

## Tadmor's Ghosts

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“You shall not escape us even while you sleep.  
Your victims' vengeance will pursue you for blood...  
Even if you muzzle their complaints they will haunt you even as ghosts...  
You have poisoned the life of the people, wounded their souls...  
Wisdom at all times  
Is to destroy the jail  
Not to cut off the hand of the jailor.  
We have completed our little duty  
From now on we shall begin  
our great duty:  
This tyranny shall never recur”  
(Mamduh Adwan, *The Ghoul* 1995)<sup>1</sup>

**M**amduh Adwan (1941-2005) was right eighteen years ago. The people whose lives Hafiz al-Assad had poisoned and whose souls he had wounded would pursue his son for blood. Decades of living with walls that *are*—not *have*—ears have produced rage and a demand for vengeance and justice: “From now on we shall begin our great duty: This tyranny shall never recur.” These lines call for revolution. It is not enough to cut off the hand of the jailor. The jail must be destroyed.

Mamduh's play *The Ghoul* had been playing for three nights in the Hamra Theater when the goons picked up on the plot. No, it was not about Jamal Pasha, the ruthless Ottoman governor in Syria notorious for his role in coordinating the genocide of Armenians. It was about their beloved leader. The play was closed. Mamduh was sanguine.

“We believed that a poem could overthrow a dictator. We were enchanted with the thought that art is a weapon. Of course, it is. But no poem, no piece

of music can overthrow a dictator. It can, however, resist the normalization of oppression” (Cooke 2007: 91). Already sixteen years before the Syrian people stood up to the tyrant, Mamduh had assumed the role of Frantz Fanon’s idealized “colonized man who writes for his people [using] the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope” (Fanon 1966: 187). Fanon’s 1961 study of what he called the problems of racism and colonialism highlights the parallel between the earlier colonial system and the later autocratic regimes in the Arab world. The Assad, Mubarak and Ben Ali dictatorships were as distant from their people as the colonialists had been from the colonized, and the revolts against them follow similar trajectories to the Arabs’ decolonizing struggles of the mid-twentieth century (29-30).

Fanon located the stimulus for independence struggles and revolutions in literature. Intellectuals had to mobilize the people and “raise the standard of consciousness of the rank-and-file. Neither stubborn courage nor fine slogans are enough” (108). Their role, in Mamduh’s words, was to resist the normalization of oppression and awaken the people. In his haunting description of and threat to the ghoul, Mamduh was writing what Fanon called “a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature” (179) that called for action beyond words.

Mamduh Adwan, an Alawite opposed to the Alawite tyrant Hafiz al-Assad, anticipated today’s revolution. He was empowering spectators to think the unthinkable: oppression is not normal; stolen dignity must be redeemed and liberty seized. In the early 1990s, this contestatory consciousness pervaded the revolutionary writings of Syrian intellectuals. Echoing the decolonizing language of their parents and grandparents who had expelled the French colonialists in the early part of the twentieth century, these intellectuals were calling on the Syrians “to live in truth,” to cite Vaclav Havel. This truth, Fanon writes, “hurries on the break-up of the colonialist regime; it is that which promotes the *emergence of the nation*; it is all that protects the natives, and ruins the foreigners” (40, my emphasis). The Assad dictators are the foreigners the natives were to ruin.

We need to remember the prophetic words of intellectuals like Mamduh Adwan so that we do not believe those who claim that the revolution came from outside. “We must rid ourselves of the habit,” Fanon warns, “of minimizing the actions of our fathers or of feigning incomprehension when considering their silence and passivity. They fought as well as they could, with the arms that they possessed then” (167).

When the Tunisians and Egyptians rose up against dictators who quickly abdicated, the Syrians were emboldened. Their uprising did not achieve the same success, yet many have continued to fight without counting the cost. Since March 2011, over 80,000 Syrians have been killed (UN estimate

15 May 2013). Three million are internally displaced; some are digging the earth out of ancient graves and reburying bones to make the only safe space they can find for their families. One million refugees barely surviving around the perimeter of their homeland are watching the world watching them. They know very well what is going on in the world. They are even empathizing with atrocities elsewhere; they know what it means to be bombed.

