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The Sounds of the Syrian Opposition: Music and Contested Identities

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Since the outbreak of the uprising in Syria in March 2011, there has been a dramatic shift in the culture of political opposition to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Many voices no longer have to hide their message in carefully constructed codes or indirect expressions of political discontent. Within this new paradigm, Syrian artists both within Syria and abroad, have used music to proclaim their opposition to the regime. In the past three years, thousands of videos have been uploaded to YouTube, many of which combine poetry, music, and images often including footage taken by witnesses in Syria reflecting the bloody events of the conflict. Despite sharing a common goal of overthrowing the regime, the artists who create and spread this music represent a diverse range of voices. Following their works, as they are reproduced online, highlights the various distinct identities comprised by the opposition.

The violent conflict began when protests first broke out in the southern city of Daraʿa in March 2011 as a response to the arrest of several youths who had been accused of creating anti-regime graffiti. In response, elements allied

to the regime of Bashar al-Assad fired on protesters, killing a number of civilians. Samih Choukeir, a songwriter and oud player living in Paris, known for his support of minorities and oppressed citizens of the Arab world, responded immediately to these events with a powerful song, worded in the secular nationalist idiom, entitled "Ya Haif" (Oh, the Shame). Choukeir's song condemned the regime of his homeland in a mixture of colloquial and classical Arabic:

> *And budding children like roses, you arrested; how? How?*
>
> *You, a son of my land, are killing my children, while you ignore my enemy…*
>
> *The youth heard how freedom was at their doors,*
>
> *So they rushed [out] to cheer for her…*[1]

Within a short period of time, this song became an anthem of the revolution, and was reproduced in several versions and attained hundreds of thousands of views on the web. Following the transformation of the uprising into a civil war, the most common response in comments on YouTube has become simply an echo of the refrain, "What a shame."

In the first stages of the uprising, the regime in fact condemned the killing of protestors. However, numerous videos emerged on YouTube showing violence carried out against the protesters by those referred to as the militias of "*shabiha*" (ghosts)—a euphemism alluding to thugs supporting the regime, likely members of the ʿAlawi minority. The unfortunate fate of many protestors overtook the “Nightingale” Ibrahim Qashush, from Hama, a city whose predominantly Sunni population has been long at odds with the regime in Damascus. Qashush produced a rap song set to a traditional dabka dance beat with the refrain "*Yallah irhal ya Bashar*" (Go away Bashar!). Qashush met a brutal death; his vocal chords were symbolically cut before his body was thrown into the Orontes River.[2] After his death, several Facebook pages were dedicated to his memory, including the page, "We're all the martyr Ibrahim Qashush."[3] Qashush's song was reproduced in dozens of versions on YouTube, and at least one of them has nearly half a million views.[4]

The tragic story of Ibrahim Qashush inspired the Syrian diaspora-based classical composer Malek Jandali, who formed the "Qashush Freedom Symphony." Jandali's works belong to the genre of western classical music, and were uploaded to the web with images representing the brutality of the Syrian regime. Jandali has received some criticism among conservatives who preferred traditional Syrian music and poetry to represent the uprising, but the "street" voted in favor, viewing one of his videos over 200,000 times. A typically positive comment follows: "I listened to it

many times and still didn't have enough from it. Mr. Malek when I listen to your music I feel proud [to be] a Syrian."[5]

By the summer of 2011, as the number of victims in the uprising grew, religiously oriented themes of martyrdom entered the soundscape. Yahya Hawwa, an imam and singer from Hama, who grew up in Saudi Arabia, and who has nearly 1.3 million followers on Facebook, uploaded a music video to YouTube entitled, "Going out to Face Death." In the song, accompanied by music, a young man sings to his mother that he's going to be a martyr, but not to be sad, because "[her] son is going to fight oppression."[6] Through such songs, the Syrian Muslim clergy in exile were able for the first time in decades to openly mobilize opposition against the regime.[7]

