

Syrians Know Their Way - from Visual memory making to Digital testimonies

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Abstract

In 2023, a decade after the 2011–2013 Syrian uprising, many had forgotten the country's revolutionary struggle. Then, a year later, Bashar Al-Assad was ousted just as suddenly as the 2011 revolts had arisen. This article investigates how we remember, recount and mediate events. It does so by examining the way different features of digital visual media produced by the art collective *Al Sha'b Al Suri Aref Tarikh* (ASSAT) ("Syrian people know their way") correspond to different stages in Syria's revolution. The article presents ASSAT as a unique phenomenon that visually documented Syria's uprising. It argues that ASSAT's visual expressions provide a temporal appraisal of the different junctions of revolutionary experiences. Finally, it demonstrates that chronicling the extraordinary phases of resilience, has also shaped their own lives. Their engagement set in motion future political effects, even when they were unable to salvage a revolutionary project in the present.

Keywords: Memory, Syria, Revolution, Chronicling, "Syrian People Know their Way", Digital Politics

I still pace around the home like a madwoman. I feel powerless. I can't go out into the street, the net is shut off, there is no news. [...] I receive a text message from a childhood friend: "Dear traitor, even God is with the president and you are still lost." (Yazbek, 2012, p. 35).

1. Introduction

In May 2023, a full decade after he had been thrown out of the Arab League due to the violent suppression of pro-democracy protests in Syria, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was welcomed back to his seat at an Arab League summit held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Without a trace of irony, Assad told the attendees that he hoped that the moment would mark "*a new phase of Arab action for solidarity among us, for peace in our region*".¹ The warm welcome Assad received in Jedda symbolized the end of hope that Syrians could free themselves from the regime's terror, sealing the sense of defeat that had been sown in the summer of 2018 when the Russian military escorted Assad's troops into Der'aa (the birthplace of the Syrian uprising) and raised the Syrian regime's flag. And yet, one year later, at the end of 2024, Assad's regime collapsed with unforeseen rapidity – a powerful reminder that social transformations cannot be avoided, even by the most powerful.

During the decade and more of Syria's revolutionary struggle, with its inspiring heights of mass resistance to oppression and devastating lows of seeming defeat, I conducted a research project about the techno-social implications of Syrian political contestation, as seen through a focus on the creative work of the *Al Sha'b Al Suri Aref Tarikh* (ASSAT) art collective. The present article forms one part of this project, which seeks to

explore the relation between temporality, aesthetics and protests, and to answer questions about the relation between testimony and digital technology.

My research frames the Syrian political experience between 2011 and 2024 as rotating around three axes: time and temporality; space, place and spatiality; and tools and infrastructures. Focusing on the first axis, time and temporality, this article investigates the political significance of the digital media and revolutionary visuals produced by ASSAT, and addresses how our assessments of these objects are shaped by the liminal features of such materials. The article looks at how major events are remembered and recounted; the (corporate) material realities that condition digital mediation; and analyses of digitally crafted and shared illustrations. Understanding these correlated domains in the use of digital visual media in political uprisings helps focus on the political developments, social contradictions and personal experiences at different moments during the (counter-) revolution, and ensures we do not fall into generalizations.

To untangle the complex political phenomena in Syria in the period 2011–2024, I convey these *infra-temporal* alignments in a grid (Figure 1) which is divided into temporal segments (to distinguish the different phases of the Syrian revolution), as well as into different analytical modalities, that operate in relation to different objectives and features (e.g. whether it is mainly a tangential tool for organizing or a space for sharing and interacting) of digital media. In regard to the former, the grid is separated into the following: past (*pre-revolution*), which is the stage during which preparation and mobilization take place; present (*outburst*), which is the tipping point, which includes confrontations with the state; and the future (*post-revolution*), which includes the continuation of mass protests either heading toward successful advance or a painful stalemate where the dynamic slides toward dangerous counterrevolution.²

Graph 1 presents both dialectical connections and techno-political layers, while simultaneously depicting changes in aspirational forces. This avoids a stage-by-stage periodization of insurgencies, where b follows a and c follows b etc., and is a necessary corrective to the tendency toward a static representation of Syrian political temporality in which popular uprisings are doomed to failure. While the political-economic dimensions and social life are understood as existing in tandem, placing these analyses also along markers denoting ideological objectives or artistic styles enables an in-depth exploration of Syrian visual cultures, and specifically the work of the ASSAT collective.

Figure 1: Matrix of resistance

The empirical data on which I focus in my research project are graphics produced by the ASSAT collective, which document the extraordinary experiences that have taken place in Syria since spring 2011. ASSAT produces and mediates content that has a pedagogic and agitative function. Partly because the algorithms of commercial digital platforms like Facebook and Flickr privilege “popularity”, in the form of a high volume of traffic (visits/views/shares), the work of the ASSAT collective was not consumed (by viewers/visitors) or displayed in chronological order. *Al Sha'b Al Suri Aref Tarikh* (abbreviated ASSAT) translates literally as “*The Syrian people know their way*”. By adopting this name, the collective associates itself with the leftist revolutionary struggle in the WANA region, via the title of a song by the rebellious musician Sheikh Imam: “I am the people, walking and knowing their way”.³ Most of the visuals were created between 2011 and 2013 and circulated on their Facebook and Flickr pages (FIGURE 2).

