman, now an expatriate, gazes at her childhood home through a fence and describes it in loving detail, recalling how she and her family successfully saved it from demolition when the road was expanded, by sitting on the porch and refusing to budge. This home belonged to her family only in the years after their victory in the Mountain War, and before the reparations specified by the Taif Accords; it since has been returned to its original owner.

A Palestinian woman describes several displacements from camp to city to village (losing her husband to a bullet when he went out to buy bread, and her son to the fighting). A Shiite woman who fled from Bourj Hammoud to Rmaile recounts with sympathy and horror being moved into a house so soon after its previous inhabitants had been routed that "the food was still warm—I swear it was still warm!"

A viewer not familiar with the history of the Lebanese Civil War, or of the preceding five hundred years of manipulations by the Great Powers which resulted in alternating periods of sectarian conflict and coexistence in Lebanon—might find watching "In This Land" a dizzying experience. (Like the games of lightning checkers played by this reviewer's Lebanese grandfather, born a Maronite Christian in Keserwan, who, as a young man, joined the migration to the West, becoming part of that migration's 125-year history.)

This documentary, however, moves beyond the troubles of one fragile republic. It is a human story, with all of the contradictions that any human story contains. As Reine Mitri says:

I think this question of victim and victimizer is one that faces all countries that have had civil wars. And it's almost always that the victim has been a victimizer, and it's a circle. This is in no way to banalize violence by saying, 'We were all victims and we were all criminals.' It's to say there is no black-and-white; nobody holds the absolute truth. Each side had something right in their rhetoric or in their motivation to fight.

But whenever a party or an individual believes they hold a monopoly on the truth, then an important part of their humanity has died. Because this is when they start to eliminate the Others. (Interview with NOW Lebanon, 29-6-15) **AJ**

Q&A with Director/Writer Reine Mitri

Ellis: Watching "In This Land," this viewer was affected by how the film moves back and forth between elegy, emotional exorcism, and indictment of Lebanon's leadership, past and present. Since finishing this documentary, have your feelings about your complicated relationship with Lebanon and to your own heritage continued to change?

Mitri: When I was making the film, which took five years, my relationship with Lebanon and my mixed feelings evolved significantly from the point of departure until the day when I finished it. Paradoxically, I have become more attached to this place we agree to call a nation, despite an increasingly painful existence here. I have come to realize that my relationship to Lebanon is a visceral relationship. Since I finished the film, my relationship to this place where I was born and where my dead are buried continues to evolve and become stronger. I express this relationship in a new film that I started in 2012, and put on hold until I finished "In This Land."

Ellis: Was your decision to make yourself a character within this documentary planned from the beginning, or something that happened during scripting and shooting?

Mitri: No, it was not planned from the beginning. I started writing in 2009. It became suddenly obvious in 2011 when my mother decided to sell our village house. At that time, I was still writing the script, so I decided immediately to film the part with my mother and myself in the house, for fear that the house would be sold and I would no longer have access to it.

Ellis: Do you think that being a woman was an advantage in getting the witnesses in this film to open up to you, or a disadvantage? What are the advantages—and disadvantages—of being a contemporary woman filmmaker in Lebanon?

Mitri: Being a woman filmmaker was definitely an advantage when approaching people to film. They easily confided in me. That is also because I told them my own story, and was very clear with them about my intentions in making this film.

I don't know what are the advantages and disadvantages of being a contemporary woman filmmaker in Lebanon, because I think these depend on each film's subject matter and filming situation, as well as on the character of each filmmaker. I don't believe in gender generalization in this matter.

Director Reine Mitri during the shooting of the film. (Photo: Alain Donio)

Ellis: Who are your major influences as a filmmaker?

Mitri: I don't think of influences. When I watch films, those that I feel are essential stay in the background of my head, but I don't think of them when I make a film. They remain in my subconscious. But if I want to name filmmakers that move me or mark me, I would say Chris Marker, Tsai Ming-liang, and Joris Ivens.

[NOTE: Chris Marker (1921-2012) was a French filmmaker associated with the Left Bank Film Movement, considered the "essayist" of his generation by his friend and collaborator Alain Resnais. Tsai Ming-liang (b. 1957) is a prominent and award-winning figure in the "Second New Wave" of Taiwanese cinema. Joris Ivens (1898-1989) was a Dutch documentary filmmaker and Communist whose prolific 65-year career included his 1937 masterpiece "Spanish Earth," which championed the Spanish Republicans over the fascists led by Francisco Franco.]

Ellis: Do you think that this film's being banned in Lebanon has helped or hurt its global distribution and impact?

Mitri: No. Censorship in Lebanon has no effect on international festivals' selection or distribution.

Ellis: What projects are you working on now?

Mitri: I am currently working on a very intimate film whose subject I cannot disclose.

'On the Banks of the Tigris': The Names Are Erased; the Songs Go On

Yair Dalal and Majid Shokor, courtesy of Fruitful Films

On the Banks of the Tigris: The Hidden Story of Iraqi Music
Directed/Produced by Marsha Emerman
Fruitful Films, 79 minutes, 2015

BY LYNNE ROGERS

In Melborne, Australia, when Iraqi exile Majid Shokor decides to look into his musical history, he discovers, much to his surprise, how much Iraqi music owes to the country's former Jewish population. The film, "On the Banks of the Tigris, the Hidden Story of Iraqi Music," documents Shokor's global journey to meet a variety of Iraqi musicians and hear their stories. Despite his trepidation about traveling to Tel Aviv as an Arab, he meets with an aging group of Iraqi exiles who played for Baghdad Radio and who proved integral to the vibrant pre-Saddam Iraqi night club scene, a world comprised of Muslims, Christians, and Jews creating and performing together.

The audience sees wonderful family photos with the son of Saleh al Kuwaity and hears the story of the family's involuntary exile from Iraq upon the creation of the State of Israel. Over and over again, scholars and musicians confirm that under Saddam's forced exile of Iraqi Jews, all the Jewish names were erased from their musical composition and relabeled "folk songs." Shokor also visits musician Yair Dalal's music class, where Dalal teaches young Israelis the Oud and Iraqi Israelis can rediscover their musical lineage. In addition, the celebrated Iraqi Arab musician, Kawkab Hamza shares his own painful story of exile and erasure at home.

Unfortunately, the documentary becomes problematic in its tunnel vision. While emotionally moving, Dalal's tears over being unable to visit his parents' homeland serve to recall the laments of some of his own Palestinian neighbors. In addition, although many young Israelis attend Dalal'sclass, I did not see any Palestinian faces. A film with a purported agenda of recognizing a neglected and oppressed cultural contribution does a very thorough job of neglecting another nearby history of diaspora. Is the Oud only an Iraqi instrument?

In keeping with the film's focus on Iraq, Dalal suggests to Shokor that they produce a concert of peace, as the same ache of exile and the same roots unite Iraqi Jews and Arabs alike. Later, after Shokar begins the second half of his journey, traveling to Amsterdam and London, he brings maqam singer Farida, Yair Dalal, and Ahmen Muktar together for a poignant peace concert in London.

Shokar eventually returns home to Iraq after 14 years. His own story, as well as those of Hamza, Dalal, and the exiled Iraqi Jews, reminds the viewer of the necessary courage demanded of young men to flee a dangerous yet loved home for the unknown.

This hopeful film captures not only the heart-wrenching stories and heart-lifting music of these exiles, but also highlights the diversity of the neighborhoods in each country. Despite the politics, "On the Banks of the Tigris" artfully records a piece of cultural history. At the very least, the music will force viewers to snap their fingers and tap their feet. Both music historians and Iraqis, especially those in the diaspora, will welcome Shokors' benevolent and well executed efforts. ***AJ***

'Nefertiti's Daughters': The (Street) Art of Feminist Revolution

Still from the film courtesy of Icarus Films

"Nefertiti's Daughters"
Directed by Mark Nickolas and Racha Najdi
Icarus Films, 40 minutes, 2015

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA

The documentary, "Nefertiti's Daughters," chronicles women's endeavors during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 and how street art reflected their unprecedented

revolutionary efforts. Street art, a powerful tool in itself, proved especially adept at highlighting the ongoing battles of these women against social, political and religious oppression, battles where "The voice of women is a revolution."

Artist Bahia Shahab opens the documentary describing how contemporary Egyptian street artists "relate to the wall." The streets become their canvasses, free spaces for expression that come under the spotlights after the January 25 uprising topples President Hosni Mubarak. During those 18 days, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, one of the roads leading to the iconic Tahrir Square, becomes an open exhibition for massive street drawings.

"Nefertiti's Daughters" introduces three prominent Egyptian street artists representing three different generations: Bahia Shehab, Mira Shihadeh, and Salma Samy. Journalist Shaira Amin and historian Christine Gruber also add valuable comments and input. Mira Shihada leaves the comfort of commercial art and yoga teaching to search for a meaningful form of art and to vent her frustrations as a human being. As for Salma Samy, she describes moving from scribbling in her own notebooks to drawing on walls that she does not own. She debuts drawing graffiti of skulls with flowers that represent different public figures.

After months of consuming images of brutality, Shehab employs Arabic calligraphy to say "no," discovering the empowering nature of such a word against violence and brutality. She sprays the word on street walls and adds her own messages, which include protests against viciousness, inhumanity, dictatorship, blinding the revolutionaries, and killing men of religion. The documentary becomes a journey in this open-air exhibition composed of an endless display of street art. By forsaking complex scenery techniques, the directors of "Nefertiti's Daughters" successfully manage to capture viewer attention with the well-chosen street paintings carrying highly charged political messages against political regimes, and infused with photos reminiscent of the Egyptian revolution. Carefully selected photos of women protestors and street art chronicle the revolt against Mubarak, the 16-month rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and the deadly clashes that ensue. It also mirrors women from all walks of Egyptian life, highlighting the key role they play in Tahrir Square and how their later exclusion from pivotal political roles dashes their hopes and leaves them defenseless against attempts to intimidate them through organized mob sexual harassment.

