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ISSUE 0.

MEDIUM

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FEATURING

ISSUE 0. MEDIUM

In a world saturated with content and roiling with uncertainty, whom do you trust? We increasingly search for interpreters for our bombarded present, soothsayers divining untamed futures. The medium through which information is conveyed, now, as ever, is imbued with these sacred characteristics. It can help you tell right from wrong. It is a stamp of authenticity, or else a libelous scourge. Except if it's your grandma. Remember, she's always right.

We know that the medium has never been a passive portal. It has always had the power, in itself, to influence the reception of what's imparted. But today, new mediums emerge and proliferate faster. Twitter accounts issuing on-the-ground dispatches from Syria and Iraq blossom, mutate, and conflict at an intense rate. It becomes difficult to keep up. We are as inundated with new knowledge bearers as we are with the very knowledge they were created to fathom.

As Issue 0, MEDIUM grapples with the age-old infiltration of elite interests into a range of conventional and less conventional mediums: Turkish television series, Turkish print newspapers, narratives underlying Israel's settlement building, Syrian war coverage, and an Iraqi militia's global branding techniques. At the same time, it showcases artwork, poetry and a play, from Libya, Lebanon, Armenia, and much more. These works are self-conscious of their forms, using unorthodox structures to sketch granules of the MENA region.

Khabar Keslan's first issue unearths the symbiosis of MENA-originated critique and art. If you have to trust anything, trust in this.

TELESCREEN OF THE SULTAN

ALI D.N.

Original artwork by Paloma Martinez-Miranda

TURKISH TELEVISION CALLS ON A MYTHICAL PAST TO SHAPE A NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY

IN an international social setting, Turkish TV shows are one of my go-to small talk topics. By friends from all over the Middle East, I've repeatedly been nicknamed "Behlül," as well as "Mohenned," the Turkish and Arabic names of the main character of the series *Forbidden Love*. Recently, my Persian teacher told us that she had to buy the Farsi-dubbed DVD of *The Magnificent Century* (2011-14) for her family. A half-Iranian student in our class screamed in surprise: she had to do the exact same thing.

The Turkish TV industry's massive $350 million business volume is surpassed only by the USA's. The worldwide fame of the Turkish TV series confirms the industry's success. Fans are wondering if the second season of *The Magnificent Century* will be on Netflix. In 2014, the same show became

the first ever Turkish TV series or film to be broadcasted in China; its estimated viewer count reaching 1.2 billion across more than 40 countries.

But there's a catch. Through his idea of "coffee ethics," Zizek reminds us that capital success today isn't achieved without implicating the product with consumer-tempting ideas. Similar to the way some brands lodge social values of health, beauty, and intelligence within their products, many Turkish television shows promote a distinctly Ottoman flavor of life.

OTTOMANIA

The first Turkish TV shows to achieve international acclaim were agonizingly melodramatic adaptations of romance novels, such as *Aşk-ı Memnu* (2008-10) and *Yaprak Dökümü* (2005-10). Novels' plots were stretched to hundreds of episodes — imagine if each page were as long as the extended version of a *Lord of the Rings* movie.

Then came *The Magnificent Century* in 2011. With the highest budget among the Turkish TV shows of its time, *The Magnificent Century* achieved massive success and popularity, but more importantly, it carried the Turkish melodrama trend into the "Ottomanization" process. Its success paved the way for many more Ottoman-themed TV series and blockbuster films, and became the torchbearer of the cultural phenomenon of Ottomania.

Ottomania has been a rising cultural trend since conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party) came to power in 2002. The term refers to a revival of Ottoman culture, which is bolstered by AKP's politics of neo-Ottomanism and "heritagization." As Elif Batuman explains, "Ottomania" has its roots in the Cold War and the pre-1980 coup d'état era, where conservative reactionaries against the political irreligiosity of the state's Kemalist laïcité, harkened back to the glory days when the Ottoman Caliph-Sultans ruled. The Ottoman heritage became incorporated into the conservative political discourse. The incumbent Justice and Development Party's (AKP) adoption and frequent employment of such discourse popularized political neo-Ottomanism, which expanded into a cultural phenomenon: "Ottomania." Hence, the promotion of the Ottoman heritage in Turkish television is closely related with conservative politics.

A NEW STATE AND A NEW NATION

Between 2002 and 2010, when the melodrama shows were at their commercial peak, one of the main policies of the AKP was to improve Turkey's global reputation. The AKP's brand of "Moderate Islam" helped its government portray itself as pro-Western and pro-American, adopting a liberal market economy and pursuing EU membership. Improving citizenship rights and civil liberties were crucial criteria for the EU negotiations, leading the AKP to become the first regime in modern Turkey to both revoke the previously dominant militaristic laicism and grant political representation of religion in government and municipality positions. The AKP government was also the first in Turkey to ever initiate peace processes with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – the armed-organization that has waged a violent struggle for equal rights and self-determination for the Kurds in Turkey since the mid-80s. These important developments were signs of a new era in Turkey, soon to be

followed by the formation of a new Turkish society altogether.

The "Moderate Islam" policy was more of an international façade. AKP's domestic policies, particularly in education and social service, were in the meantime re-defining state-society relations. By introducing a new regulatory law for mandatory education, AKP aimed to "let [children] pursue religious education younger" in İmam-Hatip (religious) schools. Erdoğan himself declared his aim of raising "a religious youth." Public schools were converted into İmam-Hatip schools. Many academics criticized the legislation as hasty, and accused the AKP government of "playing politics with pedagogy."

Furthermore, AKP's welfare policies consolidated and reconfigured the state-civil society organizations' (CSO) relationship in a framework of cooperation and partnership. Zencirci shows that this cooperation was based on AKP's specific "discourse of Ottoman heritage", "a telling of the story of the Ottoman past in a selective way" where "civil society came to be seen as a distinct sector which supports the state."

Vakıfs (religious endowments) are popular types of CSOs in Turkey, which often have a pious disposition and moral raisons d'être. Vakıfs held a crucial and intricate social place in Ottoman societies, though very different than its role of political activism in support of the rights of the faithful in modern Turkey. With AKP's selective propagation of the Ottoman heritage, they are now considered 'leftover' Ottoman institutions, 'revived' by the government's support, in accordance with neo-Ottomanist resurgence.

Changes made by the AKP government in education and civil society organizations depict that the state is not only interfering with society, but also it is able to mold societal religious disposition to the government's liking. The state claims to have a say in how society is shaped, and Ottomania plays a big role in that claim.

TELEVISING THE NATION

Before moving on to AKP's influences on Turkish TV, we have to consider the political aspects of TV as a medium, both within the country and across the Middle East. Özlem Özsümbül, head of sales and acquisitions in the popular TV channel Kanal D, said it clearly in 2012 as she was boasting about the success of their TV series:

❝

We are a Muslim country, but we are modern. We have love and passion and revenge. We use real locations and good-looking men and beautiful ladies with no scarves.

❞

Offhandedly, Özsümbül's opinions reveal a lot. First, they show that the producers of the series pay special attention to the kind of society that will be depicted on TV. Second, the depictions of sexuality and passion on TV screens are considered to be an indication of a modernized Muslim society. Ignoring for now how controversial that statement is, we can see how the producers realize that the appeal of the TV series is directly relevant to ideas about religion and society. Just so, the politicians also realize the potential of TV screens to depict an ideal society for their own interests.

The political influence of Turkish TV shows reaches across borders. It has been argued that the modernist Turkish Model of Islam had been an initiating factor for the Arab Spring, and the TV series were the primary channel through which this process occurred.

OTTOMANIA AND ERDOGANISM

As education became more religious and social work became more "Ottomanized," the AKP's influence on television was felt along the same lines. In recent years, Ottoman-themed TV series have had noticeably high budgets, four of them especially: *The Magnificent Century* (2011), on the harem of Süleyman the Magnificent, *Resurgence: Ertuğrul* (2014), on the rise of the Ottomans, *The Magnificent Century: Kösem Sultan* (2015), a sequel on the harem of Sultan Ahmed I, and *Payitaht Abdülhamid,* on the era of Sultan Abdülhamid II (2017).

AKP policies are strikingly different in this decade. AKP sharply consolidated its powers after the diminished success of the Moderate Islam policies, the failures of both EU negotiations and peace-attempts with the PKK, the widespread international criticism of the police brutality in the Gezi Park protests, the unexpected outcomes of the Arab Spring, and massively sectarian and hurtful AKP policies in Syria. Many founding members of the AKP have left the picture, leaving the stage for Erdoğan's charisma and leadership.

As the emphasis on Erdoğan's charisma was increasing, Ottoman-themed TV shows began to center much more on the sultans. The movie *Conquest 1453*, for example, is really about a particular vision of Mehmed the Conqueror; *Resurgence Ertuğrul* is really about the story of a man who single-handedly builds an empire; and *Payitaht Abdülhamid* depicts a "superhero on the Ottoman throne." This is no coincidence: with the Constitutional Referendum, which recently passed with 51% of votes, the government aims to change the regime, annul most of the powers of the parliament and collect them in the hands of the president. At the same time, the Ottoman sultans on TV series invoke ideas of iconic, reliable one-man rulers adorned with a Weberian charismatic authority. Their intentions aren't hidden in top secret files either: according to the interpretation of an AKP parliament member, "the 90 year long commercial break" of the Ottoman Empire is over.

TV POLITICS

Two main issues arise out of this infusion of state-ideology in Turkish TV: it constructs a narrow and specific interpretation of Islam, and it manipulates history in a way that benefits the government while deceiving the shows' audiences.

Popular Turkish TV shows are publicizing a particular interpretation of 'moderate Islam.' This might be a smart business move, as some may argue that the shows wouldn't have been successful if this conception of Islam weren't so popular. But enforcing a specific view of religion through media is a controversial matter, as reflected in the crises of Danish cartoons, Lars Vilks' drawings and Charlie Hebdo. There might be people out there, Muslim or not, who argue that adding passion and sexuality and removing the veil is not what makes Islam 'modern' or 'moderate.' There also might be people who think that TV series should not be the primary medium that teaches us ideas about religion.

Promoting a controversial kind of Islam in popular media has political repercussions as well. Ironically, the person who found sexuality and Muslims on TV inappropriate was arguably the person who profits the most from these TV series—Erdoğan himself. When the 'modern Islam' of *The Magnificent Century* became a bit too 'modern,' i.e. a bit too sexual and alcohol-induced, Erdoğan hurled insults and claimed that the Sultan Süleyman depicted in the show "is not the Süleyman we know." More dramatically, the show was cancelled immediately after the actor who played Sultan Süleyman was spotted in the anti-government Gezi Park protests. Around the same time, another Ottoman-themed TV series *Once Upon a Time in the Ottoman Empire* was also cancelled, and its main actor complained directly to Erdoğan on Twitter.

Does this mean that TV producers have to keep up with the government's understanding of Islam? These days, the answer is clearly "yes." The follow-up to *The Magnificent Century,* a fictionalized account of the life of Kösem Sultan, never depicts smoking or drinking of alcohol. It does, however include scenes of brutal slave trafficking—specifically, the "taming" of the "fresh" slave girl Anastasia, who later became known as Kösem Sultan, into being the concubine of Sultan Ahmed, all within a computer-generated Ottoman realm. The characters of *Diriliş Ertuğrul* (2014-present) commit a great deal of Battal Gazi/Jackie Chan-like violence against fitne (chaos, trouble) makers and/or Christians, but absolutely no blood is shown. Put mildly, after Erdoğan's interventions, there has been a great deal of change in Ottomaniac TV shows' policies when it comes to depicting sensitive affairs.

"OUR HISTORY"

Adjusting history at one's leisure, claiming it as one's own, and refusing it from the rest of humanity, is a dangerous game. The opening credits of *Diriliş Ertuğrul* read, "the story and the characters of the show are inspired by our history." But virtually nothing is known about the life of the historical figure Ertuğrul Gazi (d. ~1280), except that he was the father of the first Ottoman ruler. The show represents Ertuğrul as the founder of the Ottoman nomad tribe—a perfect, charismatic, macho leader around whom a devotedly and exclusively Sunni nation is formed. The lack of historical knowledge about Ertuğrul, combined with his portrayal's striking resemblance to Erdoğan indicate that the source of "inspiration" is not history at all, but what the Turkish government considers to be "our history."

The safety of those series as well as *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* is confirmed. After "joking" with the program moderator about who really has the power to end their interview, Erdoğan added that he expects more TV shows along the lines of *Resurgence* to be produced because he and his grandchildren love it.

