

Dec-2013

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Manal al-Natour

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## Recommended Citation

al-Natour, Manal (2013). Nation, Gender, and Identity: Children in the Syrian Revolution 2011. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(5), 28-49.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss5/3>

## Nation, Gender, and Identity: Children in the Syrian Revolution 2011

By Manal al-Natour<sup>1</sup>

I have seen the children of my people fall one by one like unripe peaches from a tree.  
— Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire*

### Abstract

This article examines the victimization and role of Syrian children in the Syrian Revolution 2011. I claim that through engaging in a competition to provide a definitive image of the nation, both the regime and the opposition victimize Syrian children. Nevertheless, the art projects undertaken by nonviolence activists have proven to help children heal and to cope with the predicaments brought on them by the crisis. The poetry, paintings, drawings, and songs produced by these children are the best means they have of representing their victimization and their role in the revolution, and communicating their perspectives on the Syrian nation today. I argue that by producing art that conveys their perception of the revolution, Syrian children reclaim their identities as citizens of Syria.

*Keywords:* Syrian Revolution 2011, Children, Art, National identity, National consciousness, Samar Yazbek, Child marriage

### Introduction

Although the Arab Spring took many by surprise, its roots are deep in the fertile ground of resistance to corruption, injustice, and oppression. The last three years have been pivotal for many countries, especially those that the Arab Spring reached and has not yet left. A powerful resistance of men, women, and children in the Arab world has brought about this wave of change. These uprisings shifted the nature of power discourse between the state and its people, shook the ground beneath dictators, and confronted everyone with uncertainty (Brynen 2). The two key demands of the rallying masses in the sweeping uprising since 2010 have been *karāma* (dignity) and *ḥurriya* (freedom), powerful and inspiring words that have permeated their slogans and chants and enticed people from all generations, especially the young one.

As the case in all wars and revolutions, children are the most vulnerable people affected by the brutality and predicaments that inevitably accompany war. With the Syrian Revolution entering its third year, the victimization of Syrian children is escalating. Syrian children and the younger generation have played a major role in the Syrian Revolution 2011 and have suffered the most because of the ceaseless violence and the repercussions of the revolution.

This study aims to explore the role of Syrian children and their victimization in the revolution, whether caused by the regime or by the rebels. I examine their victimization in Samar Yazbek's *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* and Abdullah al-

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<sup>1</sup> Manal al-Natour is Assistant Professor and Director of Arabic Studies, Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics, West Virginia University. Email: manal.alnatour@mail.wvu.edu.

Zamakshari's movie *Blood of Freedom*, both of which come as documentary accounts of the Syrian Revolution. Yazbek's nuanced diaries document the Syrian Revolution from its eruption on March 18 until July 9, 2011, and contribute significantly to a better understanding of the revolution by delving deeply into and relocating Syrians' stories of victimization within a sociopolitical context. Through her participation in several demonstrations and her membership in the Syrian Arab New Agency (SANA), and by being detained more than one time, Yazbek, who is an Alawite, is able to depict people's aspirations, oppressions, and victimization. People's testimonies are taken from personal interviews, which Yazbek put herself in danger to conduct. In its form and content, through its layout and its self-described "poetic language," the book reveals Yazbek's creativity and talent as an Arab novelist and journalist, and her political affiliations and faith in the revolution.

In the same manner, Abdullah al-Zamakshari's movie *Blood of Freedom* (2013) depicts in fifty minutes the predicament of living under Assad's regime and the harsh realities Syrian people face after the eruption of the revolution whether they remain in Syria or emigrate. The movie traces the story of a Syrian family displaced in Egypt after the older son, Ahmad, has defected from the Syrian army and joined the Free Army. While the movie concerns itself with documenting the Syrian Revolution's demands and ambitions through the eyes of Abu Ahmad and his family, it sheds light on the victimization of displaced Syrian children and their hopes of a "free Syria."

