



Underground Iraqi Music, Part 2: From Nostalgia to the Reality of War with Nova Emad

Interviewed by Dima Yassine

Prelude to an Uprising: Syrian Fictional Television and Socio-Political Critique

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As antigovernment protests gripped Syria in 2011 and 2012, observers celebrate a new generation of activist artists and their innovative forms of creative dissent. The wall of fear that had long curtailed artistic expression has collapsed, they argue, with youthful satirists moving beyond the despair and complaisance of older cultural producers to flood the internet with caustic caricatures and enliven demonstrations with imaginative tactics. Articulated in the international media and echoed in scholarly discussions, this notion of rupture attributes no role to Syria's artistic establishment. The "traditional opposition," including many media makers, is assumed marginal to the protest movement. Through omission, media accounts of dissident youth imply an older generation's impotence.

The Syrian television drama industry, with its draconian state control and multifarious ties to the regime, appears an unlikely source for evidence complicating



[A graffiti artists tags a wall with the phrase "Down with Bashar", during the Syrian Uprising, March 2011. Image from Wikimedia Commons.]

this narrative. While some television people have risked intimidation, violence and arrest to join the protests, many have remained silent. In fact, a few high-profile drama figures—actors in particular—publically supported President Bashar al-Asad, lending credence to views of the industry as a veritable propaganda arm of the ruling elite. Yet despite their limited autonomy, Syrian drama creators active during the president's first decade in power devised new televisual forms that have equipped anti-regime activists with a visual language of critique.

Through dark comedy and social realism, television drama creators worked with and through the state, although many were against the regime. Like others in the officially-tolerated opposition, television makers navigated a perilous ideological landscape, a cultural field mined with potential for castigation, cooptation and complicity. One program serves as an apt bellwether for this late Ba'athist moment. *Spotlight*, (*Buq'at Daw'*), a satirical sketch series aired during Bashar al-Asad's first years in power, seemed to herald a new openness. In 2001, Syria International, a private production company owned by a member of parliament with strong links to the regime, commissioned two of Syria's leading young comics to come up with a new show. Armed with a wide and vague brief, Ayman Rida and Basim Yakhur enlisted newcomer Laith Hajjo to direct the series. *Spotlight* emerged as an ensemble work that daringly lampooned sectarianism, regionalism, Islamic revivalism, state corruption, and even the dreaded intelligence services (*mukhabarat*). The series' team buttressed their risk-taking with the president's inaugural address, which called for a new era of transparency and a campaign against corruption. Hajjo notes, "The producer didn't really know what we were up to. We kept telling the censors that, look, the president said X, so we're following that policy." [1]

Reference to this first speech was no mere strategy. Drama creators projected their hopes for change onto the persona of the new president. Like other reform-minded elites, they believed transformation would occur, gradually. With his British education and financier wife, Bashar al-Asad appeared the consummate modernizer, poised to unravel the militarized, kleptocratic police state that had grown over nearly four decades of Ba'ath Party rule. He introduced a discourse of reform that industry people hoped would turn into practice. The president, in turn, took pride in the drama industry, purportedly boasting that foreign leaders commend him for airing critical satire on state television. The warm relationship the new leader forged with actors and directors, and his willingness to trump censorship committees on their behalf, convinced many of reform's imminence. The regime's 2001 suppression of the "Damascus Spring," the brief flowering reformist discussion that marked the president's first months in office, appeared a temporary triumph of the old system. Many in the industry remained optimistic that the young president would eventually move beyond it to launch the promised transformation. But disillusion grew with the fitful stagger towards freedom of expression and persistence of corruption. A number of television creators, including the *Spotlight* team, began to criticize the economic liberalization process that transformed their industry and rendered life miserable for millions of Syrian workers.

