

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Syria

The Civil Activity for The Syrian Documentary Film Industry

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If the documentary films before 2011 barely reflected the Syrian reality with its political, social and cultural details, then the post-revolution films tackled its violent transformations on the body, identity and land. In the last decade, several Syrian civil organizations have specialized in documentary production. Far from its artistic value, visual image aesthetics and deep human subjects, the present case study attempts to capture documentary cinema emerging from the civil movement not only as a tool for peaceful resistance facing violence and dictatorship but also as a foundation for the necessary change in cultural policies in Syria.

CASE BACKGROUND

Until 2003, the cinematic movement affiliated with the authorities started from selecting scenario, producing, distributing, importing foreign and Arab films, organizing festivals and approving the shows, training, and the possibility of academic specialization. Within the Syrian cultural policies adopted by the ruling Arab Socialist Baath Party, a socialist sponsorship model was adopted (Al-Khatib and Yazji, 2010) that integrates culture into the authority political machine and restricts the establishment of any independent, animated and productive sector, "which weakened the institutional performance in the cultural field before the crisis and its deterioration. This was represented by the severe restrictions on cultural freedoms, the absence of a vision and strategy, weak community participation and accountability, and the poor enabling environment for cultural creativity" (Al-Jabaei, 2015, p. 4). We can monitor the policies of removing cinema as a societal activity from the public sphere:

- Governmental monopoly policy: The National Film Organization gradually dominated the film industry¹. Most filmmakers had no production means, but this organization and most of them became bureaucratic employees in its offices. In contrast, private production was completely destroyed. Until 2013, the organization had produced only 66 feature-length films² signed by 29 directors (Qusha, 2015, p. 4). The short films are estimated at 400; more than half are documentary³ and used for decades as political marketing tools⁴. Furthermore, the 1970s witnessed critical films that focused on underdevelopment, patriarchy and inequality in society (Al-Kawakibi, 7, 2013). However, this approach was restricted⁵.

- Censorship policies: Cinema entered the fields of bureaucracy, non-competition and "the dominance of one sterile party's censorship" (Yazbek, 2001). Through its security (intelligence

¹ - In addition to the National Film Organization, established in 1963, both the cinema department of the Syrian Arab Television and the cinema department of the Syrian Army produce cinemas as well. There is a Chamber of Film Industry in the Ministry of Economy.

² Many of these films had a high artistic level, but many of them were only shown on a small scale or were banned from showing.

³ - The private sector did not produce documentary films, except for two films with a low quality «The Path to Peace» by Amin Al-Bunni and «A Dream» by Muhammad Malas.

⁴ - Important films should be mentioned, but they revolve around the Syrian civilization or the Palestinian issue, including "Water and Drought" by Salah Dahni, "Napalm" by Nabil Al-Maleh (1970), "Testimony of Children in War" by Iraqi Qais Al-Zubaidi (1972), "On behalf of her" Samir Zikra (1975), "Wishes" by Abd al-Latif Abd al-Hamid (1983), "The Revolution of Sheikh Saleh al-Ali" by Essam Suleiman (1984), "The Witness" by Raymond Boutros (1986), "Euphrates Rituals" by Walid Harib (1995) and «The Resurrection of a City» by Basil Al-Khatib (1995).

⁵ The most famous of these films are: "an experience on the Euphrates" (1976), "Chicken" (1975) by Omar Amiralay, "In a popular neighborhood" by Marwan Haddad (1974) and "Today and every day" by Osama Muhammad (1980). Censorship banned all these films from being shown even though they are produced by the state.

services) or bureaucratic structures (reading and publishing committees), the authority carried out decisions of banning and trimming for any Arab or foreign film. It even banned films produced by the organization itself⁶.

- Cinematic culture: cinemas' number decreased from 123 in 1963 to 42 in 2003 (Al-Khatib and Yazji, 2010, p. 112)⁷ and the sold cards from 14 million in 1963 (Alexan, 1987) to almost a million in 2006⁸. Moreover, the cinema's social culture has changed from a family activity to an almost defective activity due to the low level of shows and halls and the occurrence of religious repercussions in society and the security concern that became a crucial issue for any public activity. However, the dozens of private cinema clubs were all closed in favor of the clubs affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and the Ba'ath Party.
- Educational policies: No academic specialization in any field of cinema existed, such as photography, editing, directing and cinematography, yet the almost only way to join these studies was to join the ruling party through foreign missions.

