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We Have No Role But to Bear Witness

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Bashar al-Asad has survived the Syrian civil war, but he is unable to consolidate his rule and apply it to the whole of Syria. Prominent among the challenges to his regime is the recent “Caesar Act” (Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act), the sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Asad and his supporters. The effort to protect Syria’s civilian population from the regime’s atrocities is important and laudable. But in the long term if Syria is to be put back together again as a state, a restoration of its civil society will be necessary. In this context, it is important to examine the role of culture and specifically literature in the unfolding Syrian crisis.

In the five decades that preceded the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Ba’th regime had a formula for maintaining a functioning relationship with the cultural and artistic community in Syria. This formula was not fundamentally different from the methods employed by dictatorial regimes in other countries. The regimes of the father, Hafiz al-Asad, and his son, Bashar al-Asad, demonstrated a limited willingness to withstand criticism and did not hesitate to suppress and imprison their critics, but at the same time, their Ba’thist regimes placed great emphasis on Syria’s status as an important hub of Arab culture. The regime was able to appreciate the prestige and legitimacy that was provided by Syrian theater, cinema, television, poetry, and literature. It also recognized that a limited dose of criticism provided a safety valve with which to release public criticism of the regime.

The Ba’thists were willing to accept criticism as long as it was not aimed at the legitimacy of the regime and its leaders. Criticism of corruption, inefficiency, the bureaucracy, and the ills of Arab society and politics as a whole was acceptable. For its part, the regime was able to establish a symbiotic relationship with a large part of

the artistic and cultural community, whose people studied and taught in state institutions and produced state-funded films, plays, and television programs.

Works that went beyond the regime-imposed red lines were banned and their authors were sometimes jailed. An interesting example of this pendulum's movement is the story of great Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous. Wannous was critical of the regime, which banned the production of his plays, but in 2007, when UNESCO chose Syria to serve as the 2008 "Arab Capital of Culture," the regime allowed the production of one of his plays, in light of the fact that he was considered one of the most prominent playwrights, if not the most prominent, in the Arab world.

Syria's three most prominent intellectuals tried but failed to find a *modus vivendi* with the regime. The poet Nizar Qabbani served as a diplomat in the Syrian foreign ministry but resigned in 1966 without criticizing the regime while choosing to live in Europe until his death in 1998. The poet Adonis ('Ali Ahmad Sa'id Esber), a native of the Alawi Mountain, preferred to live in Lebanon and Paris. He returned to Damascus for a few years and wrote a regular column in *al-Thawra* newspaper until the regime fired the editor and stopped publishing the column. Adonis returned to Paris and lives there to this day. Philosopher and intellectual Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm lived most of his years in Lebanon, Europe, and the United States. In 1995, he returned to Syria as head of the department of philosophy at the University of Damascus. This episode ended in failure in 1999, when al-Azm was granted permission to leave Syria so as not to return.

As the Syrian uprising turned into civil war, a cultural war developed between the regime and the opposition, with both sides trying to enlist the support of the Syrian literary and arts community. Most of them supported the rebellion, but the regime succeeded in recruiting the most prominent comedian in Syria, Duraid al-Laham. Laham's Shi'i origins may have been an important factor in his siding with the regime.

Despite a large number of cultural figures opposing the regime, the Asad government still managed to sign about 100 artists, most of them second-tier, to a pamphlet of support. Much more ominous was the violence perpetrated against some regime critics at the height of the civil war. Thugs from one of the pro-regime militias broke the arms and fingers of cartoonist 'Ali Farzat, and singer Ibrahim Qashoush, who became famous for his protest anthem "Yalla Erhal Ya Bashar (Come on Bashar, Leave)" was found dead with his throat and vocal cords cut. Given this reality, it was not surprising that a large number of anti-regime artists preferred to leave Syria for other Arab countries or Europe and the United States. It is no wonder then, that much of the cultural-artistic protests against the regime were made on social media.

Particularly popular was a group that operated a puppet theater in short videos broadcast over the Internet.

Against this backdrop, writer Khaled Khalifa is of special interest. Khalifa was born in 1964 in Aleppo, and after graduating from university, became a successful author and screenwriter. His first book was published in 1993 and the second, published in 2000, was confiscated by the Arab Writers Union in Damascus (a radical Pan-Arab organization that also criticized the peace talks with Israel). He acquired his reputation in 2006 with the publication of *In Praise of Hatred*, which tells the story of a merchant family from Aleppo, and through it, the story of the Muslim Brotherhood's struggle against the Ba'th regime between 1979 and 1982. Aleppo was one of the main battlegrounds between the regime and the Muslim rebels. The uprising culminated in the city of Hama, where the regime killed over 20,000 residents. Khalifa found a safe middle ground between a graphic depiction of the brutal revolt and repression and the degree of caution required by an author in Syria. The words "Asad," "Ba'th", and "Alawis" do not appear in the book. Khalifa made use of the words "the president," "the party," and "the other community" instead. The book was banned in Syria shortly after its publication, but was republished in Beirut and enjoyed success. Khalifa was not arrested by the regime and continued his work, a clear example of his ability to navigate the unstated red lines during those years.

Khalifa's most important and successful book was published in 2016 under the title, *Death is Hard Work*. The book describes the journey of a Syrian family taking the body of its deceased patriarch from Damascus to his native village near Aleppo. On the journey, the family encounters all the horrors of the civil war. Khalifa explained in interviews that the idea for writing the book came to him after he had a heart attack and was hospitalized in Damascus, and when he recovered, he asked himself what would be the fate of his body in the event of his death.

Why did Khalifa decide to stay in Syria and not emigrate like many of his friends? As he explains: "In general, those of us who could have stayed in Syria stayed, and those who left Syria did so because they had to. For those of us who stayed, I feel we preserved this place despite the fact that life here is dangerous and difficult. The decision to stay here is not easy at all. Some have left without being forced, but war is not the time to ask anyone why they want to leave a dangerous place. As for my role and the role of other artists, in simple terms, we have no role but to be witnesses... We are paralyzed in what we can do. I am fortunate to be an author ... I can write by myself. You cannot go outside with a camera and take pictures on the street today. It is impossible. I feel that if I leave Syria I will lose this place for good. I am quite a coward. I cannot start my life anew elsewhere ... But it is not a matter of courage ...

There is a price for staying but there is also a price for leaving. I have decided to pay the price of staying."¹

Khalifa was also able to survive in Syria because he declared that he does not have political positions, he merely describes reality. He also criticizes the opposition, and his criticism of the regime is restrained. But perhaps more important is the fact that his book was published after the regime had actually won the civil war, with the help of Russia and Iran, and could afford to withstand some criticism, which during the height of the war seemed dangerous. The fact that Khalifa is recognized in the Arab and Western worlds also serves as a kind of shield.

With the conquest of Aleppo in December 2016, the critical phase of the civil war ended in the regime's victory. Since then, the regime has tried to reestablish its control and legitimacy and reassert its authority, with limited success. Today's Syria is very different from Syria of 2010. Six million Syrians, mostly Sunnis, have left and several million others are internally displaced refugees in their own country. A significant part of the state is not under the regime's control and the desire to stabilize the regime and begin economic rehabilitation today seems hopeless. Equally serious is that most of the cultural and artistic community has left Syria, leaving a depleted state in which even Khaled Khalifa would find it difficult to rehabilitate its status as an important hub of Arab cultural production and creativity.

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¹ Madeline Edwards, "[Syrian author Khaled Khalifa on latest novel and 'fear, in all of its manifestations'](#)," Syria Direct, February 27, 2019.