

Revolutionary Graffiti in Egypt: Resistance and Commemoration

Joyce van de Bildt

In late November 2013, as the interim Egyptian government was finalizing the controversial "protest law," it was also preparing a draft law that would ban "abusive" graffiti on buildings across Egypt. Enactment of the bill would mean that graffiti artists could face prison sentences of up to four years or a fine of 100,000 Egyptian pounds. The law is targeting the graffiti movement that has emerged and developed since the 25 January 2011 Revolution, and has visibly manifested itself on government buildings, police barricades, and houses across the country. From simple hand-written sentences to stencils, martyr portraits, and elaborate murals, the many types of wall paintings are said to reflect the spirit of the revolution and carry political messages as well as commemorative value. Since the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi on July 3, 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood has also used graffiti as a weapon against the new military rulers, albeit it in a different style than the street artists. The government's plan to criminalize certain types of graffiti is an attempt to regain control over public spaces in post-revolutionary Egypt.

Before the 2011 uprising, graffiti was rarely to be seen on the Egyptian streets. Under Hosni Mubarak, public spaces were tightly controlled and decorated largely by posters and pamphlets endorsing the government and its leader. The desecration of Mubarak's portraits was part of the symbolic acts of resistance that were fueled by the protests of January 2011. Evidently, the "conquest" of Tahrir Square led to similar appropriations of public spaces in streets and squares of the city at large. At the same time, protesters started to leave their physical marks on Tahrir Square and government buildings, painting slogans directed against the government and against Mubarak. Among other places, the walls of the Mugamma, an administrative government building that represented

the bureaucratic abuses of the previous regime, became "a canvas" on which to mock the former president.

While the graffiti phenomenon was mainly patriotic at the time of Mubarak's ouster, it soon assumed a more critical bent, including social and political commentary as the situation in Egypt remained unstable. During the last three years, street graffiti has assumed two important functions: to make political statements on the one hand, and to create commemorative narratives on the other hand.

During the period of military rule that followed Mubarak's ouster, the graffiti became increasingly directed against the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Egyptian police, illustrating the public's dissatisfaction with the ruling military council. For example, an image of a male boxer shorts with little helicopters on it – called "[Tantawi's underwear](#)," in satirical reference to Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi – was stenciled all over Cairo. Another, much larger mural of an [army tank](#), threatening to run over a man riding a bicycle carrying loaves of bread on his head, was painted in Zamalek in Central Cairo and soon became iconic. After the 2011 Maspero demonstrations, in which more than 25 Coptic protesters were killed by security forces, artists returned to work on this exact same portrait, this time adding [a group of protesters](#) being run over by the tank.¹ The graffiti movement also responded to the walls and barricades that were erected by the SCAF on Mohamed Mahmoud Street and surrounding streets after the police clashed with protesters numerous times in late 2011 and early 2012. In March 2012, a group of leading graffiti artists combined efforts and initiated the "[ma-fish gudran](#)" ("no walls") project, which involved the painting of landscapes on the walls erected by the SCAF.² The artists sought "to re-open the blocked streets by making the walls invisible" with their paintings.³

The walls and barricades have remained standing until today, and have severely hindered the freedom of movement in the city of Cairo. Almost two years later, the battle between the government and graffiti artists continues to revolve around claims of ownership of the streets. So far, the government has reacted to the graffiti by whitewashing the walls each time it deemed the paintings undesirable. Still, anti-censorship graffiti continued to encourage citizens to express themselves on the walls of Egyptian cities and to mobilize against "state

¹ "Gallery: Revolution graffiti", *Foreign Affairs*, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/gallery-revolution-graffiti2>

² Mona Amam, "No Walls: Declaring its rejection of the government's wall of separation," *Akhbar Al-Yom*, March 6, 2012, <http://www.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/15587/1/0.html#.UralgPOW1oM>

³ Mohamed el Dahshan, "Art conquers walls in Cairo," *Foreign Policy*, 12 February 2013, http://transitions.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/19/art_conquers_walls_in_cairo#sthash.HJgSxMGv.rLpYgYQZ.dpbs

oppression". This goal was also declared on the Facebook page *Irsam fi shawari' Masr* ("Draw on Egyptian Streets"). The page calls on people to continue their fight against "the illegitimate government," to draw on the streets, and to be creative and express their ideas, emphasizing that their graffiti is not vandalism but art. Loud and clear, the page calls on Egypt's citizens: "Come down and draw on the streets of your country, think, invent, struggle, draw..."⁴

The rebellious character of the graffiti movement is consistent with the reputation that graffiti movements typically have. But in Egypt specifically, graffiti has manifested itself as a very popular and large-scale element of protest. More unconventional themes, such as gender issues, have also been addressed, in particular drawing attention to the sexual harassment of women. The participation of women in the graffiti movement is also noteworthy, and is illustrated by the rise of artistic movements focusing on women's rights such as "*Graffiti Harimi*" ("women's graffiti"), '*Noon Al-Neswa*' (which may be translated as "the W of Women") and *Kata'ib Mona Liza* ("The Mona Lisa Brigades"). One of the most telling works is a stencil that portrays the profiles of three women: one without a head cover, a second wearing a hijab, and a third wearing a burqa.⁵ The accompanying text reads, "Don't label me." Similar themes have also been adopted by independent artists. For example, Mira Shihadeh together with another street artist nicknamed "El Zeft," produced the painting "[The Circle of Hell](#)," which features a girl surrounded by a group of men in a threatening manner, in reference to the sexual violence that has taken place during protests in Tahrir Square. El Zeft also created a stencil of the Egyptian Queen [Nefertiti](#) wearing a gas mask, accompanied by the words, "the voice of the women of the revolution."

