

A Revolution's Memoir: Travelling Memory in Hādī Al-‘Abd Allāh's *Critical Conditions*

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Abstract

This article explores the role of memoir writing amid the violence of the Syrian revolution and subsequent civil war (2011-2024), through a close reading of *Critical Conditions* by Syrian media activist and frontline reporter Hadi Abdullah. Employing Astrid Erll's concept of travelling memory and situated within a wider corpus of Syrian revolutionary memoirs and autobiographical-political writings, the memoir is examined as a personal testimony and an artifact that, through the themes and the lexical choices of its author, acquires significance beyond the context of the Syrian revolution and subsequent civil war.

Keywords: memory; memoir writing; Syria; revolution; martyrdom; Arab Spring; transculturalism

Introduction

Understanding contemporary conflicts and political upheaval requires more than attention to geopolitical or economic "hard facts" such as international alliances, increasing inequality and neo-imperialist agendas. As cultural memory scholars have argued, these events are also

profoundly shaped by what might be called “soft” dimensions such as the emotional, symbolic, and narrative frameworks through which individuals and communities interpret experiences of loss, violence, and displacement, and articulate forms of resistance that lie beyond conventional historical or political analysis.¹ In revolutionary and war-torn Syria, memory has never been a passive act of recollection, but it has functioned instead as a vital instrument of survival, a weapon of resistance, and a framework for envisioning a future beyond authoritarianism and civil war. Following the spontaneous ~~and peaceful~~ demonstrations that broke out in 2011 in the broader context of the Arab Spring, Syrians across the country turned to documentation to preserve their lived realities as well as to resist the systematic erasure of their struggle as the Assad regime escalated its violent machine of counterinsurgency through siege, displacement, imprisonment, and mass killing.² As Alexa Firat has noted then, the Syrian revolution was a struggle to narrate the events.³ Memory, in this sense, was not an afterthought but an urgent frontline strategy. After 2011, in the absence of conventional memory institutions such as archives, museums, state-sanctioned commemorations, or a free press, alternative platforms such as online archives,⁴ YouTube and Instagram channels, and ultimately personal memoirs too, have emerged ~~as sites of resistance and~~ as active instruments of memory-making, as Syrian and Arab activists assumed the responsibility of bearing witness. Activists have become, in Annette Wieviorka’s terms, protagonists of “the era of the witness” and self-appointed chroniclers of atrocity, revolution, and survival.⁵ The emergence of grassroots documentation practices during the Syrian

¹ Erll, “Travelling Memory”, 5

² Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 57-76.

³ Firat, “The Symbolic Power of Syrian Collective Memory since 2011”, 69.

⁴ One such archive the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution declares on its website “Creative Memory is about documenting and gathering the stories and experiences of Syrians in their epic journey [...] through which they reclaimed and redefined the meaning of their social, political, and cultural existence”. Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution website <https://creativememory.org/archive/> (accessed June 10, 2025).

⁵ Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 136-142.

uprising finds its origin at the convergence between the urge to preserve memory, to perform acts of resistance, and is shaped by each author's personal circumstances.⁶ Through state media, the Assad regime invested heavily in controlling narrative space and it promoted a vocabulary of "terrorism" to delegitimize dissent and portray revolutionaries as existential threats.⁷ In this context, independent media production became existential, an alternative epistemology, a counter-narrative to the regime's disinformation, a race against time to document events before the state's propaganda machine could overwrite them and turn them into *another Hama*.⁸ In this vein, the Syrian revolutionaries of 2011 and beyond saw in documentation a chance to resist the violence of historical oblivion.

The memoir at the centre of this article published originally in Arabic in 2020 as *Ḥālāt ḥariġa: Yawmiyyātī fī al-Ṭawra al-Sūriyya 2011-2019* and in its English version in 2025 as *Critical Conditions: My Diary of the Syrian Revolution* by Syrian reporter and activist Hādī al-'Abd Allāh (henceforth Hadi Abdullah), in addition to a strictly personal account of ~~the events of~~ the Syrian revolution with no ambition of acting as a comprehensive historical record of events, represents a framework for understanding how autobiographical accounts are constructed, circulated, and weaponized during revolution and war.

⁶ Halasa et al., *Syria Speaks*, 112-118.

⁷ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 10-113.

⁸ The massacre perpetrated by the Syrian government in the city of Hama in 1982 long suppressed and almost erased from public discourse, haunted the Syrian revolution as both a warning and a driving force, stressing the urgency of recording and preserving testimony in real time. Between 1976 and 1982, Syria witnessed escalating confrontations between the regime of Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad and a variety of Islamist opposition groups, marked by waves of political repression, armed insurgency, and retaliatory violence, such as the June 1979 massacre of eighty-three regular-army Alawite cadets at Aleppo Artillery School. These tensions culminated in the Hama massacre of February 1982. In response to an Islamist-led uprising in the city, government forces launched a massive military assault that resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and effectively crushed the Islamist opposition. The events in Hama became a foundational yet largely repressed trauma in Syrian collective memory, shrouded for decades in enforced silence and censorship. For detailed accounts of the 1982 events in Hama and the lead up to it see in English: Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, Oxford University Press, 2013, 81-129; In Arabic: Kamāl Dīb. *Tārīḥ Sūriyya al-mu'āṣir – min al-intidāb al-faransī ilā ṣayf 2011*, Bayrūt: Dār al-nahār, 2011, 553-566.