Both *A Woman in the Crossfire* and *Blood of Freedom* form compelling documentary accounts to the Syrian people and their ambition for dignity, freedom, and a pragmatic society. Both works enunciate the truth behind the regime's efforts to implement and spread sectarianism among Syrians to deface the Syrian Revolution and present it as an armed gang of terrorists.

The examination of Syrian children's role and victimization within the context of the Syrian Revolution 2011 are informed by Mariam Cooke's notion of "responsibility," the "blurred contours" of what seems to be right and what appears to be wrong during war, and "awareness" of the state of "haziness" in war and the person's responsibility towards the self and others. It is also highly influenced by Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and Edward Ziter's notion of "competing performances" in the Syrian Revolution.

In her book *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*, Mariam Cooke examines the Lebanese civil war through the lens of Lebanese women writers or what she calls "Lebanese Decentrists." Through her examination of war and of the literature of women affected by war, Cooke studies the difference between women's examination of war and that of men while shedding light on a new consciousness that has emerged in women's writings and the sense of "responsibility" and "awareness" that people are developing. Cooke contends that during war, "the line between what is normal and abnormal" becomes "thin," creating "blurred contours" that prevent actual understanding of the state of war and hinder people from overcoming harsh realities unless they develop a sense of awareness and responsibility towards themselves and others (1988, p. 52).

Cooke also claims that it is crucial to register this awareness, and Lebanese women writers have chosen the literary discourse as their medium to register this awareness, as well as the madness, blurred contours, and finally the sense of responsibility that they and Lebanese people have developed during the Lebanese Civil War. Cooke contends that if awareness is coupled with a sense of responsibility transmitted from the individual to the public, it is possible to bring action in the form of successful reconstruction. Lebanese women were working on reconstructing their society while coping with the Civil War and exploring it in writing.

In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson explains the nation as “imagined,” “political,” and “community,” as people imagine those who would comprise a nation (10-13). He claims that the religious community and the dynastic realm are the two main cultural systems that preceded what is called the nation (12). Religions and their sacred languages are what used to form people’s political identity and create power structure before the “birth of administrative vernaculars” that came into being with the creation of print-market (41), contributed “to the decline of the imagined community of Christendom” (42), and paved the path for the imagined “modern nation” to emerge (46).

### **Syrian Children: Syrian City and Town**

While Asmaa Mahfouz, a twenty-six-year-old woman, called for the January 25th Revolution in Egypt, and Tawakkol Karman, “Mother of the Revolution,” a thirty-one-year-old woman, called for the Yemen Revolution, school children ranging from ten to fifteen years of age were the first to declare their protest against Bashar al-Assad by spraying anti-regime slogans and graffiti on the walls of their school on March 18, 2011, in Darra (Yazbek, pp. 112-113 *Blood of Freedom*). Syrian schoolchildren were inspired by the waves of freedom that swept Tunisia and Egypt and successfully overthrew their deeply rooted, powerful dictators. The role of the youth in the recent Arab upheavals is remarkable; however, the role of Syrian youth and schoolchildren is especially unusual. They spark a revolution in Syria beginning in their schools and before the eyes of their teachers, who are dominated by the regime. This incident sparked the first Syrian demonstration against the regime’s cruel incarceration of those schoolchildren and the torturing of many of them to death, as in the case of Hamza Ali al-Khateeb. Many people asserted, “that some of the children were still being detained, claiming that those who had been freed had had their fingernails ripped off” (Nicholas and Hider, ¶ 9).

Most of those killed in the early demonstrations were children, as they had ignited the revolution. One doctor relates to Yazbek the story of the demonstrations in Darra and the brutal killing: “As for the [medical] centre, there were about 80 dead bodies and approximately 250 patients. [...] 90% of the dead were young men and the killing was done with regular bullets. I was impressed by all the young boys between 15 and 16 years old. I felt sorry for them. Their moustaches were just starting to grow; it was like fuzz. They were just children and they were shot in the head or in the chest” (p.113).