As the decade unfolded, *Spotlight* peaked and fizzled, much like reform project it sprang from and satirized. Artistic infighting, accusations of co-optation, and mushrooming competition pushed the series from center stage in Syrian public culture. Yet the *Spotlight* and programs like it undoubtedly helped to broaden public debate and blur the boundaries of taboo. Critical remarks unlikely to occur spontaneously, either in public forums or private conversations, flourished in discussion of television programs. "Just like on *Spotlight*" became a catch phrase denoting the everyday absurd. Ultimately, by challenging the limits of expression, the series revealed the contradictions of state rhetoric. As Hajjo explains:

The director of [state] television himself was changed, because he agreed to air *Spotlight*. That was a real action, because it confirmed that in the end, censors are unable to be open or free. When a director is fired because he agrees to air certain sketches, this shows that we've hit our boundaries. We've discovered that this freedom they're talking about doesn't exist. [2]

Spotlight lent a fresh satirical edge and technical sophistication to social and political critique, and enhanced levels of visual literacy in Syria and the wider Arab world. Drawing on critical cultural forms from the 1970s and 1980s—notably the work of Durayd Lahham and the Thorn Theater collective—*Spotlight* continued a tradition of comedic critique for a new generation of viewers and creators. Its legacy endures, even as the television industry, like the Syrian nation, faces an uncertain future.

From Employees to Stars

The creators of *Spotlight* and other new programs have benefitted from an expanded, well-financed satellite mediascape that imposes new conditions and constraints. Across the Arab world and beyond, millions of viewers now

follow Syrian series as they had once tuned into Egyptian productions. The Syrian industry's recent fortunes reflect the economic liberalization, initiated by Hafiz al-Asad in the early 1990s and accelerated by his son Bashar in the 2000s, that facilitated private production. They also involve the regionalization of Arabic-language media, as a rising number of Gulf Cooperation Council-owned, pan-Arab channels now buy Syrian series. Increased demand and foreign financing transformed the television community from a handful of socially marginal and financially struggling—yet steadily working—state-employed professionals to an array of private production companies hiring contract labor. While ensemble casts remain the norm, distinctions between creative and technical workers have widened. Leading Syrian actors have become regional celebrities, feted in Arab capitals and mobbed by fawning tourists. Those employed behind the scenes—writers, directors and visual artists—earn a substantial living, enough to finance their more “serious” creative endeavors.

For those lower down in the production hierarchy benefit more unevenly from the drama outpouring. Flexible labor conditions render struggling actors, technicians and other “below the line” workers especially vulnerable. Hours are unregulated, insurance non-existent, and contracts can be cancelled on a whim. Despite its regional prominence, the Syrian industry has developed little infrastructure. Some television figures see the term “industry” as a misnomer; drama production, they argue, is merely an “activity” that could vanish at the slightest downturn.

Producing drama within these material and ideological constraints becomes a source of pride for drama. Many express a passion for the miniseries and its potential. Those in creative positions see themselves as artists first, but remain committed to a notion of progress. They foreground issues difficult to broach in non-fiction media, hoping to spark discussion and, ultimately, social and political transformation. But as they are keenly aware, they operate in conditions not of their own choosing. The spread of satellite access has generated vast audiences and increased financing. Yet the burgeoning market threatens to co-opt social critique and derail reformist impulses, as socially committed works form part of an ever-broadening program flow.

Commitment and Critique

Drama oscillates between accommodating and challenging GCC domination, persistent authoritarianism, and the neoliberal moment. In addition to sensational thrillers and nostalgic costume dramas, Syrians continue to produce works that harken back to an earlier era of Arab cultural production. Realist dramas join socio-political satires in addressing “our problems,” as Arab viewers put it. They reflect an enduring secular, socialist tradition that lives on in Syrian cultural production, despite seemingly unfavorable political and market conditions.