Songs with an Islamic religious tone are also uploaded to the web in the style of *anashid* (hymns), which is to say a cappella music without musical accompaniment. These choruses are consistent with the strict interpretation of Islam by Salafi movements, which include the global Sunni jihadi movements such as al-Qaeda—actively involved in Syria today. They serve as a channel to connect Salafi and jihadi groups to the culture of revolutionary songs, without going against their interpretations of Islamic doctrine, which forbids listening to many types of music.[8]

In conclusion, the various types of opposition music as they are represented on the internet, both in content and visual appearance, generally reflect conflicted Syrian identities, and in particular that of secular versus religious worldviews. As a result, some of the religious-nationalist songs of the opposition can be found online both with and without musical accompaniment—though the accompanied versions have far more views.[9] The dilemmas composers address by releasing dual versions of their songs reflects a similar quandary among the armed opposition trying to overthrow the Assad regime. On the one hand, representatives of the opposition must keep from alienating the moderate Sunni base of the uprising, while at the same time those connected to fighting on the ground must be sensitive to puritanical strains of Islam, and accept the place of their unique artistic forms. In light of the increasing presence on the web of jihadi songs, in line with the increase of Sunni Islamic groups in Syria, appeasing both sides may become more complex in the future. In any event, opposition music and videos have resonated widely on the web. Such expressions of defiance against the regime are more daring than ever and they allow the observer a cultural-political angle with which to grasp the changes occurring within the Syrian opposition movements.

“Unforgivable:” Renewed Conflict between the Iranian Regime and its Opponents Surrounding the Unrest of 2009

Dr. Raz Zimmt

Recently, the struggle between heads of the Iranian regime and supporters of the reformist opposition reignited on social network services (SNS). The background for the renewed tension is the official Iranian observance of the anniversary of the demonstrations initiated by the regime following the unrest led by the reformist opposition (“Green Movement”) in December 2009, which in turn followed after the failed protest movement that erupted as a result of contested presidential elections the previous summer. In addition to subduing the Green Movement protests with an iron fist, and carrying out mass arrests of reformist activists which effectively put an end to the movement, the Iranian regime initiated a pro-regime demonstration on December 30, 2009. Now four years later, the Iranian regime decided to rub in the defeat of the reform movement by instigating commemorative pro-regime demonstrations.

Prior to the anniversary of the anti-Green Movement demonstrations, senior officials in the regime initiated a strident public relations campaign against reformist opposition leaders, particularly Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, who have been under house arrest since February 2011, as well as former president Mohammad Khatami. Public pressure to release Mousavi and Karoubi has mounted following President Hassan Rouhani’s campaign promise to free them. To date, the efforts to obtain their release have been unsuccessful, probably due to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's insistence that they offer public apologies for creating the unrest.

On December 25, the official site of Khamenei published a poster with an image of prosecution files relating to the unrest in 2009 bearing the stamp “unforgivable” (pictured). Under the image there is a quotation from a statement made by Khamenei in November 2000 in which he defined the unrest as “a great sin.” Other senior officials joined the attack on opposition leaders including commander of the Internal Security Forces, Esmail Ahmadi Moqaddam, and the Judiciary spokesman, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Eje'i, declaring that anyone who took part in the unrest was unworthy of pardon. Moreover, on the eve of the four year

anniversary of the pro-regime demonstrations, the regime distributed a nine volume encyclopedia documenting the 2009 unrest. The "chief instigators" Mousavi, Karoubi, and Khatami appear on its cover.

Pictures of those killed during the 2009 unrest. The headline reads, "Unforgivable."

The institutional campaign against reformist opposition leaders aroused great anger on SNS. In response to the poster on the Supreme Leader's website, reformist activists created a Facebook page entitled, "Unforgivable."[10] Many Facebook and Twitter users also created an "unforgivable"[11] hashtag that they attached to examples of civil rights violations by the Iranian regime, thereby claiming that it is actually the violent repression of the unrest in 2009 and the violations of human rights by regime that are unworthy of forgiveness.