FIGURE 2: Flickr + FB homepage ASSAT

ASSAT’s output is exemplary of the kinds of techniques that characterize satirical digital visual art.⁴ Rather than claiming to provide ‘objective’ journalistic mediation, the creative content-makers of ASSAT intentionally identify as anti-regime progressives. ASSAT produces and mediates content that has a pedagogic and agitative function. The collective also explicitly rejects reactionary politics and sectarian aspirations. Indeed, the decision, within my research project, to combine methodologies and disciplines was inspired by ASSAT’s description of itself on its Facebook page, which places an emphasis on unity:

Everyone is invited to the dialogue on the country’s fate, and to renounce violence. The only thing that we reject in this dialogue is sectarianism, or discourses that divide members of our united community, who should be equal before the law, neither masters nor slaves.⁵

This emphasis on unity parallels the memoirs of Syrian intellectuals discussed in the previous section, which have in common a challenge to prevalent views that reduced Syria’s popular mass revolt to “the Syrian conflict”, a “proxy war”, or “political Islamism”. My interest in ASSAT’s materials was sparked when I was searching for graphics to use in a Syria solidarity meeting held as part of the annual Oxford Radical Forum.⁶ An ASSAT graphic (FIGURE 3) of a tank which, on closer inspection, is depict depicts Bashar Assad sitting on a sharp needle, and led me to further explore the collective.

FIGURE 3: Bashar Al-Assad on a tank

ASSAT's materials are not only digitally generated images: they are also visuals that have been designed personally and that involve an intimate connection between grassroots groups and the visual creators. Tracing the course of the Syrian revolution through ASSAT's striking visuals, which portray the high peak of unity and the low depths of betrayal, allows us to understand those who created these visuals (and is also necessary, lest we forget what took place).

ASSAT's approach in the visuals has been described as mobilizing for the revolution. According to Omar, one of the people behind ASSAT who I finally met after a search via other Syrian dissidents, producing these visuals was not only about garnering international support:

We were not really trying to advocate our case to the world or report what was happening in Syria, at least not in the first year. Our target was rather the people on the ground, and those who were participating in the protests with us.

Besides being a homage to the famous song by Sheikh Imam, the collective's use of the phrase *Al Sha'b Al Suri Aref Tarikh* also reveals the degree to which it is merged with real-life progressions of revolutionary uprisings. For instance, the diverse approaches and experiences of the different Syrians involved in political change encountered, challenge the excessive focus on sectarianism that has dominated analyses of the Syrian revolution. During my fieldwork in Lebanon between 2013 and 2015, and again in 2020 (through online interactions) (see Section 3), it was evident that the narrative about the main points of reference in regard to the unfolding of the Syrian revolution was highly contested.

Following this introduction, my article progresses as follows. Arguing that ASSAT's visual commentaries are a vital social indicator in and of themselves, I start by contextualizing the way in which creative engagement by grassroots activists operates, drawing on studies about the political economy of the wider Syrian context. In addition, I discuss the political realities (including state repression) of Syria's general media infrastructure that influenced (and in many cases blocked) the creation and dissemination of content. I then discuss the importance for understanding ASSAT's work of adopting a synchronized methodology within the context of revolutionary Syria. Thus, when analyzing

the ASSAT graphics I simultaneously draw on *written* biographies and ethnographies that provide powerful testimonials of Syria's revolution. I go on to argue that ASSAT chronicled a section of Syria's revolutionary history in defiance of the powerful censorship and policing in the country and provided a visual record of the political imaginations in all its contradictory versions. I conclude that by portraying an array of transgressive experiences, ASSAT's digitally disseminated content can nurture conviction and political resilience, and restore faith in people power.

2. Framing Syria's *impossible* revolution as the *politics of life*

Recent years have seen a growth in special issues and edited books on visual culture in West Asia and North Africa (WANA),⁷ including scholarship on digital image activism during the WANA uprisings from 2011 onwards (Anden-Papadopoulos, 2020). Likewise, interdisciplinary studies have begun to look at vernacular cultures of the Middle East, with a number of ethnographies discussing the ways in which images are pivotal for constructing narratives and cultural politics (Allan & Westmoreland 2016; Dela Ratta et al., 2020). The specific relationship between cultural memory and the preservation of revolutionary legacies is also discussed in the special issue of *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (MEJCC) dedicated to Syrian political culture studied the shifts in everyday expressions over time, including within the context of the Syrian uprising. This latter example demonstrates how media and communication scholarship has also been shaped by contemporary Syrian culture and politics (Al-Ghazzi, 2022, p. 341).⁸

Recent studies about Syria's political transformations – what Al-Haj Saleh (2017) has termed the country's "impossible revolution" – also provide important insights which are relevant to the present article. Applying a deliberate bottom-up prism (framed as "micropolitics"), Munif's *Between the Politics of Life and the Geopolitics of Death* (2020) argues that Syria's mass uprising was historically unique, due to the way in which the underground resistance was able to flourish. This bottom-up perspective is also found in Pearlman's (2017) *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled*.⁹

In addition to academic scholarship, a fascinating genre in recent writing about Syria's struggle is that of memoirs and biographies. These works also center the agency of ordinary people within the revolutionary process. For example, Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami's (2016) *Burning Country* presents firsthand testimonies from opposition fighters and human rights activists. A crucial source in this genre is the diary of Samar Yazbek, which was published in English in two volumes (Yazbek, 2012, 2015). Yazbek's testimony reminds us of the initial circumstances of the uprising, and shows how it was soon erased by the

unfolding events. Yet Yazbek avoids the sectarianism-cum-civil-war framework. Her interventions are especially courageous because of her own particular subjectivity. This is undoubtedly why she was addressed as “dear traitor” (see the quote at the start of this article). This was not a case of random name-calling: Yazbek is an Alawite – the sect which, under the Assad regime, enjoyed a privileged status – yet she rejected the demand to swear loyalty to Assad and instead sided with the revolutionaries. She thus repudiated the false affinity of class/sect membership applied by the sect-based politics of the Assad family and many of the regime's entourage. In her texts, Yazbek commits the ultimate betrayal (from the point of view of regime loyalists) by relaying pro-democracy sentiments and shedding light on the extraordinary bravery of ordinary Syrians, of all backgrounds. Texts like Yazbek's are valuable because, while bearing witness to what happened, they also help to periodize the unfolding events, *before* they are pushed aside by the next event.