No wonder that the Syrian young generation is reaching an explosive stage, dreaming of freedom, and overcoming the anxiety that has disheartened their grandfathers and parents over the past forty years. The Syrian revolution emerged out of a context in which Syrian youth suffered the consequences and interrelated challenges of living under a dictatorship. Youth make up the overwhelming majority of Syria’s population, almost half: “50 percent were under 19 years of age, and 57 percent of people under 25 were unemployed” (Ajami, 2012, p. 71). Assad and his father would work on victimizing Syrian youth and children, alienating them from social positions and any resources that would better their lives and futures. Syrian children, especially those who dwell the country, have undergone oppression and alienation during the rule of the Assads that have accelerated their maturity, whetted their appetites for freedom, and driven their resistance against the regime and its supporters, who have “monopolized political power, land ownership, financial capital, and religious legitimacy” (Ajami, 2012, p. 72).

Darra’s children are a disadvantaged group characterized by neglect, alienation, and exclusion from the resources for human development that would better the quality of their lives,

resources that their peers in Syrian cities, meanwhile, have in abundance. Because they do not share in the experiences of their urban contemporaries, their view of Syrian national identity is radically different: “It all started in Dar’a, a dusty, poor city in the South” (Yazbek, 2012, p. x). These schoolchildren witnessed the oppression and unjust treatment of their fathers, an oppression that created a significant gap between the city and the country, as Ajami claims (2012, p.73), this left serious impressions on them. The regime neglected rural areas and withheld welfare services that would have greatly contributed to their inhabitants’ human development and significantly improved their lives: “[The] gap between city and country widened as the regime grew disinterested in the rural provinces. The presence of the state in the life of the neglected provinces was reduced to the predatory presence and practices of the security services. This was hardly the material for a normal world” (Ajami, 2012, p. 73). Being strangers within their own country has reshaped the national perspective of rural youth, creating new semantic colorations that relate the sons of the elite with Syria and relate the rural child with freedom.

This gap between the city and country and the differences in the Syrian nation each imagines are some of the main reasons the violence brought on by the revolution has been prolonged and the revolution has not yet been brought to its desired end. As Muhammad Yaaqubi says, “This regime and his ruling family would fall in a matter of days” if the people in Damascus were on the same page as other Syrians in the rural areas and in other countries, demonstrating to topple the regime (qtd. in Ajami, 2012, p. 93). Yaaqubi claims that while people in the rural areas were denied basic services and attention, others in Syrian cities were getting used to eating chocolate and fast food: “[T]he people of Damascus are not like they used to be in the past. [...] How much longer can we tolerate the shedding of the blood of our brothers and the violation of the daughters? Have the chocolate and the fast food produced a new kind of man?” (qtd. in Ajami, 2012, p. 93).

The Syrian regime realizes that in order to prevail against the resistance, it needs to divide its own nation and tear the fabric of its own society at all levels, and class is one of these levels. The remarkable class difference among Syrians has created gaps in the society and its people’s vision of their nation; it has generated deep cracks not only between ethnicities but also within families, which has had a negative impact on Syrian children and their view of Syria as a nation.

Class differences and the differences between the cities and the countryside ran through the Sunni majority. In the ranks of that devout bourgeoisie, the unease with the Alawi rulers yielded to economic interests. (Ajami, 2012, pp. 93-94)

The class difference and the significant gap between urban and rural created by the regime to enable that class difference to continue was what caused the revolution to erupt. This difference has had a greater impact on the young generation and children more than on any other generation.

Acknowledging the power of the poor when breaking their silence, the regime’s brutal reaction and merciless killing in Darra was not arbitrary; eventually it was a mission to crush Darra’s aspirations for freedom and destroying its people’s quest for dignity. In the words of a doctor from Darra,

In Dar'a there were atrocities that never happened in Musrata or even Gaza, the only difference is ... (raising his voice) there was phosphorus in Musrata. In Dar'a the killing was direct, we saw various cases of murder but most of them were killed with bullets in the head or in the chest. Do you know what I heard from security as I passed through the checkpoints? They said they were going to teach all of Syria a lesson in Dar'a. That's why they focused the killing and collective punishment there. (Yazbek, 2012, p. 112)