Similarly, Erdoğan gave a speech on May 2015, during the opening ceremony of TRT World – the international news platform of the state – advising the crew of *Resurgence* to pay no heed to criticism. What matters, he assured them, is that they are "embraced by this nation." Immediately following this ceremony, perhaps as a gesture in response to the standing ovation he received from the crew of *Resurgence*, Erdoğan made an appearance on the set. This shows that these TV series are a propaganda tool, invoking

and popularizing the government's ideals of what a political leader, an ideal nation's regime and politicized religion should be.

The newest TV show on TRT, *Payitaht Abdülhamid*, depicts a version of Sultan Abdülhamid II's period that majorly distorts historical facts. An Ottoman historian who studies the Abdülhamid period, writing for the newspaper *Agos*, has recently criticized the "overt fabrications" in the series, as he notices the parallels between the show's rendering of the Hamidian period and the AKP member Speaker of the Parliament's aggrandizing opinions on Abdülhamid II.

CONCLUSION

One might argue that history, the knowledge of the past in the present, can never be absolutely factual. But consistent distortion of established historical facts in the narratives of Ottomaniac TV series signals a seriously dubious practice of manipulation for political gains.

This is not to say that the act of producing TV series set in the Ottoman Empire is inherently wrong. I, for one, actually love historical fiction. My point is that these series have aims other than simply entertaining; they paint an ideal scenario for a particular conception of politics and religion at the exclusion of others. For those who share this particular understanding, the ideological elements embedded would probably be considered utopic. But the reality is that there are other conceptions of what politics and religion should be, and the TV series display no tolerance for opposing or even merely different political and religious subjectivities. Instead, they stigmatize them as enemies of the "Ottoman" state.

Author's Note: In this article I've made a generalized summary of the politicization of Ottomaniac Turkish TV shows. The source of my discomfort lies in the fact that some problematic elements of a cultural phenomenon may be neglected due to its great appeal and popularity. Without a gadfly-like cynicism, we might overlook the damage being done.

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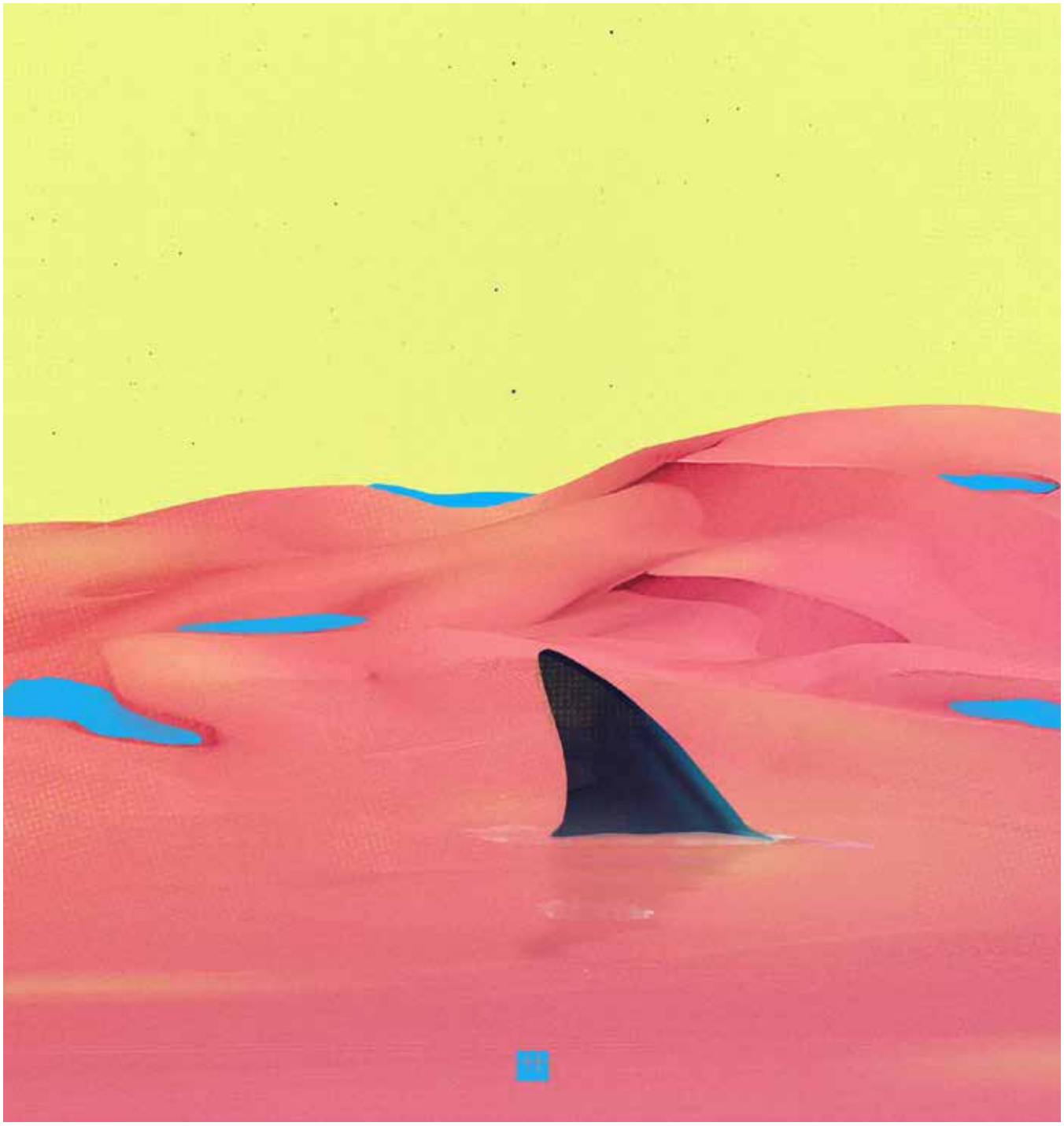

JUNE AND JULY

FARRAH FRAY

June and July were Libya's most beautiful daughters
They danced in the middle of Tripoli's fervid streets
Above the soft shoulders of daffodils
Wondering why the brown tides of men
Were still asking the sky for another hit of warmth -

In Arabic, sunburnt was spelt "sun hit"
And in the summer,
pictures spelt out words
Maybe that was why
Children didn't care for colouring books,

Cigarette smoke held hands with hot tea
And willingly approached hot lips, jokes,
proverbs
Outstretched legs, stories where men
Danced with other women;
Stories haunted by the vigorous orthography of a dialect
that couldn't describe lust gently
But persisted, lingered, laughed,
And watched women walking by
Billowing slowly, talking quietly
Women who wanted to scream in a language that wouldn't let them,

June and July searched for words to give to their mother,
A hot country that was afraid of sunburns.

FARRAH FRAY IS A WRITER, ACTIVIST AND POET STUDYING IN LONDON BY WAY OF LIBYA. SHE HAS WRITTEN FOR KINGUISTICS AS WELL AS *LETTERS LY LIBYA* AND TRANSLATED FOR *HAAWIYAT*, A SYRIAN COMIC AIMED AT REFUGEES. HER WORK NAVIGATES EXPLORATIONS OF CULTURE, DISPLACEMENT, FEMINISM AND IDENTITY WITH A FOCUS ON LIBYA AND LONDON. HER LATEST POETRY COLLECTION, *A RECIPE FOR REBELLION* WILL BE PUBLISHED IN SEPTEMBER 2017.

NOT JUST MUSES

AL MASAHA AL AMENA

@almasahaalamena

ضاق الصدر بالروح،
خيّم عليّ ليـــل/ ليل
البكى و النوح، خلاّ
دموعي ذيل/ سهران ألمّ
جروح، بوحشتي يا ويل
و انتي يا روح الروح
قلبك معذبني/

AL MASAHA AL AMENA — ARABIC FOR SAFE SPACE OR SECURE AREA — PASSIVELY HOPES TO MAKE THE WORLD A SAFER PLACE FOR OUR GENDER-NEUTRAL CHILDREN TO ROAM AND RIOT. CREATED AS A MEDIUM FOR THE FOUNDER, AMNA, TO DECLARE HER THOUGHTS (OFTEN FEMINIST). AL MASAHA AL AMENA ALSO HOPES TO FIND AND VALIDATE SIMILAR FLOWER-EMOJI PEOPLE ONLINE.

PLURALISM'S IMPRINT

OYA AKTAS

BENEATH ERDOGAN'S SWEEPING PRESS CENSORSHIP LIES A RICH HISTORY OF PRINT CULTURE FLOURISHING IN A DIVERSE TURKEY.

THE Committee to Protect Journalists began keeping detailed records of the status of journalists in 1990. In December 2016, the CPJ reported that more journalists were jailed worldwide than at any other point since the organization began tracking this data. And at the top of the list—the winner of the award for the most oppressive media environment—sits Turkey.

As of April 25th, 159 Turkish journalists and media workers are imprisoned, and of these media employees, eight worked for one of Turkey's oldest dailies, *Cumhuriyet*. In the campaign season leading up to the April 16th constitutional referendum, *Cumhuriyet* was one of the few media outlets disseminating material for the "no" campaign, arguing against constitutional changes that would grant the Turkish president sweeping executive, legislative, and judicial powers. Before that, *Cumhuriyet* incurred the wrath of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for its front-page headline about Turkish intelligence covertly sending weapons into Syria. The author of the piece and editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Can Dündar, was imprisoned and eventually fled the country. This episode occurred before the July 15th coup attempt and the ensuing witch-

hunt that gave Erdogan carte blanche to quash any and all opposition.

It goes without saying that a free press in any country is fundamental—it allows ideas to circulate freely, and keeps the public informed and elected officials accountable. But in Turkey, the press is also historically significant for groups whose identities are threatened by Erdogan's imposition of a Muslim identity across the country. In the Ottoman Empire, non-Muslim minorities led the growth of press and newspapers, and later secular state reformers mobilized the press as a tool for engaging more directly with Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike, as well as in promulgating a secular Turkish identity.

Cumhuriyet was established in 1924 by Yunus Nadi, a close associate of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Named after the Turkish word for "republic," *Cumhuriyet* was established to promote the state's revolutionary secular republic-building agenda. Although national leaders had established Ankara as the capital of the Republic the year before, Nadi chose Istanbul, the former capital of the Ottoman Empire, to be the home of his daily newspaper.

He was not alone in his choice. In 1935, although the city constituted only 4.5 percent of Turkey's population, 35 percent of the nation's newspapers, 68 percent of its journals, and 72 percent of its books were published in Istanbul. Perhaps the selection of Istanbul was born out of necessity more than choice: Similar to the way Washington, D.C. was chosen in the 1790s, Ankara was selected for its strategic location, and it rapidly developed from a small town into a capital city. Though Ankara was the capital, it likely lacked the press technology or literate readership to support the publication of a daily newspaper. By circulating a daily across Istanbul instead, *Cumhuriyet* appealed to a long tradition of intelligentsia and newspaper consumption dating back to the mid-nineteenth century.

Vital to the successful introduction of newspapers after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the early twentieth century was the introduction of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century. Unlike in Europe, where technological innovation and commercial relationships catalyzed the growth of printing, the Ottoman Empire adopted printing through a top-down imposition with a ferman, or imperial decree, in 1727. The ferman came towards the end of the Tulip Era (1718-1730), a period free of turmoil and rife with conspicuous material consumption in the Ottoman Empire.

In 1719, the Grand Vezir Ibrahim Pasha sent diplomat Mehmet Çelebi Effendi as a special envoy to Paris. His son Said Effendi accompanied him on the trip and returned impassioned to promote the printing press in the empire. Back in Constantinople, Said Effendi partnered with Hungarian-born Muslim convert Ibrahim Müteferrika to convince the Sultan Ahmet III to grant them permission to establish a printing press. In 1726, Ibrahim Müteferrika authored a pamphlet titled "The Usefulness of Printing" in which he listed the benefits that the printing press would bring to the Empire— namely, the spread of education and literacy, the better preservation of texts, and the accessibility of accurate information by way of indices and safeguards against errors. Ibrahim and Said presented this tract to the Grand Vezir, who in turn gave it to the sultan.

Convinced by their arguments, Ahmet III procured a ruling (fetva) from the şeyhülislam, Turkey's highest religious authority, condoning print media:

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Question – If [Z]aid, who pretends to have ability in the art of printing says that he can engrave on molds the figures of letters and words of books edited on language, logic, philosophy, astronomy, and similar secular subjects, and produce copies of such books by pressing the paper on the molds, is the practice of such a process of printing permissible to Zaid by canon law. An opinion is asked on the matter.