A notable feature of Yazbek's account are the numerous references to the internet. For example, she expresses her sense of powerlessness when the regime cuts off the internet, and her huge relief when it returns:

The internet is finally restored. There are demonstrations in all the cities. They're calling for freedom and the downfall of the regime (Yazbek, 2012, p. 36).

A sigh seems to exude from the page here as news of the countrywide demonstrations indicates that the uprising is spreading across the country.

It is worth providing some background information here, as this will allow for a fuller understanding of the context in which ASSAT's digital and online images appeared and were shared. At the time the uprising erupted in 2011, the internet was already a semi-integrated element within Syrian society, with internet penetration standing at 25%. Over the next ten years the internet developed into a mainstream tool, and it played a key role in the Syrian uprising, in a context of regime control over internet access. Indeed, while the mid- to late-1980s saw a process of *infitah* (opening) in Syria's economy, with a move from an isolationist and protectionist approach to a greater emphasis on the free market and on capital accumulation, the state continued to provide the main infrastructure for media and communication, through Syria's elite class – a formal and informal network that was close to the regime (Haddad, 2012). Syria's digital ecology was first formalized through Investment Law No. 10 in 1991 and by 2011 it had involved into a tightly organized media policy and infrastructure that facilitated political repression.

3. Ethnographic synchronicities

Yazbek's multiple references to the internet hint at the important role it played in the Syrian revolution. It was in this condition that digital developments during Syria's struggle, in terms of the choices of activists (including ASSAT), took place. For a critical understanding of this material context I bring together two disciplines – visual culture and anthropology- in this article.¹⁰ This has allowed me to assess the work of the ASSAT collective in Syria. This approach in digital anthropology adds to recent insightful scholarship that has brought together analyses of visual culture and critical perspectives on the Middle East, as outlined above.

Bringing together offline and online ethnography, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork over an extended period in addition to online observations of Syrian platforms. I made multiple trips to Lebanon, where I had personal interactions with various Syrian interlocutors, including members of the ASSAT collective. In Lebanon it became clear to me that the impact of their surroundings mattered to the content-makers and other Syrians with whom I engaged there.¹¹ Several of my respondents candidly described central Beirut as being a divided space. The popular central area of Hamra was the most common meeting place for Syrians, and was where I conducted most of my own interviews. However, some pro-revolution Syrians felt uncomfortable in certain venues in this area, because they were also frequented by people who were audibly pro-Assad.

In some cases, uncomfortableness in Lebanon caused my fieldwork interlocutors to leave the country. For example, one interviewee (who managed to go Europe to pursue doctoral studies) could not bear the unwillingness of some Lebanese activists and bloggers to side with the Syrian revolution. She observed these individuals, who were usually outspoken, and whom she admired, being very evasive about the revolution, and she described this as "*discouraging*".

While the information gained during my fieldwork trips was vital for my understanding of ASSAT, the periods between these trips – and a temporary halt to my research project in 2018, provided useful reflexive distance.

4. Visual registers, temporal disruptions

Time no longer carries the same indications that it used to. It is impossible to use the same logic when measuring the way things were before the Syrian revolution and measuring what came after it. (Zeid, 2018)

Considering the brutal risks present in Syria during the revolutionary period from 2011 to 2024, the satirical anti-regime commentary provided by the ASSAT images on which I focus in this article was unprecedented. These highly professional graphics were a part of what

has been termed the *visual vocabulary of resistance* (Omareen, 2014, p. 84), and they offer a suitable setting for analyzing creative representations of both fear and bravery.

Looking at the sequence of the ASSAT works over the years allows us to recognize the waves that characterized the Syrian revolutionary experience: they range from pieces that seek to rally activists, to those that reflect political deterioration in the country, to those which signal revamped confidence. Reflecting this reality, and my understanding that activists traverse different (stored up) feelings over time, I reject a teleological reading of the works and instead read them as liminal disruptions of the hegemonic social order. It is for this reason that my analytical framework allows for interpretations that address temporal dynamics.¹² As shown in the matrix, the different *phases* (pre/during/post) and the different *functions* (tools or spaces) are the base of digital and visual engagement. ASSAT's visual political and emotional expressions provide a chronicle of the Syrian revolution along temporal stages. In other words, how they relate aesthetically is integral to the political horizons of the creators.¹³ For ASSAT, the logic behind the sequencing of the uploads was attuned to the works' status as an art form.¹⁴ Omar, one of the co-founders of ASSAT, stated: "Once the art is produced, it can go its own way". When I asked him to elaborate on this, he said:

ASSAT was created soon after the Egyptian uprising, around the end of January [2011] and published early February. If I recall correctly, the first graphic was "Revolution Against Sectarianism". We had to counter the narrative of the government, which portrayed our uprising as a sectarian war.

As is clear from this quote, numerous of my interviewees regarded the framing of the Syrian protests for democracy through the lens of sectarianism as a big obstacle to their efforts.