The killing was direct in Darra, as its people imagined a new Syrian nation, a nation free of corruption and of Assad, who is willing to kill anyone who advocates freedom, including schoolchildren, without mercy. Thus, the regime worked to regain its authoritative, powerful image not only by ripping out the fingernails of the Darra schoolchildren who unexpectedly raised their voices but also by using their story to discipline and lessen any potential vocal opponent, sending the message that torture and death are the inevitable destiny of those who support change. The ugliness of the death of Darra's schoolchildren, especially that of Hamza al-Khateeb, is a projection by the state to implement fear among children and people in general, and to declare "Assad forever or death for all," a political statement that asserts the validity of one vision of the imagined Syrian nation and declares all others illegitimate.

### **Competing Performances of Nation: Politicizing Syrian Childhood**

The regime's projection and representation of the Syrian nation shows its true nature in its abuse of its own children and exploitation of them for its political agenda. The regime has sent schoolchildren to a pro-Assad demonstration in Damascus holding up pictures of him and posters that read, "All of us are with you, Bashar." This action is evidence of the shift in the power structure that the schoolchildren of Durra have brought into existence and affirms the power of their voices and graffiti that mark the birth of a new generation that refuses obliquity and subordination. The regime's recruitment of Damascus schoolchildren to lead a pro-Assad demonstration evokes primarily the fragility of the regime and evinces the power of the Syrian children.

I further claim that the Assad's regime has abused those schoolchildren and exploited their childhood by using them as its defenders and young soldiers. "Commanders of armed groups prefer child soldiers because young children, especially the girls, are more obedient, vulnerable, and malleable, and their moral codes are unformed and readily manipulated" (Morales, 2008, ¶5). I propose that the schoolchildren, whom the regime forced to lead and participate in the pro-Assad demonstrations, serve as child soldiers as they are pushed to the front lines, demonstrating in the streets, risking their lives, and demanding that Syrians support Assad. The schoolteachers and the regime manipulated these children despite the vulnerability of their character to chant political statements the meaning of which they are unable to conceptualize. I argue that the regime is using the children's chanting as a weapon to make a political statement and to defend the state and the regime in a manner similar and equal to that of firing a bullet. Many of these children "served as a mouthpiece for the regime" and "superstars on the Arab satellite channels and the Syrian satellite," chanting for long life for Assad and reciting passionate love poems (Yazbek, 2012, p. 64).

"The demonstrators were mostly schoolchildren given the day off, army conscripts and public employees encouraged to go on the march in their working hours. One woman on a busy

shopping street in Damascus remarked, ‘They’re all children’”. “Pupils were bussed into the capital and marshaled by teachers as they marched through streets festooned with flags and posters of the President” (Blanford and Hider, 2011, ¶4)

The regime’s involvement of Syrian children in politics and abuse of their childhood has not only pitted the children against each other but also within themselves, producing a fragmented nation.

Yazbek interviewed one of these torn and fragmented children, a girl who “had been conducting a kind of schizophrenic life, torn between what she saw with her own eyes and what she was involved in disseminating on television” (Yazbek, p. 63). The regime has involved Syrian children in politics in various ugly ways, tangling their relationships within their own family networks, creating a gulf between family members that impacts Syrian society in the present and will shape it in the future: “When a son is forced to publically disown his father on the al-Dunya network for being in the opposition, this hits the core of human feeling” (Yazbek, p. 64).

In the complex dynamics of contesting power in the revolution, the rebels’ practice of recruiting Syrian child soldiers appears to suggest that the violation of children’s rights is intensifying. A video accessed at [https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=516258231760887&set=a.218478224872224.87759.218464031540310&type=1&relevant\\_count=1](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=516258231760887&set=a.218478224872224.87759.218464031540310&type=1&relevant_count=1) on June 14, 2013, but since taken down features a boy who performs dangerous adult activities—smoking cigarettes, holding a gun on his little shoulder, shooting at the regime army, checking the safety of the road for the Free Army to pass, and speaking the language of adults. This boy is a victim, a child lost in the dirtiness of war and the brutality of the situation. These performances diminish the innocence and purity of childhood, defacing the image of Syrian children. The war has replaced his toy with a gun, his candy with a cigarette, and his character with the persona of a Star Wars hero. Is he a warrior? Has he become a Star Wars hero, or has he become a child lost in the revolution that was started by his generation to create a better life for him and them?