Answer – God knows it best. If a person who has the ability in the art of printing engraves the letters and words of a corrected book correctly on a mold and produces many copies without difficulty in a short time by pressing the paper on that mold, the abundance of books might cheapen the price and result in their increased purchase. This being a tremendous benefit, the matter is a highly laudable one. Permission should be granted to that person, but some learned persons should be appointed to correct the book the figures of which are to be engraved.

❝

The fetva allowed the dissemination of secular texts and emphasized the importance of accuracy in the printing process, recommending bureaucratic oversight to correct errors. The fetva also made an economic argument for the printing press: The ease and speed of production would lower prices and increase purchase, encouraging the spread of erudition across the empire. But this endorsement of the printing press caused consternation among manuscript copyists, who saw an existential threat to their profession. So, to appease calligraphers and theologians, Ahmet III's ferman decreed that printing presses could only produce secular works—that the Quran, the hadith, and similar religious texts would remain under copyists' purview. This decision limited the volume and speed of religious text production when compared to secular texts, which could be mass produced and widely disseminated.

Although this state decree and Ibrahim Müteferrika's establishment of the first official printing press marked an important innovation in the empire, minorities in the Ottoman Empire had been operating printing presses for centuries, dating back to the late 1400s. Two Jewish brothers, David and Samuel Nahmias, established the first Ottoman press in Constantinople in 1493. Other members of the Jewish community quickly followed, opening publishing houses in cities such as Edirne and Aleppo, as well as Salonika—which became the main Jewish publishing center in the empire. Apkar of Sivas—an Armenian priest and student of typography in Venice—followed the Nahmias' example and established the first Armenian press in Constantinople in 1567. Nicodemus Metaxas, a Greek printer trained in London, founded the first Greek press in 1627, also in Constantinople. All three communities founded their inaugural presses to print religious texts in their respective languages—in contrast to the strict forbiddance of printing Muslim religious texts by official presses—but they sometimes published Turkish language versions as well. By 1729, the number of minority publishing houses opened in the empire had reached 37.

Just as the minority publishers before him, Müteferrika relied heavily on western technologies to operate his publishing house, importing six printing machines and paper from Europe. Although paper mills in Istanbul and Amasya supplied raw materials, they were unable to compete with their European counterparts. In 1741 Müteferrika established his own paper mill just outside of Istanbul, but it only remained in operation until 1755.

Although it did not inaugurate Islamic or Ottoman printing, Ibrahim Müteferrika's press was the first state-supported secular Turkish press. But while Müteferrika made the state's approval highly visible in the first book he printed, the extent of state support behind the endeavor remains unclear. Most sources suggest that the government supplied consent rather than active assistance. In his accounts of Turkish culture based on his 1840s travels, British Colonel Charles White presents a more engaged state:

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Regular salaries were allotted to these two active promoters of knowledge [Ibrahim Müteferrika and Said Effendi], and the above mentioned Mufty and Grand Vizir rendered them all possible assistance. Four of the principal magistrate[s] were appointed censors; and Sultan Achmet, who survived the erection of the establishment little more than three years, constantly visited the presses, and encouraged the directors and their German workmen. His example was followed by Mahmoud I.

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White's account may reflect the value the state conferred on the press in the 1730s, or it may present an 1840s revisionist retrospective communicated to him after the state had published an official newspaper in the 1830s. Müteferrika's press produced between 500 and 1,000 copies per printed edition, which is comparable to early average European editions that ranged between two hundred and a thousand copies. However, between the establishment of the press in 1727 and Müteferrika's death in 1742, his publishing house had only released 17 books. Subsequent managers procured fermans in 1783 and 1794 to keep printing, but the publishing house eventually shut down in 1796. In over six decades of existence, it had only been operational for 18 years, during which time it only produced 24 books. It seems that state support in this period was more symbolic than practical, as Müteferrika's press could not boast noteworthy success.

Mütefferika's overarching focus was the education of the empire. The seventeen books printed in his lifetime dealt with history, language, physics, and geography. However, his press did not achieve the level of ubiquity necessary to have much of an effect on how the general public accessed information in the Ottoman Empire. Yasemin Gencer, a specialist in Ottoman and Turkish visual culture and satirical publications, suggests that part of Müteferrika's failure was due to the high cost of having to import technology from Europe. Moreover, she argues, "European publishers were savvy businessmen first and craftsmen second." Müteferrika neither cultivated business ties nor understood the importance of advertising and thus could not translate his intellectual endeavor into a commercial success. Since Müteferrika's publications did not affect a transition from print to print capitalism, they were unable to influence the public sphere.

The Ottoman public was initially constituted through mosques and religious meeting places. Five daily prayers and extra-Friday meetings made the mosque a heavily trafficked public space, and dervish convents provided a forum for contemplative discussion. The spread of coffeehouses in the 17th century further solidified this social sphere. However, these institutions also led to the development of separate publics: for Muslims and minorities. For Muslim communities, public news and government announcements such as imperial laws and regulations were generally disseminated through public criers. Announcements to the non-Muslim population, however, were communicated

through collective community responsibility. The government would issue edicts to the heads of the respective communities, and these religious leaders were responsible for ensuring the general communication of the news.

The establishment of the first newspaper in Turkey constituted a state attempt to have greater influence over these diverse public spheres. Sultan Mahmut II, best known for abolishing the Janissary corps and removing a corrupted vestige of past Ottoman glory, established the first Turkish newspaper in 1831. Mahmut II chose the name *The Calendar of Events* for the paper and intended the monthly publication to be a means of state communication with the public in a controlled and uniform manner. The first issue included an article describing the function of the newspaper:

❝

To know the events of the past serves to keep up the laws and the character of the Empire and the solidarity of the nation… If daily events are not made public at the time of their occurrence, and their true nature is not disclosed, the people are apt to interpret governmental acts in ways which are not even dreamed of or imagined by the authors…In order to check the attacks and misunderstandings and to give people rest of mind, and satisfaction, it is necessary to make them acquainted with the real nature of events… As the kindness of His Majesty regarding all of his subjects, and his goodwill to all friendly powers are evident, the utility of the work will be extended to them by making publications in languages other than Turkish. It has been decided to employ for this purpose a reliable foreign refugee.

❝

Mahmut II also inaugurated a postal system in 1834 to facilitate the transmission of his newspaper. Rather than relying on oral transmission through town criers or religious patriarchs, Mahmut II could justify his actions to different communities directly. As the article indicates, the publication was released in various languages—Arabic, Farsi, Greek, Armenian, Bulgarian, and French—to reach diverse linguistic communities. However, the language variants were not simply direct translations of the Turkish original. Rather, each version contained news that the state felt would be most relevant to the members of the particular linguistic group. Though *The Calendar of Events* constituted a state attempt to increase influence over majority and minority communities, it did not collapse—or even necessarily diminish—the divisions between the public spheres of the different communities.

Just as printing did not reduce separations between religious communities, rather than unifying the empire under the Turkish language, print capitalism gave francophone subjects a new window into the outside world. Again, just as Müteferrika's was not the first press in the Ottoman Empire, *The Calendar of Events (Takvim-i Vekayi)* was not the first newspaper to be produced in the empire. This distinction instead belongs to *La Bulletin de Nouvelles*, published by the French Embassy in Istanbul beginning in 1795. Along with its two successors, *La Gazette Française de Constantinople* and *Mercure Orientale*, this paper disseminated the Enlightenment ideals of the French Revolution throughout the empire. Its primary audience was French expatriates, but it also targeted the French-speaking Ottoman intelligentsia, which included both Muslims and minorities. The next newspaper appeared in Izmir in 1824. *Le Spectateur Oriental* also targeted francophone audiences and contained French news, but unlike the publications of the French Embassy, its primary focus was commercial. By relating trade news to francophones living in Izmir, *Le Spectateur Oriental* became one of the first major capitalist print endeavors in the

empire. Consequently, the emergence of print capitalism in the Ottoman Empire fostered an imagined community of francophone merchants and intelligentsia, rather than one centered on the Turkish language.

After these French newspapers had provided the first examples of journalism in the empire, another European-established paper set the conventions and standards of Turkish newspapers. The first non-official publication to follow *The Calendar of Events* was the weekly *Journal of News (Ceride-i Havadis)* started by Englishman William Churchill in 1840, just after the death of Mahmut II and the advent of the Tanzimat Era of constitutional reform (1839-1876). Similar to *Le Spectateur Oriental's* French focus, *Journal of News* predominantly covered international affairs. This international focus—coupled with critical commentary on international events—drew the ire of the Russian embassy, which pressured the Ottoman government to shut down the Journal for a brief period. Nevertheless, the Journal quickly reopened, and capitalized on its coverage of widely discussed events such as the Crimean War, thereby demonstrating the importance of the modern newspaper and setting the standard for Turkish journalism. The Journal also simplified its language to increase accessibility, thus creating the first instantiations of "Turkish journalese." The Journal enjoyed a monopoly on Ottoman journalism for the first twenty years of its existence, but other important Tanzimat newspapers soon emerged: *Description of Ideas (Tasvir-i Efkar* 1861-1870), *The Army Newspaper (Ceride-i Askeriye* founded in 1863), *Liberty (Hürriyet* published in London 1868-1870) and many others.

With this proliferation of newspapers came increased state oversight. Sultan Abdülmecit issued a ferman in 1854 prohibiting printing without government permission, and another in 1856 requiring printers to present their documents to the Ministry of the Official Gazette and pay a portion of their revenue to the Treasury. These restrictions were extended in 1860, making it illegal to open print houses without state permission or publishing anything against the state, members of the government or millets subject to the Ottoman state. The Tanzimat government feared that newspapers would threaten its reform agenda, and censored what it perceived to be incendiary rhetoric. Notably, the Criminal Code also protected millets, or minorities such as Armenians and Greeks, from press criticism as well. When a paper critical of the government, *The Informer (Muhbir)*, received a government-issued warning for publishing an article about the concession of the fortress of Belgrade, its editor-in-chief, Ali Suavi, fled to London to continue *The Informer* publications, thus inaugurating a trend of expatriate Turkish journalists publishing from Europe. Nevertheless, state censorship did not reach full force until the end of the Tanzimat era and the ascendance of Sultan Abdülhamit II to the imperial throne in 1876.

Historians characterize the Hamidian era (1876-1908) as a reactionary period that undermined the modernizing reforms of the Tanzimat with authoritarian control. When delineating the period of Ottoman censorship, general consensus agrees that it began in 1876. The government enforced censorship laws more vigorously and created new laws to ban words that might cause offense to the sultan. For example, writers could not use the word 'nose' for fear it would be perceived as an allusion to the rather bulbous one that Abdülhamit possessed. In response, one journalist wrote: ❝

If someone were to tell Abdülhamid that the word "nose" was forbidden in the Press, how would the people around him explain this?

Would they say to the Caliph of the earth:
Your majesty, you have quite an ugly nose,
that is why we banned this word…

❝

Alongside these stricter restrictions on the press, the government encouraged educational institutions that increased literacy rates and made these publications more accessible. In 1883, Abdülhamit II developed a taxation system that would fund the Education Benefits Share for the construction of public schools. Since schools were already concentrated in Istanbul, the tax funds were allocated across the empire such that by 1897, only 1 percent of elementary schools, 7 percent of middle schools and 3.6 percent of higher education institutions were in Istanbul. Minority groups—who had higher literacy rates than Muslims—maintained their own institutions, with 5,982 elementary schools, 687 middle schools, and 70 universities in 1897. These were also spread throughout the empire but highly concentrated, with 2.4, 14.7, and 24 percent in Istanbul, respectively. This increase expanded the influence of newspapers, and writers began to supplant religious leaders as the cultural idols of the empire. Although the introduction of the printing press did not affect an Eisenstinian revolution in the Ottoman Empire, the period of newspaper proliferation paired with improved literacy is probably the closest the Ottoman press came to a European print revolution.