More importantly, the documentary shows how street art resurrects Queen Nefertiti, this time with a gas mask, to call for a rebellion against social and political oppression, sexual intimidation, fanatic Islamists, and patriarchy; "It is time now for the feminine to rise. It is time for the voice of the women to be heard." To those artists, street art constitutes a poetic form of dissent that has the power to change lives, a change that can only come by adding color to the grey walls that surround them.

Artist Ammar Abo Bakr comments on his street art saying, "I want to reflect the voice of the real people. Not the activists. Not the Politicians. Not the Media. [I want] to write it on the wall." "Nefertiti's Daughters" closes with another act that challenges religious dogma: a call for prayer sung by the mezzo-soprano Mai Kamal. ***AJ***

'Terrace of the Sea': Diana Allan Casts Her Cinematic Gaze on a Palestinian Fisherman

Still from the film, courtesy of Cinema Guild

Terrace of the Sea
Directed by Diana Allan
The Cinema Guild, 52 minutes, 2009

BY DORIS BITTAR

A masterful film in every sense, "Terrace by the Sea" must be experienced. The steadfastness of the stationary camera builds tension between its anchored stillness and the power of the Mediterranean Sea. Set in Tyre (Sour), the most southern coastal city in Lebanon, where you once could have tripped into Palestine, filmmaker Diana Allan focuses on the family of Ibrahim, a Palestinian fisherman living in this unofficial Palestinian refugee camp.

"Terrace by the Sea" alternates between sensory landscapes, corroded family photographs, and conversations in order to convey a 60 year narrative. The frontal camera angle pauses and alternates between "real" time events and old photos. Allan's lens proves the most taunting when it perches at the back door of Ibrahim's family home, tenuously still, like a child with folded hands. We barely feel her presence, as if she waits for the family's lives to pass by her camera's scope in a meaningful way. The scenes of the backdoor, a few steps to the sea, prove both alluring and precarious.

The film divides into unannounced segments or chapters. The picture goes dark and then a new scene emerges. Repeating stained and distorted photographs reinforce the narration. The cropping of the stills, the colors and patterns found by zooming in and out prove both beautiful and chilling.

Out of several important characters, Mohamed, the son who stays home to be close to his father, emerges as the most

compelling. Since childhood, he has felt that he could not leave his father alone to fish each day. He explains how fishing made him seasick and that it took several years of vomiting each day before he adjusted. Mohamed's steadfastness in the family, and his commitment to his parents, proves palpable, poignant and incredibly sad. Mohamed's gentle voice belies the brutality of literally living at the ocean's door, on the sand, where once a year the Mediterranean washes through the corridors of the home.

Prayers and sayings punctuate Mohamed's spare words with hints of gratitude, but also cut through the lulling images of decayed photographs and memories of a family lovingly raised by strong parents. In her younger years, Mohamed's mother tended a garden and also kept the children groomed and dressed in style, using flowers and jewels to adorn the girls' hair. Later, we find her gardening to be a Sisyphean activity, with the garden often washed away by the sea. Yet the family loves the sea, with its miraculous strength and life-giving role. They love it despite the looming directive that will inevitably force them off of their illegally held plot, and turn it over to developers with bulldozers.

As viewers, we cannot remain passive as we stare at the unfolding intimate events. The execution of the film proves masterful, with its measured stillness, its exquisite color, gorgeous cinematography, and the timing which relentlessly moves toward an unexpected climax where the camera, or Allan herself, ventures out to sea with Mohamed. Suddenly, the camera metaphorically turns around to Allan and then focuses on us, its viewers. When the filmmaker's voyeuristic and trance-like gaze comes to an abrupt end, our hearts become still. ***AJ***

Coming Home to History: New Film Captures Early Days in Yemen's Revolution

The Mulberry House
Directed by Sara Ishaq
Cinema Guild Films, 2013

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

Sara Ishaq's first feature film, "The Mulberry House," tells the story of the early days of the popular uprising against Yemen's dictatorial regime as experienced by the filmmaker's family. At the heart of the documentary lies the theme of change. Just as the Arab Spring signaled a challenge to the old ways of political reality in the Arab world, so too does Ishaq signal change inside the lives of ordinary Yemenis.

The filmmaker returns to Sana'a, ostensibly to make a film about her family. Some of the debates and discussions that take place amongst family members in the early part of the film give the impression that Ishaq may be trying to explore issues around gender and the lives of young Yemeni women, as well as shifting perceptions about family life between generations. It remains quite possible, however, that she had nothing specific in mind at all, and figured instead to hit record and see if a narrative would

Still from the film, courtesy of Cinema Guild

reveal itself. Instead, history intervened, and the people of Yemen rose to depose their long-time president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Ishaq's family members play well on screen. Her grandfather appears at times charmingly reticent, and at other times suddenly insightful and effusive. One cannot help but chuckle a bit when the grandfather sees Saleh on the television and calls him a liar. Ishaq's father Habib, meanwhile, seems like a kind of fulcrum. He appears to be a figure caught between the old ways of tradition, while simultaneously coming to terms with change and how his empowered and independent daughters embody it. While Ishaq frames the narrative around the arrest and detention of her cousin Waleed, the filmmaker's father emerges as the central figure. In this way, Habib symbolizes the tension at the center of the Yemen Revolution, and, indeed, the Arab Spring itself.

With a personal, raw style of narrative, Ishaq doesn't force the narrative along with quick cuts, or much of her own narration. Instead, scenes unfold; her characters reveal themselves slowly, both accommodating of the camera's presence, and, at times, slightly apprehensive of it. A naturalism arises from the pace and closeness of the scenes, and this plays perfectly as her family confronts the gravity of the situation unfolding in Sana'a, and, indeed, the whole of Yemen. In one particularly poignant scene, Ishaq turns the camera on her family's faces as news of the murders of demonstrators on the "Friday of Dignity" careen across their TV screens. As tears, signs of anguish and disbelief appear one after the other, Ishaq's lens unflinchingly captures them all.

The Mulberry house, Ishaq's first feature film, acts as the follow up to "Karama Has No Walls," a short film that gained her international attention. As a young filmmaker, Ishaq's talent is apparent. While a few of the film's edits remain slightly disjointed, the work stands as mostly a polished piece. Ishaq certainly made the most of the opportunity, creating an indispensable journalistic record documenting the beginning of the troubles in Yemen. ***AJ***

Muslim Women Negotiating Identity in the Deep South

Voices of Muslim Women from the U.S. South
Filmed and Directed by Maha Marouan and Rachel Raimist
Women Make Movies, 30 Minutes, 2015

Still from the film, courtesy of Women Make Movies

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA

The much-needed documentary, "Voices of Muslim Women from the U.S. South," arrives at a time of escalating worldwide Islamophobia, in a country where Donald Trump, a presidential candidate, calls for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States", in violation of the Constitution's First Amendment (which grants freedom of religion) and America's immigrant heritage. The film, by Maha Maouan and Rachel Raimist, recounts the experiences of five Muslim students and a Muslim professor at the University of Alabama, where people continue to be "overtly confident with ignorance" and where misconceptions, negative stereotyping, and unflattering views about Islam and Muslims prevail.

Despite the slow rhythm, the use of minimal music, and the conventional medium close-up framing, the documentary's employment of an indirect interview technique allows it to completely focus on the students and their narration of personal experiences. Eschewing sensational stories of discrimination, Maouan and Raimist try to unravel how these six women manage to negotiate identity in their space, while living in the predominantly Christian society of the Deep South, with many influenced by the problematic representation of Muslim women in the media as backward, oppressed, lagging behind the men in their lives, helpless, and having no sense of humor.

In keeping with its mandate to avoid sensationalism, the documentary presents no tales of physical harassment, fear, or hatred. On the contrary, viewers should applaud Marouan and Raimist for focusing on the daily efforts of those young Muslim women to integrate into their society, as well as on the pressure they sometimes encounter to represent all Muslims and Islam. Not only must they live with being judged as outsiders by non-Muslims, but Muslims who have rigid views of what an "authentic" Muslim woman should look like, also add to the pressure. At the end of the day, those girls simply want to play sports, make friends, go shopping in Victoria's Secret, and claim the South as their home. ***AJ***

The Arab Spring through the Lens of Local Perspectives

Stories of Change: Beyond the Arab Spring
Edited by Kari Lundelin and Rebecca Simons
Schilt Publishing, The Netherlands, 2014

BY ALYSSA WOOD

"Stories of Change: Beyond the Arab Spring," edited by Kari Lundelin and Rebecca Simons, documents a project by World Press Photo, a Dutch non-profit organization, which has trained young photojournalists and multimedia artists from North Africa in a series of workshops and then curated the resulting work. The group encourages participants to challenge outside perceptions of the region and to relate stories of the "Arab Spring" from local perspectives. This project features an online component as well on World Press Photo's "Stories of Change" website. The site features videos (all available with captioning in English, French, and Arabic) and the photographs from the print book. All in all, a beautifully designed and compelling resource.

The photographic and written essays serve as vibrant counterpoints to the images included by wire service photojournalists documenting the "Arab Spring." Rather than covering the protests or parliamentary elections, they offer intimate glimpses into the daily life of people typically ignored by the media. Featured series include photos and stories of women with the children they bore out of wedlock, a child with Down syndrome, and oilfield workers from the Amazigh (Berber) minority group in Libya.
Another series, by Roger Anis, examines the state of tourism in post-revolutionary Egypt. In one of the most powerful images, garbage clings to a chain link fence outside the pyramids in Giza, a poignant and vivid summation of the failure of the Egyptian government to serve its population. Several of the 11 photo essays echo this sentiment, whether the photographer chronicles the status of young blind women in Egypt or the plight of Tunisian fishermen fighting the practice of bottom trawling in the Mediterranean. In each case the government has proven unable or unwilling to enforce existing regulations that would remedy the situation.

In contrast, the photo essay by Mahmoud Khaled tells a story of success. The residents of the ghetto Ramlat Boulaq, near Cairo's Tahrir Square, though victimized by both police and developers, have defeated developers in court and against all odds, have retained their homes.