Moreover, many Iranian internet users have emphasized that they do not need the authorities' forgiveness, they never requested it, and they are proud to have participated in protests against the regime. Some have even added green fingerprints as a symbol of the Green Movement to their Facebook profiles in order to express their identification with the reformist opposition. Following reports about distribution of the encyclopedia documenting the unrest of 2009, another Facebook page was launched: "We demand that our names be included in the encyclopedia of instigators."[12] A significant number of surfers uploaded their pictures to this page, with the comment "I demand that my name be included in the encyclopedia."

I proudly declare that I am an "instigator." Please add my name to the encyclopedia

The discourse that developed on SNS on the anniversary of the suppression of the Green Movement also included criticism of President Rouhani's controversial remarks on the anniversary of the rally in support of the regime. Rouhani emphasized in a government meeting that the pro-regime demonstrations of December 30, 2009 had signified citizens' desire to protect Islam and express their support for the revolution and its leader, because they felt that their beliefs and values had been offended. He further explained that foreign forces wished to intervene in the internal affairs of Iran. Rouhani's comments were criticized by many SNS users who expressed

disappointment that rather than defending the legitimate right of citizens to demonstrate, the president praised only demonstrations in support of the oppressive regime.[13]

The intense reaction witnessed on SNS to the regime's handling of the anniversary of the pro-regime demonstrations is living evidence that the national wounds inflicted by the suppression of the Green Movement have yet to heal. The refusal of the regime's leaders to release leaders of the reformist opposition on one hand, and the hostility that a large segment of the public feels towards the regime following the suppression of the popular protest movement on the other hand, impede efforts to promote national reconciliation following the election President Rouhani. From this perspective, SNS more than any other channel of communications, are an accurate reflection of the deep fracture between the regime and its opponents. Simultaneously, it seems that SNS have become the main arena for the struggle of the memory of the events of 2009 and their legacy, and both sides understand the explosive potential of this inheritance.

The future of Hagia Sophia: Will the museum again host prayers?

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

During the last month, social network services (SNS) in Turkey discussed the ongoing dispute between Prime Minister Erdoğan and the opposition *Hizmet* (Service) movement led by Fethullah Gülen.[14] Alongside this political struggle, there is a lively debate about the future of the Hagia Sophia Museum. In 1453 when the Ottomans conquered Istanbul, the Church of Saint Sophia (Hagia Sophia) was transformed into a mosque. In 1934, Atatürk decided to turn the building into a museum, and restored ancient images of Jesus and Mary engraved on the walls, making the well-known Christian heritage of the building clearly apparent. Recently, it emerged that the government intends to turn the museum back into a mosque. Government spokesperson Bülent Arınç hinted at this when he said, "The sorrowful building will soon return to life."[15] The government offered clues as to its plans for the Hagia Sophia of Istanbul in its decision last June to convert other Hagia Sophia musuems in İznik and Trabzon into mosques. Like the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, these Byzantine churches were converted into mosques after the Ottoman conquest and became museums in the days of Atatürk.

The comments made by Arınç and the transformation of the churches in İznik and Trabzon into mosques led to a discussion on SNS about the future of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Some Islamist web users created hashtags expressing their desire to see the museum reconverted into a mosque. The most prominent of these declared, "We will not enter Hagia Sophia with tickets but only after purifying ourselves for prayer" (see the picture above).[16] At the same time, other Muslim internet users called on Erdoğan to complete the work begun by Mehmet the Conqueror, the Ottoman Sultan who first turned the church into a mosque in 1453, "before the Greeks take control of its heritage."[17] This call came in response to pictures printed by the Greek soccer team AEK showing Hagia Sophia without its minarets (see picture of sports jersey). The National Turkish Students Union, the network through which Erdoğan began his political career, also provided massive support on SNS for the idea of transforming the musuem into a mosque and even suggested a target date, May 29, as the anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople.[18]

This date was likely chosen to coincide with May's municipal elections. Although public discussion of the future of Hagia Sophia remains a relatively marginal topic in mainstream Turkish media today, it is likely that the subject will play a central role in Erdoğan's campaign for re-election. As a senior opposition activist in the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Sinan Baykent, noted, Erdoğan is likely to use the Hagia Sophia card to recruit various Islamic groups to his side, in an attempt to tilt the balance against his main opponent, Fethullah Gülen.

