Leila Al Shami
Emerging from ‘The Kingdom of Silence’
Beyond Institutions in Revolutionary Syria
9 December 2016

Retrieved on 13th March 2025 from www.ibraaz.org

theanarchistlibrary.org

Emerging from ‘The Kingdom of Silence’

Beyond Institutions in Revolutionary Syria

Leila Al Shami

9 December 2016

Contents

a site of a deep questioning of cultural and social authority and of key notions including individual, community and national identity. Syrian artists are grappling with new realities and a rapidly developing situation intelligently and creatively. The new artistic forms and questions will continue to resonate and may well constitute the most lasting impact of the revolution.

the harsh reality of self-censorship in order to protect them as the families of artists were already (and historically) being targeted.'[51]

Being distanced from events poses its own challenges. Golan Haji, exiled in Paris, says, 'I have been, like many other Syrians, a witness from afar. Our eyes are suffocated by this unstoppable deluge of images. The country is deserted, shattered and torn apart, and I am swaying, in this new age of anxiety, between anger and fear, or rather controlling anger and fear. I'm not a real witness. Now I mostly belong to Syria through my memory.'[52] Omar Offendum also questioned his role and privilege:

> As the months and years went on and the situation began to spiral out of control, I was slowly growing disillusioned by the violently divisive state of Syria and the world's inaction. I also began to question my role and the legitimacy of continuing to offer my voice to a struggle that was 7,000 miles away from my day to day reality in sunny Los Angeles.

He came to the conclusion that supporting the growing humanitarian relief effort by using music to raise funds and awareness was 'the most responsible thing I could do in my position'.[53]

The revolution and war, and the displacement or exile of millions of Syrians, have transformed Syrian culture in profound ways. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this change has been the democratization of the arts, a clear contrast with the elite control of the cultural sphere before 2011. In addition to this new 'bottom-up' culture, the arts have become

[51] Omar Offendum, interview with the author, 9 July 2016.
[52] Golan Haji, interview with the author, 25 July 2016.
[53] Offendum, *op cit.*

> 'When the mood of the music changes, the walls of the city shake.'
>
> Late 1960s slogan attributed to Plato

I

Under the four-decade dictatorship of the Assad family, the arts in Syria were stifled. The totalitarian police state ruthlessly suppressed the expression of dissent and the public space was tightly controlled. The country was, according to leftist dissident Riad al-Turk, 'a kingdom of silence'. Artists and writers had to navigate the strict parameters of the permissible, or face often severe consequences. Permitted art was that which was uncritical, or acting in the service of the regime. It was distanced from the masses, served up for the consumption of a cultural elite.

In 2011 a revolution broke out and Syrians found their voice. Across the country men and women from diverse social, religious and ethnic backgrounds united in calling for freedom, dignity and social justice. In an explosion of creativity, free expression and artistic production, Syrians responded to the life-changing events and social transformations taking place around them. Art was popularized and democratized. Almost six years later, an initially peaceful uprising has mutated into violent conflict, a battle of competing authoritarianisms, and a site where various external powers vie for dominance. Yet as the media became dominated by stories of up to half a million killed, the rise of Islamic extremism, or the humanitarian crisis, Syrians continued to respond creatively, reclaiming their right to narrate. Against all odds, the profound and ongoing cultural revolution shows that Syrians refuse to be silenced.

Any regime maintains its power through a mixture of coercion and consent. Bashar al-Assad's regime employed a range of repressive mechanisms to enforce the compliance and acqui-

escence of Syrian citizens, such as the arbitrary arrest of political opponents and the systematic use of torture in detention. More subtle were the ideological mechanisms of control that maintained its hegemony. In 1970, following a military coup, the Assad family rose in power from modest origins to become the state personified. Public space was occupied with sober statues and portraits of the leader (first Hafez, later Bashar) as the president was promoted to cult-like status. Family members were often depicted with halos and Hafez himself was referred to as 'the Sanctified One'. According to Mohamed Tayeb, a Syrian-Palestinian graffiti and animation artist from Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus and currently living in Spain, 'under the Assad regime there was only one kind of street art. The Ba'ath party owned all the graffiti, that strictly showed only images of Assad and his family.' He continues, 'Syrians didn't get to see any other kind of street art and nobody would ever think about writing or painting anything on a wall that didn't praise Assad. Writing anything against Assad was like getting on a death train. The regime was very focused on controlling public space through these images so that everyone would see them. Their function was to impact on people's behaviour, so you always see and feel Assad's power, even when there were no police around.'[1]