The five written essays in the book prove as disparate as the photographic collection, and include a plea for a day of sexual freedom, a profile of Moubarik Chentoufi, highlighting his promotion of libraries and theater in rural Morocco, an evocative account of a protest march, a description of the commonplace harassment of Salafis by Egyptian security, and a caustic riposte entitled "Revolution for Dummies: A Guide for an Arab Leader."

As Petra Stienen eloquently writes in her introduction, "the power of the collection is the power of the diversity of the region." ***AJ***

Khaled Khalifa Speaks His Mind from Wrestling with Censors at Home and Abroad to How Books and Drama Fare Differently Under Syrian Censorship

BY REBECCA JOUBIN AND A.J. NADDAFF

Born in Aleppo in 1964, Khaled Khalifa has won numerous awards and remains one of Syria's most renowned novelists and television screenwriters. His novels have been translated into multiple languages, while his miniseries, "Sirat al-Jalali" (Portrait of the Jalali Family, 2000), made a cultural splash and established him as one of the leading voices in Syrian drama. He went on to write the screenplays: "Qaws Qozah" (Rainbow, 2001) and "Zaman al-Khawf" (A Time of Fear, 2007). Khalifa's third of five novels, "Madih al-Karahiya" (In Praise of Hatred, 2006), brought him international recognition. He has lived in Syria throughout the revolution and only in the fall of 2015 did he agree to accept a year-long writing fellowship at Harvard where he has commenced his sixth novel.

Naddaff: With the exception of this year, you have continued to live and write in Syria. Please tell us about your writing routine prior to the revolution and afterward.

Khalifa: Prior to the revolution I enjoyed a consistent writing routine in Damascus. I would head over to the Journalist's Club, sit at the same sequestered table in the back, and write for the next six hours. My meal consisted of coffee, water, and cigarettes. Now in a Syria rife with bloodshed and chaos, my usual ten-minute commute to the Club is interrupted by checkpoints, lasting up to several hours.

Joubin: You created your literature amid deep censorship issues before the 2011 revolution. For example, 10 minutes of each episode of *"Zaman al-Khawf"* were cut randomly when it aired in 2007. Your novels have been banned in Syria. Please discuss your relationship with the censor – as a novelist and screenwriter – both before and after the revolution.

Khalifa: Censorship issues have always been more challenging with screenplays than with my novels. Prior to the revolution, drama provided the perfect outlet to present my political ideas couched in all sorts of allegories. I would sprinkle in relationship taboos to distract the censors' eyes from politics. They would insist that I cut those parts, and I could often get away with a lot of political critique. However, portraying the 1980s in Syria was forbidden; thus, you saw what happened with *"Zaman al-Khawf,"* which dealt with the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime. Books, however, can fly. Even if they were banned in Syria they could be published in Beirut and then brought back to Syria. After the revolution, books continue to be published in the Arab world even when banned in Syria. Drama, on the other hand, has faced extreme challenges since the revolution. Gulf-State channels do not want any miniseries that support the revolution. Director Haitham Haqqi's *"al-Wujuhwa-l-Amakan"* (Faces and Places, 2015) only aired on one small channel because it dealt with the peaceful, initial days of the uprising.

Khaled Khalifa (Photo Credit: A.J. Naddaff)

Naddaff: Prior to the revolution, you were one of the only novelists to deal directly with the early 1980s in Syria – the fight between the regime and Muslim Brotherhood, which led to the regime's razing of the historical old city of Hama. You mentioned that "books can fly" and this is manifest in your 2006 novel "In Praise of Hatred," which portrayed the fight between the regime and Muslim Brotherhood in Aleppo in the early 1980s. When it was banned in Syria, it was published in Beirut. Attracting worldwide attention, this novel has been translated into seven languages and was shortlisted for the first International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Please tell us about this novel.

Khalifa: The massacre of Hama has been part of our national trauma. Prior to the revolution it was simply referred to as "The Event." In this novel, I hope to expose the fight between the

Brotherhood and the regime in the 80s that culminated into the ruthless Hama massacre. Though I never explicitly mention the Brotherhood or the Baathist regime, this story subverts the regime's narrative of battling against religious fanaticism, by exposing how they used this opportunity to stifle all forms of liberalism. My novel has especially come up in recent discussion because of its uncanny prophecy of the regime's current crackdown and purging of universities.

Writing cannot give milk to the children and stop the bombs from falling. The real heroes are those who smuggle medical supplies into government blocked areas, who risk their lives to help refugees and displaced populations.

Naddaff: Your novels have been translated into numerous languages. Please tell us about your experience with Western publishers.

Khalifa: The American version of "In Praise of Hatred" is dominated by a brown-eyed woman engulfed by a shadow of darkness, presumably the unnamed narrator. The entire final chapter is cut from the American and British translation. The French cover of "Eloge de la Haine," is much more inconspicuous. Two women blend into a colorful background and the final chapter is translated. In my view, the American cover and decision to cut the final chapter illustrates how the U.S. portrays the Arab world through the lens of Orientalism. The American cover is dangerous because it follows caricatures in the media, which represent Arab society as backward and filled with monolithic, patriarchal oppression. However, people in the Arab world are equally guilty of viewing America through a narrow lens. I hope that in the future we can have a better relationship in understanding complex cultures and histories, especially those of the Syrian people.

Joubin: Since the revolution, you have written the screenplays *"al-Miftah"* (The Key, 2012), *"al-Qala"* (The Tower), and *"al-Arrab"* Part Two (The Godfather Part two, 2016). Your novels *"La Sakakin fi Matabiq al-Madina"* (There are no knives in the Kitchens of the City, 2013), and *"al-Mawt al-Amal Shaq"* (Death is Hard Work, 2016) have been published. Your work continues to be translated into many different languages. Could you tell us what the role of the artist/writer is during a time of revolution and war?

Khalifa: When I write, I am conscious of the fact that war rages around me and that Syrians are dying every day. On the one hand, it is important to write since most social media networks are against the revolution and oppositional forces have very little voice. I believe that it is important to shed light on the peaceful days of the revolution since these stories will help future generations understand what has happened. Yet, I acknowledge the limited power of art during revolution. Writing cannot give milk to the children and stop the bombs from falling. The real heroes are those who smuggle medical supplies into government blocked areas, who risk their lives to help refugees and displaced populations. **AJ**

CONTRIBUTORS

Continued from page 5

Rebecca Joubin ("Khaled Khalifa Speaks His Mind from Wrestling with Censors at Home and Abroad to How Book and Drama Fare Differently Under Syrian Censorship," p. 24) is an associate professor of Arab studies at Davidson College.

Salam Kawakibi ("Syrian Children and the Exit from the Dark Tunnel!" p. 36) develops, coordinates and follows-up on Arab Reform Initiative's research projects, including the groundbreaking regular reports on the State of Reform in the Arab World. He is a leading commentator on political reform in the Arab world.

Father George Massouh ("The Syrian War Has Taken Us Prematurely to Hell!" p. 15) is the director of Islamic-Christian Center Studies, Al Balamand University, Lebanon.

AJ Naddaff ("Khaled Khalifa Speaks His Mind from Wrestling with Censors at Home and Abroad to How Book and Drama Fare Differently Under Syrian Censorship," p. 24) is a writer based in North Carolina.

Amjad Nasser ("Aleppo: A Catastrophe Defying Poets' Powers of Description," p. 9) is a Jordanian poet.

Lynne Rogers ("'On the Banks of the Tigris': The Names Are Erased; the Songs Go on," p. 20; "'New Archival Materials Revive Scholarly Interest in a Lebanese Druze Emir," p. 29; "Lifted by the Great Nothing': A Lebanese Immigrant Struggles with Culture and Race in the United States," p. 30) is a professor and author whose articles have appeared in various publications.

Zaid Shlah ("Textu: A Subversive New Poetic Form," p. 30) teaches English literature and composition at Salano Community College. His poetry has appeared in literary magazines, journals, and anthologies both in Canada and the U.S.

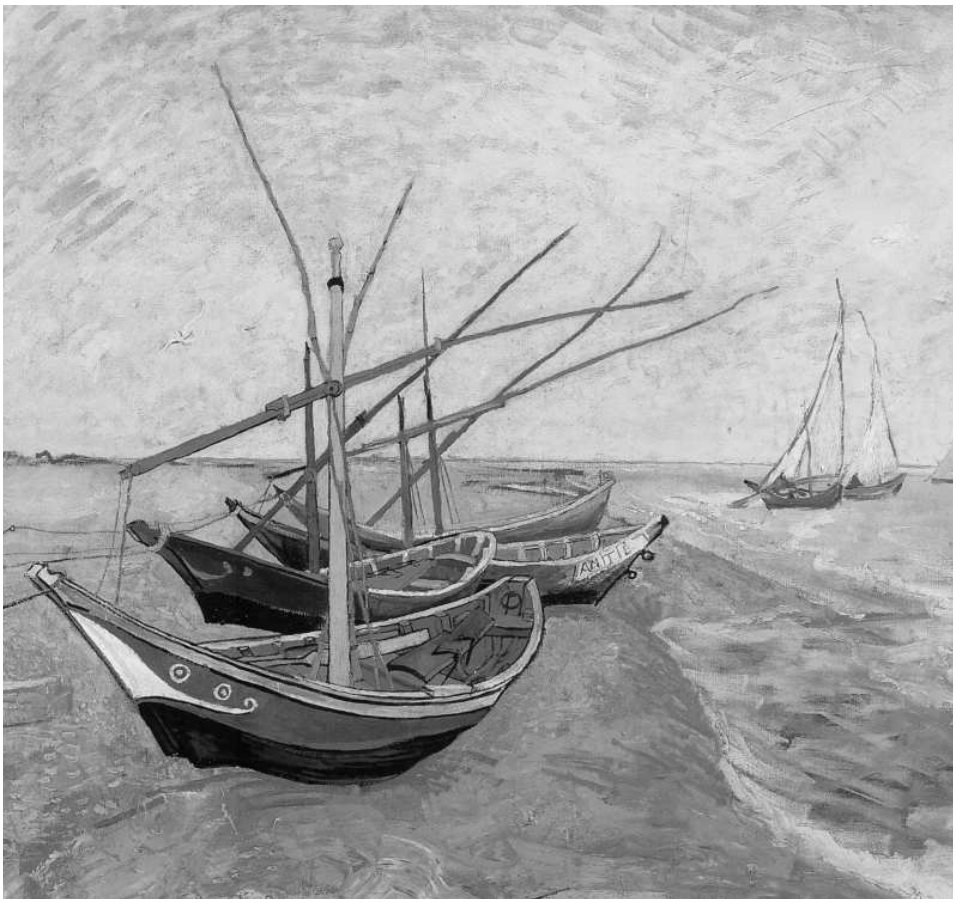
Joseph Sills ("Resisting State Co-option of Language and Poetry," p. 31) is a graduate of Davidson College, where he studied Arabic and Middle Eastern politics. He has traveled to several Middle Eastern countries, most notably Egypt and Syria in 2011, where he witnessed an early phase of the Arab Spring.