Detaining children is a form of victimizing them; it comes about because of the regime’s cruelty and the revolutionaries’ involving children in politics and driving them to their deaths by urging them to participate in the demonstrations. Yazbek relates the children’s subjection to violations in al-Baida: “Houses are broken into and scores of children are taken off to prison. The army and the security forces are combing al-Baida, there hasn’t been any electricity for days, no supplies, entry and exit is forbidden. Men and children have been arrested, and I am later able to confirm that women and children staged a sit-in along the international road demanding the release of their men” (p. 23). In both cases whether they are detained at the hands of the regime or urged to participate in demonstrations by the rebels, children seem to be the most disadvantaged group, as their age and physical and mental capabilities hamper their ability to unravel the meaning of this war. In either case, children are used as instruments to promote both parties’ imagined Syrian nation by infuriating onlookers with images of children who have experienced tragedy and urging them to take a stand. Both sides have used children as a mechanism to assert their rendition of the revolution and the creditability of their version of the imagined Syrian nation; whenever this mechanism succeeds, it results in further such demonstrations.

However, in both cases, children are victimized and denied their rights. Without showing any respect for children’s rights, both the regime and its opponents have circulated images of dead children, dramatizing the loss of their lives and inspiring resistance. Edward Ziter discusses

how both the regime and the activists depict, circulate, and form competing images of the Syrian martyr to support or challenge the credibility of Assad's presidency and injustice: "Since the spring of 2011, Syria has been the site of competing performances asserting and contesting the legitimacy of the Baath party rule. [...] Much less commented on, but necessary to a full understanding of the uprising, has been activists' use of performance and visual culture to bolster and spread an ethos of creative resistance and the failure of the regime to posit equally compelling performances and images in defense of their continued rule" (Ziter, 2013, p.116). Although these performances and images make known, to a great extent, the harsh reality that is experienced by all Syrian children on a daily basis, they at the same time victimize children and abuse their rights. I retain Cooke's notion of "blurred contours": when at war people have no vivid or clear boundaries between right actions and wrong ones. Everything becomes normal, or as Cooke puts it, "The thin line between what is considered normal behavior and what is considered abnormal is never drawn" (p. 52). For example, dealing with a dead body has its own customs that preserve the rights of the dead person. One very famous saying in Arabic is, "*Ikrām al-mayit dafnūhu*" (Burying the dead is a way of expressing respect to the dead and preserving its dignity). The circulation of images of dead children through social media during the revolution has violated the dignity and respect that dead bodies in the Arab world have. Circulating the images of helpless children, whether they are dead or alive, to create or contest national identity is an abuse of their rights and a sign of disrespect to their childhood.

### **Traumatizing Children**

The crisis of witnessing killing and the regime's brutality with their own eyes is never completely resolved in the narratives of the children who appear in *Blood of Freedom*, even when they are far away from the sounds of bombing. The children in the movie, while retaining some past memories of Syria, charge their accounts with prayers against Bashar: "I pray God destroys him because he kills us," a powerful assertion of the regime's victimization of children.