In 1908, a group of young intellectual officers in the Turkish military—the Young Turks—carried out a coup against Abdülhamit II. Heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideals, such as liberty and tolerance, the military government established a parliament and adopted rhetoric in support of free speech. In the Press Law of 1909, the Young Turks did away with the pre-publication assessments of earlier Ottoman censors. Still, the law had strict provisions against libel that would result in punitive action. The criminal liability fell chiefly on editors but also included authors, printers, and vendors. Only the readers were exempt. Consequently, despite the lack of pre-publication censorship, publishers still had to self-censor to mitigate the financial risk of issuing recalls. This allowed the Young Turks to espouse Western secular ideals, including free speech, while still silencing opposition.

After World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Atatürk's Republican government similarly purported to welcome opposition while, in fact, silencing it. Although Atatürk did not significantly alter the government approach to free speech, he did enact a radical transformation of the press through linguistic reform. Ottoman Turkish comprised a complex combination of Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish lexicons and grammatical structures, all written in an Arabic script. The prevalence of Arabic words, structures, and script in Ottoman fostered an intimate relationship between the language of the empire and the language of Islam. By breaking this bond, Atatürk hoped to separate the spheres of state and religion. Through his secularizing reforms, Atatürk changed the call to prayer from Arabic to Turkish and banned Arabic education. Atatürk, in 1928, officially replaced the Arabic script —which Turkish people had used for over a thousand years—with the Roman alphabet. He created a Turkish Language Institute, tasked with codifying the structure of the Turkish language and expunging Arabic and Farsi words by creating more authentic Turkish alternatives. These reforms were meant to simplify the language, making it more easily learned and thereby increasing literacy, as well

as purging Arabic and Farsi influence to return to pre-Islamic Turkish roots. Newspapers shifted to the Roman alphabet in 1928 and became an integral component of the transition towards a simpler, more secular language.

Cumhuriyet, too, followed the Roman alphabet shift in 1928. By circulating the new Turkish script on a daily basis, it helped to usher in a new Turkish public space and national consciousness. Perhaps one of the most valuable roles it fulfilled, at least in its earliest years, was incorporating minorities into Turkish identity, most visibly through a beauty pageant.

On February 6, 1929, *Cumhuriyet* announced that it would be hosting a beauty pageant to discover the most beautiful Turkish woman. The winner of the national pageant was to go on to represent Turkey on the international stage at the International Pageant of Pulchritude held in Galveston every year. Less than a decade after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent establishment of the Turkish Republic, the beauty pageant represented an opportunity for Turkey to showcase its modern women and assert its place among the "civilized" nations of the West. In a daily front-page pageant column, *Cumhuriyet* published contestants' photograph submissions, invited readers to vote on the winner of the pageant, and insisted that the provision of feedback constituted a national duty for every citizen. The show functioned as a tool to stir Turkish national consciousness and develop Turkish identity in the aftermath of an anachronous Ottoman one.

In its construction of the Turkish woman, the *Cumhuriyet* encouraged broad participation. Time and again, it insisted that all "virtuous Turkish girls" were invited to submit their photographs, and that "race, religion, or sectarian differences" would not be considered. In fact, many of the photographic submissions *Cumhuriyet* published accompanied Jewish, Armenian, and Greek names. The rich tradition of minority presses, as well as the secular connotations of the printing press and newspapers, would have made the newspaper a comfortable avenue for Jewish, Armenian, and Greek participation. *Cumhuriyet's* embrace of diversity under a single umbrella of the "Turkish woman" invited minority communities to ascribe to the new Turkish language and the new secular identity. In the early years of the pageant, Jewish, Armenian, and Greek women were consistently successful enough to be pageant finalists. Alongside this inclusivity, *Cumhuriyet's* encouragement of broad minority participation also excluded Islam from functioning as a criterion for being Turkish in the new Republic.

As media independence disappears in Turkey, the diversity of backgrounds and ideas that supported its growth goes as well. Censorship and government tension are part of the traditions of Turkish journalism, and strategic newspaper consumption has been considered subversive or incendiary in the past. But now, these institutions are being shut down and silenced entirely. Commenting on the results of the referendum, Turkish journalist Amberin Zaman lamented that the most articulate voices, who could have most effectively put forth the case against the referendum, were all jailed leading to the April 16th vote. Now, the country must bear the burden of the referendum results. As Erdogan dismisses allegations of vote rigging and charges ahead with his vision for a new Islamic Turkey, secular, non-Muslim identities will continue to come under threat, with dwindling avenues through which to voice their concerns.

BOUQUETS

KNAR HOVAKIMYAN
@knchuck

Art is not what happens between
the paintbrush and the canvas.

The artistic act is in the
perception and reimagination
of the surrounding world.

Although my abstract work is largely improvised,
the process is very structured.
There is a concrete way that an image
— a bouquet of flowers, for instance —
is translated to the canvas.

And if the painting is a translation,
then each new idea is a language that
I'm translating the world into.

That language is what I think of as art.

The language I use for a given series of paintings is
a combination of my identity and my circumstances.

For this particular series, I have been lost
in a confusing nostalgia
for a familiar but forgotten history.

November Bouquet. 2017. oil on canvas. 30 x 40in.

Overripe. 2017. oil on canvas. 9 x 10in.

Superbloom. 2017. oil on canvas. 10 x 12in.

Apricot. 2017. oil on canvas. 12x14in

KNAR HOVAKIMYAN IS AN ARTIST. BORN IN ARMENIA. RAISED IN LOS ANGELES. AND CURRENTLY RESIDING IN BOSTON. SHE GREW UP IN A COMMUNITY OF ARMENIAN IMMIGRANT ARTISTS AND STUDIED ART WITH THEM. BOTH FORMALLY AND CASUALLY. WHEN SHE'S NOT PAINTING COLORFUL ABSTRACT WORKS. SHE'S PAINTING PORTRAITS.

DAFN

دفن

RAIE H. THIRA

I.

With a swift exhale,
I pushed out the relief,
anxiety,
and fear.

Untouched words
expelled from my body
in a jumbled mess of jargon.

Thoughts mimicked
piled-up cars
on narrow and crowded
sidewalks of Beirut's inner cities,

As her stern face
Turned soft
With the peace and comfort
of a warm Mediterranean breeze
on an even warmer summer's day.

II.

Why do I feel like I lost someone?

I'm still here
I'm still me.
Yet, I grieved,

while the relief,
anxiety,
and fear,
vanished into thin air—
I grieved.

III.

Standing still
dressed in the night
as tall strangers

with pungent perfumes
and white veils,

pucker up
—three times.

"Allah Yerhama," they say,
god have mercy on her.

HERE AND THERE

AZIZA AFZAL

HERE: Oh! Look at you! I am looking at you. You look different. What are you?

THERE: What?

H: Where are you from?

T: Right over there. You've seen me.

H: No no, I haven't, no, where are you FROM.

T: Really, right over there. Never been very far.

H: (Thinks this over) You look like them

T: Who?

H: Them. Way over across over a ways.

T: Not me.

H: Who let you in here?

T: No one. I was born right over there with fresh blood. Like I said.

H: You came from somewhere, though, right. So just think back and back think about your history… You have other blood people like you they are yours and from elsewhere.

T: I've got blood around most places. Even you I bet you have some over there across there over that way.

H: Not me!

T: Yes, you.

H: I'm from right here right now looking like here and here I am.

T: But if I came from somewhere, you did, too.

H: No no, how silly, your blood comes from the ground and mine is here and yours is there obviously.

T: My blood has been here long enough to sink into the earth and dry into crusty dust.

H: Flaking and flying red wherever you please. Your blood paints over ground that isn't yours.

T: All of the ground over there and over here and way way across there has been soaked through and dried and soaked! Theres nothing untouched

H: So don't smear it around

T: So don't slash me and I won't bleed

H: Out of my way, then! Back over there across here over to way over there.

T: I wasn't in your way here or there but you spotted me and my blood as a hideous prize

H: I didn't win you, ok?, it's just my damn luck you're mine in my in my—

T: But you own me, yeah?

H: Just right there it is mine but yeah I decided after I went way way over there and—

T: Left a trail of my blood all the way back

H: Stupid drips

T: You made a mess

H: I won't clean it up you're different you're dirty your blood is fresh

T: Not so stagnant and curdled congealed like you. You can't seep into the ground. Can't evaporate.

H: Stop looking at me! Stop it go go away far far across far away

T: I'll squeeze you and drip drop you back wherever you came from fresh and bloody new.

H: No! No!

T: You look like them!

H: My blood is all over. They look at me and cheer wherever I am.

T: All the chanting and cheering distracted you from here

H: I'm here! I'm here! Its mine!

T: You can cheer anywhere, get out of right here and go to them they are there waiting

H: The whole world is waiting for me

T: The whole world is waiting on you

H: I have good circulation

T: Maybe you'll bleed out quickly then.

H: You wouldn't do that, you'd look like a monster with blood like tar. You'd take that risk? The way you stand out?

T: I don't answer to you. And I'm standing still in the same place, remember?

H: You don't belong here.

T: I can't hear you. All that chanting and cheering you did made me block out your white noise.

H: So I see you won't talk. I see you're not from here. Neighbors talk and answer, you know.

T: You're inflated. You're filled with pus. You look different and ugly like you might burst. You have no blood left! Your needs are infectious thick and skin deep. Your place is dying for population control. Save yourself! Slash your thick bubble and come out, the new blood will wash over you. Your place will be new.

H: I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not—

T: You look… You look…

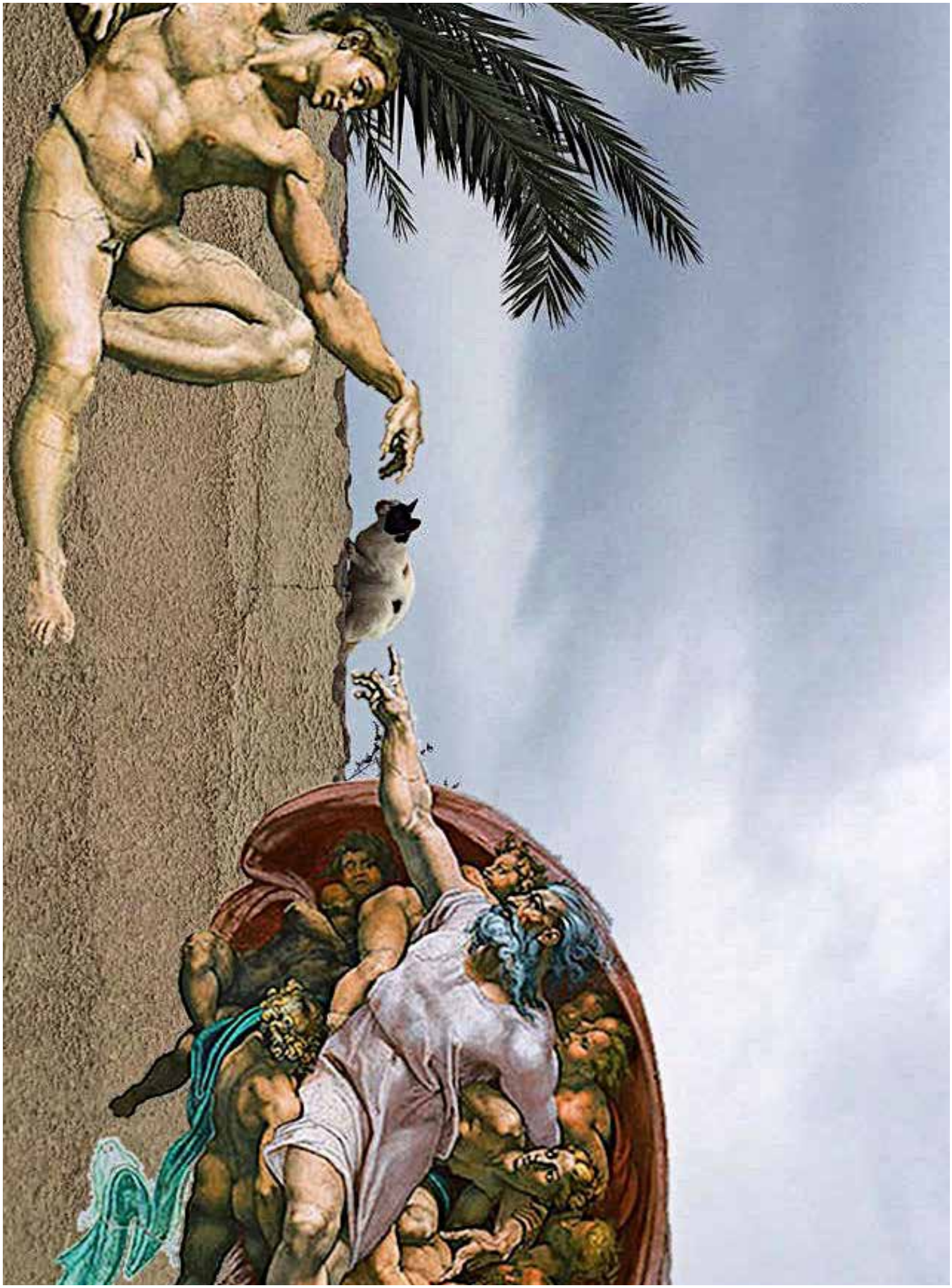
HERE tries to move and explodes. Blackout.