Alex Soltany ("Yasar Kemal: Champion of Anatolian Literature and Social Justice," p. 10) is an Al Jadid editorial intern.

Alyssa Wood ("The Arab Spring through the Lens of Local Perspectives," p. 23) is a graphic artist and writer based in North Carolina.

Etab Hreib

Etab Hreib (whose artwork "The Vanguards of the Baath," 2016, appears on the back cover) is a critically acclaimed Syrian watercolorist, who was born in Deir-Ez-Zor, Syria, and graduated from the Graphic Art Department, University of Damascus. In addition to working full time as an artist, she has taught at the Fine Arts Departent at Damascus University.



"Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer" (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh from "Van Goghs"

A Muslim American Response to the 'War on Terror Culture'

The author claims that the War on Terror Culture holds Muslims collectively accountable for acts of violence perpetrated by individual Muslims worldwide, and obscures the depth of Muslim American history

This Muslim American Life:
Dispatches from the War on Terror
By Moustafa Bayoumi
New York University Press, 2015

BY NORA ELTAHAWY

In "This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror," Moustafa Bayoumi argues that the central predicament at the heart of contemporary Muslim American life is "the idea that you are not seen as a complex human being but only as a purveyor of possible future violence." Across a collection of essays that he separates into four sections – Muslims in History, Muslims in Theory, Muslims in Politics, and Muslims in Culture – Bayoumi expands on this problem as he analyzes the manner in which Muslims have been represented in legal, scholarly, and popular discourses within the United States since the September 11th attacks. A central tenet of this exploration is Bayoumi's notion of a "War on Terror Culture." Describing the concept as a culmination of the images and notions that have circulated about Islam within the U.S., Bayoumi maintains that this War on Terror Culture has both held Muslims collectively accountable for acts of violence perpetrated by individual Muslims worldwide, and, equally as important, has, in the process, obscured the depth of Muslim American history.

Bayoumi's argument that the tendency of the War on Terror Culture to act "as if Muslims existed in the United States only after September 2001" drives one of the most important contributions of "This Muslim American Life," namely, its insistence on connecting the experience of Muslims in the U.S. to the larger history of the country. In addition to excavating the impact that Islam has had on significant moments of cultural production or political mobilization in the U.S. (one chapter looks at the importance of Islam to African American activism and examines the Muslim influences on John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," for example), Bayoumi builds these connections by emphasizing the similarities between the popular and legal exclusion of Muslim Americans today, and the treatment of other minority groups before them. Whether comparing Guantanamo Bay to Japanese internment camps, or the Bush Administration's program of special registration to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, these

comparisons prove pivotal in providing context and precedent for the political climate in which Muslims find themselves today.

"This Muslim American Life," with its explanation of the War on Terror Culture, balances an impressive breadth of subject matter with an equally diverse range of writing styles. Covering an array of topics that include immigration law, neo-Orientalist publications, and procedural television dramas, the collection of essays demonstrates Bayoumi engaging skillfully with scholarly analysis, humor, and autobiographical writing. In "The Rites and Rights of Citizenship," for instance, the Swiss-born author recounts his own immigration journey, pausing to reflect on his role as a mediator between Arab and American audiences, and on his desire to enact change within the U.S. as a citizen of the nation. Likewise, in "My Arab Problem," Bayoumi addresses the protests mounted against his first book, "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America," after it was selected by Brooklyn College as a common reading assignment for its students.

If any one criticism can be levied against "This Muslim American Life," it would concern the fact that the work, which brings together several previously published essays, can be repetitive at times. While Bayoumi has clearly reworked previously published material to fit within the larger framework of this collection, a few of the essays still broach topics that feel very similar to one another. Aside from this small problem, however, "This Muslim American Life" offers a timely and valuable reflection on the culture of prejudice facing Muslim Americans today and on the rich history and contributions that such a culture precludes.***AJ***

How Syrian Bureaucracy Valued Nepotism and Political Loyalties in Shaping Healing Policies

Inside Syria: A Physician's Memoir
By Tarif Bakdash with WD Blackmon
Cune Press, 2015

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

Tarif Bakdash, a doctor of pediatric neurology, has written a vivid and intimate memoir, chronicling his life growing up in Syria and throughout the Middle East and his eventual journey to the West. "Inside Syria" is replete with moments – some personal and precious, others grand and sweeping – that reveal the realities of life in the region.

As a chronicle of the recent history of the Middle East, Bakdash's memoir renders a stripped down account describing most of the significant historical episodes that have shaped the region as we see it today. However, Bakdash's ability to relate the events surrounding him to his own personal history makes this historical accounting even more poignant and powerful. All too often, in conventional media depictions of the Middle East, actual Middle Eastern lives remain absent. Many times, people on wanted lists constitute the only Arabs that have names in such pieces, while their authors often reduce words and images down to descriptions of the machinations of political and militant factions, mobs, or authoritarian leaders of various stripes. Bakdash's memoir forcefully reminds us that real people suffer during these events, and real people long for the perpetually elusive peace and justice.

At the beginning of chapter four, Bakdash offers a rather telling story, describing how, upon beginning medical school, he realizes that two-thirds of the students that had been accepted probably had no business being there. Rather, their appointments constituted rewards for their loyalty to Rifaat Al-Assad and his special security apparatus. This opens a window onto Baathism inside Syria, what it looked and felt like; a nepotistic and paranoid regime laced with cronyism and corruption. Nor does Bakdash fail to describe the regime's utter and horrific cruelty:

> In Hama, the killing began at a distance, with rockets and heavy artillery blasting large blocks of housing into rubble, killing and maiming innocent men, women, and children indiscriminately. I'm left now with an image of shattered, shredded human bone and tissue intermingled with crumbled concrete and twisted iron rebar. Where a family once lived, splintered furniture and mangled toys remained.

The effect proves chilling, and in passages like this, the first time writer Bakdash rises to the challenge. He renders the work in a very personal voice that, while it may sometimes lack polish, can be forgiven the occasional minor literary transgression. In the end, not only does his ability to weave the personal with the historical and political make for a compelling read, but Bakdash also provides a myriad of details about life during the age of the Assads that that would likely elude most journalistic accounts.

Bakdash's proximity to power provides another fascinating dimension of "Inside Syria". As a medical student, he stood among the elite of his generation, even if many of his fellow students landed their positions because of connections to the party. Bakdash's description of his impressions during his first meeting with the other "central" figure in this Syrian tale, Bashar al-Assad, perhaps best exemplifying this point is the following:

> "He [al-Assad] used to cover his mouth while talking, because he spoke with a slight lisp. He also had a habit of blinking overmuch while speaking . . . Such gestures of insecurity made me feel a little sorry for him and, yes, even like him a little bit."

Bakdash's memoir supplies us with a timely account, as the events described by the doctor run right up to the state of the Syrian Civil War in 2010. He writes with the awareness that Assad's regime has managed to cling to life, despite being embattled on numerous fronts. In the end, Bakdash acknowledges that, with the help of his Russian and Iranian allies, Assad may well live to have some stake in a near-term Syrian polity, thus delaying justice for the innumerable Syrians who have suffered from his barbarous crimes.***AJ***

Run for Your Life: Quicksand (A Nora Khalil Novel)

Quicksand
By Carolyn Baugh
A Forge Book/Published by Tom Dougherty Associates, LLC, 2015

BY ANGELE ELLIS

The reader first encounters Nora Khalil as she runs. The young Egyptian-American police detective—part of a fictional crime force composed of Philadelphia police officers, sheriffs, and FBI agents—takes her regular jog through Fairmount Park, contemporary Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram playing through her ear buds.

This scene represents one of the most peaceful moments in "Quicksand," the first in a projected series by Carolyn Baugh, a Middle Eastern scholar and history professor. It also serves as the jam-packed book's central metaphor. Nora Khalil runs for her life—to and from the brutal demands of her job, where, as a woman and an Arab, she battles discrimination and suspicion. She also runs to and from the complex demands of her personal life, where her loyalty to her traditionalist father and motherless teenage brother conflicts with her desire for independence, which includes making her own decisions about love and marriage.

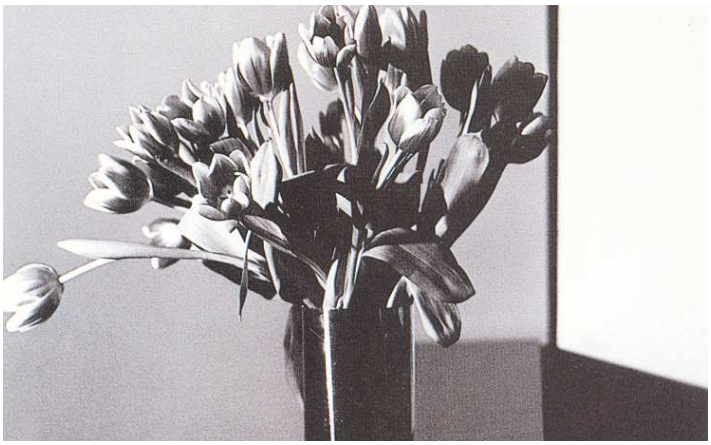
Nora uses her fluency in Arabic and knowledge of Arab culture to solve violent incidents that involve Philadelphia's Muslim community and rival criminal gangs. Meanwhile, the twists and turns of this police procedural allow Baugh to introduce characters and concepts unique to this genre.