The online discussion surrounding the future of Hagia Sophia provides additional evidence that web-based social networks have become an inseparable part of the Turkish political system, particularly during the period approaching the municipal and presidential elections. Furthermore, it is an example of official utilization of SNS: Erdoğan may gain the support of Muslim voters by placing the issue close to his heart – returning Hagia Sophia to its pre-Kemalist use as a mosque – on the agenda. At the same time, he may attempt to keep the issue on a low flame, waiting for just the right moment to derive the maximum political capital from the hot topic later on, closer to the date of the presidential elections.

Endnotes:

[1] *Sham SNN*, March, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDuzpBPgkU8&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DKDuzpBPgkU8&has_verified=1&bpctr=1384246975, my translation.
[2] Sham Network, June 27, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCS8SsFOBAI
[3] The motif "We're all (so and so)," referring to a slain member of a protest group, is characteristic of the Arab Spring culture, as in the page, "We're all Khaled Said," named after a victim of the Egyptian uprising against Hosni Mubarak.
[4] Uploaded July 8, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xVJVUNvlv4
[5] Uploaded February 10, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax5ck0fzyaU
[6] Yahya Hawwa. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ec3F4yU8mFA Uploaded June 8, 2011.
[7] Thomas Pierret, *Religion and the State in Syria*, Cambridge University Press, 2013.
[8] Benham Said, "Hymns (Nasheed): A Contribution to the Study of Jihadist Culture," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35, 12, December, 2012, pp. 863-879.
[9] Two versions of the music video, "Haram Aleyh" (It's not allowed), were uploaded by "Ahrar al-Sham" in June, 2012. The a cappella version has been viewed only 4,000 times, versus nearly 300,000 views for the accompanied version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGHvdQVbP0g, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLAUgUl9eZk .
[10] https://www.facebook.com/IRAN.Unforgivable
[11] In Farsi (#نابخشودنی)
[12] https://www.facebook.com/ma.fetnegarim
[13] https://www.facebook.com/Presidentthankyou?ref=br_tf
[14] Regarding this dispute, see "Return of Religion to the Internet: Fethullah Gülen against Erdoğan" Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak at http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/Beehive%20142013.pdf.
[15] "Ayasofya cami mi oluyor?", T24, November 15, 2013, http://t24.com.tr/haber/ayasofya-cami-mi-oluyor/244082 [Accessed on: December 16, 2013]
[16] HagiaSophiaMosque ComingSoon #AyasofyaİbadeteAçılsın #AyasofyaÜmmeteHasret #ayasofya_cami_olmalı #ayasofya_cami_olmalı #ayasofyamsabret #ayasofyaibadeteacılsın #ayasofya_cami_olmalı #ayasofyaicinkıyama #Hüküm_Ancak_ALLAHINDIR
[17] #AyasofyayıAçbeUSTA
[18] In this context, note that echoes of this discourse are felt in Greece. The Greeks consider this an anachronistic step and have asked Turkey to preserve Christian churches appropriately because of they are part of the world's heritage, see "Ayasofya için Yunanistan'dan Sert Tepki: Çağdışı bir hareket", Agos, November 19, 2013, http://www.agos.com.tr/haber.php?seo=ayasofya-icin-yunanistandan-sert-tepki-cagdisi-bir-hareket&haberid=6156, [Accessed on: December 16, 2013]