Structured in three parts the memoir charts the shifting stages of the Syrian conflict and its media landscape, as well as the author's own transformation and inevitable contradictions that emerged as alliances shifted within the Syrian opposition. Beginning as a young teaching assistant at university, Abdullah became a frontline media activist whose reporting made him one of the most visible witnesses of the Syrian revolution.⁹ Across three sections, the memoir recounts the thrill of the first wave of demonstrations against the Assad regime, followed by repeated displacements, brushes with death, the murder of close companions, and the subsequent burden of mourning and survival. The first part (2011–2014) briefly charts the evolution of peaceful protest into armed rebellion, documenting early demonstrations in and around the city of Homs, but focuses for the most part on the author's transformation from nursing student to pseudonymous activist who witnessed first-hand the forced evacuation and displacement of his entire hometown of al-Quşayr, near Homs in June 2013. The second part (2014–2019) captures the disintegration of the revolutionary movement amid foreign intervention, dispossession, and the intensifying information war, including Abdullah's survival of an assassination attempt during his coverage of Aleppo under siege. This part also revolves around the devastating loss of Abdullah's closest friends, four men he had not known before the uprising but who became bound to him through their shared activism. The final section (2019–2024), which was not included in the original Arabic version but was compiled in 2025 by the English translator, reflects a new reality characterized by displacement, reconstruction, and a continued commitment to digital testimony in the face of regime

⁹ 2016 RSF-TV5 Monde Press Freedom Prize: Prize awarded to Syrian and Chinese journalists, website <https://rsf.org/en/2016-rsf-tv5-monde-press-freedom-prize-prize-awarded-syrian-and-chinese-journalists-website> (accessed on 12 June 2025).

propaganda and erasure, until the crucial build-up to December 8, 2024, when former president Baššār al-Asad (from now on Assad) and his allies were ousted from Syria by the armed opposition. Taken together, these three parts move beyond personal testimony, offering a narrative that interweaves political upheaval with the intimate costs of repression and resistance to it, and that documents how memory, trauma, and resistance travel across places, media, and identities.

While this article centres on the revolutionary field and reads Abdullah's memoir as an act of political witnessing, it also recognises the internal contradictions, shifting alliances, and contested narratives that have characterised the Syrian conflict. These complexities surface in Abdullah's own account, particularly in his evolving relationship with armed groups operating in opposition-held areas. The uneasy coexistence and political ambiguity faced by activists on the ground is exemplified by Abdullah's shifting relationship with extremist factions. While initially targeted and threatened by groups like Ġabhat al-Nuṣra,¹⁰ he later reported from frontlines controlled by their successor, Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Šām,¹¹ with whom he worked closely as a frontline media activist without formally joining their ranks. Having taken such contradictions into account, however, rather than offering a comprehensive historiography of the conflict, this article aims to explore individual memory as articulated through memoir writing to answer the following questions: How does Abdullah's memoir and media documentation reframe the role of the witness in war, and what does this reveal about memory, trauma, and resistance in the Syrian context? How does *Critical Conditions* position

¹⁰ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 125-140.

¹¹ For a summary of the transformation of Ġabhat al-Nuṣra into Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Šām see Patrick Haenni and Jérôme Drevon. *Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Road to Power in Syria*. London, Hurst Publishers, 2025.

itself in relation to other Arab and Syrian revolutionary memoirs, and what does this comparison reveal about evolving modes of political self-narration in the region? In what way can the mnemonic practices and the lexical choices of Abdullah's writing represent an example of transcultural memory? How does his process of accounting and remembering past, often traumatic, events engender a cultural identity that is firmly centered on the experience of the revolution but culturally decentred? What knowledge, repertoires, practices and forms does Abdullah's writing invoke and involve? How might Syrian literature that emerges from conditions of mass violence and tragedy be read not only as documentation of political struggle, but also as a body of art that transcends its immediate context to engage with questions of human suffering, vulnerability, and endurance?

Drawing on Astrid Erll's concept of travelling memory and the idea that memory circulates across geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders, shaped and reshaped through transnational encounters, this article challenges approaches to memoir writing that treat mnemonic practices as confined within the borders of a national community. An ethnographic articulation of this nation-centred conception of memory and memoir writing in the Syrian context is offered, for example, by Salwā Ismā'īl (Salwa Ismail) in her study on the role of violence as a modality of government. Ismail argues that memoir writing and recollection in Syria represent primarily exercises in self-authoring vis-à-vis the nation, where personal trajectories are interpreted as reflections of national memory and subjects have long situated their personal trajectories in relation to collective aspirations for liberation and independence, embedding self-authoring within national projects.¹² This article departs from

¹² Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 122.

this nation-centred framing by showing how Abdullah's memoir resists being subsumed into such a teleology. Rather than narrating his life exclusively through the lens of national liberation, in Abdullah's account the affective bonds of family and friendship, the experience of displacement, and the ethics of witnessing, generate a form of memory that is not contained by the nation-state. In his work the lexical choices of remembrance allow it to across local (Syrian), translocal (Arab and Muslim), and transcultural (non-Arab and non-Muslim) circuits, producing a mnemonic practice that is fragmented, mobile, and transcultural. In this sense, *Critical Conditions* complicates Ismail's thesis by showing that the work of memory articulates a decentred identity shaped as much, among other things, by loyalty to one's place of origin and to deceased friends and survival as by political ideals of liberation. As much as Abdullah's motivations for writing and documenting the events can certainly be traced back to the forced erasure from Syria's collective memory of traumatic episodes of state violence,¹³ both its significance and its cultural references transcend the Syrian context.

My approach departs also from Pierre Nora's influential notion of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), which emphasizes territorially bound markers of remembrance.¹⁴ Instead, I am conceptualising memory as mobile, relational, and transcultural, exemplified by mnemonic practices that travel across cities, borders, traditions, and communities, emphasizing the mobility of memories across time, space, media, and cultural contexts, placing Abdullah's

¹³ In a recent interview with Tanwīn Podcast Abdullah revealed that when the city of Daraa in the south of Syria was under siege in April 2011 the first thing that came to his mind and acted as an incentive to continue with his activism was the desire to avoid "another Hama". The interview is available via this link https://youtu.be/Eq8usxFnJ6c?si=Ro-zWyg2KLk7_e2r (accessed on June, 11, 2025).