Some hope that their art, novels, testimonials and poetry might make a difference and, even if not, they continue to create. Hassan Abbas, a long-time critic of father and son, describes the transformation of public space from the physical to the cultural and spiritual sphere. Previously atomized intellectuals “dispersed all over Syria like droplets of water” are creating a “collective dance.”<sup>2</sup> What does such a collective dance look like? It looks like films, videos, cartoons, art, fiction and poetry all in synch with each other, all condemning the brutality of Bashar al-Assad’s repression.

### Video

Since March 2011, Abu Naddara, a group of independent filmmakers based in Damascus, have worked on a project they call Emergency Cinema (*sinama al-tawari*).<sup>3</sup> Every Friday, they release a short film—lasting from one to four minutes—that focuses on one person’s story. The four films in April 2013 were: April 5, “In a Solitary Cell”; April 12, “Flags and Men”; April 19, “Mysterious Plant” and April 26, “Children of Halfaya.” The short usually begins with a close-up of a storyteller haltingly narrating a recent experience. The camera lingers on the face or, in the case of someone who does not want to be recognized, on the mouth. Slowly, the camera pans out to the surroundings to reveal a tent full of stuff and kids or an abandoned solitary cell that has become home for seventeen displaced people.

In November 2011, Masasit Mati, a young acting troupe, launched a satirical finger-puppet show. *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator* was filmed clandestinely in a remote Beirut theater to a tiny audience for distribution on YouTube. The playwrights mock the Syrian president, his regime and sometimes also the revolution as in Episode 13 “Al-Tahqiq” (Investigation) that reflects on the failings of the revolution: the torturer alternately converses with the prisoner about their shared goals and then beats him up for disagreeing about the tactics of the revolution.<sup>4</sup> The former absolute prohibition in Syria to represent the president has gone and *Beeshu* (diminutive for Bashar al-Assad) with his simpering lisp often takes the starring role. One of the episodes features him competing in a television show called “Who Wants to Kill a Million.” He easily defeats Muammar Gaddafi and Hosni Mubarak, and the audience claps rapturously.<sup>5</sup> In another episode, *Beeshu* wakes up out of a nightmare, screaming: “The people want to overthrow me!” An officer reassures him:

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“Don’t worry, my dear Mr. President, nobody wants to bring you down. Go back to sleep.”

“But I dreamed that the people don’t love me anymore!”

“We all love you, Mr. President, but you have to rest. Tomorrow is Friday and we have a lot of work to do!”<sup>6</sup>

In the fifteenth and last episode, posted on October 23, 2012, a modern-day Sheherezade narrates the popular uprising against the “ghoul,” and their determination to fight for a just country. Not only does the *Top Goon* series use Adwan’s language, it confirms his warning: the ghosts of the prisoners of Tadmor, Hafiz al-Assad’s most terrible prison, are pursuing the son for justice, for blood.

In March 2013 Azza al-Hamwi circulated “Art of Surviving” on YouTube. A musician takes us through his workshop and laconically explains the usefulness of the spent weapons the Russians have sent Bashar and that he has used against them. The narrator sings discordantly to a metal lute and drums. The telephone, hookah and toilet only need a few elements to work beautifully. In the winter, an old man’s walking stick had to be burned for firewood to warm the freezing children, but fortunately they had on hand some empty Shilka shells “that are being used against the Syrian unarmed population.” Along with an anti-aircraft N23, these shells were cobbled together to fashion a new, sturdier cane.<sup>7</sup>

Artists and writers are using puppets, pens and paintbrushes to create an artistic revolution that will deepen and prolong the social revolution. They are fulfilling the hopes of the late Alawite playwright Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997) that the “presentation of the mechanisms of frustration, despair and surrender” would raise the people’s consciousness about their situation. Today’s artists are reviving the belief in the power of words and images to “launch a civil dialogue,” even under the most difficult circumstances: “Intellectuals should intervene in public affairs and oppose aggressors as well as tyrannical rulers.”<sup>8</sup> Not only must they strive to create the conditions for action even when the obstacles seem insuperable, they must do so *inside the country*: “To find freedom in exile is an illusion” artist Youssef Abdelke said, “It’s more of a political statement to be silent in Syria than to speak out abroad.”<sup>9</sup>