OVER/UNDERLAY

OMAR EL-SADEK

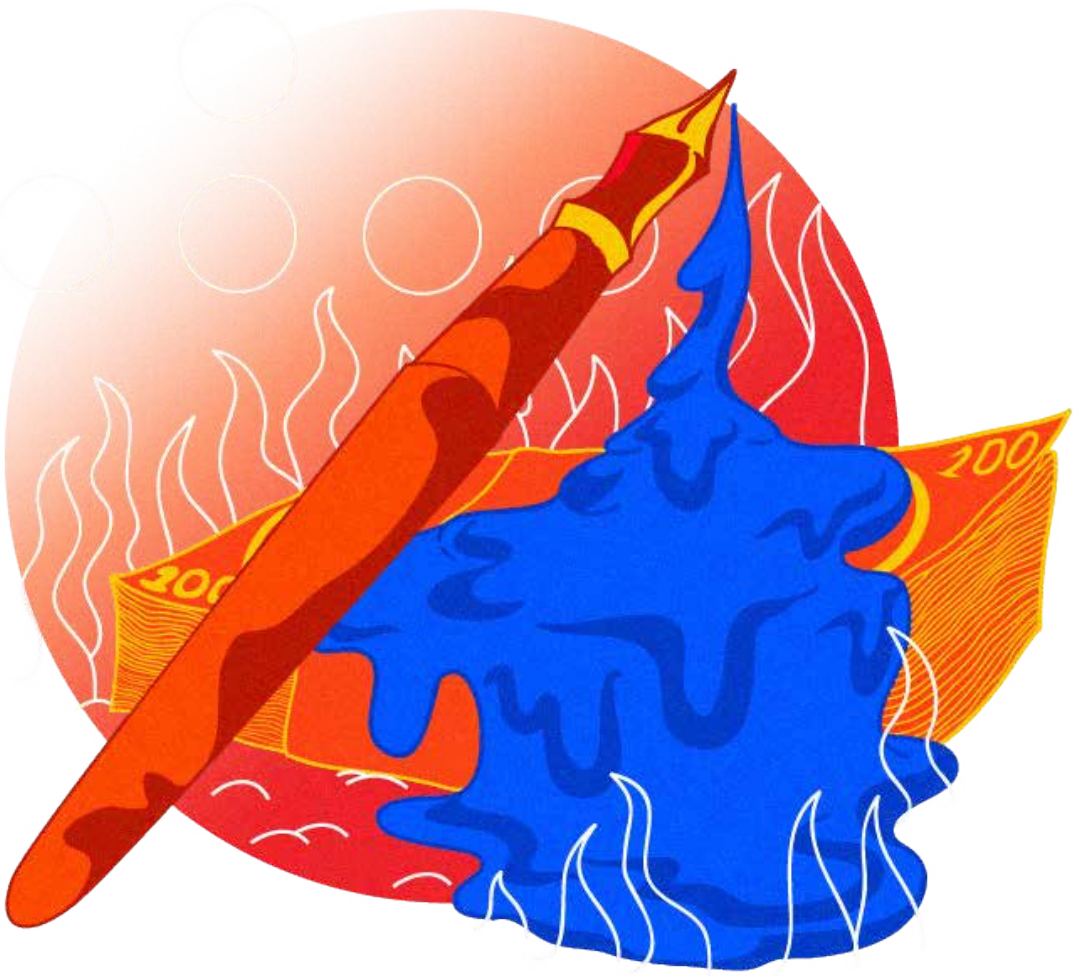
A 25 years of age fatigued and always sleepy electrical engineer working in the oil and gas industry. “Wait, what? Why?” Is what I usually hear when I introduce myself as I give off the impression of someone who came out of art school. Trust me; I ask myself the same question. But let’s just say that my passion was found at a late stage in life. If I seem familiar to you, it’s probably because I dress like your grandpa.

I experiment with a mixture of analog photography, paintings, and digital art as a form of expression, giving paintings new life, in a way.



NOT BUYING IT

JULIA KASSEM



Original artwork by Paloma Martinez-Miranda

BDS POSES A NARRATIVE THREAT TO ISRAEL. NOT JUST AN ECONOMIC ONE.

IN April 2017, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement set important precedents, passing resolutions among the Tufts University student body and at a Cupertino California community college. BDS also scored its first victory in calls to create an investigative committee at the University of Michigan in Dearborn - a campus situated in the United States' most concentrated Arab and Muslim city. But the largely student-led initiatives cannot in themselves guarantee the University's

faculty boards' compliance with their demands. Meanwhile, BDS has not yet levied a blow to Israel economically, evidenced by Bloomberg's June 2016 report that its foreign investment hit a high that year of $285.12 billion.

But the initiatives received no shortage of impassioned opposition, including vocalizations of "anger" and "hurt." Tufts' Passover-day resolution was denounced by student groups such as the Tufts Students for Two States and the Tufts American Israel Alliance. Likewise, University of Michigan Regent Mark Bernstein (D) condemned the related action on the Dearborn campus as "an intellectually bankrupt, morally repugnant expression of anti-Semitism."

City councils and state governments rushed to pass reactionary anti-BDS legislation. Numerous pro-Israel groups, lobbies, and foundations issued anti-BDS statements and campaigns in their movements and missions. Strong condemnations by US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley against the campaign's alleged denial "of Israel's right to exist" infused vows to buckle down on threats to the state.

For a movement that bears little legislative or institutional leverage, and fails to tangibly impact Israel's economy, BDS' symbolic implications are nonetheless highly salient. For a nation whose leading US lobby, AIPAC, is a public relations organization and not a political action committee, positive press remains a top priority.

Israel's premise rests on a myth: the adage of "a land without a people for a people without a land." The narrative is reminiscent of Western neocolonialism, which waxes poetic a 'modern manifest destiny.' This ethos is made palatable by rhetorical appeals to 'democracy' and human rights in an otherwise orientalized region cast as inherently archaic and uncivilized.

If political movements begin with a myth, they end when the myth's core plot holes are exposed. For a generation too young to remember either Intifada, a stark departure from the default Zionist preceding status quo is evidenced in a 9-month plummet in approval for Israel in 2016: coinciding with young liberals 'feeling the Bern.' Therein lies BDS's true power as a movement victorious: Not through the succession of boycotts or divestments that it can accrue, but in its power to myth-bust a dominant narrative that has directed and rationalized foreign policy for nearly seven decades. As a statement against BDS on campus in an AIPAC pamphlet from May 2016 itself forewarns:

❝

... Despite the efforts of Israel's detractors, no US college or university has divested from Israel or companies doing business with Israel, and none is likely to do so. Rather, the real focus on BDS on campus is to create skepticism in the minds of students about Israel's legitimacy. Seeds of doubt are intended to bloom decades later when graduates hold positions of power and authority and can withhold tangible support or even contest Israel's right to exist.

❝

AIPAC is right about one thing—today's young adults are less guaranteed to be tomorrow's investors. As movements like BDS embolden the case against settlement expansion, present and future generations

are less inclined to provide financial support. Though a majority of the Jewish population across all age groups in the United States reports at least some connection to Israel, nearly one-third agree that settlement building hurts the country's security – a conviction that had been held by up to 44% of American Jews in 2013. They follow a trend unsullied from that of their other younger American, mostly liberal, counterparts increasingly skeptical of offering an unconditional and pathological support for settlement building and militarization of a nation that takes no responsibility for their own country's social, economic, and political interests.

Americans no longer have to be keffiyeh-donning ardent pro-Palestinian protesters to be less and less inclined to subscribe to the narrative that places American interests as contingent upon – and evidently subordinate to – Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. Even Donald Trump recommended that Netanyahu slow down settlements, echoing Trump pick and Defense Secretary James Mattis's caveats against settlements that could engender 'apartheid.'

Five decades of official US opposition to settlement building—despite overall unconditional support to Israel—culminated in the US's anomalous abstention from the December 2016 UN Security Council vote to condemn Israel on settlement activity.

The language of the BDS movement recognizes the nuances, and attempted reconciliation, between Israeli support and opposition to settlement expansion, while seizing the opportunity to question a method of occupation that ultimately defines Israel's existence. In 2015, in a move to refuse enforcement of anti-BDS legislation on the West Bank, then-US State Department spokesperson John Kirby professed no qualms with a BDS that specifically, and conditionally, solely targeted occupation and settlement expansion.

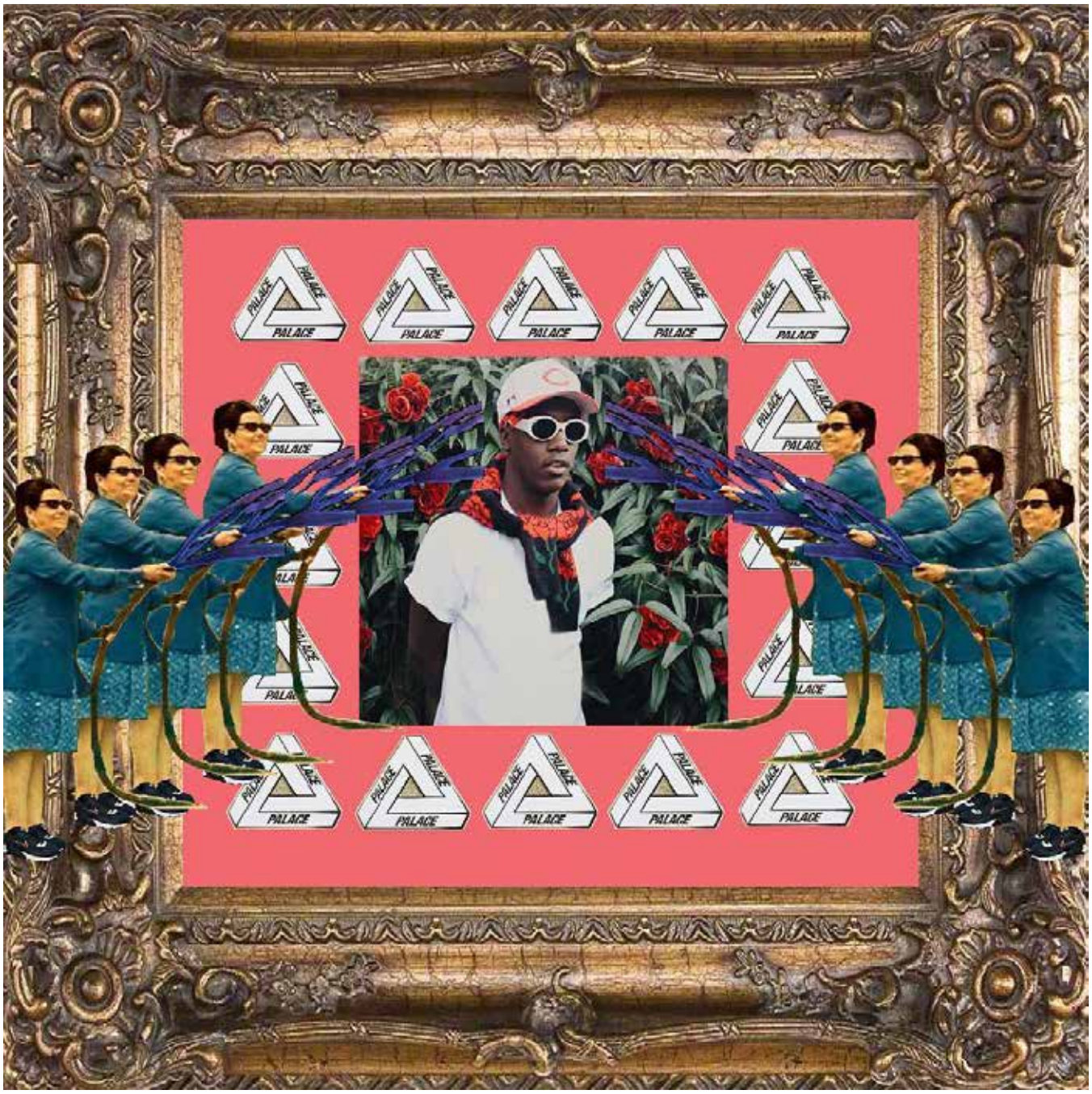
Language remains BDS's most powerful weapon. By targeting occupation and settlements, and issuing condemnations resembling South Africa apartheid-era moral appeals, BDS both convolutes Israel's claims to modern democratic sovereignty as well as its myth of sanctified Jewish connection to the land.

