ART FORMS AND POPULAR PROTEST IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

By

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Abstract

There has been ongoing conflict in Syria since the Arab Spring protests of 2011. The protest movement and anti-regime fighting have been well documented as has the violent response of the regime to the popular uprising. This thesis studies the role that art has played in the Syrian Civil War from the perspective of the Syrians who are opposed to the current Assad regime. Specifically, it investigates three art forms – graffiti, political cartoons, and digital art – and how they have functioned as means of documenting the conflict, uniting people against the regime and testifying to those outside of Syria about the conditions faced by both people remaining in the country and refugees. The period covered in this thesis is from 2011 to 2017 and, since this is recent history, there is not yet much research or analysis published on the topic.

To make the argument that art has had a definite and important impact on cultural perceptions of the Syrian Civil War, I studied sources from within and outside of Syria, though a significant part of the analysis also comes from my own study of the art that I have chosen and its importance in the context in which it was created. Ultimately, I found that art was an essential part of popular resistance to the regime, and it will have significant value in the future for how it documented this period of upheaval.

Art Forms and Popular Protest in the Syrian Civil War

The Arab Spring in 2011 is the first global event that I remember. Though I had previously been aware of the United States' presence in the Middle East, I had no real knowledge of the region or any of the history related to it. When I saw the footage of people marching in the streets in these distant countries, I was struck by the energy and emotion, and I needed to know why this was happening. For the first time in my life, I followed the news and sought out history books to explain the things that I did not understand. Over the following years, I was inspired to learn about politics and human rights and wrote my capstone paper in high school about the Syrian Refugee Crisis. In my undergraduate program at the University of Arizona, my varied and interdisciplinary courses have deepened my knowledge and interest regarding this topic, while also pushing me to consider the role of art in the ongoing protests and uprisings in Syria.

Within Syria, the Arab Spring began with graffiti, and art has continued to be a key form of resistance in the following years. By giving a voice to the people, art, in a variety of media, showcased the emotional core of the revolution and inspired the country-wide uprising in the face of government retaliation. I once asked myself why people were marching in the streets to protest their governments, and though I know now that the revolutions of the Arab Spring arose from decades of repression, it is also worth asking why the people rose up at this moment and not another. In Syria, there had been another large uprising in 1982, but it was quickly suppressed by the Assad regime and did not become the years' long conflict that is the Syrian Civil War. There are numerous factors that contributed to the 2011 uprisings, among them discontent with the global economic situation, a large youth population with nothing to lose, and, possibly, the solidarity of revolting along with people of other countries. I believe that art also had a significant role in transforming initial protests into a conflict that would overtake the country. Art made visible the reasons that people had to rebel, and the depiction of these issues gave continued inspiration that urged people to fight for nothing less than a complete overthrow of the regime.

It is necessary, however, to clarify some of the goals of this uprising in Syria. Unlike the Arab Spring uprisings in other countries, Syria's did not end quickly and instead became a complex war that has lasted for a decade now. It is difficult therefore to clearly define the goals of a revolution that has fractured into diverse groups and has been forced to evolve with the changing conditions of this conflict. In 2011, the early protests can be classified as anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic, though with few clear demands except a general desire for "freedom." The fact that freedom had different meanings to different people would soon become important, but at this time, it primarily referred to the release of political prisoners and the greater freedom of expression, through the repeal of the emergency law that had been enacted in 1963 and put the country under restrictive martial law (Macleod, 2011, April 25). Notably, these protests were also secular and included people of diverse faiths as well as large numbers of women. This spirit is captured in chants from that time of popular uprising: "Peaceful, peaceful – neither Sunni nor Alawite, we want national unity" (Erlich, 2016, p. 83). For the most part, these early protests were peaceful and used non-violent tactics, but in 2011, this began to change as the newly founded Free Syrian Army began targeted assassinations (Erlich, 2016, p. 90) and a greater Islamist faction rose from within the formerly secular uprising (Erlich, 2016, p. 92).

The greatest tension between the factions that arose from the Arab Spring protests in Syria is between democracy and theocracy, though these groups agree that they want to overthrow the current Assad regime. Within Syria, however, the population is fractured: The rise of Islamist groups within the uprising pushed away the support of minority groups like Alawites and Christians. The regime has, with success, capitalized on this and created some popular support for the Assad regime among minority groups who fear that a rebel-led government would be worse than the regime (Erlich, 2016, p. 125). This is a continuation of policies that aim to undermine rebellion, such as "employing coercion, a pervasive spy apparatus, carefully constructed tribal and family alliances, bribery and the tactics of divide and rule" (Lesch, quoted in Erlich, 2016, p. 124). For civilians who remain part of the uprising, ultra-conservative groups like ISIS can be just as much of a threat as the regime when they take control of a region (University of Minnesota, n.d.). Though the in-fighting of revolutionary groups has overshadowed the secular, pro-democracy movement, and though its impact has been diminished by the fracturing of the uprising, for many Syrians, the ultimate, if unlikely, goal is still a peaceful, secular, democratic Syria (Erlich, 2016, p. 121).

Ten years after the Arab Spring, however, Assad remains in power and is likely to stay there, though he now controls a devastated country with thousands dead and millions displaced. The Human Development Index, which ranks countries based on quality of life, now puts Syria in the Low Human Development Category with a score of 0.536 in 2017. In 2010, before the Arab Spring, it ranked at 0.644, in the Medium Category. Since 2010, all indicators including life expectancy, years of schooling, and GNI per capita have decreased (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Human Development in Syria now ranks among the lowest in the Middle East. Despite all this, however, art continues to be produced and shared even in the wake of COVID-19 and political uncertainty. This paper, focusing on the period of 2011-2017, will show how art in the Syrian Revolution has functioned as a tool of rebellion, evolving from initial slogans into a full movement encompassing many artistic styles and mediums. The goal of this Syrian art was not only to protest against the regime but also to share the Syrian struggle globally and to find ways to make meaning and restore the humanity of the artists and others involved in the conflict.

I will be examining three types of art and the roles they have played in the Syrian Civil War. These are, namely, graffiti, political cartoons, and digital art, which encompasses digital drawing, edited photography, and a combination of these. I chose these mediums because they each represent a different aspect of how art has been used and shared during the conflict.

Graffiti has been a central part of the protest movement since its inception, and it remains a way to share art and slogans within Syria. Though graffiti is most impactful on those within the country and is directed towards them rather than towards a global audience, it has also been photographed, shared, and archived online, which allows me, and others around the world, to access it. Political cartoons, by contrast, have been more widely shared from the beginning of the movement as they were published online or in print and shared widely in both circumstances, though primarily among Arabic-speaking populations. These were archived online as well, and the majority of those which I will reference come from the archive the "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution." Founded in 2011, this archive aims to catalogue the art produced in Syria and to thereby "enhance the impact of the artistic Syrian resistance, to reinforce its place in the revolution" (Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, n.d.). Though most of this art was originally shared online, especially on Facebook, the archive makes it easier to search through this art and also provides additional context including English translations, though I will add my own translation notes where relevant. Finally, I chose digital art because it has the widest global reach and has been the primary way in which art from the Syrian Civil War has made it into museums. Though this art is highly valuable, it is produced more for those living outside Syria than inside, and it provides a different view on the conflict than that which is produced in real time alongside the fighting in Syria.

By examining the role of art through graffiti, political cartoons, and digital art in that order, I will be tracing an approximation of how the conflict and artistic responses to it have evolved and become more well-known outside of Syria. Though there are many other media that could be examined, such as videos or dance and theater productions (as discussed in Miriam Cooke's 2017 book *Dancing in Damascus*), I chose these media due to the amount of available works, the influence of these categories, and my personal interest. I will be accessing all works included in this paper through digital archives, though in looking at different media, I will also address issues of audience that affect how people inside and outside Syria view and respond to the work. Before delving into this study, however, it is necessary to give an overview of Syrian history and the conflict. Though relevant notes will be provided in the text to situate the art in context, a general understanding of recent history in Syria will be useful to consider now.

The 20th century proved to be a tumultuous time in the history of the Middle East and particularly in the Levant region, which includes Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Prior to the First World War, this whole region was a part of the Ottoman Empire known as Bilad al-Sham; however, after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war, the region was divided into French and British Mandates according to the Sykes-Picot agreement. During the period of French rule, there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction among Syrians, which led ultimately to a French withdrawal in 1945 (Erlich, 2016, p. 57). Though Syria was now an independent country, there was a lack of stability both internally and externally as tensions with Israel increased. For a brief period, Syria and Egypt formed one country known as the United Arab Republic, but Syria withdrew due to a coup instigated by the Ba'athist party in

1961. Following additional coups and internal tensions, in 1970, Hafez al-Assad took power of the Ba'athist government and installed a military regime, which continues to this day with Bashar al-Assad (Erlich, 2016, p. 64).

Though the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War did not erupt until 2011, there were earlier uprisings, which set the stage for the 2011 revolution. Most notably, there was the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982, which was violently repressed and resulted in 10,000-25,000 deaths (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 11). In the 1990s, there was a further movement to address the horrific conditions in Syrian prisons, primarily through literature. As explained by Professor Miriam Cooke of Duke University, "These Bashar-era writings reveal that, before 2011, the wall of fear was cracking" (41). These narratives – explored in depth in Cooke's 2007 book *Dissident Syria* – not only exposed the graphic conditions of life in Assad's prisons, but they also used allegory to show how daily life under the regime was its own form of confinement that people wanted to escape.

In fact, the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings all arose from decades of tension within the Middle Eastern and North African countries who had experienced these regimes and suffered from a lack of freedom and control over their own lives. Leaders like Gaddafi (Libya), Mubarak (Egypt), and Ben Ali (Tunisia) catered to the interests of formerly imperial powers like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France at the expense of their own people. While interactions between the United States and Syrian governments have had their own share of difficulties (for example, the United States has recognized Syria a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979 (Otterman, 2005)), ultimately, the United States allowed the Assad regime to remain in power despite a decades-long record of poor human rights within the country. Though there were many commonalities between the governments and protestors in the Arab Spring countries, in Syria, there is the notable difference that the dictator remains in power and the protests sparked a devastating civil war.

Early reporting on the conflict in Syria is complex and varies depending on the sources. At the time, protests were already happening in other countries, and many, including Bashar al-Assad himself, did not believe that anything would happen in Syria (Erlich, 2016, p. 82). An interview from PBS News Hour that was published on March 18, 2011, interviews ordinary Syrian citizens as well as officials like the U.S. Ambassador to Syria. Though less than a week later, the same organization would publish an article about Syrian troops firing on civilian protestors (Brown, 2011), here, that seems unlikely. The article ends by saying that "Most of the analysts we spoke to until this week said they did not expect Syria to erupt in street protests, but they were quick to add that events are unfolding in ways no one can predict" (Lazaro, 2011).

The event that is reported as starting the protests is alleged to have occurred on March 16, 2011 in the city of Daraa when fifteen boys between the ages of ten and fifteen graffitied Arab Spring slogans onto the wall of a school and were promptly arrested and tortured by police (Macleod, 2011, April 2). This sparked the first protest movement as over 600 people gathered to call for the release of the children (Erlich, 2016, p. 82). Protests in the city quickly grew and also erupted in other cities including Damascus. The response each time was brutal and uncompromising, yet it would prove to be only the beginning of the civil war between the Assad regime and the Syrian people. Beginning in July 2011, the nonviolent protests moved toward armed struggle as public rallies continued to be met with violence. As a reaction to this, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) formed from national army defectors (Erlich, 2016, p. 91). The armed struggle within Syria quickly became complicated as numerous groups formed and fought with each other due to ideological differences. The FSA, with conditional support from the United

States and Turkey, was the first of these groups to form but lacked the capabilities to continue fighting as the war dragged on. Though the FSA attempted to unify various groups under its military command, the Supreme Military Council, it ultimately failed and led to the rise of numerous armed militias. Essentially, the Council was unable to incorporate the primary armed groups, many of which disagreed with the FSA's cooperation with Turkey and the United States CIA (Erlich, 2016, p. 95).

Though there have been many groups that have formed and dissolved during the course of the conflict, the primary players in addition to the FSA and the regime, are the Islamic Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The relations between these groups and the others related to them are complex as they have many similarities, particularly in the desire to establish a Sunni Islamic state in Syria. The Islamic Front is a combination of conservative groups, primarily Ahrar al-Sham, which, though it wanted to replace the Assad government with an Islamic state, recognized that Syrians would not yet accept this government (Erlich, 2016, p. 96); this is a primary difference when compared with the Islamic State. Initially supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and cooperating with the FSA and the United States, al-Sham proposed a slow implementation of Islamic government. However, al-Sham broke with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012 and aligned with other groups to form the Islamic Front. The Islamic Front then ceased cooperation with ISIS in January 2014. The commander of ISIS (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) had rejected efforts to reconcile the Sunni military groups, and the commander of the Islamic Front criticized this decision. In retaliation, ISIS killed an Islamic Front fighter, which prompted the Islamic Front to attack ISIS bases. In short, in early 2014, the Islamic Front not only opposed the Assad government but also the FSA (and by extension the United States), as well as al-Qeada affiliates including both al-Nusra and ISIS. Soon after, however, the Islamic

Front began to cooperate with al-Nusra due to a shared dislike of ISIS, and their attacks against ISIS earned them the support of Turkish and Saudi Arabian forces (Stanford University, 2017).

All groups in the conflict received backing from external actors, in the Middle East and further abroad based on how the individual groups aligned with the political goals of other countries. This support was primarily financial and allowed these groups to purchase arms and supplies for their fighters. In some instances, this also meant that the armies of other countries would fight alongside the groups with which they were aligned, but primarily this support of groups in Syria constituted a sort of proxy war by which external actors could advance their political goals in Syria with limited involvement. Both the Islamic Front and some of the al-Qaeda affiliates received support from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Turkey gave support to some of these smaller groups as well as to the FSA and Muslim Brotherhood, though the Muslim Brotherhood had a smaller impact on the actual conflict. Additionally, the FSA received support from the United States, while the Assad regime received support from Russia and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah.

The Syrian Refugee Crisis began in earnest in 2012 with the opening of the Za'atari Refugee Camp in Jordan, and by 2013, one million Syrians were recognized as refugees, one of the fastest-growing refugee communities in recent history (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). In late 2012 and into early 2013, there were initial reports that the Assad regime was using chemical weapons against his own people. The United States confirmed these reports in April 2013 following bombings in Aleppo and, in August of the same year, sarin bombs were dropped in the Ghouta region of Damascus. Sarin is among the most toxic nerve agents used in chemical warfare and can cause death within minutes; it is most often released as a vapor, which can be absorbed by inhalation or ingestion, as well as skin or eye contact (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011). This use of chemical weapons crossed Obama's proverbial "red line" and would lead to the U.S. intervention in Syria, but following international talks, it was decided, instead, that Syria would dispose of its chemical weapons stockpile. Though Assad complied with most of the guidelines given, in late 2014, it was discovered that chlorine gas was being used in Syria (Masterson, 2020). The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also grew in 2014, as did in-fighting between ISIS and other Islamist groups with varying ideologies. In June of that year, ISIS declared a caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq, prompting air strikes from the United States and five Arab countries as well as retaliation from local Kurdish forces in Turkey (BBC News, 2019). By 2014, it was estimated that half of Syria's 22 million people were affected by the conflict, and, as of 2015, there were 12 million displaced people. For context, this is among the largest refugee crises of the last eighty years. World War II and its resulting effects displaced over 40 million people. Since then, the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan (14 million displaced people) and the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence (10 million displaced people) are the only events to really rival the crisis in Syria (DePillis et. al., 2015).

Russian intervention began in late 2015 with air strikes that allegedly targeted ISIS sites but opposition forces claim that they struck anti-Assad rebels (BBC News, 2019). There was a resurgence of chemical attacks by the Assad regime in 2016, and, with Russian assistance, the Syrian Army retook Homs and Aleppo. Meanwhile Turkish and Kurdish forces aided in the fight against ISIS, while the US intervened in 2017 with a missile attack on an air base, arming of the Kurdish forces, and shooting down a fighter jet near Raqqa. The events of 2016 and 2017 greatly reduced the force of ISIS, and, in late 2018, Kurdish forces were able to push the remaining members of ISIS into an enclave on the Iraq border. 2018 brought new reports of chemical weapons attacks in Douma, which prompted the U.S., Britain, and France to carry out strikes in Syria. This did not, however, stop the advance of the Syrian Army, which by summer 2018 had recaptured the southern part of the country. With ISIS mostly defeated and the death of the leader al-Baghdadi, the U.S. withdrew from Syria in October 2019, though this was criticized as it led Turkish forces to attack the U.S.-allied Kurds in the north.

Following attempts at demilitarization, 2020 has seen the Assad regime secure in its power, though with a few rebel enclaves remaining in the Idlib province (where fighting has temporarily stopped thanks to a March 2020 ceasefire). Protests have nevertheless continued against the pronounced economic hardship, but little fighting has occurred, in part, due to the strain of the ongoing war and the coronavirus (BBC News, 2019).