## Cartoons

An example of one who has stayed even after paying a high price for years of blatant dissidence is the cartoonist Ali Farzat. In August, masked men abducted him, smashed his hands, and left him for dead on the side of the road. This man who had drawn cartoons of Tadmor with dying prisoners hanging from meat hooks, was undaunted. In one cartoon, an anonymous artist has drawn Farzat in a hospital bed, hands totally bandaged except for the middle finger defiantly wagging at the regime.



Figure 1. Cartoon for Ali Farzat by Everett Patterson. Used by permission.

He will not stop. Why should he when Bashar is so afraid of his pencil? In the image by a fellow cartoonist, three soldiers bear down on Farzat's prone body with truncheons while stomping on his hands. But his feet keep drawing and the patriotic people keep laughing, their feet wading in his blood. (Fig. 1)

In the next image, a fellow cartoonist draws Farzat's gauze-wrapped, still bleeding hand totally covered with faces. His hand articulates the voice of the people while three tiny government agents stab his finger and hack away at his hand. The caption reads: "The people's hand above their hands." The people watch the fruitless efforts of the little men to stop the revolution. In 2011, Reporters Without Borders awarded Farzat the Press Freedom Prize. (Fig. 2)

## Art

The revolution began with graffiti. In one depiction, a group of students in Dar'ā are shown scrawling on a wall the words, "the people want the downfall of the regime." They were thrown into jail, and the people rebelled. The boys' words on the wall had declared a war that spread across the country: "Walls are the battlefields of influence between anti-government and pro-government supporters. The alleys of Midan in central Damascus—once famous for its restaurants—now are filled with black paint covering anti-regime graffiti."<sup>10</sup> Like Tunisians and Egyptians, Syrian graffitists are using spray cans to take ownership of the streets, and the government is erasing the messages.

Aram Tahhan claims "artists have broken through the wall of fear in Syria and are thinking in another way...the uprising has changed the artists' thinking about the task of art in society, how they can do something useful for society. They have rewritten everything."<sup>11</sup>

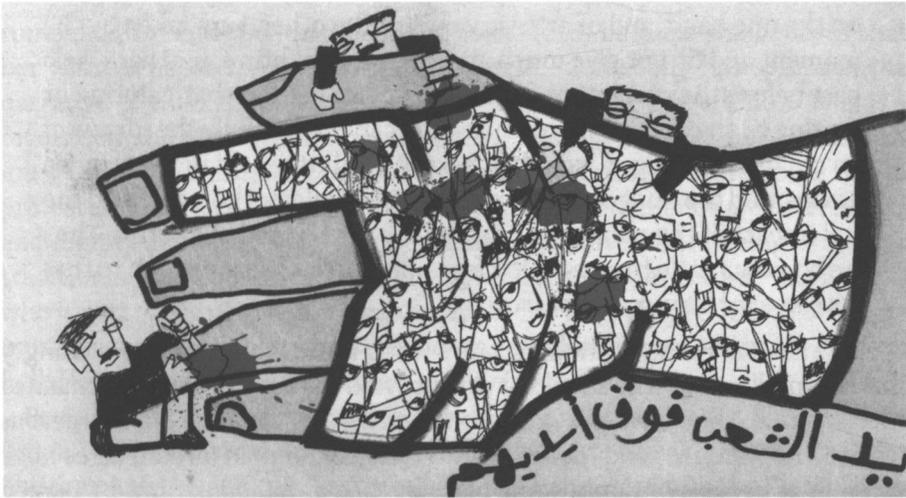


Figure 2. The People's Hand over Their Hands. Drawing by Nidal al-Khairy. Used by permission.