Still the scourge of Zionists and Zionist apologists, BDS was vilified at the 2017 AIPAC conference as "the most serious threat to Israel," according to former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. In the same breath, Harper made numerous entreaties to the waning sense of "shared values" and "security" between the United States and Israel. BDS reflects the true source of Israel's existential crisis, couched in the expansion of settlements across arbitrarily defined parameters. These parameters are drawn not just materially, but rhetorically—and BDS can make them disappear.

LARRY ABBAS II PRESENTS

SALAFI COWBOY

@salaficowboy

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D.Trump
ROUND 1
TTLE 01

THE DIRTY SAINT

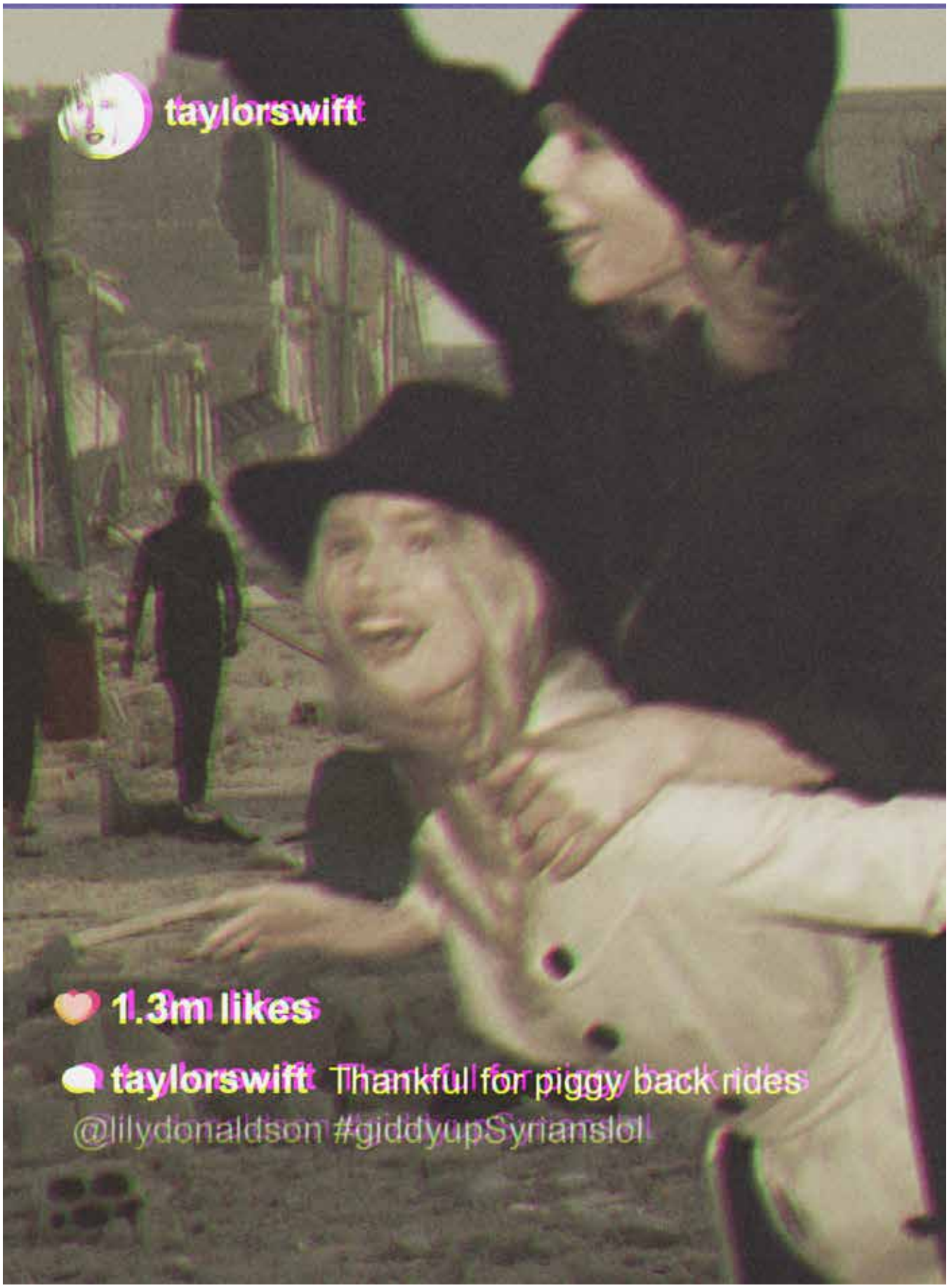
@dirtysaint

These pieces were created out of frustration towards the lack of compassion and empathy towards refugees in the United States.

Many have it very easy and never experienced anything remotely close to the hell that war is. For that reason, headlines are read without understanding.

With these, I focused on the narcissism that has trickled down from those who capture the most attention. It has run rampant in recent years — most apparent during the Syria crisis. The desired result was for people to question who they view as role-models, and also to be aware of negative traits subtly pushed through simple instagram posts.

THE DIRTY SAINT IS A BRAND THAT AIMS TO MIX POP CULTURE REFERENCES, HUMOR, AND CURRENT TRENDS TO PROVIDE SUBTLE SOCIAL COMMENTARY. THIS SOFTER APPROACH WILL HELP SPREAD MESSAGES EASIER AND TO PEOPLE WHO WOULDN'T TYPICALLY BE INVOLVED WITH CERTAIN CAUSES. IF THE BRAND CHANGES ONE MIND ON AN ISSUE, IT WILL BE CONSIDERED A SUCCESS.


taylorswift
1.3m likes
taylorswift Thankful for piggy back rides
@lilydonaldson #giddyupSyrianslol


kyliejenner
1.8m likes
kyliejenner I miss my dark hair should I go back? #needamakeoverinAleppo


kimkardashian
1m likes
kimkardashian In all seriousness I'm going to be totally selfless for this one last post. Thanks for being my main bitch! Happy Birthday!
#crunkAFinAleppo

A WALTZ WITH BASHAR

ISAAC SUAREZ

A PRO-ASSAD SETTLEMENT IN SYRIA IS LESS LIKELY THAN WESTERN MEDIA WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE

DECEMBER 22nd, 2016 marked an apparently decisive event in the Syrian Civil War. As the last buses ferried opposition fighters and civilians down the pockmarked thoroughfare of Castello Road to Idlib, regime forces occupied the last rebel-held neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo. The so-called "mother of all battles" was over. After a brutal six-year siege which had killed or displaced tens of thousands, forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad had completely retaken the strategic city of Aleppo. Though the assault left all but a few regime held alcoves in the western part of the city in smoldering ruins, Assad hailed the victory as a "decisive step" to peace. On the contrary—the very forces that delivered Aleppo to Assad will likely assure the continuation of the conflict.

Still, the regime does have reason to celebrate. Western media outlets and officials largely concurred with Assad's assessment. The fall of Aleppo marked the latest and most crushing of a string of regime victories in the cities of Qusayr, Homs, Daraya, Daraa, Palmyra and the Qalamoun mountain range on the Lebanese border. Assad could now claim control over Syria's largest urban centers, along with approximately sixty-five percent of the population, the vast majority of the country's industrial infrastructure in western Syria, to say nothing of the capital Damascus and the Alawite heartland of Latakia on Syria's coast.

What's more, Assad can reasonably cheer the erosion of international opposition to the regime. The ascendance of the Islamic State, or Daesh, and the fracturing of Syria's opposition into an array of competing secular and Islamist groups diminished foreign support for rebel forces. Though the indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas by the Russian and Syrian air forces elicited international condemnation, the United States and the European Union did little beyond expressing outrage and extending limited humanitarian aid. Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in November rendered the already distant possibility of an American military intervention to topple the regime nearly unthinkable. On the campaign trail, Trump referred to Assad as a "strong leader" and a potential partner in the war against Daesh. Nikki Haley, his newly appointed diplomat to the UN, publicly stated in February that "regime change" was "no longer a priority."

The April 6th US airstrike on the Syrian Airforce base at Shayrat notwithstanding, the prospects of an American intervention to overthrow the regime appear remote. Despite launching the first US military strike targeted at Assad's forces in response to a regime chemical weapons attack on the village of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, Donald Trump and his White House have sent mixed messages regarding its position in the conflict. Though Nikki Haley has voiced a renewed US support for regime change, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated in April 10th ABC interview that the strike was solely in response to the use of chemical weapons and the United States' "military posture had not changed." Given the deep unpopularity of any US involvement in the Syrian conflict among American voters and the risk of a military confrontation with Russia, the Shayrat Airstrike does not appear to augur direct US military intervention to overthrow Assad.

This shift in US policy mirrored those of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Formerly unwavering in his insistence that peace could only come with Assad's removal, Turkish President Recep Erdogan conceded this position before participating in Russian-led peace talks in Astana in December of 2016. Saudi Arabia, preoccupied with its campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, has withdrawn much of its financial and material support to the opposition and done little to counter the prevailing diplomatic trend toward rapprochement with the Assad regime.

However, while news coverage focuses on renewed peace talks—which would portend a political settlement where the pre-war regime remained in place, or debate the remote prospects of a US bombing campaign against the regime—the political reality within Syria undercuts Assad's optimism. The regime's recent battlefield victories belie the fact that the Syrian army no longer possesses the capability to retake or hold territory on its own. Offensively, the regime now depends on the destructive capacity of Russian air power, logistical support and training of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and the battlefield leadership and raw manpower

of Lebanese Hezbollah and various Iranian organized sectarian Shiite groups. Defensively, in the territory the regime ostensibly controls, a range of local pro-regime militias, operating under the aegis of the Iranian-trained "National Defense Force" or NDF, man checkpoints.

The result of this vast proliferation of pro regime militias is a state of lawlessness which transcends confessional communities or political affiliation. Extortion, kidnapping and smuggling in regime held territory has become a daily reality for Syria's citizens. Though the sectarian, foreign, and decentralized nature of Assad's forces already do little to endear his regime to the aggrieved Sunni Arab majority of Syria, the resulting state of lawlessness has led to mass emigration even in areas that firmly support the regime. As Mustapha, a wealthy Alawite resident of Jableh in Latakia told an interviewer after being ransomed from kidnappers, "We really are living by the law of the jungle here. The strong eat the weak and there's no law—much less security apparatus—to do anything about it… things get worse and worse in the city each day." The conditions of sectarian divisions, the decentralization of regime's armed forces, and the state of lawlessness will likely prolong the Syrian conflict and undercut Assad's military successes.

THE HOLLOWING OF THE SYRIAN ARMY

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA), theoretically the front line force of the Assad regime, survives as a shell of its already limited pre-war self. Despite retaining an estimated size of 180,000, roughly half its pre-war material power, the Syrian Army has proved unable to mobilize more than a fraction of this force. Primarily conscripted from the Sunni majority, the suspect loyalty of the SAA rank and file has severely limited its operational capacity since the beginning of the conflict. Though members of the staunchly loyal Alawite minority compose approximately seventy percent of the army's officer corps and the majority of its elite units, the massive casualties and emigration of the war have sharply depleted this pool of loyal recruits. In late 2015, Assad himself publicly admitted the Syrian Army faced a critical manpower shortage.

In the face of this shortage, the regime has come to rely less and less on its regular army for frontline duty. Outside of the loyal, and primarily Alawite, Republican Guard Divisions, the Syrian Army's role has mainly been to retain control of key military bases and provide logistical support to foreign and pro-regime paramilitary forces. Even in this support capacity, the SAA repeatedly failed to retain strategic positions before coordinated offensives by the opposition. The disastrous loss of Idlib, with subsequent regime routs from their bases in Jisr al Shughur and Ariha in April of 2015 demonstrate the weakness of the regular Syrian Army before the Russian intervention in the conflict.