In the ASSAT visuals, snippets from different genres and techniques morph into a distinct aesthetic frame. Their aesthetic appeal does not rest on claims of originality. Nor does it concern the unique biographical narrative of the artist themselves (the graphics could just as well be collaborative images or images that depict what the content-makers' friends or families have experienced). Just as personal political experiences overlap, so too do stages in mass protests. The ASSAT content-creators' aim is to go beyond a specific *moment* and, despite difficult conditions, plant the seeds for continuing revolt.

The ASSAT graphics shed a light on how social-political moods are mediated. This echoes Al-Ghazzi's (2022, p. 342) linguistic examination, in the context of the Syrian revolution, of *keywords* (drawing on Raymond Williams' classic work) as affective language that conveys suffering, regret, or defeat, through idiomatic expressions, such as *tasbih*, *ya hef*, and *al nuzuh* (Al-Ghazzi 2022, p. 344). This discursive qualification resembles the euphoric mobilizing characteristics of the ASSAT visuals.

A closer look at the visual content shows that the liminal categories related to political trajectories are in turn related to affective (provocative, cathartic, sentimental) connotations. In terms of the different revolutionary stages, the pre-revolutionary (*build-up*) phase can, for instance, be recognized in images that intentionally trivialize the mounting dangers in Syria. In FIGURE 4 “*Going out to protest*” and FIGURE 5 “*Baba Amr*” we can detect this *mobilizing* effect: the images clearly urge people to take to the streets and call on people to join the protests. On the other hand, mediating visual expressions that depict passion or exhilaration in the moment indicate the tipping point (*during*) phase. In FIGURE 6 “*Ya watani ya ghali*” [*Our precious nation*], a slogan referring to a famous anti-colonial song. The graphic depicts large crowds that are *already* out on the streets. This visual composition both radically challenges the regime through its *immediate* intensity, but at the same time strikes a defiant tone by revealing Bashar Assad as a liar.

These images remind us of the fact that in revolutionary uprisings it is crucial to break the barrier of fear. We can see that the tipping point/during momentum is a highly contradictory moment, precisely because, during this stage, competing ideologies pull in different directions. This understanding echoes FIGURE 3 showing Assad on a tank. The audacious mockery of the Syrian regime aimed to stimulate courage among Syrians with regard to rising up against the regime.

Collage FIGURES 4-5-6-7

The analysis arises from how the different temporal stages are denoted by aesthetic attributes of the visuals. Expressing courage is not uncommon. Bravery can often lead to a break-through that evolves into the post-revolution (*aftermath*) phase. This stage can involve systemic change, but it can also involve loss and shock. Although achieving a successful leap is the ideal, there may be a counterrevolutionary aftermath. In terms of the first, FIGURE 7, “*Save the rest*”, suggests culpability (for the failure of the revolution). It presents the ineffably sad realization that the revolutionary tide has turned, and it communicates a sense of being left behind. This nevertheless differs from visual rhetoric signaling condemnation. The disruption of revolutionary progress which had occurred when this piece was created rested on the degree to which the political pendulum—the balance of forces related to structures of power, geopolitical impact, and the strength of grassroots

resistance—had moved in Syria. This liminal “aftermath” stage clearly tilted toward the dark side of civil war after 2013.

The *continuation* of the revolutionary uprising depends on political alliances and that in turn relates to whether the uprising is seen as a success or failure. The regime aimed to delegitimise the protests as much as possible. Therefore, this strategy by the regime itself had to be undermined. Such efforts included making visible the regime’s deadly campaigns in order to quell the protests. As the debates about the validity of the uprisings raged, for some the Syrian state was still seen as a better alternative than international (Western) intervention. FIGURE 8 “*Hiwaarat Assad*” [Assad-style *dialogues*] counters this narrative, by dismissing the regime’s pretensions regarding dialogue. It speaks to the idea that a repressive regime should not be misunderstood as being ‘reasonable’. The creator of this visual depicts Bashar Assad’s true intention behind his use of *dialogue*, namely the (violent) boot. By showcasing the extent of Assad’s repressive methods, the image complicates anti-imperial or anti-Assad stances. Capturing the ethical contradiction, FIGURE 9, “*Crushing weights*”, adds to this message: it illustrates different imperial stakeholders stacked as a crushing weight on the shoulders of ordinary Syrians. This image challenges the notion of impartiality: in cases of oppression a noncommittal stance is untenable.

Behind the “*Assad is better than...*” argument lies the question “*better for who*”? ASSAT’s approach dismantles the well-known “lesser evil” paradigm, while also embracing a progressive pedagogy.¹⁵ In FIGURE 10 “*Putin/Obama*” a silhouette of the faces of Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin are attached to a single body that is wearing one tie. The suggestion is that, whoever you look to, neither Obama nor Putin will help you. The words “Syria and Palestine, different vetoes same death” underneath the image powerfully summarize ASSAT’s stance on the question of imperialism and offer insight into the complex reality of inter-imperial power struggles.

Collage FIGURES 8-9-10

While several of the ASSAT designs express Syrians’ determination to survive, people’s ability to continue in the face of repression has limits, particularly when they are faced with multiple layers of difficulty. In this vein, FIGURE 7, “*Save the rest*”, is a striking example of (momentary) resignation. The design shows how honestly ASSAT relates to the balance of forces: it communicates the fact that, at this point in time, the political equilibrium was approaching a definitively counterrevolutionary phase. The somewhat crude style used

to depict both despair and compassion seeks to provoke the viewer's indignation. At the same time, on an existential level, the visual promises a kind of redemption: it implies that, however small the window of opportunity was, people at least tried to overthrow the Assad regime. Survival and resistance, when taken together, sum up experience of the Syrian revolution.