Syrian social dramas uphold key tenets of Ba‘thist ideology; they also subvert it by depicting the failure of state practice. In her study of dissident high art in Syria, miriam cooke argues that oppositional artists use state pronouncements as critique.[3] They play on the distance between rhetoric and reality, illustrating the hollowness of regime slogans. However prosaic they may be, TV dramas do this as well, even while operating within official structures. Television creators remind us of Syria's role as the birthplace and “beating heart of Arab nationalism,” and many cling to Arab socialist ideals. The senior generation studied in the former Soviet Union or Eastern Bloc nations and passed on a social realist aesthetic to their young apprentices, who have transformed it with fast-paced, slick camera work and high production values. The form is considerably updated; the social concern remains central.

Social drama and satire shares a dark sensibility. The work of *Spotlight* director Laith Hajjo, exemplifies this link. Hajjo's hard-hitting drama debut, *Behind Bars (Khalf al-Qudban)*, traced in parallel storylines the misfortunes of characters sharing a prison cell. Aired on the Emirati channel Infinity during Ramadan 2005, the work featured negative depictions of Islamic piety and scenes of high-class prostitution, rape and masturbation. *Behind Bars'* reformist impulse appeared in depictions of official abuse, including the imprisonment of rape victims to prevent so-called honor killings.

Hajjo's deft hand with social issues reemerged the following year, with the series *Waiting (al-Intizar)*. A story of ordinary people struggling to escape urban poverty, *Waiting* was filmed in an impoverished, “haphazard neighborhood” of the outskirts of Damascus. Long before they erupted in anti-regime sentiment, these marginal regions, which slipped so easily from middle-class consciousness given the veneer of neoliberal prosperity, featured in drama series. Hajjo shows settlement dwellers locked in a frustrating limbo symbolizing the contemporary condition.

Waiting's somber mood and dark critique recalls Hajjo's earlier works, principally *Spotlight* and a second popular satire, *No Hope (Amal Ma Fi)*. Syrian intellectuals, especially those involved in “higher,” more autonomous fields of artistic

endeavor, often dismiss TV critique as a safety valve mechanism, offering repressed subjects an opportunity to vent, *tanfis*. They argue that seemingly transgressive programs like *Spotlight* work to perpetuate the status quo by siphoning off and defusing dissent, and lend the regime an appearance of openness, one that foreign dignitaries applaud. They imply that the leadership is aware of social and political problems and engaged in addressing them, so no real change need follow. True, few of the *Spotlight* team—now firmly entrenched in the state-sanctioned artistic establishment—have joined the protest movement, and one has openly supported the regime. Yet if the safety valve theory accurately represents regime intent, the strategy has backfired. The uprising's explosion of satirical dissidence draws, sometimes vaguely, often explicitly, on the innovative works aired during the 2000s on Syrian state television. Send-ups posted on the internet, such as the puppet show *Top-Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*, target the president and his inner circle, stomping over the ultimate red line established. Such works reinvigorate a comedic form bearing a long history of struggle. Their creators move well beyond the very boundaries their predecessors fought to extend.

One *Spotlight* character particularly resonates: Homs comedian Ahmad al-Ahmad's "Spray Can Man," inspired numerous graffiti protests in Syrian cities. Aired in 2008, this sketch was directed by Laith Hajjo's friend and collaborator Samer Barqawi. The opening graphic features a ticking bomb. In the first scene, the hero opens the front door of his dilapidated hovel to find bags of trash left by a neighbor from the surrounding—and much nicer—apartment buildings. Unable to identify the culprit, he buys a can of black spray paint and writes "don't throw trash here" on his outside wall. Inspired, he carries the can with him, and, upon finding a nearby trash bin overflowing, sprays "cleanliness is civilization," reworking a regime slogan. On a roll, he masks his face with a *kufiya*, and against a *Star Wars* musical backdrop, vents his frustrations on high rises and government buildings. He twists the proverb "patience is the key to remedy" into "patience is the key to poverty." Spray Can Man becomes a folk hero and heartthrob who taunts the bumbling security agents assigned to capture him. Newspaper headlines pronounce: "The Spray Can Man and the Contemporary Condition." When the hero plasters "get off our backs" on what looks like an intelligence services headquarters, an exasperated official tries a new tactic: a television appeal addressing the graffitist as a citizen who has merely expressed a shared angst, but cannot change the country with a spray can. He invites Spray Can Man in for a "civilized, democratic dialogue." The hero turns himself in and is given a whitewashed prison cell and dozens of spray paint cans.