¹⁴ Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", 7–24.

memoir in conversation with a broader body of contemporary life writing from the Arab world that resists using the self as a metaphor for the nation.¹⁵

Autobiographical Interventions in Revolutionary Syria (and beyond)

Abdullah's is certainly not the only autobiographical work to have been published about the events in Syria or the Arab Spring. In the growing body of memoirs emerging from the Syrian revolution, several key works have shaped the international understanding of Syria's descent into conflict. Samar Yazbik's (Samar Yazbek) *A Woman in the Crossfire* and *The Crossing* published respectively in 2012 and 2015, offer a personal, often lyrical account of political awakening and displacement from a feminist and dissident perspective, while Yāsīn al-Ḥājī Ṣāliḥ's (Yassin al-Haj Saleh) *The Impossible Revolution* presents a reflective and philosophically grounded chronicle of the revolution's ideals, fragmentation, and betrayal, shaped by years of imprisonment and exile. By way of illustration, in his summary of the main phases of the Syrian Revolution as it unfolded in its first two years 2011 and 2012, al-Haj Saleh outlines three overlapping phases beginning with the popular demonstrations of March to August 2011, through the regime's shift to full-scale military repression by early 2012, and culminating in a scorched-earth strategy marked by mass killings and the razing of opposition-held areas, particularly in Homs, Idlib, and Hama. Al-Haj Saleh's analysis reflects a macro-political reading shaped by his intellectual and dissident background, grounded in structural critique and historical foresight. By contrast, *Critical Conditions* is not concerned with such

¹⁵ In this sense Abdullah's work can be situated within a widespread form of personal testimony in Arab autobiographical writing that gives prominence to vulnerability, moral reckoning, and individual affective life over collective narratives of national struggle. See for example Libyan Hisham Matar's chronicle of his return to post-Gaddafi Libya: Matar, Hisham. *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*. New York, Random House, 2016.

analytical periodization or theoretical framing. Instead, Abdullah offers an intimate, ground-level account of how these transformations were experienced and endured by activists, reporters, and civilians. His memoir focuses on emotional resonance over political abstraction, documenting how the revolution shaped his relationship with his parents, his friendships and his convictions, as well as his response to bereavement and loss. The result is a testimony that complements al-Haj Saleh's political diagnosis by simultaneously immersing the reader in the lived texture of the uprising and in a biographical account of the revolution, its causes and consequences, its ideologies and its affective landscapes. Similarly, while Samar Yazbek's acclaimed memoirs offer a literary, reflective, and often self-critical account of the Syrian revolution from the perspective of an Alawite dissident navigating exile and return,¹⁶ Abdullah's *Critical Conditions* presents significant differences in his testimony. Dictated during frontline reporting and later through WhatsApp voice memos, Abdullah's account captures the immediacy of revolutionary life from within. His narrative centers on concepts such as comradeship, martyrdom¹⁷, and the emotional burden of witnessing, offering a grassroots account of the conflict grounded in lived experience rather than analytic distance. Again, taken together Yazbek's introspective prose and Abdullah's insurgent

¹⁶ Samar Yazbek's Alawite background holds particular significance in the context of the Syrian revolution. The Alawite minority, to which President Baššār al-Asad and much of the ruling elite belonged, has been widely associated (rightly or wrongly) with the Assad regime. Yazbek's open dissent against Assad, therefore, not only marked her as a political outlier but also as a social and sectarian defector. Her position subjected her to isolation within her community and made her testimony both more dangerous and more symbolically powerful. In contrast to dominant narratives that often portrayed the conflict in binary sectarian terms, Yazbek's perspective complicates these assumptions, offering a deeply personal account of estrangement, resistance, and moral responsibility from within the regime's own sect. See Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, 110-111; 182-188;

¹⁷ The concept of *šahīd* (martyr) in these memoirs extends beyond its Islamic theological meaning to signify anyone who sacrifices their life for justice and dignity, evolving into a political and moral category. Martyrdom, therefore, functions as a generative, lived experience that sustains resistance and collective memory rather than a purely religious or extremist ideal. See for example: Habib, "Dying for a Cause Other than God". I return to this concept later in this article.

testimonial form complementary memory texts, one shaped by moral inquiry and the other by the urgency of survival, both indispensable for understanding the emotional, political, and representational stakes of the Syrian uprising. It goes without saying it, these features of contemporary Syrian writing, while striking, arise not solely from formal experimentation but from the constraints and urgencies of writing under war, exile/internal displacement, and limited access to traditional publishing infrastructures.

In a similar vein, 'Āliyyah Malik's (Alia Malek) *The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria* blends personal history with political reportage, tracing the author's return from the United States to Syria in the early years of the uprising. As both a journalist and a member of the Syrian diaspora, Malek reconstructs the layered history of her family to reflect on the legacy of authoritarianism and the quiet forms of resistance that shaped ordinary life. Malek's work weaves microhistory with macro politics, showing how the Assad regime's repression permeated everyday existence long before 2011 from the point of view of a returnee, an observer with privileged access and reflective distance. Unlike the more literary and analytical tone of such memoirs, Abdullah's work blurs the line between witness and participant. He ~~not only~~ documents events as they unfold but also narrates them from within, as someone whose own body and emotions of fear, loyalty, joy, displacement, and devastation are entangled with the revolution itself.