The regime also sought to build a national narrative to legitimize both its rule and restrictions on political freedoms. Part of this involved portraying the regime as a resistance force subject to external threats. A strong state was needed to maintain stability in the face of potential enemy aggression, Syrians were told. This narrative worked as a cover for the centralization of power and the suppression of internal dissent. Another narrative was that of Arab unity, which concealed deep class and sect divisions institutionalized by a regime that bestowed patronage for loyalty, often to those closest to the As-

[1] Mohammed Tayeb, interview with the author, 26 August 2016.

> art because of the focus on the Syrian situation and the attention on Syrians as refugees. But the pain comes from the same reasons, because you are mainly treated as a 'refugee' artist and not simply an artist.[47]

Some have achieved worldwide recognition, such as Tammam Azzam, who moved to Dubai after the revolution broke out. His most famous work superimposed Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* (1907–1908) onto a bombed-out Syrian building. Classical pianist Aeham Ahmad, who once played his piano amid the rubble of war-wrecked Yarmouk, now gives concerts in Europe.[48] Others used their art to bring beauty to the lives of other refugees. One example is Mohammad Joukhadar who painted Jordan's Zaatari camp with murals.[49]

Syrian artists in the diaspora also responded to the unfolding events. Omar Offendum is a Syrian-American hip-hop artist based in Los Angeles. When the Arab Spring erupted he showed solidarity with protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, yet was unable to imagine a similar revolt taking place in Syria. 'When the revolutionary wave eventually made its way to the streets of my home country the fact that people even rose up to break the barrier of fear was in and of itself a triumph. So I felt compelled to write about it,' he says. He produced some powerful tracks including 'Syria' (2012), the chants of protesters singing Ibrahim Qahoush's 'Leave Bashar' (2011) providing background to his rhymes.[50] But even in exile there were risks. 'Given the fact that my mother, sister and entire extended family still lived there, I was faced with

[47] Hajar, *op cit.*

[48] See: www.youtube.com

[49] Mohammad Abdulssattar Ibrahim, '"Zaatari camp is my greatest exhibition": In exiled artist's murals, a glimpse of home,' *Syria: Direct*, 8 September 2016, syriadirect.org

[50] See: www.youtube.com

IV

Those who remain and work in Syria face enormous challenges. Khaled Khalifa says:

> Inside Syria, oppositional artists – or, to be more precise, artists and writers outside the regime institutions – work in extremely difficult circumstances. The battle is very hard. Writers are subject to insults and constant dangers to their lives, and their artistic means of production are secured only with great difficulty. This is especially true as the regime has pushed its own supporters to the forefront so they may defend it and its programme, and justify murder. Writers walk through minefields and are cheated of everything, from the provision of the costs of production to the opportunity to express their opinions through art. The mere fact that they stay in this place, after these long years of futility and looming death, is a true miracle.[46]

Oppositional artists (and citizen-journalists) are not only targeted by the regime, but also by other groups. In June 2016, the poet and opponent of the Assad regime Mohammed Bashir Al Aani from Deir al-Zour was executed by ISIS on charges of 'apostasy'.

Many artists have fled and joined the millions of Syrians seeking refuge outside of their home country. According to Abu Hajar:

> To be a Syrian artist in exile is somewhere between a privilege and a pain. It is a privilege because there is more attention and focus on Syrian

[46] Khalifa, *op cit.*

sad family or from the minority Alawite sect to which the president belonged. In Assad's Syria, the media was tightly controlled, censored and regulated, with only a handful of state-owned TV channels and newspapers permitted to operate and highly monitored Internet access. Critical journalists and bloggers were regularly imprisoned.

The system of fear created by the Assad regime (prompting the widely used local saying 'even the walls have ears') ensured Syrians kept quiet and caused them to act loyally, even if they didn't buy into the regime's rhetoric. This was used to the regime's advantage. The American academic Lisa Wedeen says, 'The regime produces compliance through enforced participation in rituals of obeisance that are transparently phony both to those who orchestrate them and to those who consume them.' She continues, 'Assad's cult operates as a disciplinary device, generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revere their leader.'[2] Through the use of choreographed spectacles, such as those generated around national events, the regime enforced conformity and submission by humiliating and debasing a Syrian public prepared to engage in acts and uphold a narrative that few believed in.