While many of the ASSAT graphics have a clear political aim, they carefully avoid explicitly prescribing what people should do and how they should do it: rather, they only provide sensory impulses that hint at what can be done. At the same time, the time-based layers illustrate that, besides their strong sense of obligation regarding documenting and bearing witness *in the moment*, ASSAT also intervened through their visuals. As ASSAT member Omar commented:

Our work gradually changed. This was obvious. If you pay close attention, you see how the message started to change due to what was happening on the ground.

On an existential level, the *Save the rest* visual promises some kind of redemption: it implies that, however small the window of opportunity was, people at least tried to overthrow the Assad regime. Oscillating between survival and resistance, these qualities, when taken together, provide an account of the full experience of the Syrian revolution. As well as offering a nod to the past, being more than a decade in the making these visuals stir melancholic responses. The ASSAT images are remarkable in how they both cultivate memories and can also be considered as promises that are retained, in the form of digital memories, for a future purpose (Hajek et al., 2016, p. 1). If we only focus on their specific political function, the images are difficult to define. The “now or never” sentiments – making the end of tyranny truly feel near – are carried through thanks to intergenerational affinities. Such visuals both reveal and reject, and subsequently become meaningful through their relationship with other (political) practices at specific moments in time.

The ASSAT visuals offer different political outlooks. Yassin, a Syrian exile who engaged in a project around digital archiving of the Syrian revolution and its aftermath (but who was not part of ASSAT) told me: “Illustration gives you more freedom to document events and feelings.”¹⁶ In line with this view, the ASSET content-creators included progressive claims—and their own dreams—in their designs. One example of this is how the depiction of prominent female figures with very expressive and defiant gestures, such as raising a fist in the air or calling out, in FIGURE 11 “*Stop the violence we want a nation for everyone*” and FIGURE 12 “*Freedom forever*”, are joined with messages of unity and against violence.

FIGURES 11 and 12

That the images evoke a particular feminist framework of the protests, as well as agitating against division, is crucial in relation to the arguments made at the outset of this article regarding micropolitics (Munif, 2020) as an original understanding from within Syria. The overall absence of women as revolutionary subjects meant that gender politics was an important factor in the visual narratives of the Syrian revolution. In the fist-waving woman (FIGURE 11) we see an echo of the important contributions of Razzan Ghazzawi regarding women's activism in Syria at the start of the uprising,¹⁷ and of Pearlman's (2017) account of gendered social transformation: "I started to whisper 'freedom' [...] when I heard my own voice I started shaking and crying. I felt like I was flying [...] and I told myself that I would never let anyone steal my voice again. And after that day, I started to join the demonstrations' shouting" (Pearlman, 2017, p. 80).

5. Chronicling—while also salvaging—a revolution

There is something exhausting about the very act of remembrance. I am asked identical questions by different journalists on assignment to produce content on the occasion of the 10-year anniversary. I don't feel my answers matter. The story is somewhat pre-written; the revolution is over, and I should somehow confirm it in my answers (Attalah, 2021).

The ASSAT content-makers were not alienated from what was happening around them during the period after 2011: they themselves participated in the protests. The way that raw, horrific, or vulnerable sentiments are conveyed in the images mattered as much for the content-makers as for the viewers. Their participation is visible in their creations, which convey astonishing testimonials. Reflecting its progressive affinity, ASSAT taps into the frameworks of transnational solidarity, left-wing labour struggles and anti-sectarianism in its own designs. In this way, they help recall previous struggles and connect those earlier struggles to future ones even as the old is dying but the new has not yet emerged.¹⁸

The ASSAT collective emerged from within local networks. This produced political commitments and affective relations based on unity that were key visual discourses in ASSAT's online political mediation during the Syrian revolution. Understandably, this focus on counter-hegemony via unity stressed the everyday challenges facing Syrians, and was nurtured in offline collectives. These collaborations represented interactions between online and offline networks around joint initiatives but were also propelled by a sense of

camaraderie. While it is undeniable that the intentions of the ASSAT content-makers and those who viewed the content did not automatically match, or always lead to practical action, nevertheless their strong shared commitments are evident in the ASSAT images.¹⁹

In the ASSAT visuals, the presentation of life and death is shaped by numerous internal and external obstacles: the revolutionary subject moves from self-confident poise to hesitancy and back to audacity as it challenges the regime. People waver between complacency, resistance and acceptance. By bringing together more coherently the temporal rhythm and representational features of the ASSAT works, which requires the application of multiple lenses, we might be able to illuminate the ambiguous relation between resistance and survival. Moreover, doing this may make it possible for people to relive the extraordinary beginning of Syria's uprising. But the question arises: does the framing in this section around chronicling/recording assume that the work is *finished*, a chronicle of the past? Despite the (initially) very rich archives, the energy of ASSAT's work began to falter as time went by. What does it mean that the images themselves are all still "there", available to view online? The work itself shows that it is not finished *precisely* because reality is open-ended. The results of the uprising continue to play out.

Indeed, no-one could have predicted the sight that occurred at the end of 2024: ordinary citizens strolling through the gardens and immense salons of the Syrian presidential palace, past its inviting swimming pools, staring with a mixture of amazement and amusement at the incredible wealth accumulated by the Assad family, who had just fled to Moscow. At precisely the same time, the regime's prisons and secret underground cells were being liberated.²⁰ When the gates of the prisons were forced open—with families and friends engaging in a frantic search through the dark dungeons for their loved ones—the overwhelming cruelty of the Syrian regime was exposed. However, this was no sudden sensational transition from fear to bravery: the Syrian struggle from 2011 to 2024 involved waves of unimaginable suffering and periods of stalemate. In retrospect, a critical mass tipping the hegemonic scale had always been a potential risk for the regime. Thus it made sense for the regime to try to distance the masses from the demands of the opposition in the way that it did. One of the reasons why this distancing was not more complete was the visuals produced by collectives like ASSAT, which were like aide-mémoires of the uprisings, being indicative of what memory scholars call the "reminiscence bump" (Foster, 2009, p. 64).