Among them, the author has included a refreshing number of different Arab Americans. In the course of this story, readers meet a variety of characters that includes the university educated, "Americanized" Nora and her brother, who is obsessed with scoring high on the SATs; their gregarious restaurant owner father; a bitterly proud Iraqi immigrant engineer, now working as a janitor; his sheltered daughter, who channels her passion for a meaningful life into mosque-based volunteer work; and an unpleasant but ultimately sad fundamentalist Syrian imam.

Baugh also deals sensitively, for the most part, with non-Arab characters. Nora develops a father-daughter bond with her boss, a black detective, and shares surprising moments of connection with a number of victims and suspects.

Unlike Nora, Baugh hasn't settled into her running rhythm—leaving the pacing of the novel jerky, while the resolution of some issues (Nora's struggles with her father and with an abrasive racist colleague) seems abrupt. Nonetheless, Nora Khalil represents an intriguing, and perhaps important addition to the protagonists of American detective fiction.***AJ***

To Contact Us,
Al Jadid Magazine, 5762 Lincoln Ave. #805
Cypress, CA 90630
e-mail address is **aljadid@aljadid.com**



"Tulips" (1977) by Robert Mapplethorpe from "Art at Work"

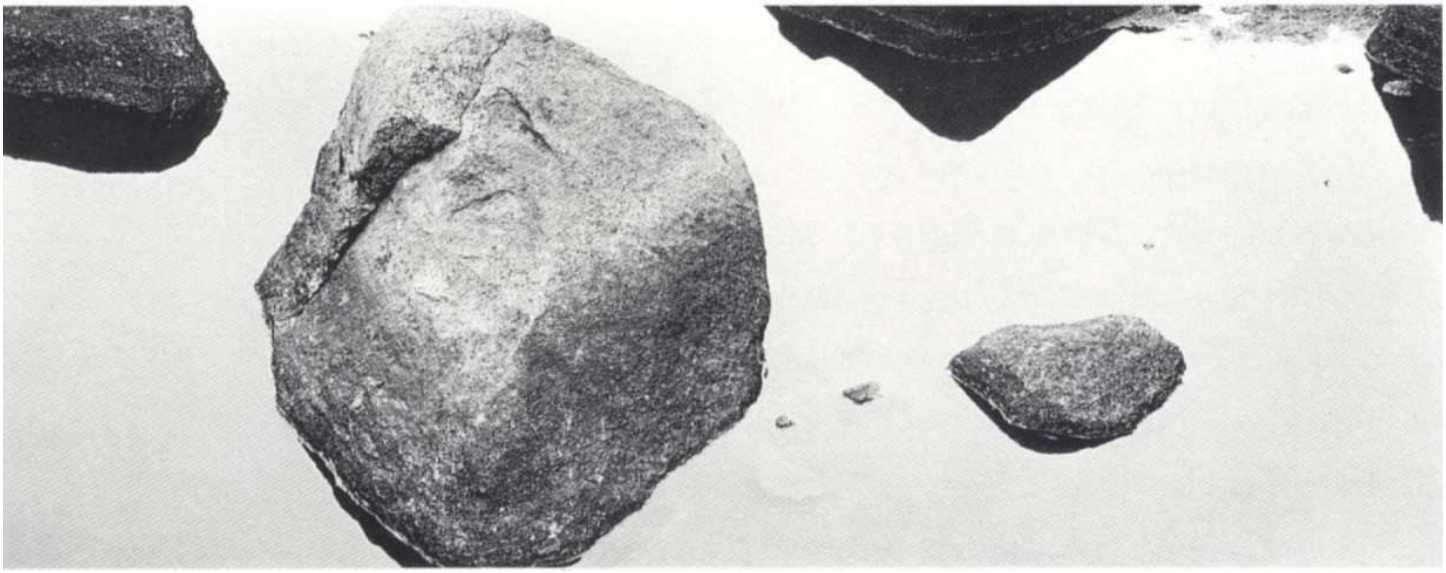
Ghada Samman's 'Farewell Damascus': From Damascus to Beirut Becomes a Woman's Journey of Self-Discovery

Farewell Damascus – A Mosaic of Insurgency (In Arabic)
By Ghada Samman
Ghada Samman Publications, 2015

BY NADA RAMADAN ELNAHLA

At a time when the dire fate of Syria hangs by a thread, a new novel dedicated to Damascus has hit the stands. Written by Ghada Samman (1942-), a prolific Syrian writer who has written in a variety of genres including novels, short stories, journalism, and poetry, "Farewell Damascus – A Mosaic of Insurgency" begins where "The Impossible Novel – A Damascene Mosaic" (1997) left off. In her earlier gripping narrative, "A Damascene Mosaic," Samman recounts the story of Amjad al-Khayyal and the fates of his family members during the politically pivotal years of 1946 to 1956, immediately after the Syrian independence, while providing a detailed nostalgic description of the Old City. That semi-autobiographical work closes with a last chapter that only offers a footnote stating that it has not been written yet. In her 2015 "A Mosaic of Insurgency," Samman finally returns to her city to resume her narrative.

In "Farewell Damascus," the main protagonist becomes the 18-year old Zayn Amjad al-Khayyal, and her story begins with her experiencing the trauma of a deliberately induced miscarriage in an attempt to escape her stifling, year-old marriage. The novel then follows her rite of passage as a free human being, a woman, and a writer, tracing her relationships with various neighbors, family members and influential persons in her life. These include Dr. al-Manahly who, enamored by her innocence, falls in love with her despite his marriage to a French woman; Gazwan al-'A'ed, a Palestinian refugee and a writer who continually asks for her hand in marriage; and Nahy, a corrupt



"Yosemite" by Michael A. Smith from www.Guild.com

lieutenant in the Syrian Intelligence Agency whose inappropriate advances toward Zayn and his subsequent labeling her as an Eastern German spy will force her to take refuge in Beirut.

From the very first page, Samman's goals clearly include fully engaging readers in her narrative, rather than simply assigning them the roles of passive observers. By presenting the readers with "attempts" of written chapters, Samman involves them in her creative process, even occasionally giving them the power to choose one out of two chapter titles. Moreover, the frequent use of footnotes (to explain some literary choices, Levantine expressions, and 60s landmarks in Damascus and Beirut) draws readers closer to the narrative.

In "Farewell Damascus," Samman inextricably links the quest for freedom to the question of women's liberation. In Zayn's Damascus, women are treated as commodities owned by their fathers and husbands. Men push them around, rape them to enforce their submission, and socially imprison them. Yet Zayn's life motto ("admitting the wrong then trying to fix it") inspires the young Syrian women around her to stand up and fight for their freedom. Thus, though patriarchal traditions and taboos shackle the strong yet flawed female characters in the novel, some of them manage to break free, seeking love, or simply the ability to make their own choices. Samman, furthermore, empowers her female characters, traditionally silenced in society, by giving them the opportunity to become major narrators in her novel and tell their own side of the story.

Though an expatriate herself, Samman divides her novel into two parts, each taking place in a city close to her heart: Damascus and Beirut. From the very first chapter, Damascus, especially Jasmine alley, appears a living entity whose houses hold no secrets and who enslaves her lovers. The events in the second half of the novel take place in Beirut, a city with which Samman has fallen in love, lamenting its fate during and after the outbreak of the civil war in "Beirut 75" (1974) and "Beirut Nightmares"(1977). In "Farewell to Damascus," Samman lovingly describes a liberal Beirut whose cultural and intellectual scene was at its height, and where, for the first time, Zayn could enjoy renting her own space.

Like her creator, Zayn wages war against religious fanatics, the bourgeois class, patriarchy, reactionaries, the revolutionists, and anyone else who stands in the way of her freedom. After going through a failed marriage and a successful divorce, the untamed Zayn vows neither to kneel in defeat nor to jump into the abyss of subservience; she has discovered she has wings. Once again, Samman ends her novel by leaving her protagonist on the verge of a new life and a new beginning. ***AJ***

New Archival Materials Revive Scholarly Interest in a Lebanese Druze Emir

Renaissance Emir:
A Druze Warlord at the Court of the Medici
By T.J. Gorton
Interlink Books, 2014

BY LYNNE ROGERS

Drawing on both extensive primary and secondary sources from Europe, Turkey and the Levant, T.J. Gorton's biography of Fakhr ad-Din, "Renaissance Emir: A Druze Warlord at the Court of the Medici," recounts not only his life and his cross cultural experiences in Italy, but also provides a cultural history of the Shouf, the mountainous homeland of the Lebanese Druze. The myths surrounding this prince of "one of the most mysterious sects in the famously fragmented human geography of the Near East" begin in 1585 in Lebanon with the death of his father, purported to have been either killed by a rival clan's member or driven to suicide by the Ottomans. Fearing for her 13 year old son's life, his mother hides him with either his Druze cousins or a Christian family, which

would explain his adult ties to Christian culture. At 21, ad-Din steps into his leadership role under the Ottomans "to collect and remit taxes and keep the peace generally, and particularly to keep the country safe from incursions by the Shia, whose loyalty to the Ports was under constant suspicion owing to their Iranian connections."