Chapter 1: Graffiti

The Syrian Revolution began with graffiti. Fifteen boys between the ages of ten and fifteen were arrested by government forces in early March 2011 as they were believed to have created the anti-regime graffiti that appeared on the side of a Daara grain silo (Macleod, 2011, April 2). The graffiti was simple, a phrase they had seen on TV coverage of the Arab Spring in Tunis and Cairo: "The people want the fall of the regime." Following the arrests of the Syrian boys, protests spread throughout their province and soon throughout the country. As in other countries that were part of the Arab Spring, graffiti was a common way for people to express their dissatisfaction with the regime. According to historian Mark LeVine, art functions as a challenge to the power of a regime and accompanies revolutionary movements because it is an essential part of them. As he explains, "social and political (inter)action are inherently symbolic and performative" (LeVine, 2015, p. 1278), and because art has an emotional effect, it has the ability to inspire action. I would argue that graffiti plays an especially important role as revolutionary art because it is an art form that is created by and for anyone. It requires no education or credentials to create and display it, and there is no cost to see this art. It is simply there and can therefore become a unifying force that puts into words and images that which people may fear to announce aloud.

The decision to create graffiti was not taken lightly. The Assad regime made clear from the beginning that this was an action that would carry swift retribution, yet with no other recourse to create social change, revolution and the dangers that accompany it become worth the risk. In her 2018 book, Phyllis Taoua explores the idea of "meaningful freedom" and notes that rights like freedom of expression are related to democracy (24). Thus, a greater struggle for freedom of expression in Syria can be understood as part of a larger pro-democratic movement.

Much work has been done to archive the graffiti of the Syrian Revolution and preserve the art whose creation was so dangerous. While many images are preserved on Facebook pages and groups, one of the largest archives is the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution*,* which contains much of the work that I will reference. Sana Yazigi, a graphic designer, founded this archive in July 2011 in order to preserve and share the work that was being created in Syria (Cooke, 2017, p. 74). This preservation and curatorial work is incredibly important for transient art like graffiti, which is so important to a movement led by the people.

In an essay titled, "The Symbol and Counter-Symbols in Syria," Zaher Omareen explained that most of the art created as part of the revolution has been intended specifically to mobilize people. It responds to specific events and traumas faced by people and serves as a way to communicate shared pain and anger in order to inspire action. This is important since "[c]reative production responding to the events openly challenges the regime's symbols and propaganda" (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 98) and it creates a democratic dialogue in which ordinary people are given permission to express themselves and speak about what they believe. In this chapter, I will address four pieces of graffiti in order to examine different facets of the art form and how it may be used.

In Figure 1, the Syrian flag is shown with three stars (explained below), which functions as an affirmation of national identity and liberty from the Assad regime. It has direct connections with Syrian history and makes use of symbols that would be familiar to people in Syria or of Syrian origin. Figure 2 shows a mother and child leaving the city of Homs after the siege there, which returned the city to state control. This bears witness to those who were forced to leave the city and documents the memory of their existence. It is both a reminder of what has happened and a suggestion that the people will return and will continue to fight for their freedoms. Figure 3 is an example of graffiti stencils that were used to create graffitied symbols and slogans quickly so as to avoid being caught by state forces. It is primarily communicative but also shows solidarity and a resistance to regime propaganda. Figure 4 is the documentation and commemoration of a specific event, a practice which is similar to Figure 2 in bearing witness to the struggle that people are facing. Finally, Figure 5 is a creative reflection on the fight and its continuation. Its message is essentially the idea that the resistance will continue no matter what.

To begin the discussion of graffiti and its use as a form of artistic protest in Syria, I will first address the idea of the Syrian national flag. In Figure 1 (below), a figure is shown holding a flag with green, white, and black stripes and three red stars in the middle. This was the flag of Syria from 1932-1958, and it was used by Syrians who protested the government of the French Mandate (MacDonald, 2020). It came into use again in 2012 by the Syrian National Coalition (Cooke 45), an opposition group backed by several Western powers (Erlich, 2016, p. 103). Since 1980, however Syria has used the 1958 flag of the United Arab Republic, which features red, white, and black stripes and two green stars (originally meant to represent Syria and Egypt). This is typically flown alongside the flag of the Ba’ath Party to which Assad belongs.

The revolutionary flag (Figure 1) has an extra third star as it did in the early 20th century, thus linking this revolution to the one that condemned French occupation and called for Syrian freedom. It therefore creates a link between the Assad government and the colonial one and condemns the repressive actions of the Assad regime as being similar to a colonial power. The people are again uniting against a government which does not respect their freedoms or encapsulate their desires as a nation. Many call the current conflict the “Syrian Revolution” rather than the “Syrian Civil War,” as it is often referred to in Western media because of its goal of toppling the regime and transforming Syrian society, much in the way the French or American

Revolutions did historically. As summarized by Ziad Majed of the American University in Paris, the success of a revolution in part "resides in their having taken place and having held firm, in their return of the people to liberty and the re-appropriation of their destiny even if only in that instant before death. This is what the Syrian revolution has achieved" (qtd. in Cooke, 2017, p. 17).

The idea of a martyr is an important one in a revolution. The martyrs become heroes because they have died in service of their ideals and with the goal of liberating those who survive. This honor is given to many who have died in Syria in the last several years. Accompanying the flag in the image below [figure 1], the text reads "Peace be on all those who died so that we live in dignity." This is a revolutionary image and statement. Not only does it connect Assad's government with a colonial one and call for something more representative of the will of the people, but it also acknowledges those who have died in the fighting to be dying in service of a greater cause, which is the liberation of the Syrian people. The graffiti is both artistic – showing a waving flag that seems already to celebrate victory though the war is ongoing – and communicative – drawing connections between past and present and expressing hope for the future. As with other graffiti shown later in this chapter, it is a memorial to the tragedy that has already happened, but it does not lose itself in that tragedy and instead continues to assert hope for the future in order to motivate and support those who see it.

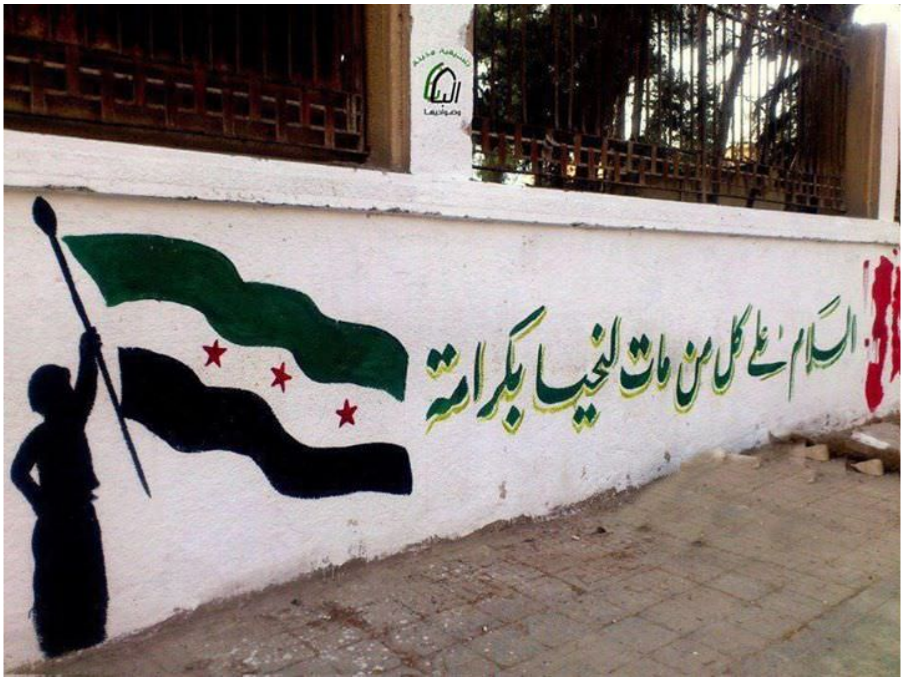

Figure 1: From Creative Memory Archive *,* Peace be on all those who died so that we live in dignity. *Aleppo, 2015*

The next piece of graffiti that I will discuss in some depth comes from Homs and responds to the 2014 siege of the city [figure 2]. In the first years of the conflict, Homs was an epicenter of the revolution, until it was retaken by government forces in May 2014 (Taylor, 2014). The siege on the city left it destroyed and nearly abandoned by the time Assad forces reclaimed it. A truce was negotiated between the two sides that allowed rebel forces to leave the city peacefully, but it remained a crushing loss to insurgents. Among the decimated walls of the city, some graffiti was created as a reminder of what had happened there. the photograph below shows a graffiti image of a mother and child leaving the city with the accompanying text: “We were forced to leave, but we leave our hearts here...We will return.” In the foreground, Homs (حمص) is written in large letters. The photo was taken by a member of the group Lens Young Homsi which was a group of young photographers who worked to document the revolution in Homs (Mohammed & Nelson, 2016). Similar collectives were founded in other cities.

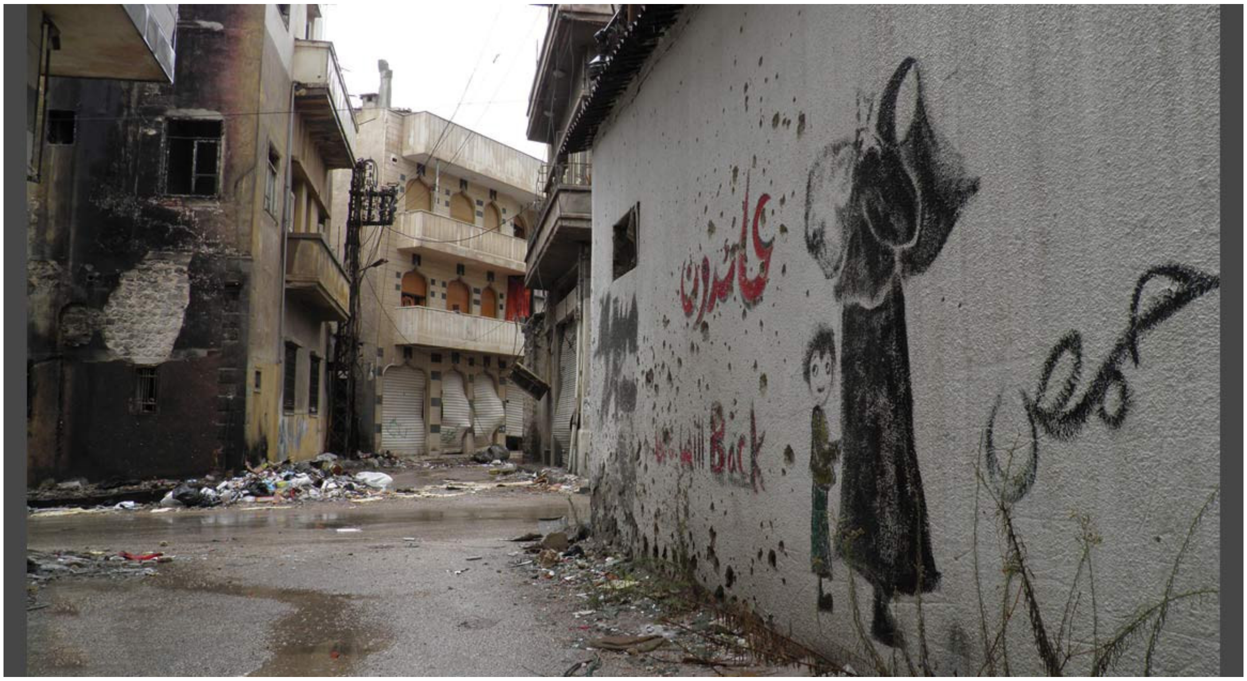

Figure 2: From [Politico Magazine,](#) We were forced to leave, but we leave our hearts here … We will return *Homs, 2014, photo by Lens Young Homsi,*

What is most striking in this image is the faces of the two people. The woman, who is bent forward slightly due to the weight of her bag, has no facial features, yet her face is turned towards the viewer. By contrast, the child not only has facial features (eyes, mouth) but is also smiling. I interpret these aesthetic choices as emphasizing a contrast between the current and future generations. Those who were part of the rebel exodus from Homs are represented in the downtrodden woman leaving her home with some of her identify lost, while the child represents a future generation who looks eagerly at the city of Homs as though he sees it whole rather than broken. The wall itself is part of the graffitist's art, as it is marked with numerous holes left from the fighting. Choosing this surface, in addition to the image and writing, is its own statement saying that although the rebels are forced to leave, the revolution and its hope remain, like the walls of the city themselves that are damaged but not destroyed.

As protests continued through 2011, the government's response was uncompromising, with thousands of people, including children, being detained and tortured. The number of protestors killed by government forces is not yet fully known: Human Rights Watch claimed that 3,500 people were confirmed to have been killed in Syria from March to November 2011 (Human rights Watch, 2012), while Amnesty International (whose report was published later) states that the number is likely over 4,300 (Amnesty International, 2012). Though the government did attempt to pass some reforms to allow more freedom of movement and media access, there were no substantial changes to Assad's rule, or the tactics used by his forces in combatting dissenters. Tear gas was commonly deployed against protestors, but often, security forces also fired into crowds without warning. According to Human Rights Watch, the protestors were most often peaceful and rarely posed a lethal threat to security forces except in response to violence initiated by these forces. Amnesty International has also documented that some members of security forces were killed for their refusal to fire on civilian protestors.

Government forces frequently targeted journalists and activists who were often detained and/or killed. In addition to well-known activists, anyone found to be creating anti-government graffiti faced retribution. With this impetus to create the graffiti as quickly as possible, early instances were typically limited to short phrases, which could be difficult to read clearly. However, graffiti became one of the most enduring and widely used forms of protest in Syria and spread throughout the country. One of the ways this happened, especially early in the conflict, was through the creation of stencils that could be sprayed quickly and with little effort (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 285). Artists and activist groups created a variety of stencils including political messages and the faces of martyrs who had already died. These were then shared online and could be downloaded and printed by anyone who wanted them. The stencils were portable and easy to hide, allowing graffiti artists to spray the stencil and disappear moments later. The prevalence of these stencils was an essential part of the 2012 campaign "Freedom Graffiti Week

Syria," which saw these stencils sprayed throughout the country as well as around the world – from neighboring Lebanon all the way to San Francisco in the United States (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 286).

Stencils were also useful in facilitating a unified message through the graffiti that appeared in Syria. Specific phrases and symbols could be found throughout the country illustrating the shared demands of the people. While the fighting in Syria quickly became complicated and involved numerous groups, the repeating symbols found in graffiti showed a united front against the Assad government. This unified, collective voice spoke not only to the Assad regime but also to outside observers and to the Syrian people themselves. The value of graffiti is that it can be created and found anywhere. It is an art form that is by and for ordinary people and can, therefore, become the direct expression of their voices. The stenciled symbols of the Syrian Revolution would serve as a reminder to the Syrian people themselves that they were not alone.

In February 2013, a campaign spread through several Syrian cities with just this purpose. This campaign, "Fingerprint of a Fighter," was one of many started by the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), a network of young activists who began organizing country-wide resistance efforts in 2011. According to one source interviewed by Syria Untold, the project had dual aims: First, to spread slogans and continue the revolution; and second, to remind the creators to honor the sacrifices made by martyrs and to demand freedom for detainees (Syria Untold, 2015). Figure 3 shows one of the pieces created as part of this campaign in the town of Tasil in Daara. The text accompanying this particular handprint reads, "Before making a change, you must change."