Despite all these circumstances, filmmakers tried to change the official policy towards their sector and to preserve their artistic privacy and civil effectiveness within the "available margins". It can be said that "the Syrian cinema creation expresses the potential role of creativity and culture in general in creating a kind of "substitution" and "compensation" for the absent free movement of civil society (Al-Kawakibi, 2013, p. 101).

TIMELINE

When the authority was almost controlling the state on all levels and every civil activity faced by repression, it was noticeable that the filmmakers were among the first people in a movement to confront domination's mechanism on society and culture. The cinematic movement before 2011 was considered one of the mechanisms of resistance against the mechanisms of authoritarianism (Abbas, 2013):

- The seventies phase: in 1976, filmmakers held the Preparatory Conference for Syrian filmmakers, in which they drafted the National Board for Film and the National Film Fund projects that did not come into existence (Haqqi, 2011). They established several national film clubs, and the most famous one was the Damascus Film Club, that was stopped after the golden period.
- The eighties and nineties phase: the cinematic movement's civil dimension was almost stopped due to the difficult economic circumstances and the consequences on the societal conscience after the events of the eighties and the severe security measures in all aspects of life.
- 2007-1999: cinema was one way to enter the contemporary Syrian civil society movement (Al-Sawah, 2018). In 26, 1999 cinematographers issued a statement rejecting the power's domination over cinema's public institution and calling for greater creative freedom. It was also followed by another statement that referred to corruption and tyranny in eliminating the cultural movement. Furthermore, and even if indirectly, film



clubs returned to foreign cultural centers⁹. They produced a group of independent documentary films with Omar Amiralay and Hala Al-Abdullah's experiences¹⁰ that looked "like the cultural and ethical establishment of today's cinema" (Jarjoura, 2017). That period witnessed the change of laws that allowed the authority to monopolize the cinematic scene¹¹.

- 2011-2007: as soon as filmmakers were given leeway, they began with documentary films crossing the limits. The new cinematic discourse evolved to tackle the contexts and horizons of Syrian life (Al-Kawakibi, 2013, p.117). We can count 11 films based on dialogue with political detainees or authority's opponents¹²; yet, all these films were banned. At this phase, the cinema's societal dimension was apparent; hence, film clubs rose, although restrictions were imposed, and they were forced to close (Abbas, 2013, p. 112). Film training workshops were launched that attempted to fill the gap in an academic specialization¹³. The Reality Film Days Festival was also launched in 2007 as an independent initiative. It witnessed bold discussions with filmmakers. This movement "calling for cinematic reform or striving to obtain a natural right for the filmmaker to work and operate, participated in a broader and comprehensive cultural movement dealing with the conditions of Syria" (Jarjoura, 2017).
- 2012-2011: Without denying the vertical split between the cinematic elites, it can be said that the civil movement for documentary filmmaking accompanied the start of the movement¹⁴ and the "outburst of the Syrian image" (Hafez,

⁹ Especially the Film Forum at the French Institute for Near Eastern Studies in Damascus, screened Syrian films that were prohibited by censorship

¹⁰ - Especially Amiralay's latest film "A Flood in the Land of the Ba'ath" (2003) and Al-Abdullah's film "I Am the One Who Carries Flowers to Her Grave"

¹¹ The Law on Restrictions on Film Import was issued in 1969 and annulled in 2004.

¹² The films «If Tired Qasioun», «Praise of Hate», «A Journey in Memory», «Dialogue with Three Intellectuals» and «A Piece of Candy» by Hala Muhammad "On the sand, under the sun," by Muhammad Malas and Hala Abdullah. «Cousin» by Muhammad Ali Al-Atassi. Silence by Rami Farah, and Zabad by Reem Ali. «Blue, Gray» by Muhammad Al-Roumi.

¹³ We can mention the "House of Art" workshops for film writing and several workshops by director Mohamed Karsali.