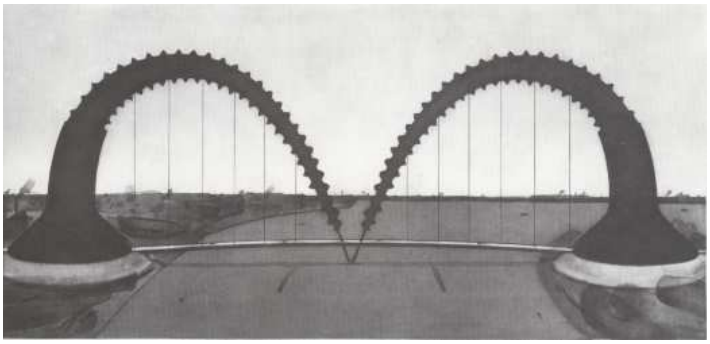
With the Pope looking towards Jerusalem, and the Europeans focusing on trade routes, while the Ottomans collected taxes, ad-Din attempts to navigate a complicated map of diplomacy. Facing imminent attacks by the Ottomans to reassert their power, ad-Din flees with his family to Tuscany. There, he observes the delights and public benefits of Italian culture, some of which he later brings back home. While ad-Din hints that he might convert to Christianity in exchange for a more concrete foreign ally, he also overstays his welcome in a changing Italy. When authorities arrest his mother in Damascus, the previously noncommittal ad-Din returns home as an able and determined military leader, rooting out treachery, taking meals with his men in the trenches, and establishing peace in the Shouf. A progressive and victorious warlord, he invites architects, engineers and doctors from Italy to improve public welfare, and shows generosity to his Maronite allies. Nevertheless, in a dramatic end begging for an historical novel, his diplomatic skills fail to protect him when two royal deaf mutes murder him and one of his sons in 1635. Although occasionally and understandably difficult to follow, "Renaissance Emir," recreates a little known piece of Druze history with resounding consequences that will echo throughout Lebanon and Western politics. ***AJ***

'Lifted by the Great Nothing': A Lebanese Immigrant Struggles with Culture and Race in the United States

Lifted by the Great Nothing
By Karim Dimechkie
Bloomsbury, 2015

BY LYNNE ROGERS

While Lebanese and Palestinian Americans may wonder if we need another novel on the war in Lebanon, Karim Dimechkie's debut book, "Lifted by the Great Nothing," answers with a resounding "yes" as it explores familiar terrain and opens new territory. Dimechkie sets his tale in an American neighborhood easily recognized by its diverse immigrant and struggling population, which totters on the edge of poverty. A single father with on-and-off menial employment, Rasheed wants his son, Max, to be happy. Max has a dog, and his father gives him a tree house, but the boy really wants to know what happened to his mother, who died when he was young. Instead of seeking refuge in the American tree house, he finds sanctuary next door with the loveable Yangs, an older Japanese couple who nurture a special needs son and Mr. Yang's camukra plant, which blooms only once every 14 years.



"Screwarch Bridge" (1980) by Claes Oldenburg from The Museum of Modern Arts

Max discovers that being 13 is not easy, especially when your father brings home his unstable and very liberal young lover and coworker, Kelly. Before she runs off with Rodney, the boyfriend of their neighbor, an African American doctor named Nadine, Kelly decides to educate Max about his manhood, and his past. Later, when the betrayed Nadine visits the boy and his bedridden father to find out what happened with Rodney, the situation becomes a catalyst to allow the older Doctor from Cameroon and the young adolescent from Lebanon to embark on an unorthodox and healing relationship.

Speaking honestly about racial relations, they decide that the white Kelly has acted out of an obsession with African Americans, and that Rodney has proven himself not to be the man for a strong woman like Nadine. While Rasheed spends time with Coach Tim or suffers with the "flu," Nadine supplements Max's high school education by introducing him to literature, music and sex without possession. When the boy receives a letter from Kelly which reveals that his name is not Max, but Hakeem, and that his mother may not dead after all, the troubled,

Continued on page 34

'Textu': A Subversive New Poetic Form

Textu
By Fady Joudah
Copper Canyon Press, 2014

BY ZAID SHLAH

Fady Joudah, in his most recent collection of poetry, "Textu," has created a new poetic form in English. In this book of haiku-like poems composed on his cellular phone, he observes the formal constraints of the screen's 160 character limit. Despite the brevity of each poem, he opens the reader to a "book of portals" which merges the all-pervasive presence of our digital medium with the arcane art of the poem – resulting in a subversive, enigmatic, tragic, and affirmatively human work. The poet meditates on many themes, such as love, death, war, and politics, as well as language and perception in unfamiliar and nuanced ways:

My heart isn't another's

love is no transplant

it can be
or when I'm dead

Here, Joudah leads us to understand the commonplace intimacies of the heart, or does he? The poet tugs at our conceptions and biases, for what more thoroughly offers an example of love than the transplant received: "it can be / or when I'm dead." This and several other poems remain informed by the language of the patient/doctor relationship and the poet's intimate knowledge of the body. Joudah finds words such as "dermis," "fistula," "syncope," and "peptide" as common as metaphor to the poet, and yet his occasionally wry, intellectual curiosity raises subtle and often provocative criticisms:

This is no retirement
you have your body still

symptoms to report
visits to keep meds to refill

referrals bill after bill relapse recovery
full-time dying

Joudah questions the efficacy or ethics of institutional medicine, and yet we see behind these poems and the other disparate ideas he explores, the larger question of the human condition, and those smaller voices which dominant narratives or power structures, as witnessed in the poem "Arabic," perhaps tend to gobble up:

calligraphy on train tracks
a pocket-size Quran asunder

sun-bleached rodent skeletons
my son and I skipping sleepers

listening to whistles
no train came

This offers the tragic portrait of those whose lives and faith have been torn "asunder." This piece focuses upon the relationship that exists between those "you cannot name" and those who would "name you." These poems delineate a voice for those who might be stilled or those with faces not clearly seen or depicted. Joudah, as poet of conscience, records and reflects throughout his sequence of textu meditations.

Still, despite the book's inspired "digital" form, with the multiplicity of ideas jarring and colliding into one another at the speed of text – very much emblematic of our technological condition – Joudah maintains a cautious embrace of its "... image habit / of pleasure." So it should come as no surprise, that as an Arab-American poet, translator, and physician, these poems shine a light back onto the dominant narrative. Joudah accomplishes this by embracing our humanity "at the synapse of finger," but for want of a world of human connection and compassion, not merely "connectedness," as revealed in this portrait of an elderly man "...& his wife / of 62 years":

If she dies first
I'd help him hurry waiting

hold his hand again
for longer

However, I caution against being dismissive of Joudah's breadthand scope if we attempt to classify him as either poet-physician or as Arab American poet. In these surgically crafted textus, he invokes a multiplicity of traditions from "Persephone," "Blake," "Dickinson," "Foucault" and "Darwish." Refusing to be boxed in, Joudah reclaims language back from the palm of his hand, and leaves his mark on the English language as a poet of the world. ***AJ***

Resisting State Co-option of Language and Poetry

ClockWork
By Zaid Shlah
Frontenac House, 2015

BY JOSEPH SILLS

In "ClockWork," Mr. Zaid Shlah composes an investigation into the role of the modern day poet using a blend of expressive styles ranging from free verse to essay. "ClockWork" at once formulates a philosophical framework – or perhaps better stated, a challenge to the current framework – by which the poet operates when using the written word, and attempts to provide examples of such poetry. The reader is thus satisfyingly rendered with an implementation of Mr. Shlah's theory of "negation" between the poet and the State.

While Shlah's position that the State, be it democratic, authoritarian, or anywhere in between, has co-opted not only institutions, but also language itself, is not a new one, his indictment of modern-day poets – and particularly the MFA programs that trained them – as being complicit actors in the State's narrative, strikes a damning chord. While some of the examples "ClockWork's" essays employ as evidence can be combative and even arbitrary, Shlah's call to the poet to resist the lure of working within a co-opted system – what he calls the conscripted metaphor – feels as refreshing as his acknowledgment of the endeavor's cost proves sobering. His essays, instead of delivering an exhaustive account of his position, serve as a starting point, a place from which young poets can launch an inquiry into their craft, and the language behind it.

The sublime poems of "ClockWork," such as "Christmas in California" and "Letter to an American Son" (a free verse poem, despite appearing in the Essays section) deliver the sincere concern of a husband and father wrestling with the culture and narrative which frames and influences his family's growth. They speak of his desire that his children's minds not be enslaved

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A Dying Man Tells

BY HANNA SAADAH

"Rationalization is more important than sex.
Have you ever gone a week without rationalization?"
Jeff Goldblum, The Big Chill

Formative years viewed with the dimmer sight of old age are the raw materials of latter life epiphanies. It took nearly seventy years for me to understand what Dylan Thomas meant when he framed that concept in his famous villanelle. We only understand what life allows us to understand and, as we age, our only constant companion becomes our memory. Said the poet in *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night:*

"Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

In 1987, as my father lay slowly dying of pancreatic cancer in his Beirut home, I made monthly flights to Lebanon, sat by his side, and listened to his tales, not realizing that his mind was bidding farewells by oozing stories that had been his constant companions for years. One story-laden morning, among Arabic coffee and Koranic chants that wafted though our open windows from minaret loudspeakers, he asked, "Is there much corruption in America?"

"Of course," I replied, failing to discern that the question was but a rhetorical introduction to a graver issue.

"Do corrupt Americans flaunt their corruption?"

"No, Dad. They camouflage it and flaunt righteousness instead."

"Then, that must be the difference between our worlds, and I don't know which of the two corruptions is the more honest?"

"How can corruption be more or less honest?" I quizzed with an intrigued smile.

"Well," he smiled back. "If a corrupt person unwittingly admits corruption by flaunting it, would he be less corrupt than if he were to hide it and profess righteousness instead?"

Pondering the question, I took a sip of coffee then asked, "Why should it matter?"

"There's a repulsive charm about our third-world *shatarah*, this *competitive cleverness in evading the law*, and we hoist our *shatarah* with ostentatious pride, it seems, saluting it as if it were our national flag."

I paused in agreement, refilled his coffee cup, and waited, for I knew that there was more to come.

"You remember our friend, Habib?"

"Habib, the rich lawyer?"