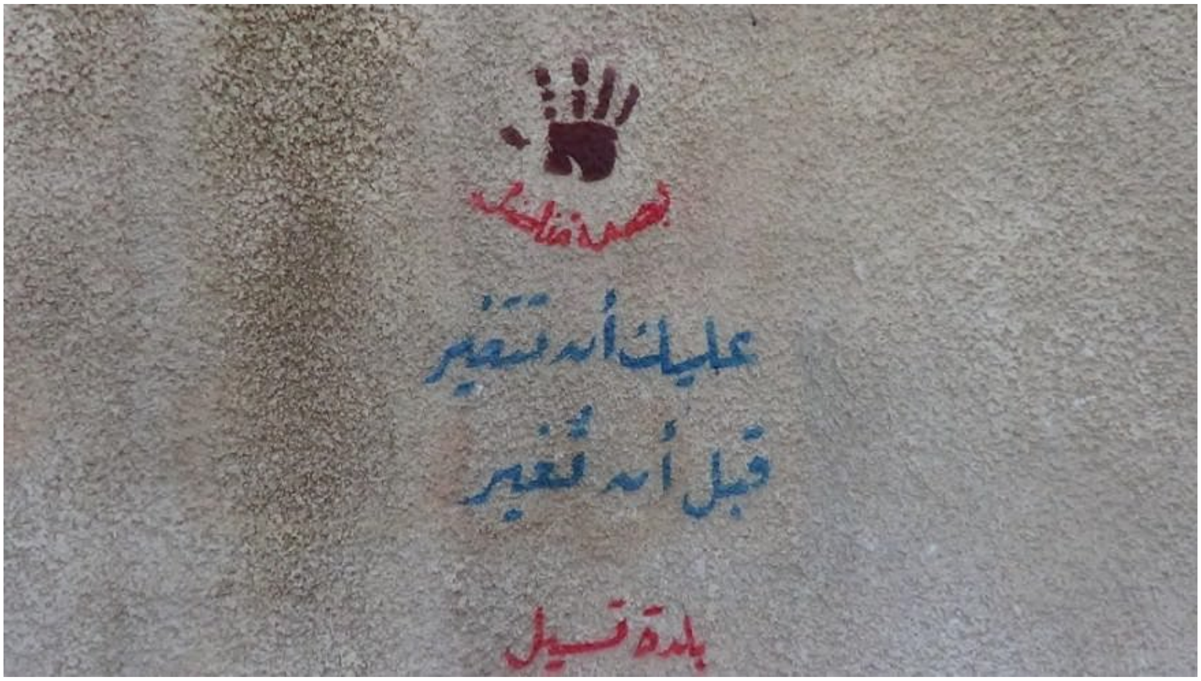

Figure 3: From Creative Memory Archive, Fingerprint of a Fighter *with text “Before making a change, you must change" Daara 2013*

The handprint that is the unifying part of this stenciled campaign brings humanity to the walls where it is posted. It is a mark that someone was here, and it therefore serves the aims of the LCC in Daara. The handprint is a simple design, but it is easy to identify and understand. It connects the viewer both with the person who made the graffiti and with the symbolic idea of the martyrs and those detained by the state. Anonymously, the handprint indicates and helps to create a sense of community among those who may be unable to speak freely about their shared beliefs and goals. The text accompanying this particular handprint urges viewers to think critically about who they are and what they do. Societal change requires the work of many individuals, who must be the change they want to create. The graffiti communicates this message while also reminding its viewers that they are not alone in the fight. Through the work of many individuals, collective change can happen, and, as the handprint indicates, the viewer is not alone in their struggles.

Idlib Province in Syria and its capital city of Idlib have been an important site of one of the nation's bloodiest ongoing battles. In 2015, the province came under opposition control but has been led by various factions since then. As the war in Syria has dragged on, rebel groups suffered from a lack of resources and internal unity, leading to the creation of numerous small groups affiliated with other countries or larger organizations like Al-Qaeda. Since 2015, the Syrian government has regained control over much of the country, but Idlib province remained one of the centers of rebel control and influence. Since the rebel takeover of the region, the graffiti has become more elaborate and colorful than during the early years or that which is found in other parts of the country where artists live in fear of government retribution. As of December 2, 2020, the archive Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution contains 486 pictures of graffiti from the Idlib Governate; in total, the archive contains some 980 images of graffiti in Syria since March 2011 when the civil war started.

Because of Idlib's continued importance as a rebel-held center, however, the Syrian government has been unrelenting with its response. Notably, chemical weapons have been deployed against civilians in the province on more than one occasion (Solvang, 2017). In particular, the Khan Sheykhoun attack on April 5, 2017 garnered international attention, but there is also evidence of earlier chemical weapons attacks. The full extent of these attacks is difficult to ascertain for certain, but Human Rights Watch documented 16 such attacks between 2014 and 2016. This evidence was made public after the alleged destruction of chemical weapons that the UN ordered in 2014 following the chemical attack on Ghouta.

The following two images of graffiti show two walls in Idlib in early 2017. Figure 4 is a direct response to the Khan Sheykhoun attack, which killed 90 people (among them, 30 children) and injured over 500. Figure 5, from March of that year, illustrates a line from one of the poems of Mohzel Mahdi al-Suqur, who primarily posts his work online.

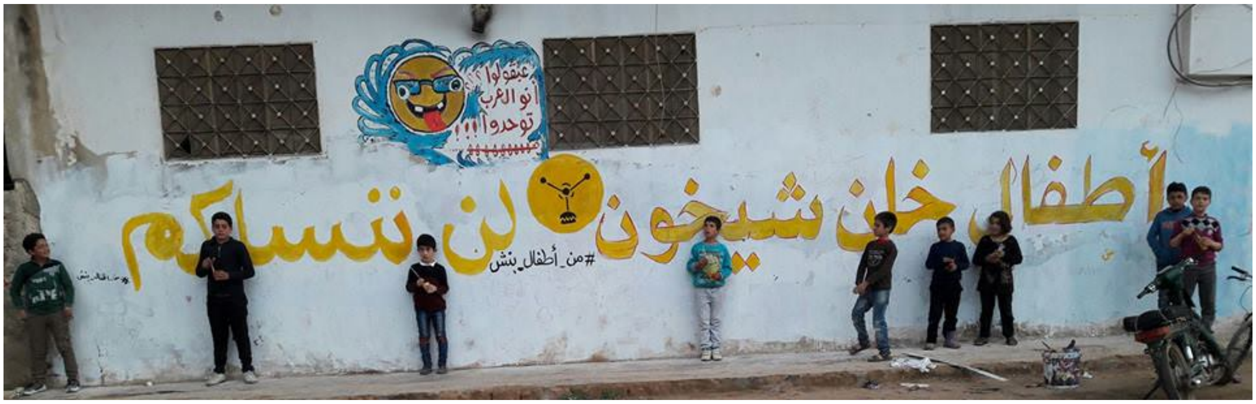

Figure 4: From [Creative Memory Archive](#) To The Children Of Khan Shaykhun, We Will Never Forget You *Idlib 2017*

Figure 4 is a sobering image that expresses the pain felt by those in Idlib who have watched the war kill and injure so many. The large text in yellow reads, “To the children of Khan Shaykhun, we will never forget you,” with a hashtag phrase written in smaller black letters that connects this with other work and discussion about the attack: #TheChildrenOfBinnish. The staging of the photo is also notable as it has included children spaced across the words as a direct acknowledgement of the children who died in the Khan Sheykhun attack. As with the stencil in Figure 3, this piece of graffiti is primarily communicative. There are artistic elements in the staging of the children and the script of the letters, which shows precision that took dedicated effort rather than just the few seconds it would take to spray a stencil or short slogan. Yet, the main purpose of this text is to create a memorial for those who died and who will be largely ignored and forgotten in the greater scope of the conflict. It is once again an effort to preserve the memory of the revolution and the lives that were lost, while also promising to continue the fight and refusing to let the deaths be in vain.

Slightly left of center in the upper third of the picture is a smaller work that is a secondary commentary on the situation. The writing in red reads, “They are saying that the

Arabs have united! Ha ha ha!" This refers to the international response against ISIS, which, to varying extents, involved numerous Arab countries (Boghani & Tsui, 2016). ISIS was a global threat, with the most immediate impact in the Middle East region, and because of this, several Arab countries and groups that otherwise struggle to cooperate with one another (i.e., Saudi Arabia and Iran-backed Shia militias; Turkey and the Kurds) united to fight against ISIS alongside Western countries. Some people, especially in the West, therefore stated that "the Arabs have united," but to those in Syria, fighting often on many fronts, this was widely perceived to be inaccurate. Residents of Idlib faced violence from their own state, so the unification of these governments was no reason to celebrate, and "unity" certainly did not represent the reality of life for many Syrians. Much of the graffiti produced in Syria during the war was similar to this usage in how it directly responded to events of the conflict and offered a local perspective: Mourning those who had died while mocking the suggestion of Arab unity during a war in which the government used chemical weapons on its own people.

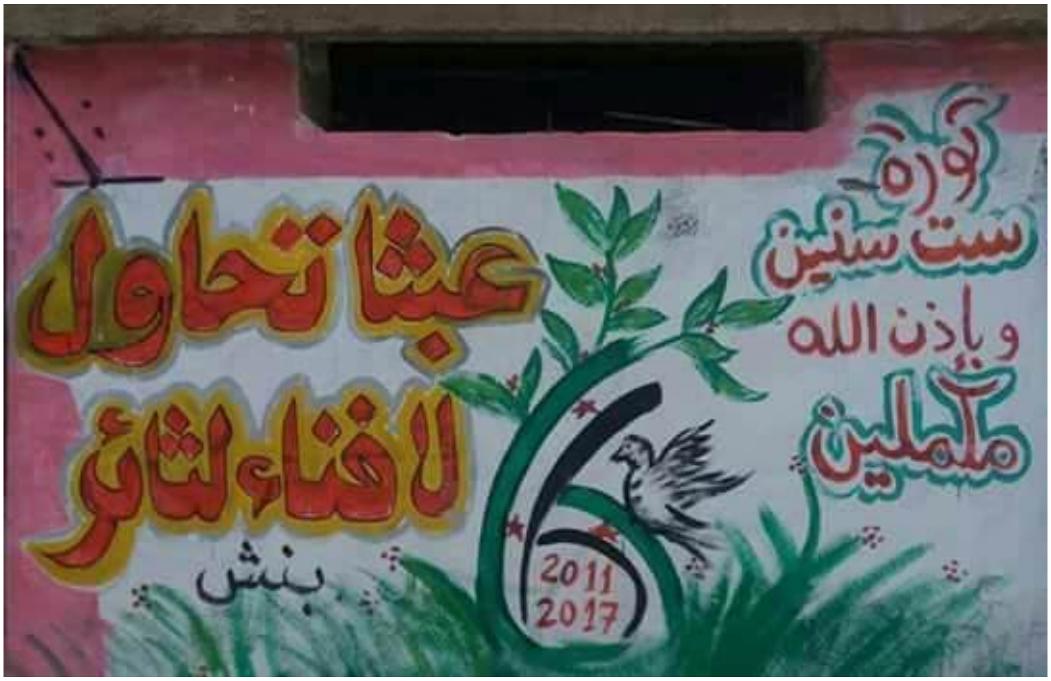

Figure 5: From *[Creative Memory Archive,](#)* Rebels are Eternal, *Idlib 2017*

The image above shows the enduring spirit of the revolution [Figure 5]. Taken in Binnish, Idlib Province in March 2017, the writing on the right in red outlined in green reads, “Six years of revolution and we continue, God willing.” The writing on the left in red outlined in yellow quotes a line of poetry by Mohzel Mahdi al-Suqur, “In vain you try to destroy a rebel” (my translation). According to the archive, an activist named Mohannad al-Khalidiya painted this same sentence on the buses that transported rebels out of Homs at the end of the battle there in 2014 (Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution).

A dove takes centerstage in the image above as a visual representation of the hope for peace. To the left of the dove, the green and black stalks of the plant curve into the shape of a 6 to represent the six years of fighting, while also making a portion of the Syrian flag with two red stars in the white space between them. A third star appears under the dove and looks as though it will soon join the others to create the three-starred free Syrian flag when the revolution is complete. The bright colors of this graffiti are hopeful and eye-catching. The use of green is commonly a representation of new life and new beginnings in art, and this a plausible suggestion in this image as well. Though the text acknowledges the struggles of the fighting, the image as a whole is ultimately hopeful. Created in mid-March 2017, this recognizes the anniversary of those first protests in Darra and celebrates the fact that the people are still fighting and working towards peace and freedom. Graffiti is an art created for those who see it by chance. It is meant to speak to the people who see it and, here, it offers a message and image of hope in the midst of a brutal and ongoing war.

Graffiti is an art form that insists on an immediate response; it begs those who see it to have hope and continue the fight. As such, it has an impact. Graffiti can be used to share messages and slogans, to commemorate those who have been lost, and to encourage others not to give up. At times, it can do all three at once. From the early days of the revolution, graffiti has played a role in leading people to protest, and as the fighting evolved, it also became a vehicle to show unity and to address the traumas from specific events. I have addressed in this chapter pieces of graffiti that use symbols (the Syrian flag and the "Fingerprint of a Fighter") to draw connections between people and events and unify a fractured movement within a larger narrative. Other works such as Figure 2, "We were forced to leave," from Homs and Figure 4, "To the Children of Khan Shaykhun," from Idlib document the events of the fighting and the tragedy that has ensued, while also promising the viewer that the fight is not over. Figure 5, "Rebels are Eternal," also interacts with the history of the conflict in commemorating the anniversary of its beginning, and as with the other pieces shown, it reiterates the promise that the fight will continue. This is the overarching theme of the graffiti in Syria and its purpose in the conflict: it creates unity, and it asserts over and over again that the people will continue to fight. This is, in one respect, a message to the regime, yet it must be acknowledged that Assad himself is unlikely to see this graffiti that is spread through the streets of the whole country. Really then, this is a message from the people to the people. It recognizes their pain and fear but also praises their resilience. As stated by Omareen and quoted in the beginning of this chapter, this art is meant to mobilize people. A long conflict is naturally draining, yet the art continues to appear, and the people continue to fight. In my view, this is a positive feedback-loop in which artists create the graffiti that promises to continue the fight, and people, seeing it, are motivated to continue, which prompts the artist to continue to create and mobilize and fight.

The graffiti gives a voice to the people who create it as well as to those who see and are influenced by it. It therefore builds a national identity among a fractured people and joins them in solidarity. Its documentation of the events and tragedies of the conflict allow artists and ordinary people to come to terms with some of the trauma simply by acknowledging it and having the opportunity to experience the violence’s emotional impact. This, just as much as slogans and symbols, motivates people to continue the fight because they have this acknowledgement that they are not alone in their struggle.

Chapter 2: Political Cartoons

Revolutionary movements and political protest in general are broadly considered serious, somber processes. They are, after all, movements that are most often characterized by violence and tragedy, not humor. However, humor does play a role in some social movements that is worth studying. This is discussed in depth in the *International Review of Social History*'s 2007 volume "Humor and Social Protest" in which the authors examine diverse historical periods and the satire, cartoons, or other jokes that existed to create a shared social identity among members of an oppressed class. There are two main ways in which humor can serve the interests of social movements as discussed in this volume: It unites the people against a common enemy, and it undermines existing power structures (Hart, 2007).

In this chapter, I will examine these two roles of cartoons and how they have functioned in Syria during the civil war. I will begin by looking at how cartoons undermined the regime from the beginning, namely by depicting and mocking Bashar al-Assad, something that was not previously permitted. This was a direct attack on the state and the limitations placed on freedom of expression, and it was a cultural production that resonated with the people. It indicated a change in how people interacted with the regime and how they allowed the regime to influence their lives. As the protests continued, so did the cartoons. Despite the regime's violent retribution, artists continued to depict Assad as the conflict grew and changed. These cartoons undermined regime power by showing no respect for Assad and, in fact, creating even more derisive cartoons that portrayed Assad as the enemy of the people.

In the second part of the chapter, I will examine one artist in particular who was well-known in Syria for decades before the revolution. Ali Ferzat was critical of the government for many years, and people loved it, even when the criticism was masked in symbolic imagery. In the

1970s, Ferzat's column was briefly removed from Syria's official newspaper, *Al-Thawra* (Revolution), and circulation promptly dropped 35% (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p.169). When, in 2011, Ferzat became one of the first Syrian cartoonists to depict Assad himself in a cartoon, he became a target of the regime. Ferzat's work bridges the two roles of cartoons as tools of unification and subversion. His work is intensely critical, not only of Assad, but of the any public rhetoric that fails to engage with the needs and lives of the people on the frontline in Syria. Ferzat has been a unifier of the Syrian Revolution through his art and has refused to stop creating even as he now lives in exile.

Finally, I will study cartoons that address specific events of the conflict. Though these are critical of Assad and the international response to the war, their larger role is providing a darkly humorous lens through which one can look at the conflict. These are cartoons that acknowledge the pain of the ongoing struggle and what often seems like futility in continuing to fight or have hope. The cartoons are not ones that make a viewer laugh out loud because the joke is typically "gallows humor," which is produced and shared because it encapsulates pain that is inexpressible through words alone. In capturing a shared history, this work is grimly unifying and serves as a connection between Syrians both inside and outside the country, as they confront an ongoing tragedy.

As with the other artwork I am covering, I have access to these cartoons through digital archives created and maintained by Syrians who aim to preserve the artistic production of this time period. The majority of cartoons under discussion are taken from the "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution" and "Syrilution Creative Arts" online archives. Though many cartoonists, like Ali Ferzat, whom I will discuss in-depth in this chapter, had or have their own websites, these curated archives made it possible to sort through hundreds of cartoons produced in the 2011-2017 period that I am studying.

Cartoons were a means of expression that was allowed in Syria prior to 2011 and many artists took advantage of this to express political opinions. However, this was not a complete freedom of expression; there were rules that had to be followed. Cartoonist Ali Ferzat (sometimes written Farzat) summarized this in a 2012 interview where he explained, "You couldn't target the president or those around him with jokes or drawings. Criticism had to be more symbolic and subtle. You could criticise the president, as long as it was the president of Nicaragua" (Amnesty International, 2020). The symbolism mentioned by Ferzat includes much of his own work prior to the Arab Spring in which he used an empty chair to represent the Syrian government when he criticized it (Hills & The World Staff, 2020).