Within such a restrictive environment, art and cultural production stagnated. Artists and writers worked within a strict framework of censorship. Advancement came through state controlled institutions such as the Arab Writers Union. Whilst boutique art galleries flourished in the capital under Bashar, and the Damascus Opera House staged regular performances, access to such art forms was restricted to the elite. According to producer and filmmaker Itab Azzam:

In pre-revolutionary Syria a clear separation of class existed between the sophisticated educated elite and the rest. The cul-

[2] Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 6.

tural scene in Damascus and Aleppo [...] was exclusive and detached. Time and time again, I came across attitudes that viewed the ordinary citizen as a threat, an embarrassing non-initiate [...] All this, of course, was part of [...] a strategy enacted with ruthless efficiency by the regime against its people. Who could wish the overthrow of these socially liberal and outward-looking people by uneducated socially conservative peasants? Never mind that it was precisely those liberal people who kept the rest uneducated and impoverished. The average Syrian sensibly kept himself to himself.[3]

Art was often employed in the service of the regime by those who openly supported it, such as the popular singer George Wassouf or state sanctioned poets. The regime also co-opted dissident artists and used their work to legitimize its rule and create a democratic facade. This is what American professor of Arabic literature Miriam Cooke terms 'commissioned criticism'. This, she argues, 'is a state-sponsored practice that performs official accountability for the rosy rhetoric of slogans while attempting to convert real dissident practice into state ideology'.[4] Cooke gives the example of Ghassan al-Jaba'i's *Banana Fingers* (1994), a collection of short stories and plays written whilst the writer was in prison, which, whilst banned in Syria, was published by the Ministry of Culture and distributed outside for foreign consumption. Another example could be the Syrian *mosalsalat* (TV series) that flourished under Bashar. These widely popular historical and social dramas often tackled taboo issues such as corruption, but criticism never directly targeted the regime.

The satirical poetry of Muhammed al-Maghout, a modernist using free verse rather than traditional forms, also shows how artists danced on the borders of the permissible. The son of a

[3] Itab Azzam, 'Syria's Trojan Women,' in *Critical Muslim II – Syria,* eds. Ziauddin Sardar and Robin Yassin-Kassab (2014).

[4] Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 73.

> media to discuss issues of religion, sectarianism, or tyranny. Though the regime is modernist in a way (and Assad is a fascist with a neck-tie) it is against culture, no less than the Islamists of Daesh [ISIS]. Actually we have three monsters in Syria, three inhuman creatures: one, the Islamic monster; second, the monster of tyranny; and third, the Western Imperialist monster. And culture can be our weapon to remake these monsters into human energies, human politics, and human actors. Culture is a humanizing field to transform these monsters to human-scale powers.[42]

Transforming monsters into human-scale powers has often been achieved through humour and ridicule. A group of anonymous Syrian artists set up the Masasit Mati group and began a series of YouTube finger puppet shows called 'Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator' which mocks Bashar (called Beeshu) and attempts to subvert regime propaganda.[43] Well known political cartoonists such as Ali Ferzat stood firmly on the side of the revolution and ridiculed Bashar and other members of the political and security establishment.[44] The Facebook page 'Syrian Revolution Caricature' was established and began promoting new caricature artists.[45] On its page cartoons attack the regime and its imperial backers such as Russia, the international community, and ISIS.

[42] Kathryn Hamilton, 'Armed Words,' *The New Enquiry*, 24 November 2015, thenewinquiry.com

[43] See: www.youtube.com

[44] See: www.ali-ferzat.com

[45] See: www.facebook.com

give birth know the meaning of life. Some of [my] illustrations – the man giving birth to a weapon or the man masturbating [his penis is depicted as a gun whilst he watches protests on the TV] – communicate this idea.'[39]

Through their art Syrians continue to stress that they refuse to accept any tyranny, whether that of the Assad regime, other extremist groups or the power hungry militias who rose in prominence as Syria burned. In his track 'Down With the Homeland' (2014) rapper Abu Hajar sings:

> You're supposed to protect us
> How could you take advantage of us?
> We didn't start a revolution to replace his boot with you
> Not to create a similar tyrant
> We're the ones who give you protection and power
> When you try to cross the line we won't permit it.[40]