"Rich lawyer, indeed." He sighed and took a sip. "A few years ago, he came in glowing and couldn't wait to tell me about what he had just accomplished. In his little mountain town, a rich cousin of his built a stone wall around his home, unwittingly fencing in a sliver of government land behind his house. No one noticed except Habib, who filed an anonymous complaint with the municipality. When the municipality sent in a surveying inspector, his cousin was apprehended and incarcerated. The wife rushed to Habib for help, which was the expected thing to do because he was the family lawyer. Habib visited his cousin in jail and informed him that, in view of the seriousness of his incursion, it would cost $10,000 to free him, expunge the municipality records, and save the expensive stonewall. The cousin, who was more than happy to pay the sum, was released three days later and expressed his sincere gratitude by sending an expensive gift to Habib's home.

"When I asked Habib how did he manage all that in such a brief time – a question, which he had been dying to hear – he related, with a smug smile that never left his face, that he bribed the judge with $500 to incarcerate and release Habib, and bribed the municipality inspector with $250 to expunge the municipality records by saying that his initial report was erroneous."

"And what did you say to him when he was through bragging?" I asked with unconcealed disgust.

"I asked him if he had suffered from remorse when he had the time to think about what he had done. He sneered and then declared that his *shatarah* made everyone happy. 'My cousin is happy, the judge is happy, the inspector is happy, the wall is saved, and I made $9,250 in three days,' he broadcast with remorseless ebullience. I then piqued him by asking about his younger brother, who had been fired from his post as a seaport inspector because he refused to take a bribe from a member of the parliament who was trying to smuggle in a large shipment of whisky. He sneered again and said, 'It serves him right. He's now working for the Pepsi company, instead, making less than half what he used to make at the port.' Then, as if to validate his corruption, he quoted from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure, 'Some rise by sin, some by virtue fall.'* This was probably the only Shakespearean quote he knew because it suited his devious ways."

Our conversation was then interrupted by well-wishers, and it had to wait until the next morning's coffee before it resumed. I broached the topic by telling my father that in the U.S. one goes to jail for bribery. With downcast eyes he explained that bribery had been the *modus operandi* during the four hundred years of Ottoman Empire rule and that the slippery slope has gotten steeper, thanks to our civil war, which has rendered justifiable what had, until then, been unthinkable.

"Corruption is contagious," he lamented. "Once it becomes epidemic, the only vaccine that can halt it is mass enlightenment, which history has shown that it's impossible to achieve. All the prophets have, so far, failed. All societies decline with time, moving from order to entropy. The advantage of America is that it's a new world, whereas our world suffers from the relentless infirmities of old age."

He then surprised me by quoting from a poem I had penned while Lebanon's civil war roared, revealing its long, bloody fangs:

Yes, I have known the gentle peace of death
The pain and sleepless anguish of Macbeth
Have loved and hated, even leased my soul
With perfect logic, softened to comply
With inner whims that do not yield nor die
Yes, this is I
There hardly is a process, which I could not justify.

That morning's conversation left me concerned, not only about the U.S., but also about the future of humanity. My morose mood was uplifted, however, by another *shatarah* story, which was as funny as it was corrupt. An exuberant Mr. Jabbour dropped in on his way to the airport. He was going back to Sierra Leone, where he had a prosperous business. After exchanging the customary salutations and circumlocutions, he presented my father with a $250,000 check.

"What's this for?" gasped my dad.

"For the orphans of our civil war. You know the honest organizations. Distribute it among them as you see fit, but do not mention my name."

Then, without fanfare or flourish, Mr. Jabbour took his leave and rushed to the airport.

"Who's this man?" I asked, astounded by his buoyant nonchalance.

"He's an old classmate of mine," began my father with a tempered smile. "After high school, he joined his father's haberdashery business in Sierra Leone, when the country was still a British colony. With time, he made friends with the natives who worked the diamond mines, and would sell them merchandise on account, which they settled when they got paid. Before long, they started selling him diamonds, which they would smuggle out of the mines for quick cash. As this trade grew, the British became suspicious and staged repeated surprise searches of his home, shop, and car, but never found anything. Their informants assured them that he was buying and hoarding stolen diamonds, but they could never tell them where the diamonds were hidden. With blatant insouciance, he hid the diamonds under the smoldering tobacco ashes of his pipe, which he kept in his mouth, especially during surprise searches.

"Periodically, he would travel to Switzerland, sell the diamonds, and deposit the money in a secret Swiss account. Aware of his *shatarah*, British customs would search him thoroughly, rip his suitcase apart, purge him with caster oil and sift through his liquid stools, but no one ever thought of looking inside his smoldering pipe.

"One busy day, an informant happened to see him put a recently purchased diamond in his pipe. When the British customs search car appeared in front his shop, having conducted a through surprise search only the day before, he realized that his cover had been blown, and quickly flushed the pipe's ashes into the bathroom sink. That sink's elbow became his new hiding place, but from that point on, leaving Sierra Leone with his diamonds presented insurmountable difficulties.

"One day, while hunting, he fell and broke his leg. A doctor friend of his at a nearby clinic casted the fracture. One week later, Mr. Jabbour booked a flight to Switzerland and, before going to the airport, he had someone tip British customs that the leg was not broken and that the diamonds were hidden inside the false cast. Upon arrival – eight hours before his flight in order to give authorities ample search time – he was immediately whisked into a private room. In spite of agonizing screams, convulsive protestations, and a visibly swollen and bruised shin, his cast was pulverized. When no diamonds were found, his luggage was meticulously inspected, his suitcase was ripped apart, he was stripped and his body cavities were searched, and his bowels were purged with a double dose of caster oil. At the end, with everyone exhausted and disgusted, the British officer in charge, feeling foolish and remorseful, offered to drive Mr. Jabbour back to his doctor to be re-casted, and to bring him back to the airport in time to make his flight.

"Salon de Partiste" (1935) by Omar Onsi from "Dictionnaire de la peinture libanaise" by Michel Fani

"This time, at the doctor's office, the diamonds *were* strategically placed between the layers of his new cast and Mr. Jabbour was escorted back to the airplane, as if he were a diplomatic dignitary..."

"Is he still smuggling?" I asked, intrigued.

"He no longer needs to," replied my father, holding the $250,000 check in his hand.

"Is he still corrupt?"

"Yes, but he perceives himself as Robin Hood."

When he said that, a verse from Sam Walter Foss's poem, *The House By The Side Of The Road*, leapt into my consciousness and I shared with my dad:

"Let me live in a house by the side of the road,
Where the race of men go by –
The men who are good and the men who are bad,
As good and as bad as I
I would not sit in the scorner's seat, or hurl the cynic's ban –

Let me live in a house by the side of the road
And be a friend to man."

My father died in July of 1987; he was sixty-nine. Now, I am sixty-nine and my father's stories are still young in my memory. His last dying words to me were, "No one can change where humanity is heading, Son. Just be the best you can be and remember me to your children."

Flying back home, after my father's funeral, the following verses descended upon me and I penned them, midflight:

When I shall go, I shall not leave a dent
Nor those behind me wonder where I went
I'll simply fade away with grace
Unmentioned by the tidings of the day
They will not say, we miss his loving face
And history will look the other way
Though I shall try, as I am passing
Just to catch his eye
Perhaps he would remember that
I was among the boys
Who lived, and loved, and made a lot of noise
Until their times grew thin
Then, seeing that they caused so little change
Have settled down with illness and a double chin. **AJ**

Resisting State

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to the way of thinking he refers to as the "ought to have."

The title poem, "ClockWork," and others like "The Four Seasons," take a more direct resistant stance toward authority, embracing nature as an alternative, reliable source of truth and knowing. Both challenging and refreshing, Mr. Shlah's verse and his use of the written word feel both poignant and perceptive, with his poems ranging from the straightforward to the experimental.

"ClockWork" provides an intimate gaze into the work and thought of the poet-philosopher Zaid Shlah, while challenging us as readers, writers, thinkers, and citizens to act intentionally and hunger always to discover more. A short read, this work will nevertheless stay with you, and be one to which you will doubtless return. Mr. Shlah's vision, and the perspicacity with which he writes, have created a work that, rather than be self-serving, invites us all to search within, and then calls us to act. **AJ**

Syrian Children

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resistance to these popular organizations, the majority of the administrators of those schools tended to hold extremist views. At the time, this did not bother the state, as officials believed that religious indoctrination would teach the students submission and obedience, and would not incite revolts against their superiors, especially when the state closely watched the religious bodies in question.

The phenomenon of private schools returned at a later stage as a result of the weakening of the influence of the "popular organizations." However, private schools failed to raise student consciousness or initiate constructive debate. In fact, through the teachings of these schools, the youth came under the influence of the negative aspects of foreign cultures, identifying with spiritual and moral impoverishment, which in turn served a new kind of parasitic bourgeoisie, fully connected to the state.

A whole generation has suffered from this backlog of oppression. Yet, despite all the lapses and imperfections of its creations, the genie of repression eventually demanded its freedom and the freedom of its downtrodden parents. Syrian youth will be able to contribute to the process of reconstructing their country, if it will be built on a clear and transparent basis, dependent on civil peace supported by international will, though that goal may have to wait for a long time. **AJ**

Translated, from the Arabic, by Elie Chalala. The author has granted Al Jadid magazine the right to translate and publish his essay.