In the post-Morsi period, the Muslim Brotherhood's supporters have not produced artistic compositions like those described above, but rather confined themselves to writing slogans directed against the military leader General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, such as "Al-Sisi is a traitor and must be executed" and "The coup is terrorism." The group has also used graffiti as a way to announce demonstrations.⁶ It may be this specific practice that has led the government to consider a law banning graffiti. Commenting on the "insulting" and "abusive" language sprayed on the walls of Cairo, the newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported: "The statements are inflammatory, and obviously made in haste. Obscenity is the rule."

⁴ Facebook page: "Graffiti the streets of Egypt | *Irsam fie shawari' Masr*".

<https://www.facebook.com/GraffitiOfEgypt>

⁵ Maha elNabawi, "Graffiti campaigns bring women and children into street art," *Egypt Independent*, February 18, 2013, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/graffiti-campaigns-bring-women-and-children-street-art>

⁶ Ramadan el Sherbini, "Islamists turn to walls in feud with Egypt military," *Gulf News*, October 12, 2013, <http://gulfnnews.com/news/region/egypt/islamists-turn-to-walls-in-feud-with-egypt-military-1.1242330>

One needs only a brief tour of downtown Cairo to become disillusioned: the capital has turned into a theatre of insults and vulgarity."⁷

Although the latest draft law is probably directed at the Muslim Brotherhood, one should not underestimate the power of the "other" graffiti – the street art – to be a real menace to the regime as well. Despite the fact that a debate about the distinction between art and vandalism is entirely legitimate, in this case one could argue that a ban on graffiti is in the government's interest, given the oppositional nature of the graffiti during the last three years and considering that it has particularly targeted the military. Street art in Egypt has served as "a strident yet eloquent instrument of protest," painted in public places for everyone to see.⁸ At a time when the Egyptian government is struggling to maintain its legitimacy, dissident street art is probably something it would like to curb.

Indeed, since the graffiti movement emerged, the majority of the paintings have been anti-government in one way or the other: including images calling for the completion of the revolution, mocking portraits of Mubarak, Morsi, and military officials, and paintings making statements against police violence. It is remarkable that elements from ancient Egyptian civilization dominate many of the images, often invoking pyramids, pharaohs, mummies, the "bastet" – the ancient Egyptian goddess portrayed as a woman with the head of a cat – and other mythological figures or ancient symbols to reflect current events. Besides the scenes taken from ancient Egyptian civilization, graffiti art has depicted Egyptian film stars or pop singers from the mid-twentieth century to express Egyptian national pride on the one hand, and to send a political message on the other. One famous one is a stencil of [Umm Khulthum](#), accompanied by a lyric from her song "El Atlal" ("The Ruins"): "Give me my freedom, release my hand."

Moreover, commemorating martyrs and heroes has also been a prominent theme among the wall paintings. In February 2011, the Egyptian artist Mohamed Fahmy, nicknamed "Ganzeer" ("chain"), began to paint a series of large portraits of the men and women who had been killed during the eighteen days in January 2011. In addition, life-size martyr paintings of those who are regarded as the "iconic martyrs" or "heroes" of the revolution – such as Sambo, Mina Daniel, Ahmed Harara and Sheikh Imad Effat – are easily recognized in the graffiti.⁹

⁷ Chahinaz Gheith, "Graffiti on Cairo walls: Art or insult?" *Al-Ahram*, November 2, 2013,

⁸ Alastair Sooke, "Egypt's powerful street art packs a punch," *BBC Culture*, 9 March, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130508-egypts-street-art-revolution>

⁹ Sambo (Mohammed Gad) had seized a gun from police forces during protests in June 2011, in an attempt to defend fellow protesters who were being violently attacked by the police. Mina Daniel was a Coptactivist who was killed in the Maspero incident in 2011. Ahmed Harara was twice blinded, first in protests against Hosni Mubarak, then in clashes with the military. Sheikh Ahmed Effat has been called the "revolutionary sheikh" and was killed by military police in Tahrir square.

Throughout 2012, the practice of painting faces of martyrs on the walls of Egyptian cities expanded, especially around the area of Mohamed Mahmoud Street. One project included a series of portraits of [faces with one eye](#), in reference to the many victims who lost an eye in the 2011-2012 street clashes. Mohamed Mahmoud Street has therefore also been called *shari' uyun al-hurriya* – "the street of the eyes of freedom." After the Port Said stadium riots, [faces](#) of its victims were added to these murals, which gave the commemorative project an even wider resonance among Egyptians. More recently, portraits of [Belal `Ali](#), an eighteen-year-old student killed during anti-government protests in October 2013, were added.

In day-to-day life, the painted walls have emerged as a memorial space: flowers are placed on the street, Qur'an verses are written or taped next to martyr portraits, and people photograph themselves in front of the walls. The walls and its paintings serve as constant reminders of the violence and the victims of the revolution, both to the Egyptian public and to the current Egyptian government. The wall paintings form a commemorative narrative that is explicitly framed as belonging to the public, one that vows not to forget the horrors of police violence and the injustices committed by government forces. With its presence, the street art continues to challenge the interim government and provides momentum to what has been called *al-thawra al-mustamirra*, "the ongoing revolution."

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