To bolster the wavering Syrian Arab Army, the regime has come to rely increasingly on loyalist militias both on the front lines and to hold territory. Mostly organized either under the banner of the National Defense Force (NDF), or Syria's various "mukhabarat" intelligence branches, these militias enjoy higher pay, prestige, and in certain cases superior equipment and training than the regular army. Though these groups operate within the command structure of the Syrian military and intelligence services, they exist as separate units from the regular army, often with discrete sources of training and ideological motivations. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has provided training and backing to groups operating within the NDF.

THE PROBLEM OF ASSAD'S FORCES

Neither the Syrian Army nor the NDF appear likely to survive in any form without extensive foreign support. Recent regime successes in Aleppo, Palmyra, Wadi Barada and Daraya depended on extensive Russian air support and troops provided by Hezbollah and Iranian-supported Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani militias. Though operating within the formal framework of the SAA command structure, Russian, Iranian and Lebanese commanders have asserted a great degree of operational control over their Syrian counterparts. SAA and NDF forces do not commonly depend on Syrian forces for funding and training. This leaves the regime reliant on the continued support from its foreign backers, ensuring the fate of Assad will be as much decided in Moscow and Tehran as it is in Damascus.

The nakedly sectarian appeal of many of these foreign forces complicates Assad's dependency on multinational support. Though Hezbollah, Iran and their proxies ostensibly fight to preserve the secular Baathist regime, these groups are avowedly Shiite. IRGC affiliated foreign groups such as the Afghani "Liwa Fatemiyoun" and Pakistani "Liwa Zainebiyoun" mobilized, at least rhetorically, to defend Shiite holy places in Syria. The largely confessional affiliations of pro-regime militias drawn from Syria's remaining minority communities compounds the problem of sectarianism among foreign forces. Some groups, such as the Hezbollah trained "Quwat al-Ridha" in Homs province, have adopted a sectarian Shiite identity. Even secular groups, such as the Alawite majority Marxist-Leninist "Syrian Resistance," have been implicated in regime atrocities against Sunni communities in regime territory. Tasked with combatting opposition forces primarily composed of Sunni Islamist groups, the pervasiveness of sectarian revanchism within these paramilitary forces does little to endear the regime to the country's beleaguered Sunni majority.

To be fair, it is easy to overstate the role sectarian identities play in the Syrian conflict. Defections from the Syrian Army remain rare after 2013 and many groups operating within the NDF are drawn from Sunni, as well as the Alawite, Druze and Christian minorities. The regime can still count on support from well-placed Sunni families and business interests, such as the infamous al-Berri clan of Aleppo. Despite the stark confessional divide between the mostly Sunni opposition and majority Alawite regime, well placed Sunni officials and families ensure that Assad has little incentive to stray from its secular, nationalist appeal. Ultimately, all loyalist groups operating in Syria depend on Assad's survival as head of state to sustain the regime. The real existential problem for the Assad regime and its armed forces lie in its dependence on criminal networks that run concurrent to – but do not narrowly rely upon – religious or communal identity.

THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE

The Syrian armed forces, intelligence services, and loyalist paramilitary groups have come to rely on profits from the illicit economy to survive. Operating thousands of checkpoints throughout regime territory and various battlefields, members of army and militia units augment their salaries by extracting rents from travelers and confiscating property of rebel sympathizers. Kidnap for ransom, especially across sectarian communities has also become a popular means to generate revenue. In the military's higher ranks, or among well-placed militia groups, smuggling goods from Lebanon to regime and rebel-held territory provides a lucrative source

of income. The largesse and distribution of these sources of revenue in many cases supersede the rank and duty, reducing the damage caused by high-ranking defections.

The prominence and flagrant criminality of NDF and militia commanders demonstrate how deeply reliant the regime has become on these parallel command networks. Many, such as the Sami Aubrey in Aleppo, and Talal al-Dakkak in Hama, were well connected businessmen before the war and enjoy close personal ties with the Air Force Intelligence Directorate and the Assad family. Dakkak in particular has gained a notorious reputation for organizing an extensive kidnap for racket, smuggling oil and natural gas and feeding captured enemies to his pet lion.

These illicit activities on the part of local militia commanders frequently undermine the strategic interests of the regime. Despite the fact that fuel shortages have forced residents of Latakia, Homs and Hama to live with only an hour of electricity per day, Dakkak's network profits from smuggling oil and gas refined in Homs to rebel held territory. Even so, neither the regular army nor the government in Damascus has made any efforts to stop this enterprise. When an Army patrol intercepted one of Dakkak's oil convoys bound for Idlib in late 2015, the soldiers simply turned over the fuel to the local Airforce Intelligence Directorate, who, in turn, sent the fuel along to its original destination.

In regime-held territory, civilians continue to suffer critical shortages of basic necessities, and the daily threat of random robbery and violence. In government-controlled Hama, one activist reports that kidnapping has become "as profitable a business as any" and that militias are beholden "to no law but their own."

Assad's government possesses neither the ability nor inclination to challenge the illicit activities of its forces. Military bases, particularly in the southern and western parts of Syria, allow loyal military commanders and militiamen to carve out their administrative fiefs or "qutaa." The decentralization of the armed forces regional "qutaa" command structure and the proliferation of paramilitary groups make direct control from Damascus infeasible. Further, Assad relies upon the parallel networks of these criminal enterprises to preclude any possible challenges to his power from within the military or intelligence services. Control of this profitable war economy gives the regime means to reward the loyalty of its armed forces. Access to the war economy, determined by familial and sectarian proximity to Assad's regime, have come to supersede traditional rank as a determinant of authority in Assad's armed forces.

The decentralization of command and erosion of professionalism within the Syrian Armed forces complicates any efforts on the part of the regime to govern its territory or reintegrate opposition-held areas. Smuggling and kidnap for ransom have become realities of the Syrian war economy, in both regime and rebel-held territory. This pattern of lawlessness in rebel-held areas has already done much to delegitimize secular and moderate Islamist groups in rebel territory. The promise of a return to the rule of law played a major role in the emergence of radical Salafist groups such as Jabhat al-Sham and Daesh.

CONCLUSION: FEDERALISM OR WARLORDISM?

In the most recent cease fire negotiations in Astana, Russia proposed a formal policy of "decentralization" as a means to reunify Syrian territory. Russia, doubtless aware of

the administrative reality in regime territory, promulgated a draft constitution which would radically redistribute political authority to provincial governors and sub-provincial municipal councils. Though both sides rejected this draft constitution, this Russian gesture likely signals that the legal devolution of power from Damascus to local councils will serve as de jure means to reunify Syria in any internationally brokered settlement.

Unfortunately, the proliferation of armed groups in regime territory and their dependency on illicit sources of revenue will limit the efficacy of any attempts to empower local elected councils. Possessing weapons, manpower, access to foreign and regime funds, and various familial and personal ties to the regime, the loyalist armed forces will have little reason to abandon their livelihood even with a peace agreement. The illicit activities of these groups will, in turn, stymie efforts at economic reconstruction or develop the rule of law. Their sectarian allegiances and continued dependency on Russian, Lebanese and Syrian support will continue to exacerbate the grievances of disaffected rural Sunnis who do not benefit from these patronage networks.

Beyond the recent, almost completely unanticipated, US airstrike on the regime's Shayrat airbase, Assad currently has little reason to be sanguine. Despite recent battle field victories and talks of a continued ceasefire, the regime's hold on the country is far weaker than it appears. Reliant on foreign support and the loyalty of his commanders, Assad can only sustain his regime by playing to sectarian tensions and sacrificing the rule of law. Under those conditions Assad's war against his own country will continue, with no end in sight.

LOCALS

IMAN ABBARO

The Locals series was captured in the Egyptian market, Khan-el Khalili in January 2017. This series is meant to capture the uniqueness of the Egyptian culture, while fighting the stereotypes of the nation after the 2011 revolution.

Wast-el-Balad (final photo, not part of Locals) was captured in December 2012 in one of the streets in Downtown Cairo leading to Tahrir Square.

Al-Fananeen

Al-Sha3b

Al-Khan

Wast-el-Balad

EID AL-ADHA

WARNING: VIOLENCE

SARAH AL-MUTAIRI
@salm0nds

Eid Al-Adha fell upon my birthday this year. Every year, my family wakes up extra early and heads to the mosque for Fajr (dawn) prayer. We drive down to my grandmother's home in Jahra, Kuwait. Always dressed in our best for Eid day, like a scavenger hunt for greetings, we make our way around the neighborhood and wish our extended families a happy Eid. Lunch is in the courtyard, held by a rope against the diwaniya (a space where men normally gather, typically in bedouin households) door.

I felt a lot of controversy about our traditions coming from the west and even from Muslims who are against the sacrifice of such. We ensure that the animal is an adult, in good health, and the tools that are used have been sharpened – for animals are slaughtered every day, and some may not have the luxury of a quick, clean death. The meat is then distributed into three ways, one third for relatives/friends/neighbors, a third for the household, and a third for the needy—regardless of their faith.

These photos are special. They were shot mainly outside of my grandmother's house, and my father had originally asked for me to shoot them through a window inside—not wanting his daughter to casually be on the street in this part of Kuwait. After failing to achieve a proper shot, I urged for his permission to join them outside. This made me very, very happy. It was a big step for us.


الهندسية

WARNING:VIOLENCE

FALA URFALI

When I look back, I am looking forward. Since I've moved back to the region, I have met many who are living, whether physically or mentally, in the never-ending conflict that we call home.

Stepping away, I realize that it is not uneducated to live in acceptance; not the acceptance that you know, but the acceptance that people in the MENA have created.

Acceptance—to do everything you can, stay positive, create awareness, and show the world that we are people too. We can laugh, we can appreciate, and we can change unwarranted discriminatory behavior.

In moving forward, we emerge from the past. We have every right to live as we choose, but always remember the environment and culture that raised you, HELP IT, because in many ways it helped you.


NM FAMOUS
DAVID GUETTA

DIGITAL DISTRACTIONS

OMAR ALHASHANI & YOUSIF KALIAN

THE HASHD A-SHABI BRAND THEMSELVES AS UNITED TO TAP INTO MULTIPLE POPULISMS

IN a video with over 3,000,000 views on Youtube, Abu Tahseen, a stocky senior of about 60 years old wearing a hand-knitted camouflage beanie, slowly walks up to his station. The hills and rivers of Iraq surround him. "I am relaxed", he says. Nothing seems to reassure him more than being in his position high above the conflict, raining sniper rounds onto unsuspecting so-called Islamic State (IS) militants miles away. "They [his superiors] gave me a month off before I started again, but I only took 12 of those days before this deployment". He pulls out a walkie-talkie and begins to listen in on IS's frequency. "Look!" he scoffs, "Only Afghans and Chechens! Perfect". He looks down his scope and, for the next half of this video, calibrates his immaculate shot.

Abu Tahseen is one of the thousands of Iraqi militiamen who joined the fight against IS. His brand of Iraqi national pride echoes in the countless videos produced by the Hash'd al-Shaabi – or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs). As IS stormed across Iraq and closed in on both Baghdad and Erbil in 2014, Shiite leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa calling for Iraqi citizens to join the army and "defend the country, its people, the honor of its citizens, and its sacred places". Instead, thousands responded to his call and formed the PMUs: currently, a non-state militia umbrella organisation. Today the PMUs number around 140,000 fighters and are a source of national pride for many Shia Iraqis who see them as the real defenders of Iraq – especially since the Iraqi national army,

or the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), abandoned its positions easily during the IS onslaught.

In a sociopolitical landscape saturated with sectarian rhetoric, the PMUs claim not to fight for a single group, but for Iraq as a whole, giving them significant credibility in the country. By branding themselves as true nationalists who have risen above 'petty' identity politics, the PMUs have effectively tapped into a distinct flavour of Iraqi populism. We show that despite the diverse makeup of the organisation, the PMUs appeal to a sense of unity through narratives of nationalism, victimhood, cross-sectarian solidarity, and fighting a single barbaric, demonic enemy – IS.

But similar to IS, the PMUs produce high-quality videos for an English-speaking audience, replete with English titles and subtitles. Whereas IS's media campaign was successful in branding the organisation to the global public as terrifying, notorious, and counter-cultural, the PMUs have successfully garnered widespread support by branding themselves as overcoming sectarian tensions and unearthing the power of Iraqi unity. By deconstructing their brand through close readings of their YouTube videos, we attempt to describe the nuance of Iraqi populism, which in turn provides insight into the future of Iraq, the PMUs, and the battle for political and social influence in Iraq.