The Arabic version of Mr. al-Kawakibi's essay appeared in https://hunasotak.com/article/20651?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=2-1532c616494

Lebanese Immigrant Struggles

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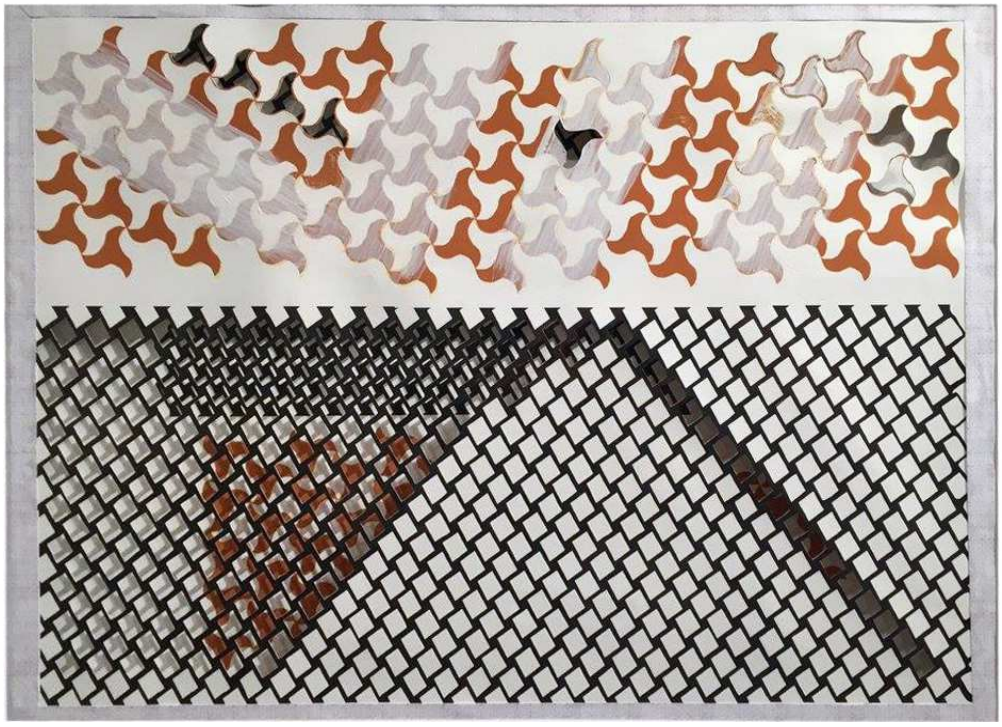
yet congenial American teenager leaves New Jersey for Beirut.

There, in a city that lacks a phonebook, but has plenty of strangers eager to help him find someone somewhere, Max quickly learns that discovering the hidden truth behind one secret only leads to more secrets. The road to Beirut leads to Paris and then back to the Palestinian camps, while a heart wrenching family reunion reopens the wounds of the past and begins to explain the present. Still, when called back to America to be at his dying father's bedside, Max finds himself "dumbstruck by how little he [knows] about the world [he's] grown up in."

Dimechkie's coming-of-age novel brings a sense of beauty to his varied settings, in much the same way that a transplanted ritual from Japan – the party to celebrate the rare bloom of Mr. Yang's carefully cultivated camukra flower – becomes an event which illuminates the neighborhood."Lifted by the Great Nothing" traces the tragedies and painful choices recently uprooted Lebanese have made in their immigration to the States, while celebrating the universal resilience of humor and a depth of love that defies war and death. **AJ**



Doris Bittar's 'Cryptographic': Finding Identity and Unity Through Art

BY BOBBY GULSHAN

Doris Bittar, artist and educator, recently exhibited a new collection of work at the Al Quds Gallery in Washington, D.C. The exhibit, entitled "Crytographic," displays work completed in the last year that makes use of found objects the artist has been collecting for some time. "I have been collecting detritus from my walks, walks from long ago in some cases, or recent walks in California" Bittar explained. "I collect bits of wood, old maps and sea glass. I find them significant somehow, but their isolation is meaningless."

In order to overcome that isolation, the objects are made into assemblages with paper and paint to create complex and multi-layered pieces. The layers of material in the images are literal; they are diorama-like structures with physical depth. Yet the juxtaposition of disparate elements begins to reveal the metaphorical dialogue that unifies them. In a sense, Bittar's art searches for the possibility of some kind of unity to emerge from the collection of objects. However, as with many artists and intellectuals who inhabit different – and sometimes competing – cultural spaces, the emergence of a holistic vision or identity is elusive. This is not to say that Bittar's work comes up short. On the contrary; it's the very sense of an ongoing project, a puzzle yet to be solved that is most compelling. In Bittar's own words, "In a way, these pieces measure my attempt to make sense out of the confusion of my life, the region I live in – the seat of an empire, and the Middle East or where I come from."

For Bittar – whose writing and artwork has appeared in Al Jadid – the notion of "cryptographic" has to do with a sense of puzzlement and dealing with issues of identity and intention that shift and are sometimes in conflict. On the one hand, her nod to traditional Islamic art is obvious in the use of abstract mosaic-like patterns that overlay the visual space. However, once we look through the pattern to the layers below, we find objects, some found in California, others found on the Lebanese seashore that start to map out the space of inquiry.

The exhibit also featured several pieces gathered under the title "Conversations with Modernism," in which Bittar examines her relationship with certain art-historical ideas. According to Bittar, "Modernism is an over 100-year period when the old rules of making art were taken apart in a very radical way. Modernism is Western Eurocentric and developed at a time when colonial adventures peaked . . . So I wonder, as a pseudo colonial subject, how does all of this make me feel?" This raises questions regarding what an artist can represent, what they should or shouldn't represent and how to navigate various hybrid aesthetic and cultural worlds.

While Bittar's work contains nuance and complexity in terms of intention and meaning, it also is flat-out aesthetically pleasing. The works are bright and bold, and literally compel the viewer to look deeper and take in all of the underlying layers of imagery. ***AJ***

Syrian Children and the Exit from the Dark Tunnel!

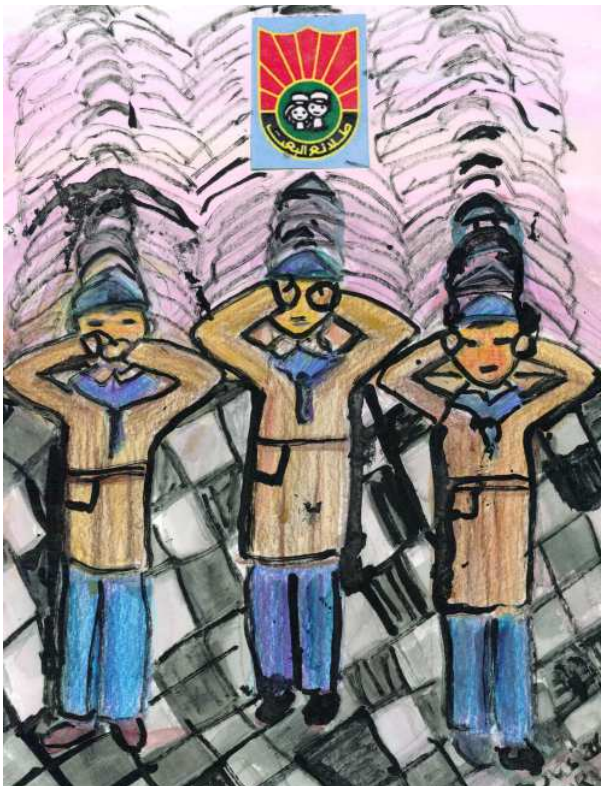
BY SALAM KAWAKIBI

For more than five decades, the Syrian child was subjected to an orderly process of upbringing to control the phases of his growth and maturity. Following the nursery phase, which did not have an ideological formation, the child entered the realm of official popular organizations, along the North Korean model, controlling the child's consciousness and distorting his growth.

Among the new promised generation, ideological series of "brainwashing" continued while accompanied with the development of an intelligence psychology. A seed planted very early, in the beginning stages of their burgeoning awareness, resulted in the "art" of reporting fellow students to state officials. These practices developed in scope as the students gradually advanced in age, all the way until they entered the realm of practical life.

The training for children of the "Baath Vanguards" kept them away from concepts of childhood like freedom and spontaneity. The children were subject to rounds of military training from their early childhood. Instructional political lessons instilled in their immature imaginations misleading concepts about modernism, openness, accepting the other, and pluralism.

This training forced the student to repeat empty slogans consisting of themes like the worship of the individual, along with concepts irrelevant to the child, leaving him unaware of who drafted them or of their moral or even linguistic significance. Some, mistakenly, have resorted to frivolous defenses of the Syrian regime by providing distasteful examples from totalitarian countries or countries hostile to democracy, like former East Germany. In East Germany, advocates truly believed in a clear ideology, although they tried to disseminate it among the youth through rude and poor methods. The former East German methods differed in their respect for the concept of childhood, through which they infiltrated soft and fresh minds in order to implant concepts they believed in and attempted to maintain. In the Syrian case, those in charge of the content of the message, from vanguard supervisors, teachers, or guides, were in fact detached from the goals of their tasks, and attached instead to their real habits of flattery, submission, and corruption.



"The Vanguards of the Baath" (2016) by Etab Hrieb for Al Jadid

During subsequent periods of training, the Syrian youth, subject to the "Union of the Revolutionary Youth," grew up with the concepts of "securitocracy." This meant that their successes and prominence depended on their loyalty proven by reporting their peers and even their parents. In addition, mobilization meetings consisting of stuffing, repetition, and recitation of concepts, did nothing to aid the progression or practice of thought, but instead distanced the youth from the basic sources of consciousness, such as reading, and the development of critical thinking and sensitivity. Regardless of whether the man or woman came from a family known for its progressive and nationalist consciousness, their subjugation to this hellish machine erased everything they dared to keep from their parents' socialization. Only rarely, if their family upbringing proved exceptionally strong, would students challenge the full swing manufacturing of illusion and intellectual poverty. The mainly security personnel, those in charge of socializing the new generation at the most delicate stage of their age, showed no concern for disseminating values or educating young generations about their roles in the collective future of their country and their people.

To arrive at the perfect conclusion of this training, the students entered the college level in parallel to the development of a political-security apparatus called the "National Union of Syrian Students." Here, "educators" implemented stages of classification, perhaps humorous in appearance, but destructive in reality. Members would label their colleagues from "neutral" to "positive neutral," or "negative neutral," among other classifications, which crowded the files of the Union, as well as those of the security branches in charge of these college organizations. Besides corrupting the students' relationships with each other, the culture of "treason, condemnation, and complaint," also applied to their teachers, who found themselves subject to the same evaluative standards, unless they happened to be lucky or acted in blind submission to the will of the state.

Generations graduated through this dark tunnel of successive "popular organizations." While sending children to religious schools offered the only possible form of societal

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