Artist and graphic designer Fares Cachoux from Homs designed a poster of a man representing Al Qaeda's former affiliate in Syria, Jabhat Al Nusra. The man's hair is depicted as snakes. Another depicts ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi as a wind-up doll holding a sword.[41]

Yassin Al Haj Saleh, a leftist intellectual dissident and former political prisoner, argues that culture is an important tool to fight against various oppressions:

> Culture is […] an important strategy against the Assad regime, because this is a regime that has suppressed intellectuals, suppressed critical thinking, has not allowed people in the universities or the

[39] Halasa et al., *op cit.*
[40] See: www.youtube.com
[41] See: www.behance.net

peasant farmer, born in 1934 in the town of Salamiyah, Maghout was imprisoned several times on political grounds. In his poetry he railed against the corruption of the Arab nationalist regimes, examining issues of freedom and oppression. In the poem 'Shade and Noon Sun', he explores themes of inequality and power and appeals to class-based solidarity:

> They have the nooses
> We, the necks.
> They number their pearls:
> We number our freckles and warts
> Theirs is the night, dawn, dusk and day
> And ours the skin and bones…
> In their pockets are the addresses of traitors and thieves.[5]

His films such as *Al-hudoud* (The Borders, 1982) and *Al-taqreer* (The Report, 1987), parodying the failures of Arab nationalism and the bureaucratic state, were tolerated 'as if' they were generalized attacks on all Arab regimes, but not Syria's. Playwright Saadallah Wannous also pushed against the limits of censorship.

Unable to publish openly in Syria, the work of many dissident artists was pushed underground and distributed in secret. One popular art form was prison memoirs, written by those incarcerated for their opposition to the dictatorship. In works such as those by Faraj Bairaqdar, Mustafa Khalifa and Yassin al-Haj Saleh, the oppression of the prisoner often acts as a metaphor for the suffocation of the citizen by the state. Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* (2008) talks about his incarceration in the infamous Tadmor Prison between 1982 and 1994. It was this prison which poet Faraj Bairaqdar described as 'a kingdom

[5] Muhammad Al-Maghut, *Joy Is Not My Profession,* trans. John Asfour and Alison Burch (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 2006).

of death and madness'.[6] Khalifa, a Christian accused of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was actually an atheist and so was ostracized by other prisoners. He records the horrors of daily life in detention, the torture, and his own isolation. Many of Syria's great poets and novelists, such as Nizar Qabbani, Zakaria Tamer and Rafik Schami, wrote and published their work abroad.

II

The 2011 uprising in Syria arrived in the context of a broader cultural transformation occurring across the Middle East and North Africa. Known as the 'Arab Spring', the transnational uprising contested the narratives of the security states. Following decades of political repression, elite corruption and failed neoliberal reforms, the people of the region asserted their right to self-determination. Connected like never before, due in large part to mass and social media, expressions of popular solidarity began to emerge. According to doctoral student Mohammed Maghout, 'these feelings of solidarity are not nationalist in the Nasserist or Ba'athist sense, as in they did not call for Arab political unity, but they firmly asserted a concrete state of commonality between Arab countries'.[7] The youth on the streets did not frame their demands in the key ideologies of the post-colonial era: Arab Nationalism, Socialism and Islamism. The 'Arab Spring' therefore represented a transformation in people's conceptual frameworks.

The first revolutionary act in Syria was to reclaim the public space. 'A group of 15 children [...] took a few cans of

[6] 'Kingdom of Death and Madness,' *NOW*, 7 August 2008, now.mmedia.me

[7] Mohammed Magout, 'Cultural Dynamics in the Syrian Uprising,' conference paper, Change and Continuity in the Middle East, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 11 June 2012: www.files.ethz.ch

> work; or from marrying the men they love; or from completing their education under social or economic pretexts. They have, today, become independent and responsible women – perhaps to an extent that holds as many rights in their favour as it places an onerous burden of responsibility over their shoulders.[37]

In her narrative text 'To my daughter', Zahlout tells the story of a young women who rose up for freedom and was detained. Her uprising was multi-faceted: against the regime's tyranny, against patriarchy and against sectarianism.