¹⁴ The first documentary film that made the movement its main theme was produced by «Alshare3" Foundation for Media and Development entitled «Smuggling of 23 Minutes of a Revolution» and "The Sun's Incubator" by Ammar Al-Beik

⁶ - The relationship has remained and is still complicated between the institution and filmmakers, as it has given filmmakers the opportunity to work free from the authority of the box office, but it has contributed to cease its relationship with the audience by its classification as elite films or festival films. The absence of competition with the private sector broke the natural development cycle of cinema as an industry and reduced production opportunities to the point it became rare, so it was not surprising that many directors left Syria in ٢٠١١.

⁷ - At a rate of one seat per 1000 citizens only, while the percentage in the Arab region is 9 seats per thousand of the population, and in industrialized countries and developed countries 50 to 70 seats per thousand people (according to UNESCO).

⁸ - Despite the multiplicity of the population: See: Cinema: A postponed industry and investment promises (2008) Damascus: Al-Iqtisadi Magazine. Number 48

2017); hence, “improvised” initiatives appeared to produce documentary films, which considered the image an effective way to make its voice louder and support the protest movement. However, in the absence of the infrastructure for filmmaking, they remained in the process of preparation and trial. It was later called “emergency cinema” (Bank, 2017), and some of its makers are still unknown today¹⁵, while others were martyred or arrested¹⁶.

- 2015-2013: the documentary production developed its tools, and the digital revolution and technologies played the main role in enhancing its capabilities¹⁷. However, an important factor emerged with developing civil institutions that support film production and training programs (Hafez, 2017). A young documentary movement emerged asking difficult questions that start with art and do not end with politics, and these institutions made the first steps for alternative documentary cinema.

In recent years, and with the control of the armed groups over the movement, and many activists went to neighboring countries, these organizations have settled financially and organizationally outside Syria, small organizations almost completely disappeared where opposition forces controlled the regions, and radical changes occurred in the relevant issues, methods of distribution and even the target group.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES

During the past eight years, hundreds of Syrian documentaries have appeared. Most of them were produced by organizations working in numerous fields such as relief, media, human rights and refugee issues. As for the most professional ones, they were produced by organizations that specifically tackle documentary production.

Civil organizations operating in the arts sector constitute one of the five key classifications of the non-profit sector (Blackwood et al., 2012). These organizations aim to encourage citizens to think critically and express themselves and become agents of social transformation (Philippine, 2014. P7). Syrian films played their role as a societal tool whose mission is to promote the principles of democracy, freedoms and human rights and focuses on spreading cinematic culture, training, qualification and advocacy. The main areas in which it has been active can be outlined:

FORMS OF WORK

Initiatives developed remarkably, even though with varying degrees. They moved from a mere gathering of some activists to organizational forms with legal characteristics and internal regulations. The “Alshare3” Foundation for Media and Development¹⁸ started in 2010 as a media campaign to support the island’s refugees due to the drought. However, the Foundation’s early involvement developed its team, which now includes 30 activists, distributed today in more than 7 countries. The board of directors of Dox Box organization in Germany¹⁹ presents a unique experience as being elected by the general assembly in which

the decision authority is taken, while the “Abu Naddara”²⁰ team worked as a collective team without an administrative hierarchy. However, the “Bidayyat” company refuses, to date, to announce its employees’ names or its sources of funding, despite its production and support for the most famous young documentaries. On the other hand, many non-profit organizations started their work. They then were obstructed and stopped their work²¹, either due to their inability to continue working in dangerous areas such as the “Waw Al Wasl Group” (Aleppo), the “Eye on the Homeland” group (Al-Raqqa), and “Mashrou Kabrit” (Homs), or to the absence of financing strategies such as the “Cat Academy” (Turkey), “My Film Foundation” (Damascus), and “Visual Arts Group” (Lebanon). Some of these institutions tended to produce the image in its consumer rather than aesthetic form by preparing more politicized and less artistic press reports, such as “Sabq Foundation”, “Step News Agency” and “Aleppo News Center”. Moreover, some organizations were transformed from their random form based on volunteers and video lovers into profit-making institutions that have benefited from the demand for the “Syrian image”, such as “Nidaa Media Production” or “Bokra Ahla Foundation” that started as a civil initiative in Aleppo and turned into an artistic production company in Turkey. It can be noted that the largest number of these organizations were established in non-governed areas, and most of them are suspended today or have moved to the countries neighboring Syria, and to a lesser extent, in European countries. (See Figure 3).