While Spray Can Man languishes in jail, another gadfly writes "to be continued" in the sky with a jet pack. The sketch plays on the regime's manipulation of reformist language, exposing it as mere doublespeak. It invokes the system's cooptation of dissent through the pretense of dialogue and the control of cultural production. Artists express themselves, but from behind metaphoric bars.

Protestors modeling themselves on Spray Can Man emerged in numerous Syrian cities during the uprising. A "Spray Can Man" website pays tribute to the character and links him to current anti-regime action.[4] The Dubai-based, oppositional channel Orient TV aired a news story on the phenomenon, interspersing Ahmed al-Ahmad's character with real-life graffitists. One such agitator was killed after "causing *shabbiha* [regime thugs] and security men in Homs a headache for weeks," by writing anti-regime sentiments on "sensitive" buildings. Another spray can graffitist disappeared in Damascus "under mysterious circumstances." [5] Hundreds attended the funeral of noted 23-year-old spray can man Nour Hatem Zahra, one of the activists behind the "Freedom Graffiti Week Syria" Facebook page, after his fatal shooting in late April 2012.[6] Even for the established artists of state-controlled media, metaphoric bars may become real: Spray Can Man's creator, actor and screenwriter 'Adnan Zira'i, was arrested outside his Damascus home in late February 2012. What promoted this action is unclear, but reports of his incarceration, and Facebook calls for his release, celebrated the influence of his famous creation on uprising dissidents.

Another clear influence on dissident cultural producers is Laith Hajjo's series of vignettes entitled *No Hope*. These aired on Syria's state-owned satellite station in 2004. Here Hajjo presents a Beckettian dialogue between two armchair intellectuals, played by eminent actors Fayiz Qazaq and Bassam Kusa. Shabbily dressed, sipping tea from a battered table in a dimly lit shack, the two expound on a different topic each episode, in a tone of existentialist gloom. Opening graphics begin tracing the word "hope," then add its negation, as the theme song croons, "it won't work out for you, no listens to you, perhaps there's no hope." In one memorable episode, Kusa is pondering "the revolution." "What revolution?" Qazaq asks. "The revolution that hasn't happened yet, and the problem of who will lead it," Kusa responds. "Maybe he's among us in some unknown corner, or a child in school," Kusa muses, "Maybe he hasn't even been born yet." "That's it!" Qazaq exclaims, "that's the most likely scenario."

In "Applause," Kusa tells Qazaq he has been busy clapping, by himself and just for practice. Qazaq tells him that

clapping has gone out of fashion, and no one has any reason or desire to clap, but Kusa begs to differ: “you say this now my friend, but when push comes to shove, everyone will applaud.” He begins clapping loudly, and is soon joined by a chorus of applause timed to the martial strains of a Strauss’s Radetzky March. Syrians in earshot join in a surge of praise for an unseen regime spectacle; failure to do so carries consequences.

If anti-regime messages conveyed in state-controlled works like *No Hope* were necessarily—and creatively—ambiguous, autonomous activists now render them explicit. The day after Bashar al-Asad’s March 2011 speech to parliament, dissidents operating under the moniker *Shamrevolution* posted on a remix of *No Hope*’s clapping episode. The new version interspersed the Qazaq-Kusa dialogue with scenes of cheering crowds and parliamentarians’ obsequious ovations, replaying the ominous line, “when push comes to shove, everyone will applaud.”