NO BORDERS ON NATIONALISM

There are a plethora of tropes in the PMUs' media that resonate with Iraqis. These visuals and narratives compose the 'brand' of the organisation, conveying particular labels to individuals and communities in Iraq. For example, although young, Shiite Iraqi men are overwhelmingly featured, the content released by the PMUs implies transcendence of age, class, sect, sex, and nationality. In a country divided by sectarian tensions wrought by both IS and foreign state-backed organisations, it is no coincidence that the PMUs focus on nationalism over prioritising certain sects to move away from the label of a 'foreign proxy' fighting force. By choosing to concentrate on their fight with IS – widely seen in Iraq as the greatest evil active in the world today – they are appealing to both nationalistic Iraqi populism and Western liberal values to gain political legitimacy at home and abroad.

For instance, one video features a 78-year-old architect/veteran sniper they call "Jidu" (grandfather in Arabic). Jidu volunteers to leave his two daughters and wife to fight IS on the front lines "to defend Iraq, all the holy sites of all the faiths of Iraq and most importantly to him, to defend the honor of the Iraqi woman". In the video, Jidu, filled with passion, declares, "Ramadi and Amara are one! Basra and Mosul are one! We do not differentiate. But they [IS] have black hearts!"

In many ways, Jidu is supposed to represent the PMUs' mission and the Iraqi people's frustrations. By showing that not even his age can stop him from protecting Iraqis of all faiths from the evil IS, his character appeals to Iraqi nationalist sentiment and cross-national respect for the honour of women, Iraqi culture, and religious plurality. His reference to the cities clearly implies that he (and the PMUs) do not have sectarian reasons for fighting and will fight for all sects, as he pairs Mosul and Ramadi, which are mostly Sunni cities, with Basra and Amara, respectively, which are predominately Shiite cities.

Another video tells the story of the now famous middle-aged Tikriti woman Umm Hanadi, who reportedly lost two husbands, three brothers, and her father to IS – and now leads a special task force of the PMUs. In her video, she is in command over a battalion of men – an anomaly in the masculine Iraqi military. Likely inspired by the Iraqi Peshmerga's broad recognition on the international stage for their famed women-fighting forces, the PMUs demonstrate that their cause is so important that even traditionally poor, widowed women are assuming leadership roles to fight IS. While there are few reports of female fighters in the PMU's ranks, Umm Hanadi's 'character' quickly drums up nationalist support amongst local and foreign audiences attracted to the feminism she embodies, simultaneously driving recruitment amongst those who perceive themselves as more able-bodied to fight.

One of their most famous videos, entitled "Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units promise Mosul's church bells will ring again", shows an armed PMU soldier breaking the lock on a church and allowing Christian women and children to come in and pray. This video appeals to many around the world with its promise to undo the massive persecution Christians have suffered under IS, but also to Iraqi nationalism. In many ways, this video portrays the PMUs as fighting for even the weakest members of Iraqi society – religious minorities. By tapping into Iraqi regret over the situation of Christians, this depiction combats accusations that the PMUs have particular sectarian allegiances.

In presenting themselves as overturning traditional attitudes towards age, sex, and religion, the PMUs emphasise that their fight against IS supersedes attitudes and traditions. But despite being comprised of conservative and religious members, they have attempted to brand themselves as progressive saviours through values such as feminism and pluralism.

FOREIGN ATTRACTIONS

While publicly rejecting IS's ideology and tactics, the PMUs have nonetheless used their production techniques to solidify their brand. Some have written on IS's media apparatus and how this standardised high-quality communicates legitimacy in itself. For example, their aforementioned 'Mosul's Church Bells' video uses HD video camera footage, slow motion effects, military attire, a choreographed script, dramatic music, and excellent video editing and composition. The narrative of the video, communicated without a single word, is that the PMUs are clearing the path for Christians to return – taking on the mantle of Iraq's protectors. To many Westerners frustrated with the oppression of Christian communities, the video's production quality communicates that the organisation is professional, trustworthy, and organised. As the argument goes, an internally conflicted and insurgent militant group could not possibly have the capacity to produce something so visually impressive and inspirational; unless, of course, the group received foreign assistance in building these capabilities.

Scrolling down to the comments section of this video shows an abundance of English-language responses – nearly all in praise of the PMUs' noble mission. In many ways, these comments are the clearest indication that the PMUs have successfully garnered a major European and American public

following: from Germany, Spain, Poland, and Texas. In fact, one of the highest rated comments applauds the production quality and praises the PMUs for teaching youth the necessary skills to manoeuvre in the digitally-centred world: "Stunning piece of art. Perfect in every way. The faces, the editing, the photography, and of course the message. Wow. When the fighting is over, everyone involved in this project has a bright future".

Similarly, in one video entitled "Iraqi soldiers do the mannequin challenge on front lines against IS in Mosul", uploaded on November 2016, PMU soldiers are seen performing the Mannequin Challenge: a trending meme where a song by Rae Sremmurd – a famous trap hip-hop duo – overlays footage of multiple people frozen in a single position as the camera pans around them comically. While regional militant organisations' media campaigns have a history of using Western visual tropes, this is the first instance where an armed militia vying for institutionalised sociopolitical power in the Middle East recreates an American-originated meme. Moreover, the title itself implies that this bit of 'spontaneous fun' occurred during the battle against IS, humanising a type of people typically associated with unrelenting violence – the Iraqi soldier.

Finally, drawing from a history of militant media tropes, the PMUs have an extensive repertoire of 'on-the-ground' battle footage split between two types: militant spotlights and equipment demonstrations. Fighters, like Jidu, are given heroic spotlights where they are interviewed and romanticised, typically through speeches about defending a united Iraq. Equipment demonstrations also come in two types: low-quality, granular combat footage replete with loud noises and shaky camera-work, and high-tech equipment footage, such as the use of Iraqi army's armed drones, Abrams tanks, and a Mi-28 helicopter. These videos typically perform 'government legitimacy,' including background communication, static, and other elements conveying that the group is a legitimate military – not a militant organisation.

With these videos, the PMUs still appeal to those who enjoy the spectacle of violence, thereby remaining authentically masculine, united, and legal in its brand while simultaneously simulating a progressive feminist, 'melting pot', and grassroots identity.

STRUCTURAL FISSURES

Despite the image of unity, the PMUs are internally divided across sectarian, partisan, and foreign-state patronage. The disconnect between their brand and their material reality is not only evident in their political machinations, but also in their videos.

For comparison, IS has multiple media outlets in each province (wilayah) that maintain relatively close communication with the Ministry of Media – the organisation's central media apparatus. While each of these wilayat media outlets operates with relative autonomy, the Ministry of Media sets the acceptable levels for video quality, narratives, and language, screens each product, and adds small finishing touches, such as symbols and logos, for consistency.

In contrast, apart from the first and last sections of each video, the PMUs' videos do not rely on a standardised production

template: the actors and characters vary, the video quality differs, and the scene construction is heterogeneous. Whereas a strict and regulated set of production techniques and visual styles indicates a centralised production structure while an extensive and random set indicates a decentralised one, it can be inferred that, relative to IS, the PMUs do not have a highly centralised media apparatus.

Instead, the PMUs most likely have a few dedicated individuals operating with significant autonomy (yet ultimately under the tutelage of leading members of the organisation), who solicit certain types of video footage from soldiers and camera operators on the ground, then package that footage for their YouTube channel. This way, their videos – both in content and organisational structure – ultimately reflect their "salad-bowl" identity, while keeping the political ambitions of the organisation's leaders away from the spotlight. They effectively brand themselves as an organic grassroots movement when, in fact, they more closely resemble a small group of 'Astroturfing' warlords. As the multitudinous organisation reveals its genuine interests during its absorption into the Iraqi political infrastructure, only time will demonstrate the sustainability of such a media campaign. Moreover, when IS is defeated, how will the PMUs rebrand to stay politically relevant?

While we have made some comparisons between the IS and PMUs media campaigns, there are of course fundamental differences between the organisations. Despite the fact that some Iraqis in the PMUs have been foreign fighters themselves in Syria, the PMUs are not trying to recruit foreign fighters (at least not yet), nor create and maintain a caliphate in opposition to the current system of nation-states. The PMUs have shown dedication to entering Iraqi politics legally. Indeed, their goals seem to centre around the April 2018 elections. However, as they draw closer, how will the PMUs' media presence translate into the political arena?

WHO IS NEXT?

Unlike previous organisations entering Iraqi politics, the PMUs do not tout a patronage model. Instead of subsuming interest-sharing financial benefactors into their network, the PMUs rely almost solely on foreign funding and social populism. Though not explicitly, the PMUs have suggested a new political model: populist nationalism.

While this model is not a guaranteed success, it could be. Many Iraqis feel that the established model of governance has failed miserably. Many – both locally and internationally – see the Iraqi government as failing its people with regards to security. Even though the ISF have fought more battles, liberated more cities, and suffered more casualties than the PMUs and the Kurds in the fight against IS, many Iraqis – especially minority groups who faced discrimination – cannot forget that the ISF failed them at the onset. These sentiments, coupled with the fact that the PMUs media campaign did not target Kurdish or Sunni support, suggests that the PMUs are vying for the backing of the Shia patronage network, albeit through populism.

Once IS is out of the picture, the PMUs will have to rebrand to stay politically relevant for the parliamentary elections in April of 2018 – or risk becoming a mere extension of the military. To do this, the PMUs may turn

to a new enemy to maintain their populist support: the current Shia establishment in Iraq. Such rebranding could be an effective move by the PMUs, which would then be able to appeal to all demographics who feel marginalised by the current establishment – namely the Kurds and Sunnis. The PMUs can also leverage their nationalist narrative in areas disputed between the KRG and Iraq, such as the Nineveh Plains and Kirkuk – this time, painting the KRG as the threat to Iraqi territorial unity. With such a broad, populist, and nationalist support base, any of these moves could snowball the PMUs' popularity to new heights, leaving little room for the Abadi government to oppose their future actions.

Questions over the upcoming elections have generated heated discussion surrounding the future of these militias. Although predominantly Shiite, the PMUs contain Sunni, Christian, Yezidi, and Shabak forces. Amongst these many are groups that are outright Iranian proxies formed before 2003, units loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr, al-Sistani and Iraqi politicians, and units linked to the Iraqi army. Recently, however, the PMUs were officially integrated into the Iraqi Armed Forces with salaries and benefits included – and these forces will shape the future of Iraq.

CONCLUSION

Demobilising the PMUs or further folding them into the state security apparatus would be the best way to prevent their firepower from affecting the election results; however, many militias have expressed their desires to enter into politics. Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi has repeatedly stated that any militia that keeps its weapons cannot run in elections. However, given the PMUs' populist support base, will this be enough? With buzzes of Iranian-backed PMUs possibly uniting into a single party or running on a single list, the future of Iraq as an independent state not beholden to any foreign actor is at stake.

Credit must be given where it is due: the PMUs defended Baghdad and were involved in many counter-IS operations. However, with a hunger for political power as the driving force for many PMU branches, Iraq and the international community as a whole needs to be aware that the PMUs may successfully enter local politics with the strength of their popularity amongst parts of the Shia population. The media campaign has helped the PMUs brand on the international and domestic stage, with the use of populist rhetoric that was infused with feminism, memes, and flashy media to gain legitimacy with diverse Iraqi and Western audiences. By investing in the PMUs, Iranian-backed groups might likely be able to use this popularity like a shield against its opponents.

Those seeking a non-sectarian future for Iraq need to be wary of this foreign influence and support in order to ensure Iraq's PMUs do not transform into an Iraqi-IRGC force. After years of suffering, the Iraqi people deserve more than bowing to the rule of militias, who have already exerted considerable influence on Baghdad. Members of the PMUs who fought and died for their country deserve to be honoured and remembered; however, neglecting to keep these militias in check will undoubtedly lead to warlordism – this form of 'meritocracy' is practical in the context of war, but, in the context of peacebuilding, it only begets more violence.

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Khabar Keslan is an independently run, volunteer based outlet aiming to empower the arts, activism, and cross-community solidarity initiatives surrounding the Middle East, North Africa, and South [East] Asia (MENASEA).

Coverage of the region has been exceptionally lazy. Hence our name, "Khabar Keslan," or lazy news. To chip at the monolithic image entrapping our diverse identities, Khabar Keslan seeks to construct a more representative texture for the MENASEA -- through active expressions of art, cross-community solidarity, and critical analysis.