No wonder those children learn to say prayers against their president; they are traumatized from witnessing horrific scenes of loss, blood, savagery, and cruelty that, in turn, will impact their lives, behaviors, and worldviews and perceptions, including their nation. The brutality of killing children reveals the regime's cruelty and brings the line between fiction and reality to an almost eroded state. The notion of death is central to Syrians' testimonies of the revolution passed on by Yazbek, and not only the death of young children, but their detention, their physical torture, and sometimes the psychological torture inflicted on their families in front of them. The brutality that the regime exercises on children erases any boundaries between fiction and reality, as Yazbek claims (p. 9). Syrian children become angels in a city of madness. Death in Syria becomes a person who "walks on two legs" (Yazbek, p. 4), but this does not worry either Yazbek or others any longer because Syrians have started to "get used to it" (p. 5), "life here has changed" (p. 5), and chaos and madness have turned Syria into "a ghost town" (4). Accordingly, Yazbek wonders: "Is there any difference between reality and fiction? Where is the line that separates the two?" (p. 9). In the Syrian "ghost town," children are thrown dead on the floor; they are sleeping gazelles:

I am surrounded and suddenly I find myself down on the ground. I see a sleeping face, eyes half-closed: my mother used to call this the 'Gazelle's Sleep.' People are pushing and shoving all around the sleeping face. I call it sleep, because death



is like sleep. The only difference between sleep and death is that we disintegrate—a subtle distinction. Will this young face disintegrate after a while? How will his mother kiss his forehead before it is swallowed up by the dirt? (Yazbek, p. 20).

Even in their deaths, Syrian children vindicate themselves over the tyrannical regime that has killed them. The juxtapositions that Yazbek brings to the above scene—peace and violence, honesty and cruelty, and life and death—intensify the regime’s inhumanity and illegitimate vision of the Syrian nation.

Yazbek’s book is saturated with the victimization of children, and killing them is one way the regime voices its version of the imagined Syrian nation, which can only be ruled by Assad. In the following passage, Yazbek relates a case of the regime psychologically and physically torturing a child who happened to be in one of the early demonstrations with his family:

Suddenly I noticed the little boy gaping at his father and his brother as they were beaten, watching as the two of them were stuffed inside a bus. The face of the ten-year-old was frozen, as if he had just been administered an electric shock, and a powerful fist came flying at his little head: THUMP. His head went limp, and after a second, they kicked him along with his father inside the bus. I recoiled and turned the little boy’s head away so he wouldn’t be able to see what was happening, slung him over my shoulder and ran.[...] The little boy asked me to stay with him; that his father and brother had left him, and that he was going to hit the policeman who had struck his brother. (Yazbek, p. 9)

Syrian children’s reflections upon the violence and the bloodshed they have witnessed usually come in a form of flashbacks in their dreams. Their dreams are intricately interwoven with bitter realities they live in their daily lives. The YouTube video “A Dream of Powerful Monsters,” is a series of short interviews with displaced Syrian children, who recount their dreams that to a great extent reflect reality. They dream about monsters, vampires, gigantic spiders, fires, criminals, Syrian security forces, bombs, planes, and most importantly, Bashar Assad. In their dreams, they are terrified by human beings who can transform themselves into monsters to chase them. The children’s repeated descriptions of the monsters, which could be allegorical to the so-called *shabbiha*,<sup>2</sup> subtly demonstrate the “haziness” of war, to use Cooke’s words, and the blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy (1988, p. 50). The fantasy of their dreams complements the harsh reality they live; moreover they naturally desire to understand their unjust world, so they are left in an ambivalent relationship with their nation and their national identity.

Yazbek’s daughter is an example of Syrian children who are tortured by the psychological war and traumatized by fear for her mother and herself. The psychological war that the regime has launched against the supporters of the revolution negatively impacts the family structure. The persistent harassment imposes a state of madness and psychological war on Yazbek and her daughter. Yazbek describes herself as a woman “at a crossroad,” and as the title of her book declares, “A woman in the Crossfire” (p. 51). Yazbek’s narrative dramatically

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<sup>2</sup> *Shabbiha* are the regime thugs and security forces, “men with huge rings and inflated muscles and gaunt eyes and cracked skin,” who appear out of the streets to kill, torture, and silence protesters forever (Yazbek, 2012, p. 8).

exemplifies her torn relationship with her family and daughter, one of many cases that can easily be found in Syria. Traumatized by the killing and arbitrary detentions at the beginning of the revolution, Yazbek's daughter's reaction comes in the form of refusing to accept her mother's actions, lucidly presented by her shutting the door and bursting out crying every Friday when her mother tries to join the demonstrations (p. 50). Yazbek's daughter's way of expressing pain and trauma comes in the form of crying, as the communication between her and her mother is disconnected; she cries and screams to "restore" her voice and revive her "connection with reality"; crying and screaming offer her "a larger space than that occupied by [her] body alone," and accordingly, she is able to "contain" her pain (Scarry, 1987, pp. 49-50).