Samar Yazbek highlights the struggle that female revolutionaries face working within a patriarchal society and the limits on revolutionary culture itself. 'There has been a discourse denigrating women on the basis of their gender in public opinion about female political participation since the beginning of the revolution, and this has not been limited to the Islamic sphere – it has been rife in democratic opposition circles too,' she says. 'This was not only perpetuated by men but by women too, as patriarchy in our communities is not determined by gender but by the centres of power. Feminism is not hostile to men, as it is belittled and ridiculed for being, but is a fight against a hegemonic mindset, and it is an act of political liberation in which individuals in a society are given their rights equally and lawfully, men and women, without distinction.'[38] To some extent the militarization of the revolution relegated women's participation to the sidelines. Digital artist Sulafa Hijazi explores 'the implications of masculinity in killing, power, dictatorship and domination'. In her view, 'if women were in charge of the world, there would be no more war. Women who

[37] Hanadi Zahlout 'Syrian Women After the Revolution: Partners in Pain and Homeland,' *Rozana Radio*, 9 November 2015, rozana.fm

[38] Nayla Mansour, 'A Conversation with Samar Yazbek (2 of 2),' *Al-Jumhuriya English*, 23 June 2016 aljumhuriya.net

III

For many Syrians, finding their voice – a direct consequence of the revolution – was a liberating experience. According to Mohammed Tayeb, 'Those children [who started the revolution in Deraa] broke the fear that was implanted for 40 years, with just a few paintings.'[35] Breaking the fear barrier perhaps was the Syrian revolution's greatest feat. And with it came a questioning of everything. Khalil Younes says:

With such a dramatic shift in society and in the collective consciousness of a society, comes courage. Witnessing the brutality of the Syrian regime against the Syrian people from the very early stages of the uprising caused a very violent shock in Syrian society. As a result, people started to challenge their comfort zones. The most feared consequence of any human act – killing – was established from the very beginning as the new norm in the way the Syrian regime will deal with any uprising. Contrary to the regime's expectation, the brutality didn't deter protesters […] their struggle with the regime was used as a model to challenge other oppressive powers, old traditions, religious oppression, gender inequality, and gender identity. There was a synced shift in the Syrian modern culture; it put us back on the map.[36]

Syrian women have faced multiple struggles, and have overcome many barriers to participate in Syria's revolution. As author Hanadi Zahlout says:

> These are women that have, for years, been suffering under the yoke of a social system that seems content to relegate them to the lowest rungs of the ladder – even leniently tolerating their killers on the pretext of reasons of 'honour'. These are women who were prevented from

[35] Tayeb, *op cit.*

[36] Younes, *op cit.*

spray paint and wrote the first letters of the revolution on their school walls,' says Mohammed Tayeb. 'They graffitied the sentences that have broken an entire monstrous regime. They were the ones who made the change. These kids were arrested and tortured, their nails were ripped out. From this point, actual graffiti was born in Syria. Words such as "freedom", "social revolution" and "down with dictatorship" were written on walls. In solidarity with the children and their families, towns started to go out and protest – it was a very fast domino effect.'[8] Calls for the regime to fall reverberated across the country's streets and squares. Ibrahim Qashoush, a fireman and amateur poet from Hama, wrote a song called *Irhal Ya Bashar* (Leave, Bashar), which was chanted by hundreds of protesters.[9] In July 2011 his corpse was found in the Orontes River. He had been killed by regime mercenaries. In symbolic retribution his vocal cords had been ripped out.

The new revolutionary movement had to work hard to contest the regime's narrative and build a new narrative to reflect its aims and goals. Citizen journalists began to emerge recording the protests and regime repression and uploading the videos online, ensuring that Syria's revolution became the most documented in history. This was important so as to challenge the regime's media monopoly and its propaganda that aimed to discredit the protest movement. Citizen accounts attempted to ensure that Syrian voices and concerns reached other communities inside the country and also in the outside world. Revolutionary groups such as the Local Coordination Committees, founded to coordinate the movement and unify its messages and demands, often gave training and advice to people in using camera equipment and navigating Internet restrictions.[10] Some citizen journalists rose to prominence as key

[8] Tayeb, *op cit.*

[9] See: www.youtube.com

[10] See: www.lccsyria.org

revolutionary voices and attracted a wide following – for example, Hadi Abdullah from Homs, who was a student when the revolution broke out.[11] Dozens of independent media collectives were also founded. In Idlib, Radio Fresh was established by a group of young activists in July 2013. It aimed to deliver local news and spread the values and principles of the revolution.[12] In Zabadani a group of young men and women created Oxygen magazine in January 2012 to reach sections of the population that remained silent, encouraging them to take a stand and promoting peaceful resistance.[13] The newspaper kept running despite the daily barrel bombs and the starvation siege.