In contrast, Wendy Pearlman's *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* constructs a collective portrait through dozens of curated voices. Pearlman, an academic based outside Syria, gathers and organizes testimonies from across the Syrian diaspora. Her work functions as an oral history, a mosaic of suffering, hope, loss, and resilience of revolutionary experience. Both

works are united in their refusal to allow the revolution's memory to be erased, however where *Critical Conditions* draws its emotional core from bonds of revolutionary brotherhood and personal sacrifice, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled* captures the shared trauma of displacement and collective yearning for justice of a variety of actors. Despite their differing narrative forms (memoir and oral history) they both testify to how individual memory becomes a political act in the face of systemic silencing.

Among the growing corpus of testimonial literature produced in the wake of the Arab uprisings, *Voices of the Arab Spring: Personal Stories from the Arab Revolutions* edited by As'ad al-Ṣāliḥ (Asaad Al-Saleh) stands out for its mosaic of first-person accounts spanning several Arab countries including Syria. Al-Saleh's work highlights the emotional texture and subjectivity of revolution, as well as the motivations, traumas, and aspirations of individuals who experienced the uprisings firsthand. Unlike many of the narratives in *Voices*, which are often retrospective and shaped by exile or post-revolution reflection, Abdullah's memoir is a chronicle-in-motion, ~~deeply~~ embedded in the immediacy of media work, displacement, and trauma. By way of illustration, Al-Saleh structured the contributors' testimonies around a set of pointed questions: "What were your reasons for joining the revolution? How did you participate? What activities were you involved in, and how did you understand their significance?"¹⁸ These queries give prominence to political agency and situate the revolution as the core axis of narrative identity. Abdullah's *Critical Conditions*, by contrast, only briefly dwells on such motivations, primarily in the opening pages. After this initial framing, the memoir shifts from a direct political chronology to an exploration of the ~~deeply~~ personal

¹⁸ Al-Saleh, *Voices of the Arab Spring*, 12.

consequences of the conflict. The revolution remains a backdrop, but the emotional and narrative weight shifts to the momentous transformation of ordinary life under extraordinary pressure. Consider the following passage as an example of the introspective nature of *Critical Conditions*.

They say life cannot be summarised in words. I disagree. I believe that words possess the capacity to express the realities of life, to convey its significance, its grievances, troubles and spells of restlessness at the simple strike of a pen. To record a whole story in the space of one line or two and, by doing so, salvage it from oblivion. When you speak, you don't want to miss anything. And yet you know that your confession won't capture every corner of your memory. There are things that we choose to forget and others that we keep buried so they don't expose our wounds, and yet others that we hope will just go away as if they never happened.¹⁹

Unlike the detached tone often associated with journalistic accounts, this introspection marks the memoir as more than a chronicle of events. Abdullah situates his testimony certainly as a political act of witnessing, but also as a personal negotiation with trauma, forgetfulness, and the ethics of remembrance.

Al-Saleh also notes how autobiographical writing in Arab societies often avoids overt self-focus due to cultural norms around modesty and collective identity, and many Arab revolutionary narratives tend to adopt an explicitly political or collective tone to dispel any suspicions of self-glorification.²⁰ If indeed autobiographical writing in Arab cultures is often constrained by conventions of modesty and tends to privilege collective narratives and

¹⁹ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

political discourse over introspection or personal detail, this cultural hesitation toward individual memoir resonates with the origin story of *Critical Conditions*, where Abdullah initially resisted writing about himself. As it is revealed in the foreword, it was his confidante, Jude, who encouraged him to recount the parts of his experience that could not be captured on video or in brief reports, offering the memoir as an act of preservation for voices that risked being erased.

It was Jude who came up with the idea of writing my story. Against the vast expanse of events that weighed us down, confronted with the extent of injustice and hardship that my compatriots have to endure and the torment and sadness that floods over them after every new life lesson, Jude's suggestion was to tell my story from the beginning of the Revolution—recounting with my voice what I had captured with my camera plus those experiences which weren't in my social media or in the limited personal information you could find in my reports from the battlefield. [...] I dismissed the idea, thinking it would be too difficult, if not impossible to accomplish. The events were just too complex. She said, we'll just set down some events that you still retain in your exhausted memory. I said that a lot of people suffered more than I had, and had seen more suffering. She said, consider your story like a younger sister to theirs. Everything deserves to be recorded. Consider it an attempt to rescue the facts from those who want to distort what happened and to remember the experiences of those whose voices might otherwise be gone forever. The only solution was to write. And that's what we did.²¹

As Susanne Enderwitz too has argued, modern Arab autobiography has often been shaped by a preference for exemplary rather than critically introspective self-representation, as well as a rootedness in collective identity over individual subjectivity, and a tendency toward

²¹ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 29.

concealment of private matters rather than frank disclosure. These conventions have created an essentialist notion of Arab-Islamic culture as a 'shame culture,' inhibiting the development of introspective or confessional autobiography.²² While such characterisations are somehow outdated for younger generations, they nonetheless continue to inform dominant expectations about the function and form of autobiographical writing in the region. In this way, the memoir in question then, exists in productive tension with both Syrian and broader Arab autobiographical traditions, offering a subjective, personal and emotionally grounded narrative while acknowledging its place within a much larger mosaic of revolutionary memory.²³ This shows how revolutionary participation bleeds into the private and intimate, but also reveals the memoir's transcultural dimension. The act of writing down one's story, particularly in a war context, thus becomes a form of memory preservation as well as a culturally complex and somewhat counter-normative gesture. If it is true as Al-Saleh says that memoir writing, especially by ordinary individuals, can be perceived as self-aggrandizing or inappropriate,²⁴ it reveals how the Syrian revolution created new conditions of narrative legitimacy, where even non-elite voices became entitled to speak and be heard. In this sense, deciding to write one's own memoirs becomes almost a form of transgression, not against authoritarian power in this case, but against seemingly entrenched conventions of authorship that have long circumscribed the legitimacy of personal testimony. The memoir embodies a transcultural act of remembering, on one hand shaped by silences (explicitly and implicitly)

²² Enderwitz, Susanne. "Public Role and Private Self." In *Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, edited by Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor, and Stefan Wild. London: Saqi Books, 1998, 76-78.