Trauma, loneliness, and fragmentation are the common characteristics of the situation of both Yazbek and her daughter, both of whose feelings of fear reflect on the other. Yazbek has been torn from her family, and the regime has enticed people to kill her, considering her one of the "infiltrators":

I have been cut off from my family, I have been torn by them and from them. I know how much pressure is on them but I won't pay the price of the tyranny and brutality of this regime. I will not surrender to their sectarian blackmail. And so, just like every other moment in my life when I have found myself at a crossroads, I bend towards my freedom. (Yazbek, pp. 50-51)

Like Yazbek herself, her daughter is traumatized. Her growing trauma, like that of many Syrian children, has been inflicted equally by the regime and by her family. Whether done intentionally or unintentionally, involving children in politics by narrating terror stories in front of them has traumatized, shattered, and engaged them against their will in the vicious dynamic of ethnic conflict. This unfair involvement of children in politics has altered their social realities and led them directly to seek ways of surviving, whether by declaring loyalty to the regime or claiming affiliation with the rebels. Like her mother, Yazbek's daughter found herself at a crossroad after she heard in her house a man and his girlfriend telling Yazbek that she is one of the Alawite figures whom the regime has accused of associating with "armed and Salafi gangs, and that [her] name was on the wanted list (Yazbek, p. 100). Yazbek's daughter declares that "the only way [Yazbek] could make her feel better is to appear on state television and proclaim [her] loyalty to the president, so that [their] life could go back to normal" (p. 101). Forcing children to be involved in politics and ethnic conflict tears the fabric of children's national identity and fractures their personalities and sense of belonging. Yazbek describes the situation when her daughter heard one of Yazbek's friends warning her that she was on the wanted list:

The man spoke openly in front of my daughter and I believed him. I knew he was concerned about me but I was surprised by what he said and I sensed the enormity of the mistake I had made in letting my daughter hear this. She turned yellow, went to her room and slammed the door. The man left and I was there with her silence and fear. (p. 100)

Those who allow for the forcible involvement of children in politics hurt the revolution more than they benefit it. They intentionally or unintentionally reinforce ethnic conflict that is rupturing their national fabric. Frantz Fanon warns us of the dangerous impact of ethnicity on the national fabric: "The cracks in it explain how easy it is for young independent countries to switch

back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe—a regression which is so terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national unity. [...] such shortcomings and dangers derive historically from the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie in underdeveloped countries to rationalize popular praxis, in other words their incapacity to attribute it any reason” (Fanon, 2004, p. 97-98). Ethnic conflict may demolish the state, as the national consciousness is “imagined,” as Anderson (2006, p.145) claims. Thus, the involvement of children in politics at times of crisis could translate into a fragmented society and a tragic civil war. Through recounting her experience of the Syrian uprising, Yazbek provides several examples of children involved in politics:

A five-year-old boy carrying a wooden stick on his back like a rifle stood there; his skin was scorched, his eyes shone, and a long honey-coloured beauty mark covered his forehead. He looked like a painting. I smiled and handed him my ID. After scrutinizing it, he handed it back to me and motioned for me to continue. Fighting back a smile, I asked him, “Who are you with?”

“I’m with you!” he replied.” (Yazbek, p. 26).

The urgency in the above passage to claim the political affiliation of the five-year-old boy, as well as that of many other Syrian children, is characteristic of both sides of the struggle for power in Syria today; the more adherents each side can claim, the more right they claim to wield power.