Prior to the 2011 Arab Spring protests, it was a generally established rule in many Middle Eastern countries that cartoonists did not explicitly mock the head of state. It was not until 2011 that artists both in Syria and elsewhere – for example, Mohammed Anwar in Egypt – began to challenge this and to create cartoons that identified the dictator whom they were attempting to overthrow. While I speak in more detail about Ali Ferzat later, I will first address more generally the cartoons that made fun of Assad for the first time. These were notable in that they represented an abrupt and dramatic change in the way people interacted with the regime. Although harsh punishments were likely (and did occur), political cartoonists, much like the graffiti artists in the previous chapter, did not let this deter them from creating the statements they wanted to make about Assad and his government.

"The Real Reform" [figure 6] is a caricature from April 22, 2011 that was originally shared on Facebook and is currently preserved in the "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution

Archive.” The artist for this cartoon identifies himself as “Adonis” in the lower left of the image below. The title, “The Real Reform” (top right) refers to Assad’s attempts to stifle protest in Syria.

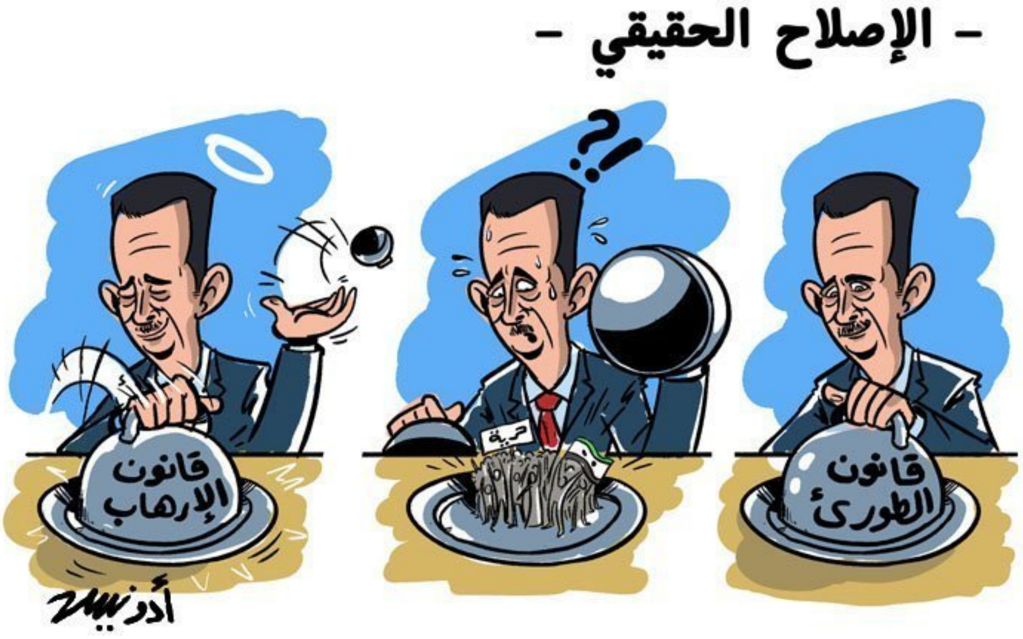

*Figure 6: From [Creative Memory Archive](): * The Real Reform *by Adonis, 2011*

There are three small panels in the cartoon depicting Assad; these are to be read from right to left as one would read text in Arabic. In the first image (right), Assad is calm but perhaps a little nervous. In front of him is a plate, suggesting food, but meant to represent the people of Syria, which are covered by the “Emergency Law.” In the second image, Assad lifts the lid to see that the people are protesting and calling for “Freedom” (written on the small sign in that image). Assad is surprised and apparently concerned by this, with sweat dripping down his forehead. Thus, in the third panel (left), he throws away the old lid and replaces it with one that now reads “Anti-terrorism Law.” Believing he has fixed the problem, Assad is now smiling and has a halo over his head.

These laws – the Emergency Law and Anti-Terrorism Law refer to events that took place in April 2011. The "Emergency Law" had at that point been in place in Syria for 48 years after Hafez al-Assad enacted it in 1963. When the Ba'ath party of Assad took control of Syria in a military coup, a state of emergency was promptly enacted, which placed the country under martial law and gave the government the ability to infringe on the human rights of its citizens as well as the rights (like freedom of speech and assembly) that were promised in the Syrian constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Under this law, there are many vague crimes like "offenses against public authority" that can and have been widely interpreted in order to violate the freedoms of Syrian people. Additionally, the law allowed for civilians to be tried by the Supreme State Security Court, which does not have to follow the general legal framework of other courts and was, therefore, used to prosecute human rights activists (Human Rights Watch, 2007). While one of the main uses of the state of emergency was to prosecute any perceived threats to the regime, it was often justified publicly through reminders that Israel occupied the Syrian Golan Heights (Macleod, 2011, April 20).

Pro-reform demonstrators in 2011 included repealing the state of emergency as one of their top demands, so it was a victory near the end of April to learn that the government had passed a bill repealing the state emergency, abolishing the State Security Court, and legalizing peaceful protests (Al-Jazeera, 2011). However, on the same day that the law was repealed, security forces fired on demonstrators in Homs and killed six people. In response, workers in the city instigated a 3-day strike to protest the violence and deaths. Al-Jazeera reported on both the repeal of the Emergency Law and the tense situation in Homs on April 19th. The article ends on a grim note that foreshadows what was to come; it describes the city as a "war zone" with all the shops closed and a stand-off between protestors and security forces. Similarly, a BBC article noted that the mass protests organized across the country would be “an early test of the government’s intentions” with many people worried that Assad would resort to a different restriction like an anti-terrorism law instead (BBC News, 2011).

And indeed, the BBC article and the cartoon in Figure 6 were both prescient: Syria’s Counter-terrorism Law would go into effect on July 2, 2012 (Tahrir Institute for Middle Eastern Policy [TIMEP], 2019). Though more delayed than many expected, there was not any significant change in Syria following the repeal of the state of emergency. In fact, April 22, the day Figure 6, “The Real Reform,” was published, was noted by Reuters as “Syria’s bloodiest day of unrest” as protesters in Homs, Hama, Damascus, and Izra’a all met with violence (Oweis, 2011). BBC quoted one former member of Assad’s government, Abdel Halim Khaddam, who summarized the situation, saying, “It is not the state of emergency that arrests people and takes them to jail and it is not the state of emergency that fires on people” (BBC News, 2011). It is, in both these cases, the government of the Assad regime that perpetrates such actions against the people, and, for that reason, it is notable and necessary that the cartoons of this time no longer used symbols to mask the fact that it was Assad who was responsible for the oppression of the people.

A cartoon titled “Bashar Snorting Destruction” (figure 7) takes this a step further. This particular cartoon was drawn by Amjad Wardeh, a graduate of the Damascus University Faculty of Fine Arts, who, as of 2015, was living and working in Istanbul.

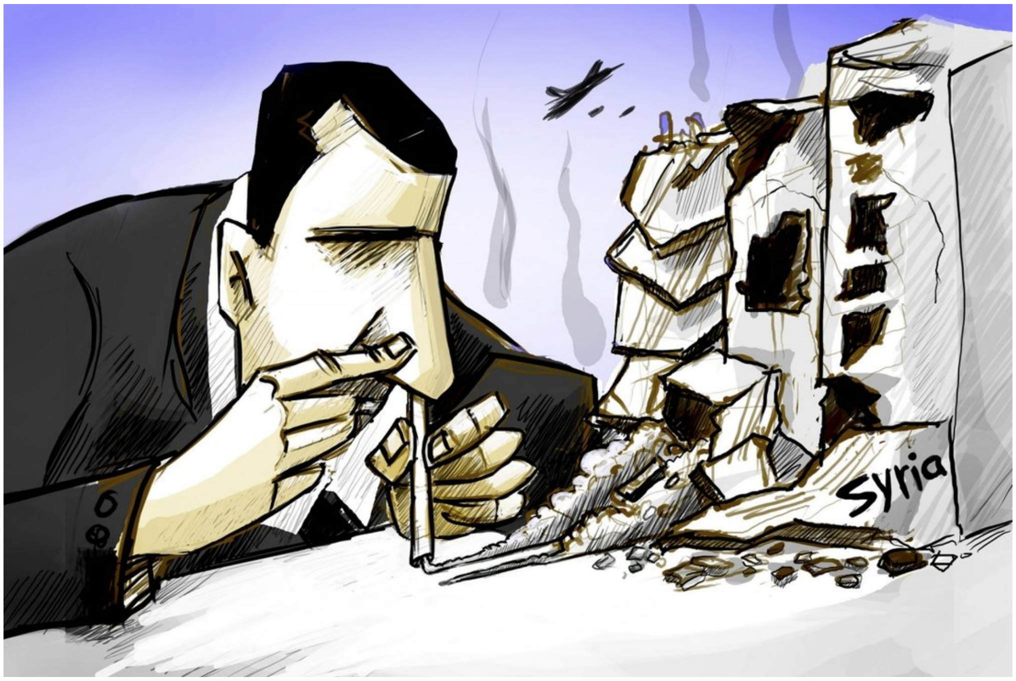

Figure 7 From South China Morning Post*:* Bashar Snorting Destruction *by Amjad Wardeh, 2015; also included in* Dancing in Damascus *by Miriam Cooke, page 49*

As indicated by the title, the image shows a caricatured Assad snorting the debris of a bombed building as one would snort cocaine. Assad's nose is especially exaggerated in the image, something that indicates arrogance. One cartoonist, Abdullatief al-Jeemo, stated that because of this association, he always draws Assad with a large nose (Boylan, 2015). In addition to arrogance, the drawing of Assad snorting the destruction of Syria indicates a moral depravity and the idea that he gets high off the war and its impacts.

Published as part of a collection in early 2015, this piece addressed the growing tragedy in Syria as 2014 was (at the time) the worst year of the conflict with 76,000 deaths, almost half of the then total (Gladstone & Ghannam, 2015). In 2014, Syria also saw the growth of ISIS and the refugee crisis, which would make international news throughout 2015. It was estimated that half of Syria's population was affected by the conflict in some way and in need of aid (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2018). Assad, however, was unfazed by these mounting tragedies. In fact, in June 2014, Syria had a general election in which Assad won

88.7% of the vote. Officials described Assad’s win as a “vindication” of his campaign against rebels who wanted to remove him from power (Reuters Staff, 2014). Notably, however, voting was only conducted in government-controlled areas and voting against Assad was equated with signing one’s own death warrant (Darke, 2014). It is not hard to imagine then the idea of an arrogant Assad “getting high” off the destruction of Syria. Three years into the conflict, he was still in power and seemed unlikely to lose that position. The election was a victory for Assad, even though millions of Syrians were classified as internally displaced or refugees at this time.

One of those who was displaced by the time this image was published was cartoonist Ali Ferzat. In August 2011, Ferzat made international news after he was brutally beaten by agents of the Assad regime. Based in Damascus and attuned to the dissatisfaction with the Assad regime, Ferzat had long published controversial cartoons, many of them online, as they were banned in Syrian publications. With the emergence of country-wide protests in 2011, the regime cracked down even harder on any dissent. Ferzat was one of several artists and writers who were arrested in August of that year (Flock, 2011). Prior to 2011, Ferzat and others had been allowed some measure of free speech; when Bashar al-Assad first took power in 2000, he seemed like a less threatening man than his father Hafez al-Assad.

Many in Syria and abroad hoped that this would mark a change in Syrian politics as Assad did allow more freedoms at the time. When Ali Ferzat hosted a show in Damascus in 2000 to display some of his cartoons that had been banned from newspaper publication, Assad himself attended the show, praised Ferzat’s work, and encouraged him to start his own newspaper (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 169). For a time, Ferzat had a friendship with Assad and stated that he “used to communicate directly with him beyond the control of *Mukhabarat,* the secret police” (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 169-170). Ferzat’s friendship with Assad is clearly a subject of interest as it is highly unexpected from a leader who allows for very little criticism of his actions; however, although this detail was frequently mentioned in the sources I read, there was little detail given about the relationship besides what I have included here. It was during this time that Ferzat began publishing his newspaper *Al-Doumar* (The Lamplighter), but as the newspaper published its criticism of government scandals and corruption, Assad's support waned. After just over two years, *Al-Doumari* ceased publishing, and Ferzat's friendship with Assad was over (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p.170). Ferzat then began to post many of his cartoons online where they continued to circulate in Syria, though he was still careful in his critiques not to attack Assad directly.

In 2011, many things changed: The people rose up against the government and were met with harsh retaliation, which only provoked further outrage including more specific targeting of Assad by artists like Ferzat. This, then, was the impetus for Ferzat's arrest and beating during which government agents crushed his hands before leaving him for dead by the side of a road (Ali, N., 2011). Photos of Ferzat in the hospital circulated internationally and drew attention to the violent suppression of free speech in Syria with even the White House condemning Ferzat's treatment (Amnesty International, 2020). Cartoonists, in particular, responded by creating art that responded to the moment (Cavna, 2011). Ferzat himself drew a self-portrait showing himself in the hospital, bandaged and bruised but still giving a middle finger to the Assad regime in a promise to continue fighting through his cartoons (Cooke, 2017, p. 48). Ferzat said at the time that he found courage to continue drawing because he was humbled by the people "who cannot draw or write, but who are sacrificing their lives for freedom" (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 171).

Though no longer heading news stories about Syria, Ferzat has continued his resistance. Searching for his work in the archive "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution" shows images from as recently as 2019, and in an interview with Amnesty International in May 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020), Ferzat also created a new cartoon critiquing the attitude of Western countries toward Syrian refugees. Due to the international condemnation of Assad following the attack on Ferzat, he was able to escape to Kuwait where he continued to critique not only Assad and the Syrian government but also the international response. In this section, I will examine two of Ferzat's cartoons from 2012 and 2014 respectively that address these issues, and which are characteristic of the political cartoon genre that maintains a low tolerance for meaningless political rhetoric.

The first Ferzat cartoon, "International Sympathy" [figure 8], is from 2012 and depicts well-dressed world leaders crying into a bucket that is held by a man who represents the Syrian Opposition (as written in the Arabic label beside his head). Though the cartoon is from 2012, it is aptly described by something Ferzat said in a 2015 interview with *The Independent*: "The West stood looking at the biggest tragedy in the world and…they used the policies of the three Monkeys: I do not see, I do not hear and I do not talk."

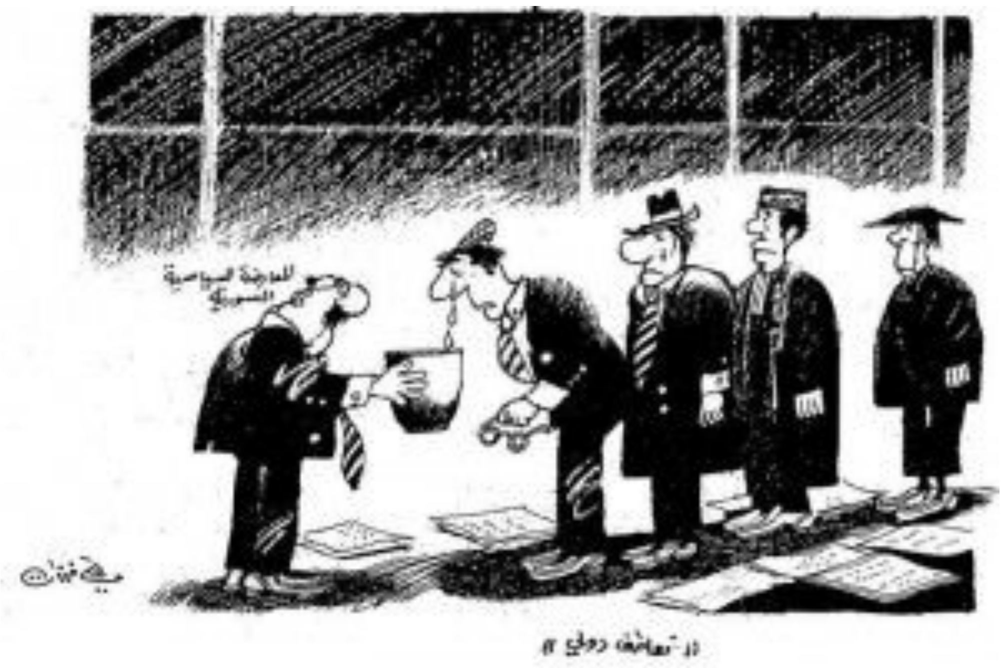

Figure 8: From [Creative Memory Archive](#): International Sympathy *by Ali Ferzat, 2012*

To understand the mockery of international actors in this cartoon, it is necessary to understand the events of 2012. The cartoon itself was published in May of that year, and while I will focus on the events of spring 2012, I will also give a general summary of the whole year since the drawing remained a relevant depiction of how the international community responded to the crisis in Syria, especially from a Syrian perspective.