“Funun al-thawra al-suriya” (arts of the Syrian revolution) is a Facebook site full of artists’ renditions of the Syrian revolution. They show exploding heads, hanged bodies and firing squads, several adapted from Goya’s 1814 *Los fusilamientos del a Montaña del Príncipe Pio*. Tammam Azzam projected slides of this commemoration of the May 3, 1808 Spanish resistance to Napoleon’s army on to scenes of urban destruction that he then photographed, photo-shopped to look like a fresco, digitized and then circulated on the Internet. Wisam al-Jazairi replaced the French soldiers shooting the Spanish patriots with Syrian soldiers. On April 21, 2013, 566 bodies were discovered in the Damascus suburb of Jadidat al-Fadil, eighty five had been killed execution-style. Within hours, Ayham Jum’á had painted a row of shrouded cadavers linked by a chain of flowers that he immediately uploaded to the “Funun al-thawra al-suriya” Facebook page. It was the first outsiders heard of the massacre.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the violence of the past two years, Tamam Azzam has recorded the bombing of bakeries, the use of chemical weapons, and the dire conditions in the refugee camps. The image that caused the greatest stir was his projection of Gustav Klimt’s *The Kiss* on to the wall of a destroyed building.<sup>13</sup> For Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian*, the “painting whose golden ghost he has made to materialise on a ruinous facade is a passionate plea for universal love.”<sup>14</sup> When Saadallah Wannous’ daughter Dima asked Azzam about the future of such art, he answered:

Undoubtedly the influence of these works will vary with time. I often try to complete the works under a dual influence, that is, of the moment

on the one hand, and of artistic value on the other. I am taken by the moment and do not give much attention to the future, for there is no past before the revolution for me.... I do not believe that painting or writing or any other form of expression can express fully the sorrow of an old man waiting in front of a bakery, the bitter cold in the refugee camps, and the hunger of the refugees. We could not comprehend the full impact of the moment a missile hit or the sound of aircraft. Thus we borrow a little from people's fears and sorrows, just enough so that we can express our own sorrow.<sup>15</sup>

There is more than sorrow in Azzam's work; there is anger also. He is angry that the intellectuals who should have supported the opposition have remained silent. Worse, they have provided "intellectual 'legitimacy' to a murderous regime." He wants to send "to the Zaatari refugee camp (in Jordan) three huge volumes of books by Adonis, some plays by Ziad al-Rahbani, films by Dareed Laham, and poetry collections by Unsi al-Haj and Nazih al-Afash, hoping they will make a fire to warm a Syrian child." The works of these intellectuals who did not stand with the revolution should be burned.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fiction and Poetry**

Novelist Samar Yazbek has written about the people's arts of resistance. Yazbek, like Mamduh Adwan and Saadallah Wannous, is a prominent Alawite writer, but unlike them she is directly defying the Alawite regime. Last year, she published her memoir entitled, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*. She describes survival under the bombs and her compulsion to fight this loathsome regime. Endangering not only herself but also her daughter, she goes where the action is, meets with fighters from the Free Syrian Army and records the government's atrocities: "the idea of a revolt against this regime had been brewing for years.... We mobilized on Facebook, through art and writing" (236, my emphasis).

With Yazbek, we follow the revolution from its peaceful beginning when the people of Dar'a believed that, like the Tunisians and Egyptians, they might achieve their goal without violence. She reflects on the role of writing in her everyday life. Whereas in the first days she is not sure that there is any "use in writing down what was happening," she later discovers "that these diaries were helping me to stay alive" (50). This is also the chronicle of her evolution from being "just an idea, a character in a novel. I drink my coffee and believe that I am only thinking about a woman I'll write about one day. I am a novel" (78). Her Facebook entries catch the eye of the intelligence service and their "mukhabarati website" rejoins with accusations of her sellout to the Americans (33). In the end it is these same diaries that force her to leave Syria. She feels

compelled to “turn my diaries into a book” (258) because she believes that her witness needs to be known in the world: “Somebody has to smash the narrative of this criminal regime with the truth of the revolution. This is a revolution and not a sectarian war, and my voice as a writer and a journalist must come out in support of the uprising...the demonstrators going out to protest are unarmed and peaceful people, and their demands are for freedom and dignity and justice” (230, 255). Yazbek has moved from being Gramsci’s traditional intellectual, part of a class of thinkers, to an organic intellectual who is part of the people. No longer prepared or even only resigned to die, she must survive so that the world may learn what has happened in that place of hell. Her testimonial will surely be used in history’s tribunal.