²³ See for example, with an introduction by Samar Yazbek: Al-Zubaidi, Layla. Cassel, Matthew. and Craven Roderick, Nemonie. Eds., *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus*. London, Penguin Books. 2013.

²⁴ Al-Saleh, *Voices of the Arab Spring*, 13. While reading al-Saleh's introduction it occurred to me that there is a specific Syrian vernacular expression that fits this idea: "Šāyyif ḥalū" literally "someone who sees/looks at themselves".

enforced within Syria and by the dynamics of travelling memory that circulate narratives across borders.

Since it was not written by the author in the traditional sense but rather dictated in Arabic first to a Lebanese collaborator (known by the nom de guerre of Jude) who transcribed the first two parts, Abdullah's memoir exists at the intersection of oral testimony, mediated memory, and collaborative authorship. The third, previously unpublished section, was compiled by the English translator based on voice memos sent by Abdullah over a two-month period and translated directly from Arabic into English in the months following the events of December 2024 which drove Assad into exile. This oral-to-textual transformation highlights this text as a collaborative, dialogical process shaped by the urgencies of war and the post-revolutionary period, crossing the boundary between oral history and autobiography in the form of dialogical testimony. Since the third part was compiled after 2020, and included for the first time in the 2025 English edition, it does not have an Arabic original per se and it is important to acknowledge the mediated nature of its production. Based on voice memos recorded and sent by Abdullah during and after the political turning point of December 2024, this section reflects a retrospective perspective shaped by this significant shift. As such, it carries traces of post-facto meaning-making and this article does not draw on this third section; all textual examples and close readings are taken from the parts of the memoir originally published in Arabic in 2020. By focusing on the earlier material, the article centres on the memoir as it was first conceived and circulated, before the post-2024 political context had emerged.

Travelling memory, travelling memoir

While *Critical Conditions* frames itself as a personal diary of Syria's revolution, I argue that in fact its relevance goes beyond Syria's recent history and that its *travelling* nature emerges through enduring relationships between Abdullah and his closest friends, as well as between Abdullah and the towns and cities in which he operated as the emotional core that binds it. Political events in Syria structure the story, but the emotional pulse of the book lies in moments of shared danger, grief, and loyalty, alongside the experience of displacement, life under siege and survival strategies. Names like Țarād, Hālīd, Rā'id, and Ḥamūd as well as that of 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Sārūt, recur as fallen comrades, as living presences whose memory sustains the narrator. These undercurrents of friendship, resolve, belonging and moral duty shape *Critical Conditions* into a memoir about more than war and revolution, as they reflect how revolutionary identity is forged through relational ties, quiet acts of courage, and personal promises kept. Consider the following passage, which illustrates how the act of remembering in *Critical Conditions* is rooted not in national ideology, but in personal ties, love, loyalty, and the emotional weight of loss:

My mood was at an all-time low. I kept reminding myself of the tragedy of losing Khaled, the only glimpse of beauty in that hell that Tarad's departure had made for me. [...] Death was all I could see. And doesn't death envelop us all? Those who left their childhood home, whose friends and families are separated by borders and seas [...] or those whose soul was separated from their body by shrapnel—wasn't death devastating for all these people? Why shouldn't I die too? [...]

When I was finally able to walk again with a crutch, I decided the time had come. I slipped away to the motorway and picked the car I would throw myself in front of. But as I stood there, all the

*images materialized at once: the corpses, the destruction, the screaming and the black nights. I remembered my promise to Khaled, and the pledge we all made never to give up until the Revolution triumphs in our country or die. I couldn't take my own life. I went back with even more determination to complete my journey.*²⁵

This also aligns with Abdullah's broader memorialization of fallen comrades as martyrs (in Arabic *šahīd* pl. *šuhadā'*), extending the concept of martyrdom beyond theological boundaries into a universal ethics of resistance, revealing a more original role of faith, not as extremism but as a source of resistance, memory, and endurance. The term martyr connotes here not only someone who dies in the path of God, as is emphasized in Islamic theology, but anyone who sacrifices their life for a just cause, especially in the face of oppression.²⁶ In the context of Syria, as in Palestine and other war-torn areas, the word has evolved beyond its strictly religious dimension to encompass the political and moral identity of an individual who refuses submission, who dies so that others may live with dignity, freedom, and memory.²⁷ As Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami observe, following the 2011 revolution widespread dispossession, torture, and mass killings intensified religious sentiment across diverse segments of Syrian society. The violence, dispossession, and killings pushed Syrians to seek solace in religion, deepening fragmentation of national identity and strengthening subnational identities expressed through spiritual and moral vocabularies of sacrifice and resilience. In a nation already marked by a fragile and contested sense of national identity, this shift contributed to a further fragmentation of collective belonging and the strengthening of subnational identities, often articulated through spiritual and moral vocabularies of sacrifice and

²⁵ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 165.

²⁶ Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam*, 2-5.

²⁷ Habib, "Dying for a Cause Other than God", 325.

resilience.²⁸ In this sense, and drawing on Astrid Erll's insight, I situate Abdullah's lexical choices within an effort to move beyond site-bound or nation-bound, to examine mnemonic dynamics as they unfold across and beyond boundaries.²⁹ By "boundaries" I do not refer only to geopolitical borders, such as those between Syria and Lebanon or Syria and Turkey, but also to the conceptual and cultural limits imposed on how memory is framed, narrated, and circulated.