In February 2012, the Assad regime increased its attacks on the city of Homs, which was a center for rebel activity early in the conflict. In March, one year after the first protests, the UN Security Council endorsed a non-binding peace plan, though this was supported by Russia and China only after it was modified to a weaker version than the original (BBC News, 2019). The final version of this plan included six points meant to bring an end to hostilities and address the concerns of Syrian protestors. Regarding the fighting itself, the plan stated that “the Syrian government should immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centers, and begin pullback of military concentrations in and around population centers" (Hamilton, 2012). However, as this plan was non-binding, it quickly proved to be ineffective with violations from both the regime and the opposition. Assad's regime also became especially hostile to UN peacekeepers at this time, including refusing to approve their visas or allow them to use their own helicopters and other assets (Associated Press, 2012). By mid-June, UN observers were forced to suspend their work in Syria due to the violence that continued to escalate, though there was still hope of resuming it. While some members of the United Nations believed that it was still possible to salvage the peace plan, they also believed that a threat of force would be necessary to enforce the plan. Russia and China, however, were vehemently opposed to this proposal (BBC News, 2012), and ultimately the fighting continued. In August 2012, Kofi Annan, the UN envoy to Syria who had proposed the six-point plan, resigned, marking the failure of the proposal and the UN observer mission in Syria (Gladstone, 2012).

This failure of the United Nations to adequately address the ongoing conflict in Syria is the substance of Ferzat's cartoon. The continual vetoes from Russia and China meant that the sympathy of the international community was worth very little to those Syrians who were continuing to suffer. July 2012 saw the opening of the Za'atari Refugee Camp, which would soon become one of the largest in the world, and by the end of the year the United Nations High Council on Refugees recognized 12,000 Syrians as refugees, while a total of 500,000 were in some way seeking refuge in another country (UNHCR, 2018). It was also in 2012 that the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed in Qatar to represent the Syrian people (with the exclusion of Islamist militias), but it too saw the sort of international sympathy depicted by Ferzat. The Arab League was hesitant to take sides in the conflict or to fully acknowledge the group, and by December 2012 only Turkey and the Gulf

States (along with the United States, Britain, and France) recognized it as representing the interests of the Syrian people (BBC News, 2019). This, however, did not guarantee the kind of support needed by Syrians, and the power of Russia and China on the UN Security Council would continue to hinder efforts to make peace in Syria.

While this first cartoon recognizes international problems related to the war in Syria, the second (figure 9) is more abstract in concept, though contextually, it relates to the rise of ISIS. Created in 2014, this cartoon demonstrates how terrorist groups are products of dictatorial regimes. The writing on the dictator's sash is simply this phrase, "Dictatorial regimes" or الأنظمة الديكتاتورية.

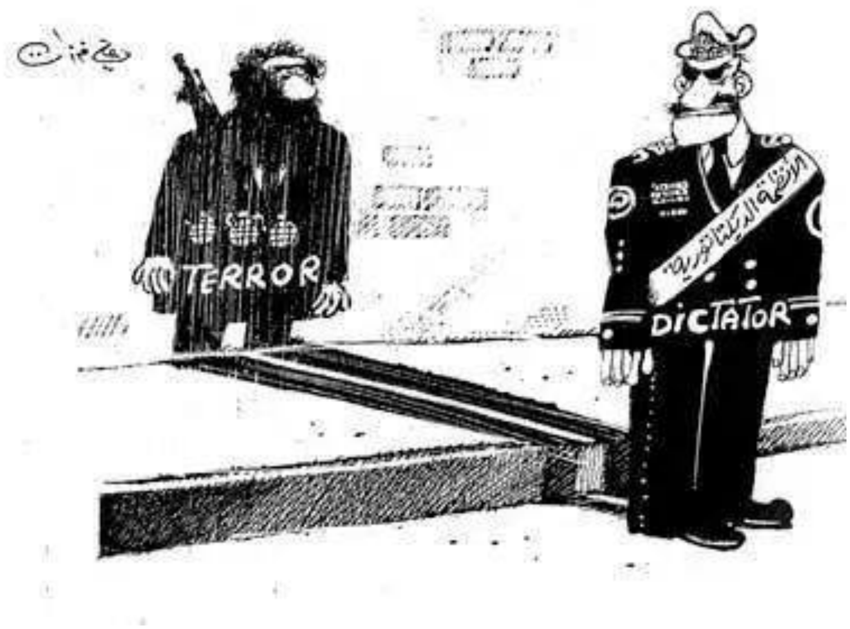

Figure 9: From Creative Memory Archive: Untitled *by Ali Ferzat, 2014*

The dictator wears a military uniform with the sorts of decoration that would indicate an impressive military career but are more likely meant to be a facetious indicator of how dictators bestow such awards upon themselves. Within the context of the Arab Spring, this would likely remind people of Gaddafi, mocked in *Newsweek* as a "Mad Dictator" who was the spiritual successor of Uganda's Idi Amin (Roberts, 2011). The terrorist in the cartoon lacks military awards but wears a few grenades and has a gun over his shoulder. As both characters are meant to be a type of warmonger, it is a notable distinction that the terrorist carries his weapons, while the dictator has only his awards. This can be seen as indicating their relative degrees of power as the terrorist does his own fighting, while the dictator commands armies to achieve his goals. In order to make a connection with the fundamentalist Islamist militias, the terrorist also has a bushy beard that covers most of his face in contrast to the dictator who has a clean-shaven chin but a handlebar mustache, like a classic movie villain. This, again, indicates the class of the two men. The terrorist does not have the well-maintained appearance of the dictator, and because of the connection between beards and orthodox Islamist groups, a viewer may also assume that he is a religious person, and that religion may motivate his actions. By contrast, the dictator does not have a beard, and this may draw a connection to Mubarak in Egypt who did not approve of beards because of their connection with Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which he considered to be a threat (BBC News, 2013). As this was published in 2014 at a time when the threat of ISIS was prominent and images frequently showed religious extremists with full beards, the dictator's lack of one may indicate more secular and Western ties, though, with the handlebar mustache, he, too, is depicted as someone we may see as a threat.

The key takeaway from this cartoon, however, is clear without deep examination of the drawing: Terrorists are the shadow of dictatorial regimes. There are two ways to interpret this. First, there is the idea that terrorist organizations arise and become prominent due to the oppression of regimes and the people's collective desire for a different form of government. The cartoon then is demonstrating how groups like ISIS came to be; the youth was so disillusioned by their government that extremism became an acceptable alternative. While this is true and has been widely reported (Darden, 2019), there is also the second explanation which is that the regime itself is a terrorist group because the possibility for peaceful, productive change at the national level is almost impossible. Despite the dictator's presentable military posture and costume, the truth of the regime lies in its shadow, which, through its violent actions, is comparable to a terrorist group. Rather than choosing explanations, I think it is entirely possible to understand the cartoon with both ideas at once. Terrorist groups arise from the abuse of dictatorial regimes, which can themselves be terrorists. With that in mind then, the physical depictions of the cartoon's characters do not matter because the characters are the same person. Both drawings are caricatures of a cultural idea of either a dictator or a terrorist, but they are actually both stereotyped images that play with notions of who is a terrorist and who is a dictator. The physical differences matter very little because their actions are similar; in fact, the largest difference between a dictatorial regime and a terrorist group is the amount of power they wield since a regime which controls a country has the capacity to be more dangerous than a guerilla terrorist group.

Ferzat's cartoons frequently have this understated meaning, and this was necessary especially in the days prior to the 2011 uprising. When he still published his cartoons in the newspaper, each one had to be approved, so messages were often subtle in order to slip past these controls. Said Ferzat, "At that time, the minister [of information] was a bit of an ass, and he would say 'yes' because he didn't understand it. The next day people saw the cartoon and immediately comprehended its meaning, because it was just a matter of common sense" (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 169). Ferzat's cartoons became more direct when he began to specifically address Assad and the ongoing situation in Syria, but there were others who responded directly to the events of the conflict with a different style that had not been honed by decades of work under the Assad regime.

The works in the next section are digital creations that were published online. Online digital publication is a response to the war that will be addressed further in the next chapter. Here, however, the emphasis is on how these works address the events in Syria and the confrontational tone of the images that reflects an evolving shift in the people's response to mounting tragedies and the continued inaction of those who could help. Anger and frustration are the most prevalent emotions in the following cartoons, which come from 2015 and 2016 respectively. They are the most recent cartoons in this section and were created by artists who had already endured years of this painful conflict. Though caricatures of Assad and cartoons with the symbolic satire of Ferzat continue to be produced, there has also been a shift towards more explicit works that clearly show the frustration of the artists who depict the events in Syria with brutal dark humor.

"Russian Veto" (figure 10) depicts the United Nations as a single firefighter confronting a burning Syria. The water hose that would allow the United Nations to put out the fire is, however, crushed by a large scythe labeled Russia and meant to represent the Russian veto. This leaves the UN firefighter unable to help as only a few drops of water come out of the hose and are of absolutely no use against the raging fire. Though archived in 2015, this comic most likely refers to the May 2014 veto to the UN resolution that would have referred the humanitarian crisis in Syria to the international criminal court, which Human Rights Watch described as a betrayal of Syrian victims whose rights were violated (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

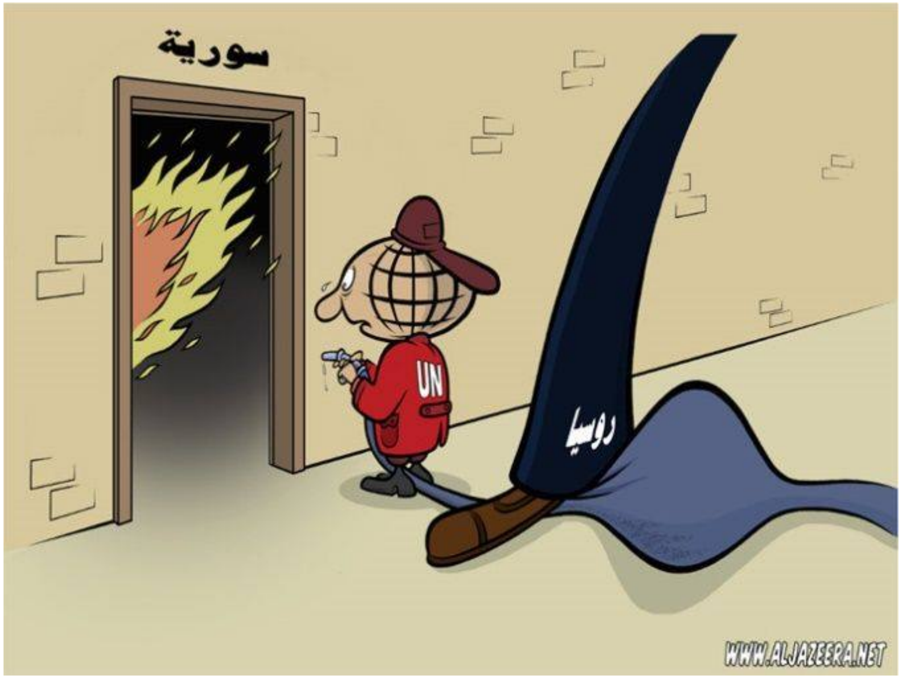

Figure 10: From Syrilution Archive: Russian Veto *by Akram Raslan, 2015*

The scythe representing Russia is likely meant to reference the hammer and sickle symbol that was part of the Soviet Union flag. This can also be taken ironically since the hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag were meant to represent the workers and peasants respectively (Smith, 2016), yet here Russia is much more supportive of the Assad regime than the Syrian people. This veto was the fourth time Russia and China went against other members of the UN Security Council to deny aid to the Syrian people. Only two resolutions were unanimously approved: One required the Assad regime to dispose of its chemical weapons, and the other tried to grant access for humanitarian aid. Human Rights Watch reports that neither had seen much success at the time of this 2014 proposal (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

As depicted in the cartoon, by this point Syria was like an out-of-control fire. In 2015 when the cartoon was archived, there were over four million Syrian refugees with a total of twelve million people displaced in some way. An estimated 250,000 people had died due to the conflict, which showed no signs of slowing (UNHCR, 2018). The cartoon condemns Russia for impeding any help that the UN could offer, yet one must also wonder about how effective this single firefighter could be against the raging fire that he faces. Previous UN resolutions had limited success, and the earlier six-point plan was non-binding. Though Russia and its support for Assad's regime are shown to be most at fault for the present lack of aid, this also refers to Ferzat's depiction of "International Sympathy" in which the tears of international actors are as effective as the few drops of water coming from the hose held by the firefighter here. The cartoon has a mocking tone overall with the oversize scythe squashing the possibility of UN assistance, but beneath that there is a desperation shown in the fact that Syria is depicted as a fire. There is clear frustration at the lack of assistance and the ongoing struggle that is not improving, and the next image emphasizes this.

"Hypocrite World: Thank you…" (figure 11) shows a computer screen that displays the body of a small boy on a beach. This cartoon from 2016 was created one year after the body of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi's body washed up on a Turkish beach. In 2015, that picture went viral and resulted in people worldwide condemning the harsh conditions that left so many refugees to drown in the Mediterranean. However, one year later, the story was all but forgotten in the international public consciousness.

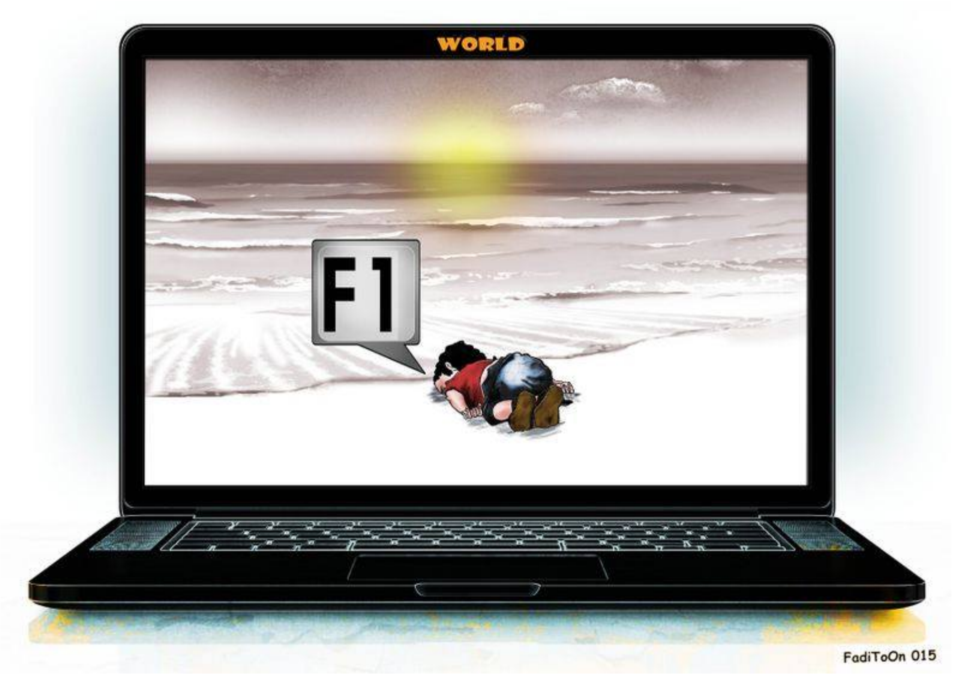

Figure 11: From [*Syrilution Creative Arts*](#)*:* Hypocrite World: Thank you... *by FadiToOn, 2016*

In this cartoon, the world is depicted as the computer upon which Kurdi is saying “F1.” On a personal computer, F1 is the key that will open the help menu for whatever program is being used (Keen, n.d.). However, very little help was actually given in the months following the viral image of Kurdi’s death, and it was, of course, too late to help the child himself.

In looking at the image years after it was created, however, my thoughts are also drawn to the meme, “Press F to pay respects.” Beginning with the videogame *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* in 2014, there was an option after the death of a game character to press the “F” key to pay respects for the dead. The phrase “Press F to pay respects” soon became a meme on the Internet particularly because of the jarring request to pay respects, which many found disrespectful even in a fake memorial service (Morris, & andcallmeshirley, 2014). In popular usage, this may be done in a game’s chat for players to pay respects to someone whose character died, but it is often used in a joking way as well, for example, as a comment on a video in which someone did something funny but embarrassing. In this sense, the cartoon can be read as suggesting that the outraged global audience was merely paying lip service to the dead child and his family but had no intention or ability to actually take action. Rather, the viral stories and social media posts were nothing more than the equivalent of commenting “F” in an online game.

This cartoon blatantly mocks the lack of international sympathy given to Syrian refugees whose struggles did not decrease after the photo of Kurdi went viral. Because of this, it is not a cartoon that would be popular or widely shared on Western social media; while cartoons mocking Assad may gain attention abroad for their pro-democracy themes, a cartoon that condemns the rest of the world as well is not so palatable. Despite its English title and address to the world, it is in fact created for Syrians with whom the tragedy and lack of real response will resonate. It is not meant to be funny but rather to unify people by expressing the ongoing pain of the conflict and refugee crisis.