These institutions witnessed the inveterate tension that occurs when non-profit organizations operating in the arts attempt to balance two trends: working within market forces and playing their civil role with which, they define themselves (Sanders, 2012). These roles are often conflicting. It may have produced what has been referred to as “multiple conflicting identity organizations” (Salamon, 2012, 3). These institutions provide films to the public, which are “economic products” subject to demand, supply and competition mechanisms. At the same time, they aim to societal change and raise awareness concerning the Syrian cause. It cannot be known which of these two functions affected the other, but it is noticeable that many civil institutions have turned into an operational sector where volunteerism and activism faded away for the benefit of employees and professionals, respectively. The first film activists who conveyed reality in all its manifestations with the least equipment and tools had disappeared, and the cinematic elites returned to take the lead. There is no doubt that this enhanced the films’ artistic quality, but it raised questions about the societal effectiveness that these institutions lost due to their target group. It is noticeable that the control of large and more institutionalized organizations over the documentary sector, and the disappearance of small non-profit organizations, are one of the results of the successful professional administrative work, without ignoring the possibility of access to funding and the accompanying personal relationships and informal networks, and the ability to cope with a changing of the fund and its trends. Film subjects have changed from observing protests to revealing power violations and then focusing on violent conflict and jihadist movements, leading to asylum trips. Today’s trend tends to focus on integration issues. It is difficult not to notice that this change is often driven by financiers’ direction more than the Syrian society’s needs hoped for. It is evident that the more professional an organization becomes and markets its operations and products, the less its civil role in social justice and community building (Backman & Smith, 2000s). Eikenberry & Kluver (2004) also note that globalized arts consumption, including cinema, has shifted the focus of non-profit

15 “Waar - Anthem for Survival” documentary filmed by an unknown Syrian filmmaker secretly in Homs during Ramadan 2011

16 Basil Shehadeh and Tamer Al-Awam were martyred, and the authorities arrested Osama Habli, who was from the «Abu Naddara» group, and ISIS killed Ibrahim Abdul Qadir and Faris Hammadi, who were from the «Eye on the Homeland» group.

17 Independent cinema developed worldwide after the transition from filming on 35 mm tape to digital camera technology

18 “Alshare3” is a non-profit media organization licensed in France. Its team works on “investigations, dialogues and documentaries” <http://ashar3.com/>

19 Dox Box defines itself as a non-governmental organization registered in Berlin and consists of a group of professionals and administrators working with specialized advisory committees under the supervision of a board of directors elected by the General Assembly and consisting of a number of international documentary filmmakers and experts in cultural management, communication, finance and politics. <https://dox-box.org/about-us/imprint/>

20 «Abu Nadara» 2010 was established in Damascus to serve the documentary film by 3 filmmakers, but it quickly became involved in the movement due to the short films that it broadcasted online every Friday in cooperation with a group of volunteer activists who worked secretly in the group «emergency cinema» <https://bit.ly/2WQPAVq>

21 The report counted 38 organizations that had stopped working, i.e. more than half of them

artistic institutions to meeting the Western financier and recipient's aspirations and culture instead of the local community. However, other organizations become captive to the financing cycles and do not commit any kind to social change, and they only seek to reproduce themselves. (Fitcher, p. 22).