In this way, Abdullah's testimony moves fluidly between frameworks: rooted in the Syrian revolutionary struggle and collective memory, yet accessible through a vocabulary of suffering, resistance, and moral urgency that humanizes the struggle. This applies directly to Syrian life writing more broadly, from Yazbek's Alawite positionality to Abdullah's recollections rooted in male camaraderie as these texts emerge not as unified national narratives, but as fragments in a heterogeneous and internationally connected archive. In this light, both works (Abdullah's and Yazbek's) do not reflect a singular Syrian national memory, but multiples memories rooted in specific communities, while simultaneously intersecting with transnational circuits of memory and sacrifice shaped by war and displacement. Abdullah's focus on friendship, loss, and witnessing places it within a broader, decentralized constellation of life narratives that contribute to a pluralistic cultural remembrance of the Syrian uprising. While the memoir is geographically situated within one country, *i.e.* Syria, with only occasional detours into neighbouring Lebanon and Turkey, its emotional structure and narrative flow are in constant motion. This is amplified by Abdullah's constant physical movement, as his journey through the revolution takes him across Syria and into exile: from

²⁸ Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 109; Al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 122-125.

²⁹ Erll, "Travelling Memory", 12.

his native Homs to Qalamūn, to Kafr Nabil, Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān, Aleppo, Lebanon, Turkey, and then back to the north of Syria, specifically in the area around Idlib. Places such as al-Quṣayr, Sarāqib, Castello (Kāstīllū) Road and the Bāb al-Hawā border crossing between Syria and Turkey, trace the geography of his journey. Each location shapes the narrator's sense of self through geographic and symbolic movements, charting his transformation from anonymous citizen to pseudonymous activist, and finally to one of the most recognizable faces of the Syrian uprising. As Abdullah himself reflects shortly after settling down in Kafr Nabil and joining the local group of activists, "Kafranbel seemed to have migrated from Homs, carrying its spirit and settling anew".³⁰ In this way, memoir is never static but infused with affective continuity, displacement, and renewal. His mobility mirrors the fragmentation of the national narrative and underscores the translocal and transnational dynamics of memory.

This trajectory brings into memory studies what Erll calls "the internal heterogeneity of cultural remembering"³¹ within a single nation-state (in this case, Syria), illustrating a form of transcultural memory that exceeds the confines of hometown, country, or nation. At this point it is useful to recall Pierre Nora's influential concept of *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory"), which designates physical, symbolic, or cultural locations—monuments, commemorative rituals, texts, or traditions—where memory becomes crystallized, especially once living memory begins to fade. For Nora, such sites serve as anchors of collective identity in the modern world, where the natural *milieux de mémoire* ("environments of lived memory") have eroded.³² Instead, Erll shifts the emphasis from such fixed points to the circulation of memory, conceiving of it instead as movement, as "voyages" that unfold across

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

³¹ Erll, "Travelling Memory", 8.

³² Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", 7-24.

times, spaces, and media.³³ Building on this distinction, I argue that mnemonic practices exemplified by Abdullah's memoir, resist Nora's static *lieux de mémoire*, as they are shaped instead by displacement, border-crossings, and networks of activism, producing not stable sites but dynamic, travelling archives of remembrance.

This movement, the constant drive to change places for Abdullah was not a choice but a sheer necessity, inflicted by the events and by multiple evacuations enacted by the Assad regime and its allies on fighters and civilians equally. With each movement and each new residence inside and outside Syria, another actor, other than the author himself, acquired centrality in the narration. In his first experience of forced evacuation from his hometown of al-Quṣayr, the figure of his friend Ṭarād al-Zuhūrī was essential as an older brother-like figure and a mentor in the art of reporting. This was followed by their relocation to the Qalamūn region and their attempt to reach the Damascus suburb of al-Ġūṭa which ended with al-Zuhūrī's assassination in an airstrike at the hands of the Syrian regime.

*When God put Tarad's body in that ditch, he also pulled me to the edge of it. I staggered on the brink between lingering on and perishing, drowning in depression, contemplating whatever was left for me [...] yet there's a long road ahead, and it is my duty to step away from the ditch, because my grief and my weeping are not going to bring the dead back. I had to move on and to continue delivering a message. I might as well keep the Revolution alive despite all the losses and hardships.*³⁴

³³ Erll and Rigney, *Memory, Remediation*, 3.

³⁴ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 113.

The recurring motifs of loyalty, perseverance, and sacrifice in the relationships between the author and his comrades then act as the catalysts of mnemonic practices. This commitment to resistance, iterated alongside the resolve amid despair become mnemonic acts in themselves, designed to uphold morale in the darkest moments of war.

This interplay between lived relationships and the ways Abdullah narrates them highlights how memory itself is structured: not as a singular voice, but as a layered, hybrid form that oscillates between documentation and reflection. As with Ṭarād al-Zuhūrī, whose mentorship shaped Abdullah's early activism and whose death marked a turning point in his revolutionary journey, the figure of Rā'id al-Fāris becomes another pivotal presence, again defined as much by his life as by his absence.

Al-Fāris, a former medical student turned real estate agent and community leader, was not only a key figure in local civil society but also the main creative force behind Kafranbel's iconic protest banners. These hand-painted banners, written in both English and Arabic, often mixing sharp political satire with moral appeals, garnered international attention and became a symbol of the revolution's creativity and steadfastness.³⁵ Al-Fāris quickly came to embody the role of a father figure: a guide, confidant, and anchor in a new stage of his activist life. Their bond bridged a generational divide: Al-Fāris was simultaneously a friend, father, and guide, someone whose revolutionary ardor seemed to mirror Abdullah's own, binding them across age and circumstance. Al-Fāris's presence threads through moments of despair and introspection and the memory of him, like that of al-Zuhūrī's, becomes a mnemonic anchor, a way to bind revolutionary testimony not only to trauma but also to love,

³⁵ Halasa et al., *Syria Speaks*, 102-104.

commitment, and refusal to forget. Al-Fāris was later assassinated in November 2018 with Ḥamūd Ğunayd, most likely by hardline militants within the opposition. In the memoir, his memory functions not as nostalgia, but as ethical compass, a reminder that the revolution's losses must continue to be named, mourned, and narrated.