Cartoons have been an important cultural production in Syria for decades. Originally used as one of the only ways to subtly critique the government, it became a tool with which artists could comment on every part of the Syrian Revolution, from mocking Assad, to condemning the international response, to expressing shared pain that was brought about because of the fighting. These cartoons have not only been a vehicle of free speech, but they have also been a way to share dissident opinions across borders. This is seen through the international coverage that Ferzat received after being attacked by government forces. Yet, as argued in this chapter, the cartoons were brutal in mocking the international community’s response. So, while it is important that the cartoons could be shared so easily, one can conclude that the intended audience was actually the Syrian people (and to a lesser extent, others in the Middle East) for whom the conflict was more immediate. The expression of dissent was also more important for

Syrians because it was a cultural phenomenon that they were witnessing and participating in. The cartoons also allowed for a connection between refugees, exiles, and those remaining in the country, who all had a shared experience that could be expressed through the format of a political cartoon.

Cartoons can at once unify people and reject oppressive structures, whether those structures are within or outside the country. They function similarly to the "Fingerprint of a Fighter" graffiti (chapter 1, figure 3), in that they present the idea of unity among the people. Additionally, by commenting on changing political situations, cartoons can document history from the perspective of those experiencing it, something which gives later scholars insight into these moments of conflict. Particularly in a place like Syria in which censorship is rampant and has been for some time, there is a danger in not documenting the events of the revolution and the emotions associated with them. One key aspect of art in the Syrian Civil War that I have mentioned already is how it allows artists to bear witness to the violence and react to it; this testimony is invaluable in creating the people's history of these events that will need to be remembered in the future.

Though the cartoons I have discussed represent a small fraction of the total produced during this period, they demonstrate two central themes of political cartoons: uniting the Syrian people against shared threats and undermining the regime's power. However, it is important to note that while the cartoons achieve the evocation of a common enemy, they rarely suggest an alternative. The primary effect of this is that the cartoons are more popular because the diverse groups fighting against the Assad regime would all agree with a cartoon criticizing him, even though they would have vastly different ideas of how to fix the problem. This is not a critique of the art form itself but, I would argue, one of its strengths. As I have shown in my own explanations, different people may read the same cartoon differently – as with any work of art. There is a benefit then to a cartoon that identifies one main enemy and has a clear statement overall (such as Ferzat's untitled cartoon that showed the dictator and terrorist) but can be examined and interpreted in more than one way. Under the right circumstances, cartoons like this can start a productive conversation that begins with the common problem identified in the work and allows people with different opinions to discuss them. Most often, however, cartoons are not discussed in the same way that one would talk about a work of art in a museum. Though they have this possibility, they are typically something you look at, maybe laugh at, and then mostly forget about. The importance of the cartoon is how it reaffirms the viewer's opinions (i.e., "The regime is bad" or "The world doesn't care") and allows those who see it to make decisions in daily life that will reflect a greater confidence in the correctness of their thoughts. Cartoons create a feeling of unity against a shared enemy, but they do not necessarily create unity in action. That is simply not what they are designed to do.

The role of cartoons is as a vehicle of free speech through which dissident opinions can be expressed and shared. Today, most people would see these cartoons online as I did, rather than on the street as with a piece of graffiti. Reactions are more individual, and the goal of the cartoon is less about taking action and more about solidifying opinions that a person likely already holds. It for this reason that cartoons are valuable as a form of art used in protest movements. They give images and words to widely shared beliefs and reassure people that there are others who also want to fight against existing power structures. Additionally, the criticism-heavy aspect of cartoons makes them useful in a prolonged struggle because they continue to document injustices and thereby sustain the anger and revolutionary fervor of those who see them and agree with their content.

Chapter 3: Digital Art

Art has consistently been a form with which to document historic events around the world and the art produced during and in memory of revolutions is some of the best known in the world from Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and *Death of Marat* (1793) to Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851). Syrian artists continue this tradition by documenting their revolution through what may be considered "fine art," albeit in a more modern way. First, however, it is necessary to define the terms I will use in describing art in this chapter.

Above, I state that the mentioned paintings and the art in this chapter may be considered "fine art" in order to differentiate this style from the graffiti and political cartoons previously discussed. While it may be necessary to make an argument to consider graffiti as art, fine art is the art that is widely recognized to have aesthetic merit. Paintings are among the most recognized in this class, and traditionally the term fine art refers to art produced for aesthetics as distinguished from art with a practical function like pottery or woodcarving. In a modern sense, "fine art" may be more generally recognized as art that should be appreciated, usually for aesthetic and/or intellectual reasons. For this reason, people can have different definitions that may exclude a contemporary art style like minimalism or a less academic medium like graffiti. The art in this chapter, however, would likely be widely accepted as meeting the definition of "fine art" through both aesthetic and intellectual merit as well as the unstated requirement of being displayed to an audience and accepted by critics.

Though an understanding of what fine art is considered to be is important for this chapter in which I will discuss artists who have more name recognition than those in previous chapters, I did not title this section "fine art." Because "fine art" is a highly subjective and broad classification, it would be very unclear as to what type of art I am actually discussing here, and for that reason, I called this chapter "digital art." While this is also a broad term, it matches the other chapters in defining a medium within the field of arts, and I can from here give a working definition to apply to the art that I will discuss. I offer a very basic definition of "digital art" as art which was created using computer software rather than physical materials and which prioritizes its aesthetics. Though much of the political cartoons in the last chapter were also created digitally, they also functioned as news and direct commentary on events, while this art is more detached from the immediacy of the news cycle and individual events in the conflict.

The digital art I have chosen to consider in this chapter takes various forms. Ahmad Ali uses repeating patterns generated with the assistance of software to create optical illusions in works that can be largely considered minimalist for their restrained use of color and emphasis on pattern over a single image. Hijazi by contrast does her own drawings but uses a computer program instead of pen and paper, and she herself defines them as "digital art illustrations." This has an effect on the visual appearance of the art while also having the practical importance of being harder for the government to control. Finally, Azzam's work uses "Photomontages" - multimedia productions that combines photography of contemporary Syria with superimposed images of famous artworks from the western canon. While created digitally, Azzam's works were subsequently printed on canvas for display as part of his *Syrian Museum* collection shown at the Ayyam Gallery in Dubai in 2013 (Azzam, www.tammamazzam.com). I selected these artists instead of others because their art was compelling to me, and I knew that I would have a lot to say about their work. There are, of course, many other artists who create similar digital work, but these three were among my favorites of the art that I looked at in researching this section.

In studying the role of art and protest in the Syrian Civil War, this chapter will build on the previous two. The graffiti of the first chapter was marked by immediacy, and it was primarily created by and for those within Syria, though a photo archive is accessible online. Political cartoons expanded the view somewhat as they were circulated deliberately online and were, at times, able to reach a global audience who reacted along with the Syrian people to recent events. This art takes a further step; the physical creation of graffiti and some cartoons is replaced here by technology, and the art itself, though it has a direct connection to the war, is less immediate and addresses the violence through metaphor and symbolism. Additionally, none of the artists in this chapter still live in Syria, and though their art was shared online and likely seen by many Syrians, it was also produced for a global audience who was able to see it in museums and through English and French publications. Though still created by Syrian artists, this art was also created for the rest of the world and its role was to draw and maintain the attention of outsiders more than it was to inspire those within Syria.

The first artist I will discuss here is Dino Ahmad Ali, who is a France-based Syrian artist who has worked extensively with digital art in his career. He graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus and since 2005 has explored the use of optical illusions in digital art. In 2011, Ali left Syria to live in France where he also obtained both a Master's degree (2014) and PhD (2018) from the University of Paris where he studied Information and Communication Sciences. For his doctorate degree, he studied the role of the spectator in optical illusions and in 2010 he won a prize from the National Museum of Damascus for work presented at an exhibit that focused on "The relationship between traditional Islamic art and contemporary design" (Ali, D. A., 2021) Ali's 2014 works, which I will look at here combine these ideas of Islamic art, optical illusions, and contemporary design in creating monochromatic images with repeating patterns that are engaging and demand a few moments of further study from the viewer. What may be dismissed at first glance becomes striking and important.

In *Migration Across the Sea* (figure 12) an initial look at the image shows a wavy pattern that is reminiscent of the ocean. One also notices the bird in the upper left and the circle in the lower right, both of which slowly blend into the undecorated waves in the center of the artwork. It can be suggested that the bird at the top of the image is a part of the sky and that its blending into the waves mimics both the wave-like motion of a bird flying and the distinction between sea and air. With this in mind, one may wonder at the circle in the lower third of the piece, which, based on the title, I would suggest is a person's head that slowly sinks below the waves as it approaches the middle of the piece.

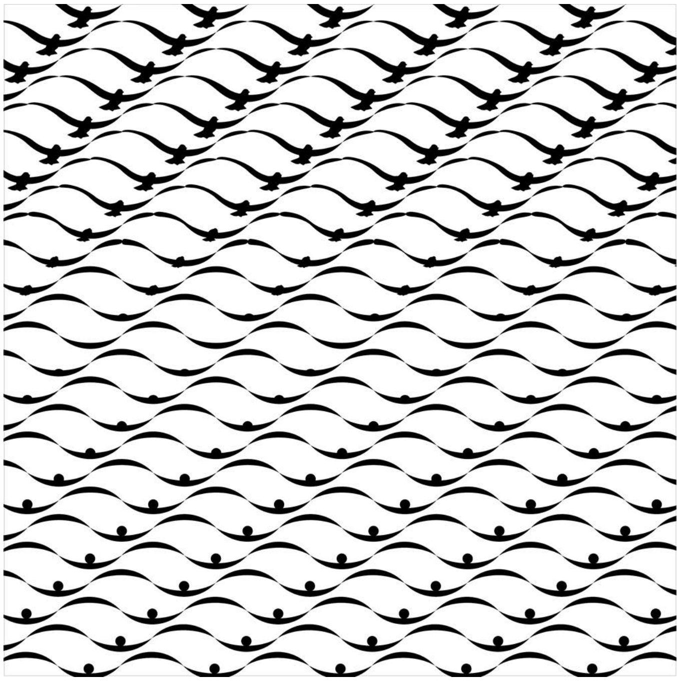

Figure 12: From Creative Memory Archive, Migration Across the Sea *by Dino Ahmad Ali, 2014*

We have then a picture of the sea with birds in the sky, perhaps diving into the water, and people in the water who are sinking beneath its surface. I would take this a step further as well to suggest a metaphorical reading. On one side of the artwork's central sea there are birds representing freedom, while the people on the opposite side are refugees holding their heads above the waves that, like the ongoing violence in Syria and struggles in refugee camps, threaten to overwhelm them. If the people could cross the sea, they would, like the birds, have freedom, but instead, they sink below the waves. It is worth noting, however, that this is my interpretation. The minimalism of Ali's work gives it a universality that allows for many interpretations: For those like me, who are distanced from Syria and the refugee crisis, this is an image that references a tragedy on the other side of the world. For migrants, however, this is an image that may have a more immediate and dramatic resonance, as it may speak to their personal experiences. That Ali's work allows for multiple interpretations based on a person's experiences is a large part of what makes his art stand out.

This work was created in 2014 before the height of the refugee crisis and the international headlines about migrants who died in attempts to cross the Mediterranean, but with the knowledge of those tragedies, it is difficult to look at the image and read its title without those news stories coming to mind. In another reading, one might suggest that the birds which seem to be flying upwards are the souls of the migrants themselves who crossed the sea and found freedom only through death. Though the art itself is simple and unassuming, it is a work that when contemplated for a few moments becomes deeply moving and more powerful for its understated appearance.

More immediately striking is *Cry of a Woman* (figure 13), which is a circular image with a woman at the center whose mouth is open in a cry and whose head is uplifted as though she is making a supplication to heaven. On the outer edge of the circle around her are planes that grow blurrier and less detailed as they spiral inwards. Ali previously won an award for his fusion of traditional Islamic art with contemporary styles, and here as well we can see the repeating pattern of the planes that become more abstracted as they move inwards and create a geometric pattern similar to those that are widely associated with traditional Islamic art. Traditionally, many of these patterns focus on repetition of simple forms like circles and squares that are combined to make intricate patterns (Department of Islamic Art, 2001). This connects with Ali's background and interest in optical illusions, which also make use of repeating patterns to achieve a hypnotic and deceptive effect. In *Cry of a Woman*, the spiraling of the planes that draws the eye inward has this hypnotic impact that is exacerbated by how the planes blur together before meeting sudden clarity in the crying woman at the image's center.

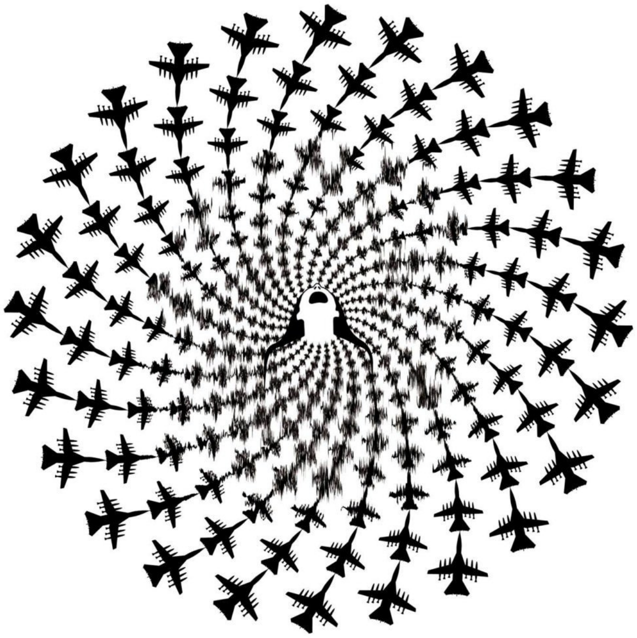

*Figure 13: From [Creative Memory Archive](), *Cry of a Woman* by Dino Ahmad Ali, 2014*

Created in March 2014, this work can be seen as responding to the relentless violence in Syria. The chemical weapons attack in Ghouta had only recently occurred in August 2013 and, in the early months of 2014, peace talks in Geneva failed as Syrian officials dismissed the talks of a transitional government (BBC News, 2019). Also in August of 2013, the UNHCR reported one million Syrian children who were classified as refugees. The woman in this image can then be seen as a stand-in for the Syrian people and, in particular, Syrian women and mothers who saw their homes destroyed and families torn apart and displaced. The violence, like the depicted planes, comes from all sides and the relentless, overwhelming force that leaves no escape here for the woman. Furthermore, in viewing the woman as a mother, this can be seen as an expression of female pain and the difficulty of being a mother in a time of conflict; this can also be contrasted with the men who are the primary perpetrators of violence, as will be further explored in the works by Sulafa Hijazi. It is an image that immediately captures the viewer's attention by making use of a repeating pattern circling to a central focal point. The planes with their sharp points that are clearly seen on the outer ring seem almost to be stabbing the woman who is trapped at their center. Her cry is pitiful and urges the viewer to consider those who are similarly trapped.

The work of the second artist in this chapter, Sulafa Hijazi, continues to explore this idea of how violence has trapped people within Syria. Between 2011-2015, Hijazi created a series titled *Ongoing* that captured her reaction while living in Syria during the early protests and her reflections upon leaving the country. Born in 1977, Hijazi has made a career through her animated and multimedia creations and received international praise for her animated film *The Jasmine Birds.* Beginning in 2011, Hijazi became part of the peaceful protesting in Syria and began creating and publishing her digital artworks that criticized the oppression of the regime. As the government response to protests intensified, Hijazi moved to Frankfurt, Germany in early 2013 to continue studying and creating art. Her work, especially the *Ongoing* series, has been widely acclaimed and reviewed in various books and magazines, and some of her works are in permanent galleries at the British Museum in London, United Kingdom, the Barjeel Art

Foundation in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and International Media Support in Copenhagen, Denmark (*Sulafa Hijazi*, n.d.).

In writing about the series for the anthology *Syria Speaks*, Hijazi begins by discussing the militarized nature of Syrian society and explaining that the integration of what she calls the “military machine” that makes ordinary people into “one of the tools of the regime’s oppression” (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 11). The blurred line between military and civilian life is a key theme of her series *Ongoing*, which explores the cyclical nature of violence in Syrian society that Hijazi has witnessed over the course of her life. While the civil war that began in 2011 is central to the series, Hijazi aims to interrogate the militarization of Syrian society more broadly. The cycle of violence in Syria did not start with the 2011 protests, and it will not end any time soon. This cycle, Hijazi says, benefits the regime because it “keeps the authorities in power and effectively destroys society” by providing the regime with “a pretext to murder people” to maintain the status quo (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 12).