Yet the sheer volume of information coming out of Syria had unintended negative consequences. According to Donatella Della Ratta:

> In the immediate aftermath of the March 2011 uprising, Syrian activists and ordinary citizens have widely employed filmmaking to bear witness and denounce human rights abuses, in the hope that the sheer amount of visual media will provoke outrage and push the international community to find a solution to the conflict. However, these efforts have only contributed to aestheticize violence and anesthetize spectators from it. In the end, the incessant documentation of Syrian life has overexposed it – as well as daily deaths – turning the everyday into a banal, uninteresting, repetitive thing.[14]

[11] See: twitter.com

[12] See: en-gb.facebook.com

[13] See: www.facebook.com

[14] Donatella Della Ratta, 'A New Wave of Syrian Films Exposes the Failure of Images,' *Hyperallergic*, 16 September 2016, hyperallergic.com

the ones coming from Syria were published under fake names. There was a new breed of artists in addition to the already established ones. The new breed was the most genuine, it was a great shift in expression, moving from vocal expression to a more abstract form that seemed very seamless and natural.'[27] Abu Hajar agrees: 'Art itself experienced a revolution […] Art went to the streets. It left behind all the elitism that existed in art before.'[28]

Street art witnessed an explosion. 23 year old Nour Hatem Zahra, also known as 'Spray Man', sprayed slogans against Assad in the streets of the capital and set up the 'Freedom Graffiti Week' Facebook page before he was assassinated by security forces.[29] In besieged Daraya, Abu Malek Al Shami painted hope onto destroyed buildings.[30] Activists in the Islamic State stronghold city of Raqqa graffitied 'Down with Daesh' and other anti-ISIS slogans on the walls of their city.[31] Other art forms not traditionally associated with the Arab world also gained in popularity. Following liberation from the regime, the city of Raqqa held its first public hip hop concert before it was taken over by ISIS.[32] Heavy metal, which had a small following before the revolution, became more prominent. The challenges artists and fans faced to keep the scene alive in the midst of war is shown by Monzer Darwish in his forthcoming documentary 'Syrian Metal is War'.[33] Groups such as Anarchadia performed in English and called for internationalist solidarity.[34]

[27] Khalil Younes, interview with the author, 15 July 2016.

[28] Hajar, *op cit.*

[29] See: www.facebook.com

[30] Barrett Limoges, 'Meet the Banksy of Syria,' *Middle East Eye*, 31 August 2016, www.middleeasteye.net

[31] See: www.youtube.com

[32] See: www.liveleak.com

[33] See: www.youtube.com

[34] See: www.youtube.com

shared or copied for demonstrations.[23] One poster reads 'It is the day of the civil strike. There is no justification for keeping silent after today.' Another depicts a man crouched in a cage, or behind prison bars. The writing underneath reads, 'They struggled for our sake. Let's struggle for their freedom', urging people to continue campaigning for the release of detainees. Hip hop artist Abu Hajar from Tartus says:

> Before the revolution, I thought that art could play a role in promoting ideas and maybe opening new horizons and new ways of thinking. But with the beginning of the revolution I noticed that art can go beyond that. It can actually help in organizing people, as we saw at protests, and can play a role in the direct political life of people.[24]

In all of these groups decision making is collective, reflecting the democratic ideals behind the struggle.

In the revolution, the range of people producing art and their audience has dramatically expanded. 'The street is not an ignorant listener,' writes Hani Al Sawah, better known as rapper Al Sayyed Darwish. 'It can distinguish the good from the bad.' That which was popular was copied and circulated, on the streets and on social media. Online art galleries began to emerge,[25] as well as initiatives to record Syria's cultural production.[26] Art was no longer the preserve of a cultural elite. Painter, illustrator and short-story writer Khalil Younes says, 'The revolution didn't only influence established Syrian artists, it created new ones. People from all walks of life started to explore new means of expression. For them, it was art out of necessity. Thousands of works of art started to emerge; most of

[23] See: www.flickr.com
[24] Abu Hajar, interview with the author, 26 August 2016.
[25] See: www.facebook.com; and www.facebook.com
[26] See: www.creativememory.org

Some independent film collectives such as Kayani Web TV[15], Bidayyat[16] and Abounaddara[17] sought to humanize the conflict. Abounaddara (The Man with Glasses) produces short documentaries which often feature Syrians speaking directly to camera. These interviews of activists, refugees, former prisoners and ordinary citizens provide powerful portraits of people from all walks of life caught up in Syria's turmoil. The collective seeks to challenge dominant media representations of Syrians as victims or extremists and allow Syrians to represent themselves.