Poets have added their voices. In November 2012, blogger and fiction writer Razan Ghazzawi wrote “The Revolutionary Cannot Speak.” Fearful that the entire country would be massacred and that she would be the “last Syrian alive,” she challenges Syrians abroad.

You think ‘critically’ of our raw revolution, you say  
 You think and cite our savagery with references of youtube videos....  
 What is your struggle, I wonder  
 When you’re the diasporic subject and I am the postcolonial....  
 I am being silenced by your pen.

Is this the pen that writes that it is not the people who are resisting the tyrant?

Poet Faraj Bayraqdar, who spent fourteen years in Tadmor prison, has observed the revolution from his asylum in Sweden. “Most of the world now knows the bloody and terrible truth of the Assad regime,” he writes. “Thus informed, the world powers can no longer ignore the reactions of their peoples to the atrocities in Syria.” Will he be right?<sup>17</sup>

### **Concluding Words**

From the reign of terror under Hafiz and now the apocalypse under Bashar, artists and writers have been creating works that informed the world of the hell they were living. Contrary to popular opinion outside the country, the Syrian people have always resisted injustice, even if before the revolution few dared, or knew how to turn their anger into action. Aerial bombardments and chemical weapons are changing all that.

From the moment that the native has chosen the methods of counter-violence, police reprisals automatically call forth reprisals on the side of the nationalists. However, planes and bombardments from the fleet go far beyond in horror and magnitude any answer the natives can make.... In all armed struggles, there exists what we might call the

point of no return. Almost always it is marked off by a huge and all-inclusive repression which engulfs all sectors of the colonized people (Fanon 1966: 70).

The Syrian people are now at Fanon's point of no return. ✨

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup>cooke 2007: 81, 90.
- <sup>2</sup>Layla Al-Zubaidi, "Syria's Creative Resistance" in *Jadaliyya*, 8 June 2012.
- <sup>3</sup>[www.abounaddara.com](http://www.abounaddara.com) accessed 26 April 2013.
- <sup>4</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=el38zyvRlFM> accessed 27 April 2013.
- <sup>5</sup>Amelie Rives, "Art and Revolution: the Syrian Case," in *Near East Quarterly*, 24 March 2012.
- <sup>6</sup>Al-Zubaidi, "Creative Resistance."
- <sup>7</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28d1-AgGOW0> accessed 21 April 2013.
- <sup>8</sup>*Dissident Syria*, 93-99.
- <sup>9</sup>Al-Zubaidi.
- <sup>10</sup><http://monde-arabe.arte.tv/en/rima-marrouch-graffiti-war-in-syria/> accessed 11 April 2013.
- <sup>11</sup>Tahhan was a curator for the Amsterdam exhibition, *Culture in Defiance: Continuing Traditions of Satire, Art and the Struggle for Freedom in Syria*, that featured short films, animations, songs, graffiti, art, and posters: [www.princeclausfund.org/en/activities/culture-in-defiance.html](http://www.princeclausfund.org/en/activities/culture-in-defiance.html) accessed 21 April 2013.
- <sup>12</sup><http://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution.Arts> accessed 22 April 2013.
- <sup>13</sup><http://world.time.com/2013/02/13/the-art-of-war-syrias-artists-find-pain-and-fame-on-the-frontlines/> accessed 5 April 2013.
- <sup>14</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2013/feb/04/syria-klimt-kiss-tammam-azzam> accessed 10 April 2013.
- <sup>15</sup><http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2013/feb/04/syria-klimt-kiss-tammam-azzam> accessed 2 March 2013.
- <sup>16</sup>Elie Chalala in *Al-Jadid* March 2013.
- <sup>17</sup>"The Children's Revolution: Youth and the Syrian Rebellion" in *Al-Jadid* 17/64 2011. (NB: the date should be 2013).