Though the protests in Syria in 2011 began peacefully, the fighting quickly became violent, and activists were targeted. It is partly for this reason that Hijazi’s series is made of digital prints, which she was able to create and store on her computer. This provided a measure of security since they were easily hidden, and, if necessary discarded, before authorities could see them (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 16). Hijazi expresses a sense of exhaustion in writing about her series of prints. While in Syria, she found drawing to be the only way to process and share the complicated mix of emotions that she felt because of the ongoing fighting, but after leaving the country, she found it difficult to relive and draw her experiences. As suggested by the title of this series of prints, the cyclical violence in Syria and the pain it causes are ongoing and will not be easily forgotten. Hijazi states, “After two years of such conflict, you feel you need space and time out to rebuild yourself…. Inside Syria, people live as prisoners in a huge cell. Once we try to escape from there, we discover that we are still inside" (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 16).

The first of Hijazi's prints that I will examine is the work titled *Addiction* (figure 14) from 2013. In this image, we see a gun being used like a needle to inject something into an extended arm. Several of the works in *Ongoing* connect the human body to weapons and often comment on the masculine nature of violence; for example, other works show a man giving birth to a weapon, and another masturbating with one. This interaction between the body and weapons suggests that violence is a part of human nature, but Hijazi does not shy away from a gendered critique that shows how much violence is perpetrated by men. Regarding this, she states, "I also pondered the implications of masculinity in killing, power, dictatorship and domination. I believe that if women were in charge of the world, there would be no more war. Women who give birth know the meaning of life" (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 15).

Though *Addiction* does not show a full person, it is worth noting that the features in the image do appear more masculine than feminine. The weapon here is distinct from the body, but it is used to inject something into the blood. As already discussed, the cyclical nature of violence and the all-consuming militarization of life in Syria are important to this series, so we may interpret this image as the weapon being used to metaphorically inject violence into a person, especially a man.

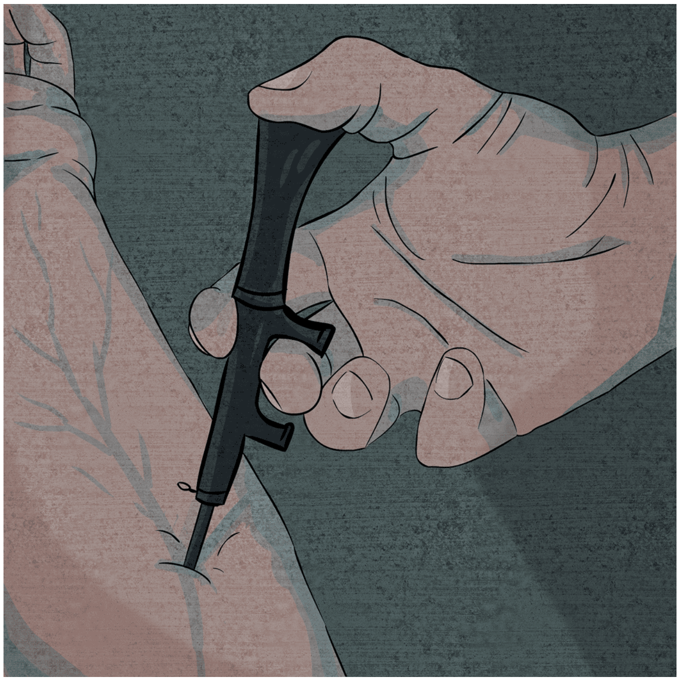

Figure 14: From [*sulafahijazi.com*](sulafahijazi.com)*,* Addiction *by Sulafa Hijazi, 2013*

The title of this work is *Addiction*, which again conveys the persistent nature of violence in Syria. This violence is addictive and continued repetition of the cycle can be equated to an addict seeking out another dose and another high. The drug becomes a part of the addict and something they feel to be necessary to their continued existence. Social illnesses like oppression and state violence lead people to believe that they must respond with violence of their own, and it becomes an addiction that, like a drug, it has debilitating and potentially deadly side effects. To use Hijazi's idea of the cyclical nature of violence, this can be summarized by saying that a violent society will create violent people who will continue the cycle into infinity, addicted to this dangerous drug.

I have already addressed a metaphorical connection between drugs and the violence in Syria as in the previous chapter's Figure 7, I showed a cartoon titled *Bashar Snorting Destruction*. Here, however, the image is not of a specific person; there are no identifying characteristics at all since we see only an arm and a hand. Hijazi stated in *Syria Speaks* that she "purposely did not include pictures of the President or any elements related specifically to Syria in the series" (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 15) even though the images were born of her experiences there. In this image therefore, the viewer may be aware of Hijazi's connection to the fighting in Syria, but it can be understood without that context as well as a commentary on how armed conflict can act as a drug in any war. Hijazi critiques this addiction through depicting it in this way and making a connection between the high one gets from a potentially dangerous drug and the high one can get from violence which may have unintended consequences, even with good intentions. Hijazi mentions frequently that she was involved specifically in peaceful protesting in Syria and that art is, for her, "a powerful and *peaceful* weapon" (Niemann, 2013, emphasis added).

The second of Hijazi's images that I will discuss contrasts ideas of peace and violence. In *Untitled* (figure 15), we see a hand holding a misbaha (Islamic prayer beads, also called masbaha, tesbih or subha) in which the beads are made of human heads and which has replaced the misbaha's tassel with weapons. The misbaha is used as a tool in remembering the dhikr and reciting the names of God (Al-Abyad, 2006). This act, which would normally be considered peaceful and sacrosanct, is here given a violent undertone that implies death and destruction.

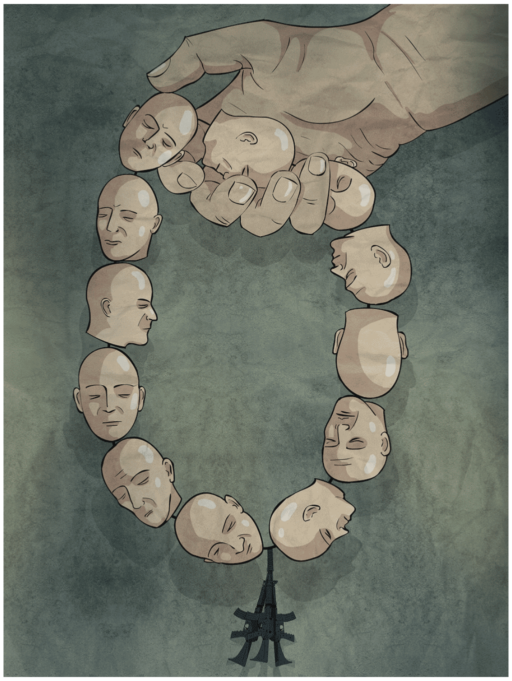

Figure 15: From *sulafahijazi.com*, Untitled *by Sulafa HIjazi, 2013*

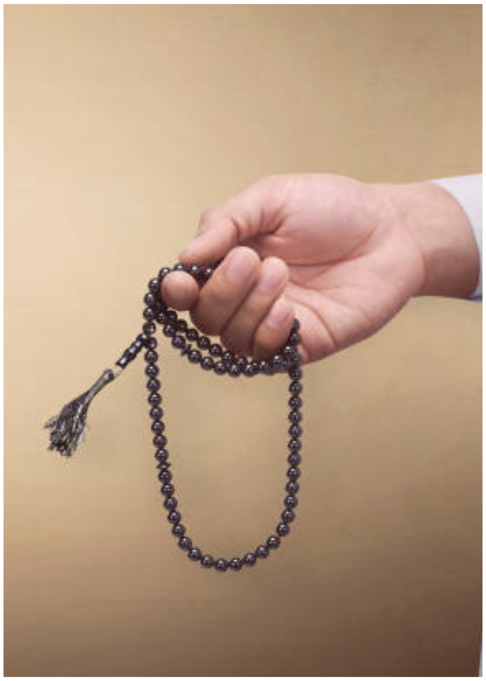

Figure 16: From *Fethiye Times*, Tesbih – Islamic prayer beads *by Lyn Ward*, 2020

As Hijazi stated in talking about her art, "Death in Syria became a fact of life" (Halasa, et. al., 2014. p. 13). Here, death has become a religion; something that is, for many people, an everyday fact that is a part of their life and identity. Also notable in the image are the muted colors that can be observed across Hijazi's series. Though the art does not specifically address individual events and is not explicitly tied to Syria, the muted color scheme is a way in which Hijazi brought her history into her art. She has said that the muted colors in her art reflect the muted colors of her childhood under a socialist regime in Syria (Halasa, et. al., 2014, p. 15). Related to this, one can consider the conflict between the religious image of a misbaha and the socialist, secular Ba'ath party. One possible interpretation then could be that, for this regime, in particular, death and destruction is their religion. Another interpretation, however, could suggest that Hijazi is critiquing political Islam and the masculine violence used in the name of a peaceful religion. In either reading, it is the juxtaposition between prayer and death that stands out and makes clear Hijazi’s condemnation of the ongoing violence.

The change from peaceful protest to violent conflict is also seen in the work of the final artist in this chapter, Tammam Azzam, who received international attention in 2013 with his *Syrian Museum* series, presented in conjunction with the Ayyam Gallery in Dubai. Azzam studied Fine Arts at Damascus University where he specialized in oil painting (Azzam, n.d.). However, it was his later work in graphic design that elevated his status to the so-called “artist of the revolution” (Cooke, 2017, p. 81). After leaving Syria in 2011 to live in the United Arab Emirates, Azzam created digital artworks that combined photos of the destruction in Syria with masterpieces of the European canon. Though he had never previously considered creating digital art, living in Dubai without easy access to his studio or materials helped to pave a path for the creation of this series (Marray, 2021). Following the success of the *Syrian Museum* series, which was displayed through the Ayyam Gallery, Azzam participated in numerous solo and group shows around the world (“Tammam Azzam,” n.d.). As of 2016, Azzam has lived in Germany where he first participated in a residency at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Delmenhorst before moving to Berlin where his most recent work focuses on collage, a new medium for the artist (Marray, 2021).

The work that catapulted Azzam to international fame was *Freedom Graffiti* (2013), a digital work that superimposed Klimt’s *The Kiss* (1908) over a bombed-out building in Syria. When posted on Facebook, the image went viral in just a few hours as people, first Syrians then an international audience, reacted to the juxtaposition of love and beauty in a war-torn space (Aung, 2013, p. 49). As this particular work has been widely written about, I have chosen to discuss two others works from the *Syrian Museum* series, which have similar themes and continue to use well-known works from the European canon on backgrounds that show the destruction of Syria. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Azzam stated that he wanted to parallel “the greatest achievements of humanity with the destruction it is also capable of inflicting” (Siegal, 2013). On his website (www.tammamazzam.com), Azzam adds that the series is also meant to pose questions “about the nature of beauty, global inequality, and the changing role of the image in the digital age” (Azzam). Importantly, however, though the artworks ask these questions, they do not give clear answers. Azzam also said, “Even I don’t know exactly what it means” (Marray, 2021), but the visual power of the images is undeniable. One subject that urges consideration is in looking at Azzam’s choice of works from the Western canon specifically, as this likely helped to make the works more famous as well as more resonant to an international audience who would be more familiar with these works. In choosing these works, however, and placing objects of Western cultural importance in Syria, Azzam also makes a statement about equality and the value of Syrian life. The all-consuming violence of the Syrian Civil War is, for much of the world, something distant that could be overlooked in favor of smaller problems closer to home. Azzam’s use of Western paintings uses an aesthetic vocabulary and canon that is more familiar to a Western audience and therefore grabs their attention in order to make statements about the violence in Syria and the value of human life there that is equal to that in Western countries.

The first of Azzam’s artworks that I will discuss may be among the most easily read of the series, though it is also one of the most striking in my view. *Goya’s The 3rd of May 1808* (figure 18) takes this well-known Goya painting (*The Third of May 1808 in Madrid*, 1808, figure 17) and places it on a Syrian street. Azzam has replaced the spelled out “third” with “3rd” as well as shortening the original title. As with other works in the series, the painter’s name has become part of the work's title in Azzam's rendition to more clearly connect the new artwork with the one it references.

The figures in this work have also been flipped across the horizontal axis, which is similar to other works in the series in which Azzam altered the positioning of a painting's elements to better fit them within the landscape. In this image, blue lines (possibly cables of some kind) come down from the top center left and curve towards the edge of the frame and match the curve of the French soldiers' swords in the Goya painting. This adds to the overall unity of the work and how Azzam fit the scene into the Syrian landscape. Similarly, one of the dead bodies in the lower right lies within, and is framed by, some of the debris on the ground, while the body behind him arches slightly over the edge of the debris pile instead of over another body as in the original Goya painting. The frontmost French soldier on the left also appears to be standing on a block on the small hill of debris, which gives him more solidity in the landscape as though he is actually standing there.

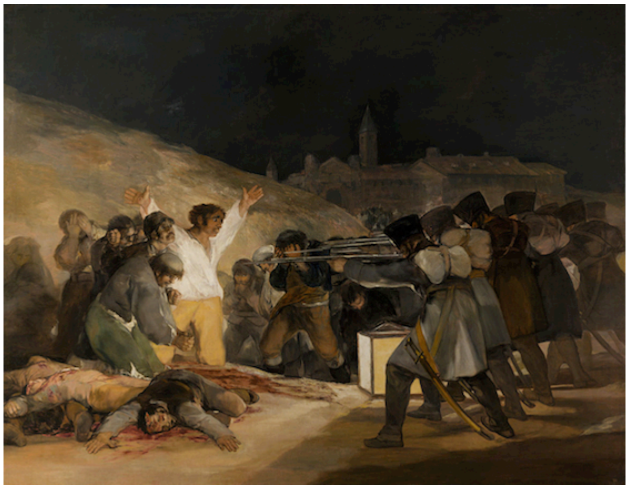

Figure 17: From Khan Academy, The Third of May 1808 in Madrid *by Francisco Goya, 1808*

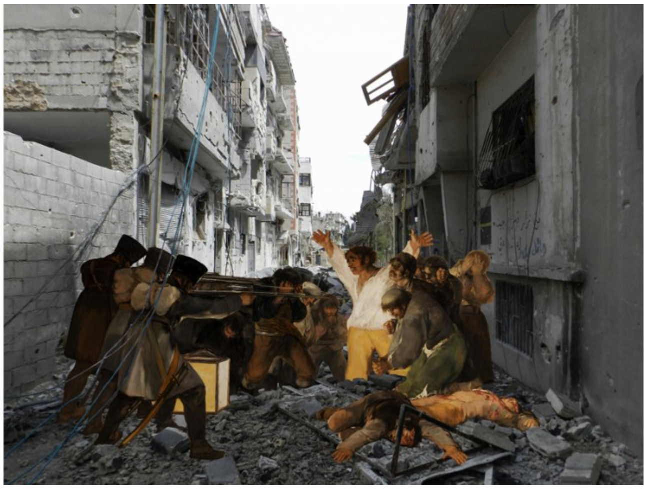

Figure 18: From Oneart.org, Goya's The 3rd of May 1808 *by Tammam Azzam, 2012*

In the composite work by Azzam, the drab industrial of the surrounding buildings contrasts with the warm, lively colors of Goya's painting, but the figures still fit into the debris-filled landscape that is devoid of other people. As in the original paining, the figure which stands out is the one to the center right with his arms raised. In Goya's painting, which depicts the slaughter of Spanish freedom fighters by Napoleon's forces, this well-lit figure becomes a Christ figure who is dying for his country. The Christ-figure allusion is most clearly supported by the stigmata holes on the man's hands, which reference the nails that held Christ to the cross (Zappella, n.d.).

Goya's painting has been celebrated for a number of reasons that resonate in Azzam's interpretation as well. Most notably, Goya's painting depicts the idea of "man's inhumanity to man" and the cruelty of warfare (Zappella, n.d.). It is easy to see why this painting would appeal to Azzam as something to part of his conversation with Western classics in his *Syrian Museum* series. The Spanish freedom fighters in the Goya image can be easily linked to the Syrian rebels fighting against the Assad regime and being met with extreme violence. In Goya's painting, those who have been or are about to be executed appear to be primarily poor laborers with the exception of the monk to the right of the Christ-figure who is identifiable by his shaved head. These human figures are relatable and pitiful particularly because in looking at them, a viewer will likely conceptualize them as hard-working and religious men who are fighting for their country up to the last moment. By contrast, the French soldiers are shown from the back and in more darkness than the men to be executed, and they are not humanized the way their victims are. Set on a Syrian street, this scene calls to mind some of the early events of the Syrian Revolution around the time that Azzam was still in the country and seeing the mounting violence that peaceful protestors faced.

Goya's painting has also been hailed as a powerful anti-war statement which critiqued not only countries at war but also the people abroad who are able to conceptualize a foreign conflict as something abstract rather than human (Zappella, n.d.). Goya's painting showed the humanity of the Spanish freedom fighters and was especially striking for audiences who were unfamiliar with the photos of war zones that we have today (Zappella, n.d.). Azzam's painting brings this criticism and its impact into the 21st century. Especially in 2012-2013 before the global headlines about chemical weapons and a refugee crisis, the fighting in Syria seemed distant and unimportant to many abroad. Azzam's series and the international acclaim it received drew more attention to the conflict. In creating digital works that combined modern photography and older paintings, Azzam was able to humanize the conflict by creating something both new and familiar that could not be dismissed by modern viewers who may be desensitized to images of violence.