Ra'ed and Hamoud's departure took away the last ounce of hope from my existence. [...]
Inadvertently, I thought about calling Ra'ed to ask him what to do. Who is going to be my mentor and my guide now? Who am I going to turn to for help? ³⁶

Abdullah's lexical choices too, illustrate how transcultural mnemonic forms enable the circulation of memory across religious, historical, and cultural boundaries, as condensations of historical meaning. A native of al-Qusayr, a small, rural town in western Syria located near the border with Lebanon just south of Homs, Abdullah's religious identity is neither doctrinaire nor marginal, but emerges throughout the memoir in ordinary, affective ways, through expressions and terms such as Allāh 'azza wa ġalla (God the Almighty, the Majestic) and references to ritual practices like uttering the testimony of faith (šahāda) and fasting during Ramadan.

One is allowed to postpone their prayer if there is an emergency, for example, but that was certainly not like Tarad. He was like a father to me, a brother and a friend, and a call to prayer. He taught me how to recite the two shahadas in moments of danger. ³⁷

[...]

³⁶ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 178.

³⁷ Ibid., 49.

[W]hen Ramadan came [...] Khaled and I remained committed to fasting despite the heat and the ongoing war, both of which would have been morally acceptable reasons to exempt us.³⁸

These references are not ornamental but systematically integrated into the narrative, framing his ethical reflections and responses to trauma. Rather than indicating formal theological training or a cosmopolitan secularism, Abdullah's transcultural references seem to arise from an internalised repertoire common to many Syrians, especially those raised in regions such as Homs where Muslim, Christian, and pan-Arab symbolic traditions have coexisted. His narrative voice does not seem shaped by elite intellectual influences or academic intertextuality but by the lived religious and cultural landscape of pre-war rural Syria. In this sense, the memoir's chapter titles transport Syrian events into a shared symbolic lexicon, linking them with historical and theological referents familiar to non-Syrian audiences. Titles such as "Exiting Paradise" (in Arabic *al-Ḥurūġ min al-Ġanna*)³⁹ and "Via Dolorosa" (*Ṭarīq al-Ālām*)⁴⁰ operate as floating signifiers that condense and mobilize cultural and religious memories. "Exiting Paradise", which recounts the harrowing evacuation of al-Qūṣayr, draws upon a Quranic and Biblical motif of exile from a sacred or once-safe place, immediately invoking the Fall of Man. These are not necessarily evidence of direct interreligious borrowing, but may instead reflect the intertextual permeability of Islamic and Biblical traditions. Indeed in Islamic tradition as well as Judeo-Christian texts, paradise represents a symbol of divine proximity and protection as well as a metaphor for home, innocence, and origin. In using this phrase, Abdullah evokes a moral and emotional rupture, not just a military defeat, but a loss

³⁸ Ibid, 144.

³⁹ Ibid., 87; al-ʿAbd Allāh, *Ḥālāt ḥariġa*, 79.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 157; Ibid., 155.

of belonging and identity. This framing allows readers across religious and cultural contexts to interpret the chapter within a shared semantic field of loss and displacement.

We hadn't even said good-bye, and it was already time to leave. The evacuation took place at night. The last car left at six-thirty in the morning; tears flooded our eyes, and grief squeezed our hearts. If our houses could talk, one reproachful look from them would've been enough to make us go back [...] the guilt made us leave covertly under cover of night, so that at daybreak the place would look as if nothing had happened, except that our absence would give us away. Al-Quşayr remained a hostage that wailed as we departed, while our distressed hearts sank and implored for forgiveness.⁴¹

Similarly, “*Via Dolorosa*”, Latin for “Way of Suffering,” the name traditionally given to the path Jesus is believed to have walked to his crucifixion, invokes Christian iconography of martyrdom, pain, and redemptive suffering. Though not writing from a Christian perspective, Abdullah employs this term to underscore the universality of suffering under tyranny and to connect the Syrian people’s ordeal to a longer genealogy of collective sacrifice and unjust persecution.

On these dirt roads, which would be an understatement to describe as being uneven, it takes approximately three hours to get to Türkiye. [...] However, my destiny kept the Angel of Death away from my soul as it reminded me that the road to glory is an impressive, arduous and painful one, and cannot be crossed without suffering and sacrifice. As expected, something did happen. The road was not suitable for an ambulance, which caused a puncture to one of the tires, but since my transfer couldn't be put off any longer, the driver carried on driving. I thought about Khaled the

⁴¹ Abdullah, *Critical Conditions*, 89.