Numerous digitally enabled visuals, including those of ASSAT, communicated the epic revolutionary moments of the Syrian struggle. Attempts to approach this visual collection through a liminal lens are not motivated by a desire to find *order* but rather by an awareness that it is a slice of the collective revolutionary memory. Emphasizing the difference between collective and individual memories, one ASSAT member, Omar, reflected:

I think it goes beyond being just a memory. What I personally find fascinating about the visuals is that if you look at the timeline of the posters now, there is actually a story of how things have changed. We see it go from a very peaceful uprising to an armed uprising and the emergence of the FSA [Free Syrian Army], then the arrival of ISIS, then how our groups faded away, etc... for me personally as an individual, they are memories, but for me as part of a collective they are a story.

This semantic layering—in terms of “stories” and “memories”—is important in a *phased* timeframe because visual transferences (as facilitated by digital platforms) across time and space may traverse different political, temporal and spatial boundaries. Seen in this light, and bearing in mind the idea that a memory (and the goosebumps it provokes) is singular, while a story (with its arcs, chapters, and dialogue) is multilayered. Omar’s point that a (collective) story has another meaning than an (individual) memory strikes a different note.

Boosting morale and generating rebellious stamina, ASSAT’s work during the Syrian revolution was not only a reflection of events but was deeply situated in the complexities of Syria’s different movements. The works conjure idiosyncratic sentiments that mattered for activist projects that were invested in collective change. Rather than simply recapturing an intense memory as a moment whose broader meaning gradually dissolves, this was about engendering new activist configurations. As political acts of documenting, the ASSAT works were geared toward encouraging new avenues for staying connected to the aims of those political efforts. This steering of the passage of time offers the viewer the possibility of *taking shelter from historical time* (Toscano, 2016).

When I asked Yassin (quoted before) for his thoughts on Omar’s distinction between collective stories and remembering, he made a revelatory point. Reflecting on ASSAT’s visual material 10 years after its establishment, he said:

I find this relates to the sense that I simply can’t locate the sense of time when I first encountered ASSAT. The feeling it evokes doesn’t connect to a specific event or a moment in time, or a specific feeling related to that. Its evocative power for me is very unpredictable. And doesn’t seem to dissolve, perhaps *because* of that unpredictability.²¹

Put this way, the work of ASSAT can neither be considered as *passive* nostalgia for the group nor as inert *melancholy* for individuals. Its power is that it does not dissolve into a (predictable) nothingness. ASSAT’s visual productions simultaneously helps to digest the intense—even absurd—nature of a specific political moment and act as collective *aide-mémoires* that help viewers to retain the lessons of a former story. When the intense transformations of the Syrian uprising, as visualized by ASSAT, are re-lived as collectively shared memories, they have a particular reminiscence. Taken further, by prolonging a sense of engagement, these graphic souvenirs of the Syrian revolt can salvage political struggles. We have here a mix of the temporal sense that something that happened over a decade ago feels very recent, and the historical rupture captured in the adage that nothing may happen in 30 years but then 30 years can happen in 30 days. Perhaps this is why activist

engagements can sometimes, in a similar fashion, *feel* longer than they actually are, or, similarly, it may explain why things look old but feel fresh if they are sufficiently well *sheltered*.

Taking up Omar's point about *collective stories*—differentiating between the implications for an individual and the meaning for a collective—also presents itself as a liminal question. Namely, how durable are they? The subtext of the visuals indicates that the ASSAT creations anchor *ongoing* aspirations, rather than reminiscing about *foregone* desires. In this way, the digital visuals resemble how paintings, letters or pamphlets regain their power to inspire and teach far beyond those places or instances that they directly reflect. They are to be regarded as *reverberations*, akin to how the revolts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are described, and, even more, the way that the Arab revolts of 2011 inspired a range of inspiring texts and collaborations that echoed the anti-colonial era and the liberation movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, forming *constellations* with those earlier experiences.²² This conjures up confidence and hope in retrospect, and incorporates a political horizon that can help to direct activist survival strategies and tactics. Seen in this way, the 2011 Arab revolutions are testimonies that speak to the bond between possibility and dream, or maybe merely an *instinct*.

Returning to the distinction between remembrance as a memory and as a story, respectively: this is important as regards the initially demarcated stages. When exhibited along liminal parts, a visual can appear to represent uninterrupted efforts according to the matrix in Graph 1, but the revolutionary temporalities do not depict a circular ('past/present/post') motion. Instead, in the words of ASSAT co-founder Omar:

In 2011 [the visuals were] motivated by the belief that change would happen in Syria. Then how can we participate from exile? Then it slightly moved to prove it is [a] peaceful uprising in its time. And today it is evidence that back in 2011, when the uprising started, it was very peaceful.

In other words, the motivations shifted in line with the political developments. Taken together, the most direct impact of digital media in the Syrian revolution was how, as a mnemonic aid, it facilitated the essential task of countering narratives that denied *that the Syrian revolution started as a peaceful* people's movement. The ASSAT images also offer the substance needed to (re)create a sense of past and present in relation to the future. Merging visual aesthetics and the practice of remembering in this way provides the means to delay the (perhaps inevitable) fading of revolutionary stamina.