The second of Azzam's images continues to humanize the conflict and those whom it affects. Figure 21 shows Azzam's work *Matisse's La Danse* (1909, 1910). Matisse completed two different versions of this painting, the first in 1909 known as *Dance 1* (figure 19) has lighter colors and less definition on the figures than the later painting, titled simply *Dance* (figure 20) from 1910. Azzam appears to have combined the coloring of *Dance* with the figures from *Dance 1* who lack most of the interior lines of the later work. In Azzam's piece, the dancers are on top of a pile of rubble with the city behind them.

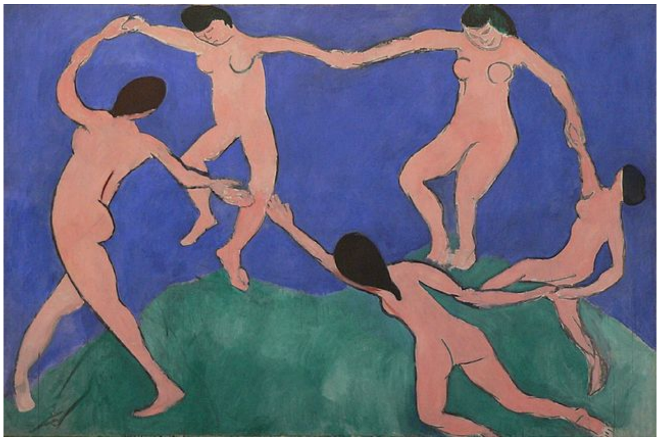

Figure 19: From [Khan Academy](), Dance I by Henri Matisse, 1909

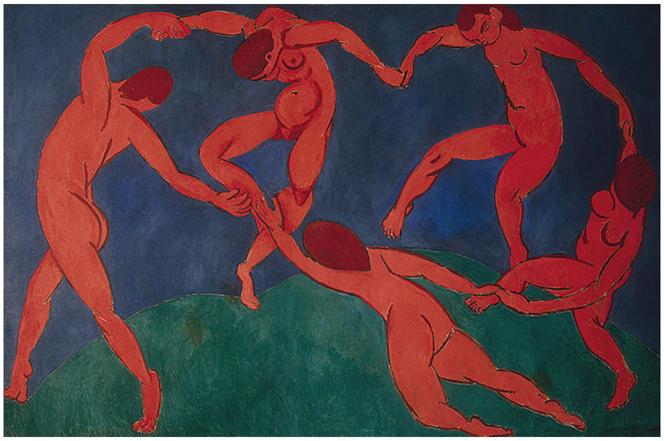

Figure 20: From [Khan Academy](), Dance by Henri Matisse, 1910

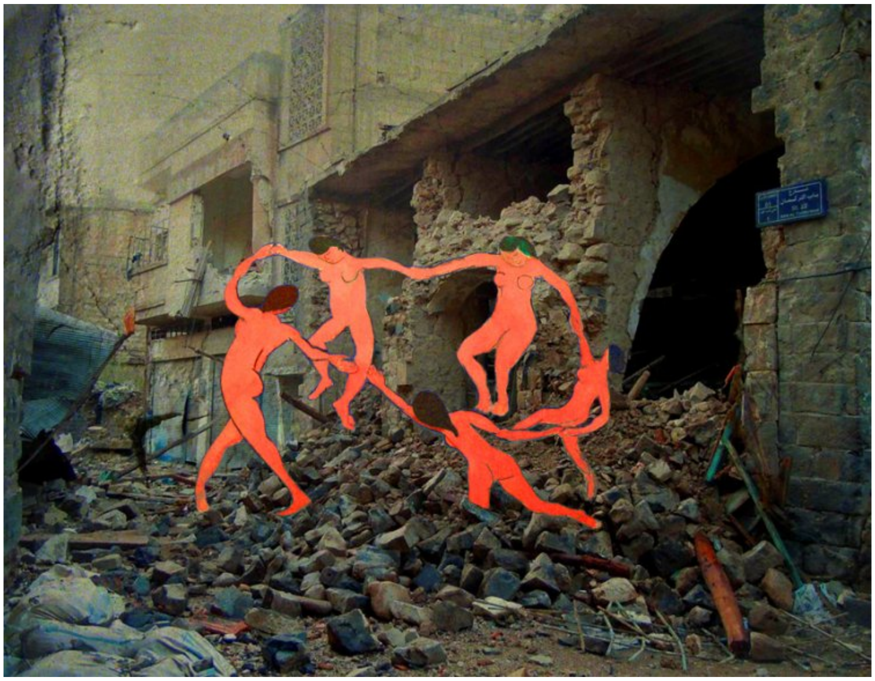

Figure 21: From Oneart.org*,* Matisse's La Danse *by Tammam Azzam, 2012*

This is different from the Matisse paintings in which the red figures were placed on a simple green and blue background. Before addressing Azzam's creation, it is first necessary to give some context for Matisse's paintings. *Dance 1*, though it was originally intended as no more than a study for *Dance*, is widely beloved because of the childlike quality of the dancers and the freedom of their movement that creates an unrestrained, joyous scene. Though *Dance* depicts the same scene, its darker colors and the definition of muscles on the figures creates more tension in the image, and many critics view it as more menacing than *Dance 1* (Harris & Zucker, n.d.).

In Azzam's work, the more saturated red better situates the dancers in the scene as it makes them stand out against the less colorful background, but given the violent context of the image, the red also suggests blood as a result of violence. The lack of definition on the figures perpetuates the unrestrained freedom seen in *Dance 1*, but this appears in stark contrast to the background scene, which shows the destruction of a Syrian city and the ravages of war. Most striking however, is the front dancer who has one leg cut off by the pile of debris. As in *Goya's*

The 3rd of May 1808, Azzam has given careful attention to how he places the figures. Though those in the original Matisse painting mostly have their feet on the ground, they do not really appear grounded and the figure in the front looks to be flying or lying across the green background. In Azzam's version, the figures are aligned such that they actually appear to be standing on bits of debris. The front dancer whose leg cuts off may then be seen as rising out of the rubble.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the original Matisse and Azzam's work is the disconnected hands of the front dancer and the dancer to the left. In Matisse's painting, there are two main critical interpretations: It is either a tension among the dancers that needs to be resolved, or it is an invitation to the viewer to join in (Harris & Zucker, n.d.). In Azzam's work, the first explanation, that it is tension between the dancers, may also suggest that the leftmost dancer will either pull the front one out of the rubble or let this figure fall. Depending on one's interpretation of this gesture, it may be suggesting the possibility of hope and rebirth after violent conflict in which the dancers will rise above the rubble, or it may suggest that they cannot maintain this illusion of joy for long and will eventually fall. The second explanation given for this tension in Goya's painting – that the dancers are inviting the viewer to join – is also compelling as it suggests the viewer may determine whether these dancers rise or fall amidst the rubble. As these are paintings that invite the viewer to consider the humanity of Syrians affected by violence, the dancers may be inviting the viewer to join them and make a decision whether to help by pulling the front dancer free from the rubble or to let the tension overwhelm the dancers. The tension of the dancers and the juxtaposition of dancing on the remnants of violence are essential to this image. It expresses a human desire to live free of violence and destruction, but the tension in the image begs for empathy and suggests that the possibility of joy and dancing is not guaranteed. In short, Azzam uses the figures of Matisse’s *Dance 1* to create the menace that lurks within Matisse’s *Dance*.

The digital art in this chapter is markedly different from the graffiti and political cartoons in the first two chapters. It is more detached from the conflict, both in the design of the art itself and in the fact that none of the artists remain in Syria. Though each of the works included speaks directly to an aspect of the Syrian Civil War, they are not immediate and they address the conflict in more abstract terms than either graffiti or cartoons which are tied explicitly to the moment they were created. Because of this, it is much more difficult to clearly state what an individual work refers to, and though I offered varying interpretations of the works included, someone else may look at them and have yet another interpretation of what they mean. This then is the beauty of digital art, and “fine art” that comments on and documents a conflict. While there are certain aspects that are clear, there is still room for interpretation, which lends the art a certain universality.

As a medium, these artworks are best displayed in a museum, and this combined with their universal appeal that addresses the abstracts of conflict, makes them the most popular of these works outside Syria. Though created by and for Syrians, and initially viewed by a primarily Syrian and Middle Eastern audience, these digital artworks and their creators have gained international attention and thereby serve as a testimony that urges the world to pay attention to the conflict and the people in Syria. Furthermore, while graffiti will be erased and political cartoons may be lost in the ever-changing news cycle, these are works that will go to museums where they will continue to document Syria’s history for future generations.

The role of digital art in Syria is two-fold: It creates a narrative with broad appeal and it is preserved as a part of the cultural history, not only of Syria, but of the world. If graffiti is powerful because of its ability to inspire people to continue protesting, digital art is powerful because of its demands for attention and how it forces the world to acknowledge the conflict and begs them to feel empathy. While political cartoons make statements about individual events, digital art makes ambiguous statements about life and death or the nature of violence, and it forces the viewer to look more closely and to really think about these ideas. Like the paintings that preceded digital art in the field of “fine art,” these works capture history as it occurs, and, whatever happens in the future, they will continue to tell the story of this time.

Conclusion

Art has played a key role in Syria since the beginning of the conflict. Like the Syrian Civil War itself, the art produced in response has grown from boys creating graffiti on a grain silo in Daara (Macleod, 2011, April 2) to the international exhibitions of artists like Ali, Hijazi, and Azzam covered in the last chapter. As stated at the beginning of this thesis, the art covered here is an infinitesimally small sample of what has been created and the mediums of graffiti, political cartoons, and digital art are only a few of the ways that Syrians have found to express themselves and their beliefs during this time. Despite this, however, these art forms still show the incredible creativity and invaluable consequence of art that is created as a form of popular protest.

Each art form covered is a way of giving a voice to the people in Syria. Graffiti builds on a shared identity and common beliefs as people create and see it on the ground in Syria. This particular type of art is by and for the Syrian people as it requires an instant emotional response and engagement from them. In the danger of creating graffiti, people assert that they are still present and still fighting, and, by doing so, they encourage others to do the same. Political cartoons function in a similar way by depicting the things that anger people and allowing them to express a dark humor at the situation. Though graffiti often commemorates specific events, it is more temporary, while cartoons that are published, especially online, create a record of the events of the conflict that will bear witness to this time in the future. Due to how easily cartoons can be shared online, they also share news of the conflict abroad and urge people to have sympathy for those fighting. The cartoons then are created for both an audience inside and outside of Syria, yet, like graffiti, one of the key impacts of political cartoons is how they create unity among the people who see them. Digital art does this as well, but in its own way. More than graffiti or political cartoons, this art speaks to an international audience, and has a more distanced and abstract aesthetic than the others, especially the graffiti that is created on the spot. Despite these differences in audience and form, however, digital art still addresses an idea of unity through provoking an emotional response in the viewer and eliciting empathy for these people who, though they are far away and living very different lives, are still people. Art has many roles in a protest movement; it can be a way to call for change or a way to testify about pain and recovery from trauma. It can be something immediate like graffiti sprayed on the side of a building or it can be a lengthy digital project that will be housed in a museum. But in each art form, the most central role of the art is its ability to connect people. Whether the art is a "Fingerprint of a Fighter" urging someone to keep fighting, an Ali Ferzat cartoon critiquing government actions, or a mesmerizing work by Dino Ahmed Ali representing immense pain with delicate minimalism, the art demands that whoever sees it take a minute to look at the work and feel something.

In every aspect of studying this art, it is important to note the role of the Internet in both sharing and archiving the art. Though I did early research on the subject using two books cited in this paper *Syria Speaks* (2014) by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen, and Nawara Mahfoud and *Dancing in Damascus* (2017) by Miriam Cooke, I found the majority of the art through online archives, especially the "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution" and, to a lesser extent, the "Syrilution Creative Arts" page on Facebook. The Internet has been invaluable in preserving this artwork and making it widely accessible to the rest of the world. Graffiti especially is a transient art form that has been preserved through photos online in defiance of both retribution by the regime as well as natural causes like the weather that would, given time, erase the art. For political cartoons, publication online has assured that they will remain in existence, while, if they were published only in print or only in Syria, they would have a more limited reach and would be much more heavily censured by the Syrian government. With digital art, being shared online has contributed to the popularity of the work and the recognition of these artists. As mentioned, the work *Freedom Graffiti* (2013) by Tammam Azzam went viral after being shared on Facebook (Aung, 2013, p. 49), and notices online by various galleries about shows featuring Syrian artists contribute to how many people come to those shows and are exposed to the art. Additionally, many of the artists mentioned in this paper have their own websites where they publish their art, which has been valuable to my research in connecting me to more information about the artists and their work.

In looking to the future, one additional role of the art created by Syrians during the Civil War will be its use as a record of this history. The archives and other online publications will be important for future historians studying the art, especially as the art provides the perspective of the Syrian people. The international news cycle moves quickly, and it rarely succeeds at covering a multi-year struggle in which the day-to-day news is less exciting than the occasional viral moment. Art, by contrast, is created by those living in the day-to-day struggle of the conflict. Graffiti shows daily responses to the violence, while political cartoons react to individual events in the conflict, and digital art reacts to the abstract ideas and complications proposed by the ongoing war. This art shows those who see it that the conflict is not confined to breaking news stories and viral images but is in reality something much bigger and more impactful that is difficult to fully understand, especially as an outsider.

At the time of writing this essay during the spring of 2021, the Arab Spring began ten years ago. In Syria, the fighting is not yet over. The brute force of the regime combined with the COVID-19 pandemic have had a devastating impact on the country in the last year. This is, of course, combined with the destruction of the last decade that has displaced over 11 million and has killed somewhere between 400,000-600,000 Syrians (Chughtai, 2021). In the midst of this, President Bashar al-Assad is running for re-election on May 26, in an election that has been heavily opposed by foreign governments and Syrian activists who point to the numerous factors that will prevent this from being a free and fair election. The fact that candidates must have lived in Syria for the last ten years rules out a large percentage of the population, especially activists, and even for those within the country, there is only a ten-day window to be nominated, following which they would need the support of at least 35 members of the Ba'ath-dominated parliament (Chehayeb, 2021). Though six candidates have submitted requests for parliamentary approval to run against Assad (including one woman, Faten Naher, the country's first female presidential candidate), there is little hope for an outcome in which Assad is not victorious. As stated by activist Joseph Daher and quoted in this article, "Any serious political opponent who comes back to Syria will end up in prison" (Chehayeb, 2021). These elections, like those held by other dictators, will be little more than a charade that cements Assad's power in the country.

Despite the valiant effort of the last decade, Syrian rebels do not have the same strength today and regime forces have taken control of all but the northwest corner of Syria where the battle for Idlib continues, albeit in a different way than it did before the coronavirus. Since March 2020, there has been a ceasefire in Idlib, but the situation remains tense. The population of the region includes many displaced civilians living in camps as well as fighters split among various rebel groups. Though these groups are loosely unified under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (which controls the distribution of gasoline and humanitarian aid in the region), in-fighting still happens (Agence France Presse, 2021). Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is a complicated group for many Western powers to support as it was founded by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, who previously founded a Syrian chapter of Al Qaeda and served as a commander in ISIS before breaking with these groups to found his own, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra. Jolani's group is currently the primary Syrian opposition to Assad, but, due to previous involvement with Al Qaeda and ISIS, Jolani and HTS are classified as terrorists by the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States (Boghani, 2021). Currently, the ceasefire in Idlib depends on the balance of the Russian-supported regime and the Turkish-backed rebels, but there is speculation that President Erdogan of Turkey may agree to concessions. Namely, the Assad regime wants to secure the commercial M4 highway through Idlib, which would give it partial control in the region, and Erdogan may accept this in exchange for greater control over Kurdish territory (Agence France Presse, 2021). Though the situation is not fully resolved, it seems now that the future of Idlib will be negotiated by the Syrian, Turkish, and Russian governments, rather than by the people living in the region.

There are many unknowns in the future for Syria and its people, among them questions of what will happen following the election, how the ongoing struggle for Idlib will resolve, whether refugees will be required to return to Syria, and what will happen when they do. One thing that is not unknown, however, is that Syrians will continue to document their struggle through art, and they will not forget this decade easily, no matter what happens in the coming months and years. New works continue to be added to the "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution Archive" and will continue to be posted here as well as in Facebook groups and the social media of individual artists as a means of protesting, documenting, and remembering what they are fighting for. In a piece written as part of Al Jazeera's "Arab Spring: 10 Years On" series, Omar Alshogre, a young activist who fled Syria in 2015, stated that, "We still remember and are working hard to become the people who will rebuild Syria when the time comes" (Alshogre, 2021). Though the dimensions of the war have changed and though democracy still seems to be a far-off dream, this struggle is not over.

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