*whole time. His presence and the joy that it brought; his absence, and how difficult it was to bear it. I prayed that he was able to doze off as a relief from the pain. I found solace in the idea that pain is an aspect of human life. If he was in pain, then he was alive. A little time, along with God's grace, would be enough to bring him back to me.*⁴²

These titles serve as mnemonic bridges between traditions and audiences, revealing the *transcultural elasticity* of memory forms and that Syrian revolutionary memory can be articulated through symbolic references that transcend the national or sectarian frame. Rather than assuming deliberate transcultural intent, these choices do reflect a syncretic, emotionally charged lexicon shaped by popular piety, shared cultural memory, and the exigencies of revolutionary witnessing. If anything, their resonance across traditions affirms the permeability of Syria's cultural landscape and the capacity of symbolic language to traverse religious and linguistic boundaries. This positions the Syrian experience within a broader narrative of moral struggle and existential displacement, capable of resonating with readers regardless of religious or cultural background. As Erll argues memory is not a fixed container, but a network of overlapping and often contested frameworks shaped by class, ethnicity, religion, and transnational encounters. Memory traverses cultural, spatial, and temporal borders, carried through people, media, narratives, and symbolic forms. It thus resists approaches that treat the nation as a self-contained "memory container," emphasizing instead its circulation and reconfiguration across contexts. Memory is not static but circulates through networks shaped by overlapping social identities (class, ethnicity, religion) and by transnational encounters.⁴³ While rooted in the local contexts of Homs, al-Qusayr, and other Syrian towns, Abdullah's testimony consistently exceeds them provides a vivid case study of

⁴² *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴³ Erll, "Travelling memory", 8.

such movement.⁴⁴ More relevantly for the concept of travelling memory as illustrated by Erll, intertextual references to both Islamic and Christian traditions in his writing further universalize his story, embedding his personal and national experiences within symbolic repertoires recognizable across cultures. In Abdullah's work memory becomes mobile, produced in one place but sustained, transformed, and reactivated across multiple cultural and linguistic landscapes. In this light, Abdullah's *Critical Conditions* demonstrates why memory studies must move beyond the "container-culture" model that Erll talks about, which presumes territorial, ethnic, or national collectivities as the default framework of remembrance. Such a model obscures the multiplicity of mnemonic practices that emerge across borders through travel, war, and displacement, as well as within them, through the lived heterogeneity of class, generation, religion, and subcultural experience. By centring on friendship, loss, displacement, and transnational media practices, Abdullah's memoir resists reduction to a single national narrative and instead exemplifies a transcultural form of memory work that speaks from Syria but humanizes this country's experience and resonates across broader networks of solidarity, trauma, and resistance.

Conclusions

In tracing Hadi Abdullah's trajectory as both a media activist and memoirist, this article has explored how *Critical Conditions* reframes the role of transcultural memoir writing in war. The analysis suggests that Syrian literature produced in the midst of war cannot be reduced to mere testimony or political chronicle. Abdullah's memoir demonstrates how works rooted in

⁴⁴ The English translation of this memoir published in 2025 continues this trajectory, enabling its narrative to enter broader international academic and activist conversations.

the urgency of survival and resistance also generate lasting insights into the fragility of human bonds, the ethics of remembrance, and the universality of loss. By situating his personal trajectory within networks of friendship, displacement, and mourning, the pages above have aimed to demonstrate that his narrative resonates beyond the Syrian revolution, positioning it within a broader field of transcultural memory. In this way, Syrian literature under conditions of catastrophe both documents a historical moment and contributes to reflections on what it means to live, suffer, and remember under extreme duress.

While Abdullah's testimony⁷ reveals how witnessing in the Syrian context is inseparable from acts of resistance and survival, his work exemplifies what Astrid Erll calls travelling memory, a form of memory that is mobile, displaced, and shaped through transnational circuits of communication as well as influence (directly or indirectly) by transcultural mnemonic practices. 'Transcultural memory' is best understood not as a fixed category but as a research perspective that directs attention to mnemonic processes unfolding across and beyond cultures. It calls for transcending the borders of traditional cultural memory studies by questioning established assumptions, broadening the objects of analysis, and adopting methodologies attuned to movement, exchange, and heterogeneity. In this sense, Abdullah's memoir complicates the notion of witnessing by inviting a discussion on the nation-bound of memory work. The events conveyed move across territories not only physically, as the author is forced from city to city, but also culturally, as his use of both Islamic and Christian motifs. Lexical choices in terms like martyr as discussed above, and references to Exodus and Via Dolorosa, situate his personal experience within a broader symbolic grammar of collective suffering and aspiration, transcending narrow national narratives. Abdullah's movements from Homs to Idlib, his shifts from pseudonymous activist to public figure, and his use of

WhatsApp voice notes as raw archival material in the process of putting together his memoir underscore how memory here is inseparable from mobility, both literal and symbolic. His memoir reveals how the process of remembering traumatic events, rooted in place yet filtered through displacement, can generate a form of cultural identity that is firmly anchored in the revolutionary experience but territorially decentred. In doing so, *Critical Conditions* does more than preserve national memory; it participates in the creation of a cultural archive that is at once personal and resonant beyond the borders of nation and country. As such, Abdullah's work contributes to a travelling and transcultural memory of a revolution that continues to speak across borders, languages, and generations.

His decision to write alone signals a transcultural mnemonic practice that resists the constraints of traditional autobiographical conventions in the Arab world. Unlike traditional war correspondents who maintain a degree of separation from the events they report on, Abdullah is a witness whose presence is inseparable from the revolutionary movement itself. His testimony is not just a recording of facts, but an embodied, emotionally invested act of remembrance shaped by trauma, love, loss, and moral commitment.

Rather than preserving Syrian national memory in the conventional sense, *Critical Conditions* foregrounds friendship, place, loss, and survival as the coordinates of revolutionary memory, while circulating through digital and transnational channels. In doing so, Abdullah's memoir resists closure under a unified historical account, instead reflecting the fractured but enduring textures of memory in war. Through this lens, memory becomes an act of resistance against the silence that often follows mass atrocity and that typified Syrian literature for decades. Abdullah's testimony bridges the personal and collective, the traumatic and the political, the

ephemeral and the archival. *Critical Conditions* invites us to rethink how war narratives are produced, who gets to author them, and how memory can function as both survival and solidarity in the face of systemic violence.

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