Writers also attempted to convey the hopes, dreams and fears of Syrians to a wide audience. For example, the Syrian-Kurdish poet Golan Haji wrote about the severe government repression:

> Then they came, cancelled their appointments
> Picked their teeth to throw the remains of our hearts to ants
> And shouted: 'No one is accused. All are sentenced'
> They closed the pharmacies and bridges. They blocked the entries of cities and the openings to the squares
> And lifted a wrong address on the end of a spear.[18]

The writer Samer Yazbek has written two powerful eyewitness accounts of the uprising. The first, 'A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution' (2012) recounts the vicious repression that the protest movement faced in its early days, through the voices of its participants. It also documents

[15] See: www.youtube.com
[16] See: www.youtube.com
[17] See: vimeo.com
[18] Golan Haji, 'Shooting Sportsmen,' *The Wolf*, www.wolfmagazine.co.uk

the difficulties and threats that the writer herself faced as a pro-revolutionary Alawite. The second, 'The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria' (2015) recounts the horrors of war and rise of Islamic extremism that grew out of the state's bitter repression.

Khaled Khalifa, one of Syria's most well-known novelists, says:

> The role of writers and artists didn't change after the 2011 revolution, but new challenges and new questions of a kind that we Syrian writers hadn't experienced before became prominent. This was the case in particular because the revolution witnessed crucial turning points and obvious international complicity in its defeat. All these questions concerned the insufficiency and limitation of the means of expression. I think it will be a long time, at least until the end of the war, before the effects of linguistic and expressive changes become clear. The role that writers undertook – to explain their cause to world public opinion – was a frustrating one, because they discovered that the world didn't want to hear anything about this particular revolution.[19]

Yet writing was not only directed at an external audience. For Khalifa, 'Wars and revolutions may provide a real opportunity for introspection, especially as the question of identity remains the deepest of the Syrian revolution.' There are the obvious categories: pro-regime, anti-regime, Sunni, Alawite, secular, Islamist. But individual, communal and national identities are also being examined in new ways. Here we cannot separate the cultural from the political. Setting up a democratic local council is part of the process of exploring community identity

[19] Khaled Khalifa, interview with the author, 30 July 2016.

and examining the relationship between individual and society.[20] The attempts to be democratic, non-sectarian and inclusive were vital as prior to the revolution Syrians did not have the freedom to come together or engage in cultural and political life, and sectarianism was used as a tool for social control and domination.

The battle over social identity was fought first at the carnivalesque site of protest. Syrians took to the streets singing songs, banging drums and holding witty and colourful banners depicting revolutionary slogans. Celebrities such as Alawite actress Fadwa Soliman and footballer Abdul Baset al-Sarout joined the protests.[21] The small town of Kafranbel in Idlib became famous for its darkly humorous banners which frequently criticized the Assad regime, elements of the opposition and the international community. In the Euphrates city of Deir al-Zour an anonymous collective of artists and activists called Kartouneh made posters of colourful chalk on black paper.[22] Such banners often emphasized the revolution's inclusive, non-sectarian aspect. Slogans were written in solidarity with Kurds, Christians and other minority groups. This was important because the regime worked on fostering division both prior to and during the revolution in its attempt to divide and rule. Through posters, activists continue to communicate the values of the revolution, reject violence and discrimination and encourage participation in civil disobedience to bring down the regime. The Syrian People Know Their Way collective uploaded their posters online, which were

[20] Local councils have been established throughout Syria to administer to areas liberated from the Assad regime. They provide basic services to the population. Many have had their members democratically elected.

[21] Sarout's journey from non-violent protest leader to fighter is moving and is told by Talal Derki in his film *The Return to Homs* (2013).

[22] Malu Halasa, et al., eds., *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (London: Saqi Books, 2014).