The anonymous youth collective “With You” has produced a send-up of and homage to *No Hope* entitled *Freedom and Nothing But (Hurriya wa Bas)*. Aired on Dubai-based oppositional Orient TV in Ramadan 2011, the new vignettes have a strong YouTube and Facebook presence. Its title reworks the regime mantra “God, Syria Bashar and Nothing But.” Opening graphics begin with the word “freedom,” then add “and nothing but.” Young activist-actors adopt *No Hope*’s scruffy *mise-en-scène*, transforming its somber resignation into revolutionary passion. Two disheveled youths replace the older actors’ curmudgeons, and the table moves outdoors to a simmering junkyard.

The *Freedom and Nothing But* episode “Puppet Theater” evokes both the *No Hope* clapping sketch and the president’s parliamentary address. One character, holding a newspaper, reels off a list of disasters: an earthquake in Japan, a hurricane in Mexico, and a friend’s death, as his companion punctuates each item with applause. Infuriated, the reader cries, “What’s wrong with you, have you no feelings, no conscience?” “No it’s not that,” the grinning clapper replies, “I’m thinking of running for parliament.”

While embracing *No Hope*’s format, the With You team distance themselves from its makers. They argue that the Hajjo series, “only skimmed the surface of Syrian issues.”[7] With You point to the bitter irony that those who built careers ridiculing the establishment now defend it, as so many television creators either fail to join the protests, or overtly back the regime. Episode one of *Freedom and Nothing But* begins with a declaration: “Freedom is coming, despite some artists’ hesitance.”[8] At the “Spring of Arab Cinema” festival held in Paris in September 2011, a With You spokesperson remarked that the team sought to “awaken professional artists in Syria, and tell them if they don’t wake up, there are young people to take your place.” Veteran TV drama director Haytham Haqqi took issue, reminding the audience that drama creators were among the first to call for “a democratic, pluralist state with a citizenry equal under a just law.”[9]

The debt that programs like *Freedom and Nothing But* owe to the televisual innovations of the 2000s is easy to miss amid celebrations of the uprising’s creativity, and the pro-establishment stance of some high-profile drama makers. Yet in a nation denuded of conventional politics, fictional television became an arena of social and political imaging. Despite stringent censorship constraints, and amid insalubrious market conditions, programs like *Spotlight*, *Waiting* and *No Hope* brought critical reflection to the center of Syrian—and Arab—public life. TV makers saw themselves as working within and through the state to critique the regime. The Syrian industry’s legacy of social realism and political satire percolates through the current protests, reflecting the *longue durée* of creative struggle. Critics have long bemoaned drama’s limitations. Yet as the works of *Shamrevolution* and the With You team illustrate, programs of the Bashar al-Asad era succeeded through implication. Avid viewers, some now turned activist cultural producers, fill in the blanks.

Endnotes

[1] Marlin Dick, “Syria under the Spotlight,” *Arab Media and Society* 3 (Fall 2007).

[2] Author interview, October 17, 2006.

[3] Miriam, Cooke. *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[4] <http://albakhakh.wordpress.com/>.

[5] “The Regime Chases “Spray Can Man” from Homs to Damascus (Al-Nizam Yalhathu wara’ al-Rajul al-Bakhakh min Hims ila Dimashq.” *Zaman al-Wasl*, July 20, 2011. <http://zaman-alwsl.net/readNews.php?id=20481>.

[6] <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/02/151852095/a-syrian-graffiti-artist-defiant-until-death>, <http://mediaorient.com/>, <https://www.facebook.com/MAD.GRAFFiTi.Week.SYRiaa>.

[7] Nadine Elali, “The Syrian Revolution in Sketches: Talking to the Horriyeh w Bas team.” *Now Lebanon*, July 19, 2011. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=292824>.

[8] In Syria, the term *fannan*, “artist,” generally refers to actors.

[9] al-Azhari, Nada. “Even the Image Shouts: Freedom and Nothing But!” (Hata al-Sura Hatifat: Huriya wa Bas!). *al-Hayat*, September 23, 2011. <http://www.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/310415>.

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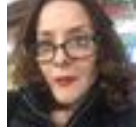


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