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Documentary films are considered one of civil society's tools to meet certain demands. The artistic movement has its own demands and tactics to develop its status, negotiate changes to laws and cultural policies, or dissociate and resist mechanisms to control their effectiveness (Kalima, 2017. p51). Some of the tools used by civil organizations working in the field of documentary films can be summarized as follows:

- Data: the Syrian filmmakers were the professional category that preceded the issuance of the 2011 statement rejecting violence and aligning with the demands of the movement. They considered that "any reform does not stem from abstaining the security services from controlling the citizens' livelihood, lifting immunity from these forces and the license to kill, arrest or attack peaceful demonstrators, and closing the Political Prison page forever is an unserviceable reform"²².
- Documentation: the new documentary cinema relies on a semi-exhaustive belief among its filmmakers, considering the image and sound as an archive and historical document that reflects the political and social event and preserves for history (Rashidi, 2018).
- Syrian festivals: Dox Box Festival was banned in 2012, and it published a statement denouncing the violence of the authority in the suppression of activists. However, the team launched a program of Syrian documentary shows in 38 cities around the world. In 2013, it developed its program "International Day of Solidarity with Syria," showing a series of videos that celebrated the journalist's work in Syria. The "Alshare3" Foundation also launched the "Syria Mobile Films Festival" as an initiative to support experimental documentary cinema in three sessions. Filmmakers hosted the "Film Festival of Free Syria" online to revive it until it was stopped in 2014, in addition to the Homs Festival for Documentary Films between 2014 and 2015, which was held in Syria in the besieged Al-Waer neighborhood during that period.
- Grants and Support: Dox box Foundation offers filmmakers residency programs, workshops and counseling sessions. "Bidayyat" launches every year grants for feature-length documentary projects and supports the production of short and experimental films throughout the year.
- Training: "Alshare3" Foundation establishes partnerships with civil societies to train activists in Syria, while "Bidayyat" organizes intensive training and workshops and produces periodic educational videos aimed at creating a clearer understanding of the creative documentary.
- Participation in international festivals: the Syrian documentary film became permanently present in festivals, which supported the Syrian cause and the civil organizations that built international alliances and relations, providing opportunities for funding, networking and raising their capabilities.

POLITICAL RESULTS

- In the short term
 - Defending the Right to Expression: activists describe their work as an attempt to overcome the recipient's job being public only. The "right to the image" is a major demand of the "Abu Naddara" group, while the "Bidayyat" Foundation defines its goal as "breaking the monopoly of power on the right to make the images it wants about and for Syrians".
 - Disassociating documentary cinema from propaganda: art can be a framework for glorifying and justifying violence. These organizations work in a part of it to secure freedom for artists in which the authorities and their discourse do not use them by activating the independent community of documentary filmmakers based on trust and solidarity.
 - Humanizing the conflict: the organizations believe that they have evoked what remained absent from the people's stories and refused to talk about the victims as figures. They tried to present Syrians' image that respects the complexities of the situation and fights for the right to represent the person outside the categories of race, religion or political affiliation.
 - Emphasizing the Syrian culture decentralization: these organizations worked to establish a platform for surpassing the cinematic image's elitism, centrality, and civility. Syrians could feel through these films the silence of the forgotten countryside and the geographical or class marginalized people's stories.
- In the long term
 - If most of the countries today that have witnessed a violent history have what are called memory policies, then this action is against the policies of forgetting and absenteeism and prevents the control over narratives, history and memory.
 - Emphasizing civil society's role in setting cultural policies as a project for democratization by changing management methods, reviewing cultural legislation, and civil society's participation in it to meet more needs of deprived areas of cultural service.
 - Creating a society free from cultural domination and governmental institution monopoly for cultural expression, especially expressing is the core of democracy and culture can be a powerful voice (Matarasso, 2016, P3).

LESSONS LEARNED

Cinema is a power with an economic, social, political and cultural dimension, and it represents a platform through which people can listen to unheard stories. It also maintains hope in cultural and political repression (Grohs, 2009, P12). In recent years, its role has become prominent when its work offered an opportunity to marginalized people or people who can barely hear. Consequently, civil organizations working in the field of documentary films could be crucial for development and social change. Yet, their exit from the Syrian geography and their subjected products to global consumption caused them to have a special susceptibility, which led to some of them' cessation. In contrast, others were developed on the administrative and organizational level at the expense of shrinking their societal and civil function.

²² The statement collected the signatures of almost 700 filmmakers worldwide from Spain, the United States, France, Britain, Greece, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, Iran, Qatar, South Africa, Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine.

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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.

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