The visual expressions in the ASSAT images (and the accompanying texts) promote a valuable goal, decoded in the future tense, a signifier for interventions. ASSAT teaches us that by visually compressing them, extraordinary memories can help organize the lessons

that are drawn from earlier experiences. Because the messages of such memories are not cyclical but respond to parallel social timelines, the collection of images is neither linear nor cyclical: they register, chronicle, disrupt, and salvage. This dialectical relation impacts how we interpret visual archiving critically, as an engagement that helps keep the flame of activism alive. Like the *post phase* analyzed in the previous section, we can't think about a revolution without considering counterrevolution. Revolutionary representations might aid people in their next attempt to achieve freedom and dignity, but what mainly matters is keeping an open mind regarding the realm of the possible.

6. Conclusion: *Syrians know the way*

I personally think that if *we are marching, knowing our way*, we do not necessarily need to know the history (Omar, ASSAT, 2021).

... the revolution is over and I should somehow confirm it in my answers. But my answers about the end and the defeat do not arrive, not out of blind hope or political naivety, but out of a certain conceptual blindness cast upon the entire conversation (Attalah, 2021).

After the fall of President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a formerly Al Qaida-affiliated political group that was involved in the ousting of Assad, had to carefully consider what kind of new rule would be accepted by the Syrian people. The way the ASSAT graphics depict coexistence, emancipation and grassroots agency in Syria exemplifies why such a pedagogical strategy is crucial with the takeover by a group like HTS: neither their reactionary leanings nor their vulnerability to foreign intervention are underestimated by the revolutionaries depicted in the visuals discussed in this article. The revolutionary horizon from the early years, as documented in the ASSAT visuals, hovers above Ahmed al-Sharaa (whose nom de guerre was Al Jolani), the leader of HTS. If the desire is to achieve certain political aims, replacing Assad may not be enough and a continuation of resistance may be required. It cannot be assumed that this will be an easy process.

The aesthetic narratives of the ASSAT visuals reflect shifts in the Syrian uprising related to temporal changes, and in turn suggest new forms of *remembering* that are facilitated by digital infrastructure. While recalling the triumphs of the Syrian revolution, the visual examples are meant to make us understand the losses too. This takes us back to the article's opening quote, from Samar Yazbek, about what remains one of the most extraordinary moments in recent political history. From the highpoint of unity and multi-confessional collaboration to the horrific nightmare of never-imagined suffering, accounts like Yazbek's record the profound experiences of millions of Syrians. Such losses led some to quit their grassroots organizing and activism. Nevertheless, great personal losses were often also accompanied by specific transgressive experiences. Together, these form an

inheritance that continues to resonate. That is why, no matter the orderly representation, actual experiences of uprisings entail trials and tribulations. They do so, firstly, because they are shaped by social contradictions, and, secondly, because the different stages of struggle—and their requirements, constituencies, and expressions—are never discrete but always overlap.

This article has made clear the difference between passive *documentation* and active *documenting*. This speaks to the relation between *conceptual blindness* and Lina Attalah's statement regarding the 10-year anniversary of the Egyptian revolution and constant claims that the revolution was *over* (quoted at the start of Section 5). It helps to remember that few believed Bashar Assad could be publicly rejected, *including* among his own loyal constituency. It was thought that it would never happen... until it did. The rushed move from framing the uprisings across the region as "Arab Spring" to framing them "Arab Winter" follows a linear order because sometimes the parameters which allow us to grasp political revolts are unfinished, and do not allow for including disruptions, halts or retreats. This subtle difference marks the key difference between visual archives as passive nostalgia and active memory-making. By considering visual archives as *reflections* through revolutionary periodization we can avoid foreclosure.

While the fear dissipated within a matter of hours, this does not mean that terror had not been there before. The numerous security branches, the notorious prisons, and the invisible network of informants that had pervaded Syrian society were no secret. with ASSAT's work and I realized that it was a finger on the pulse of a Syrian society in revolutionary tumult. In this article, I have discussed the work of the ASSAT collective as a powerful and rich example of art, technology and revolution coming together. I have done this by positing revolutionary temporality as the general conceptual proposition, in order to examine a unique visual grammar of dissent and to illustrate that this grammar is still valid 10 years after the ASSAT collective was first formed, because the collective's mediation does not rely upon a *moment* in the literal sense. ASSAT's work of chronicling the extraordinary phases of resilience in Syria also shaped the lives of the collective's members, and set in motion future benefits, even when those members were unable to salvage a revolutionary project in their present. Meanwhile, revolutionary content provides symbolic *shelter* by enabling those involved in revolution to maintain their stamina. As a unique phenomenon, the ASSAT collective's work provides documentation of Syria's interrupted and resumed uprising. Its visual expressions show the different junctions of the revolutionary experience. Interviews with activists and artists provided further insights regarding these experiences, revealing how some joined the armed resistance and others got involved in filmmaking outside of the realm of activism.

When I initially read *Al Sha'b Al Suri Aref Tarikh* (ASSAT), I interpreted the phonetic transliteration of Arabic into the English alphabet incorrectly, due to the similarity between *tarikh* and *tariq*. While “*tarikh*” means “the way” (*tariq*), a literal transliteration can also be decoded phonetically as *tareekh*, meaning “history”. Whereas the intended meaning is *know the way*, my initial (mis)reading happened in a context in which many people (myself included) were seeking to resist the erasure of Syria’s revolutionary experience, its being consigned to an historical black hole. This mis-transliteration did not represent a difference in *principle*. Firstly, to know *one’s way* is also to know *one’s history* and this requires preventing the erasure of that history. Their “way” was to never go back to the old ways of the Assad dictatorship. But here it is important to also be honest about the ambiguous trajectories and not prescribe some true way forward. Secondly, to *know one’s history* is necessary in order to know *one’s destiny*. As Omar told me:

The transliteration [*tarikh* versus *tariq*] is indeed a bit confusing. We didn’t really think about the ‘history’ back then, although interestingly, one of the first works we created was called ‘history of loyals’.

ASSAT’s work is a powerful reminder that “to know” is one way to reclaim history, whether this involves memorializing those who have been lost, or refuting artificial dialogues and becoming geopolitical proxies. This requires, at the very minimum, an attempt to document experiences. In its appearance, each word implies something different, yet the two interpretations are more related than appears, precisely because *tareekh* and *tariq* are in essence a *continuum* in the conjectural accounts of the Syrian struggles for justice. The homage to “knowing their way” goes beyond the present time and location, as is found in the mix of the passive/active and first-/third-person narration in the song by Sheikh Imam:

“I am the people marching and knowing their way,
My struggle is my weapon, and my will is my friend,
I wade into the nights, and through the eyes of my hopes,
I pinpoint the place of the real morning,
I am the people marching and knowing their way.”

ASSAT’s work has the ability to combine political claim-making with humor and it involves a form of irony that does not deny the seriousness of the situation. In addition to critically conveying the visual material itself, this article’s analysis of ASSAT has sought to understand how the visuals reveal the dialectical relation between political objectives and the temporal condition. By displaying social contradictions and personal dilemmas, the ASSAT images show us that, even when aligned with hegemonic politics and corporate platforms, the global mediation of images around epic events can (temporarily) shift gear from merely consuming a tragedy to redirecting our focus toward grassroots activists, with online visual works helping to maintain people’s resilience through an aesthetics of political resistance.

This article challenges the inclination to read a (failed) present back into the past—as if progression is predetermined by those features. The overthrow of Assad in 2024 reminds us that hegemony based on violence is *rarely stable and closure is never total* (Munif, 2013, p. 216). The protests organized against HTS and Al Jolani soon after the takeover were a rejection of the capitalist, sectarian and imperialist status quo. The creative works of the ASSAT collective for an archive that includes stories of defeat. Looking back at this visual record of Syrians' quest for freedom we recognize a deeply poetic quality in them, but not in the climactic meaning of *poetic justice*: because revolutions are not an event that happens and then ends. Rather, they are a journey that must continue.

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List of figure captions

FIGURE 1: Analytical framework of temporal stages (“matrix of resistance”)

FIGURE 2: ASSAT’s original Flickr and Facebook homepages

FIGURE 3: Bashar Al-Assad on a tank. By ASSAT (used with permission)

Collage of: FIGURE 4 (Woman putting on a kufiyah, Arabic text “*Going out to protest*”); FIGURE 5 (Boy with a catapult, Arabic text “*Baba Amr*” [a town in central Syria]); FIGURE 6 (Photo of a mass protest, Arabic text “*Our precious nation*”); FIGURE 7 (Shackled feet, Arabic and English text “*Save the rest*”). By ASSAT (all used with permission)

Collage of: FIGURE 8 (Military boot, Arabic text “*Assad’s dialogues*”); FIGURE 9 (Crushing weights); FIGURE 10 (Putin/Obama as single head, text “*Different vetoes, same death*”). By ASSAT (all used with permission)

Collage of: FIGURE 11 (Woman waving fist in air, Arabic text “*Stop the violence, we want a nation for everyone*”); FIGURE 12 (Woman chanting, Arabic text “*Freedom Forever*”). By ASSAT (all used with permission)

¹ Many news photos captured the ceremonial reunification, and revealed the broadly smiling Bashar al-Assad. The following news headings heralded a full-circle storyline, even while the blood of thousands of civilians had not yet dried: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/19/assad-gets-warm-welcome-as-syria-welcomed-back-into-arab-league>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65650768>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/19/syria-bashar-al-assad-receives-warm-welcome-on-arab-league-return> and <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-assad-attend-arab-summit-bringing-regional-isolation-an-end-2023-05-19/>.

² This matrix of resistance forms a grid to more realistically deconstruct the conditions that shape different kinds of engagement. It illustrates how when activists adapt strategies this also implies making tactical adjustments. In this article I focus on the temporal relations to the digital as a space, elsewhere I discuss the relation between how digital phenomena work as tools organizing across different political temporalities (Aouragh forthcoming). This conceptual framework was developed in Aouragh, M. 2012. Social media, mediation and the Arab revolutions. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable

women in the abstract sense: women are a part of all of the revolution's aspects (Ghazzawi, 2014; see also Ghazzawi et al., 2015).

¹⁸ The famous sentence is *The crisis consists exactly because the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear* by Antonio Gramsci. Extract from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For an accessible source, see: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/theoretical-review/19833101.htm>.

¹⁹ During the revolution this aspect often ran counter to media accounts and was systematically ignored in the dominant mainstream framing of the Syrian revolution, which preferred singular framings, such as "uprising", "conflict", "war" and even "bloody civil war", that denote an abstract politics rather than reflect dynamic contexts and subjects with agency. There is a particular violence in this talking over people and reiterating a familiar (paralysing) frame of the kind that is often applied to the Middle East. In the post-Assad era, the ASSAT archive thus might function as a form of 'hindsight' salvation.

²⁰ While the fear dissipated within a matter of hours, this does not mean that terror had not been there before. The numerous security branches, the notorious prisons, and the invisible network of informants that had pervaded Syrian society were no secret.

²¹ Conversation held in Brussels, Belgium, in March 2021.

²² See Amann & Boyden (2021); Jabary-Salamanca (2018) on solidarity constellations on the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Palestinian revolution: <https://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/struggles-for-dignity-and-solidarity->.