Moreover, involving children in politics has ultimately increased the death toll among children. Children have been participating in all aspects of the revolution, including demonstrations and funeral processions. In one of the testimonies, Yazbek asks a ten-year-old boy the reason behind his participating in a funeral procession, an event that the regime seizes on to kill people and traumatize children: “‘Why did you come, little guy? Go home.’ His father looked at me, and after a long stare, said, ‘He isn’t any more valuable than his father’” (Yazbek, p. 98). The father’s answer embodies urgency to speak out on behalf of others, his son in this case, even if it inevitably means silencing them.

Silencing children and taking their voice away is a crime that is not different from involving them in demonstrations or shooting them. In “Friday of the Children of Freedom,” Yazbek relates:

Every single day there were demonstrations against the regime, even the children were coming out to say, *The People Want to Topple the Regime!*

[...]

A woman told me there was an officer who picked a little boy up by his hair, high enough to look him in the face, and then shot him and threw him back down on the ground. (pp. 212-213)

This passage vividly portrays the violation of children’s rights, which is equal in its violent transgression to silencing them. The violation comes equally and at once from both the regime and the rebels, who mistakenly assume that the national identity can be (re)shaped through the putting on of the best show of attesting the other and asserting the self by involving children and using them as an essential force in this conflict to gain support.

### **Textbooks and School Rituals**

Militarizing Syrian childhood has been central to the creation of the cult of Assad and the construction of the political and social identity of children through “iconography acts” that demonstrate Assad’s dominance (Wedeen, 1999). Teaching material and textbooks in schools have been a major tool for the creation of the cult of Assad and his imagined Syrian nation. Saluting the flag, spectacle, and marching are politicized performances aiming to construct the Syrian national political identity and the submission to Assad’s dictatorship:

Ever since we were school kids, it was repeatedly drummed into our heads never to criticize the regime or the president. In between the mandatory sticking of pictures of the president on our school books, political ideology education classes, singing his praises during the morning salute to the flag, and being force marched chanting for the regime on national holidays, the cult of personality was everywhere. (Starr, 2012, p.149)

Politicizing Syrian childhood and occupying their school time with creating a cult around Assad rather than teaching their subjects have deprived children of a competitive educational system that would prepare them as critical thinkers and shape their worldviews.

Through school rituals and textbooks, the regime form children’s political ideology, weeding out their ambitions and sense of consciousness and instead preparing them to be obedient citizens in the future. The major purpose behind the morning rituals in Syria’s schools is to construct a monolithic Syrian national discourse. The morning rituals start most notably with *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali‘iyah* (“[The Chant of the Baath Vanguard]”), which translates as:

April 7, the birth of the great party  
Friends, Baath Vanguard  
Sing the best song  
For the leader Abu Suleiman<sup>3</sup>  
And the Corrective Movement  
(*Al-Tali‘i* clap)

March 8  
Our revolution has started  
Baath Revolution  
Against backwardness  
May God protect you, our leader  
And keep you for the steadfast Baath party  
Arabism, Arabism, Arabism is the loyal friendship  
(*Al-Tali‘i* clap)

(*My translation*)

I argue that through politicalizing children’s school lives and forcing them to sing *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali‘iyah*, which parallels in its function the national anthem, the regime constructs its Syrian

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to Hafiz Assad.

nation and forms children's political ideology. Like "iconography acts," *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* functions as "a disciplinary device" and educational instrument of the Baath party and its indispensable position in people's lives (Wedeen, 1999, p. 6). *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* makes reference to the birth of the Baath party and Assad's "corrective movement" in Syria, which succeeded in seizing power and effectively ruling the country in 1967. The second part of *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* hinges on the principles that Baath party calls upon to achieve its goal of reviving the Arab nation: unity, freedom, and socialism, translated *wahda, ḥurriya, and ishtirākiya* in Arabic (Wedeen, 1999, p. 40). *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* is targeted to generate complicity and a sense of nationhood through evoking history: "If nationalness has about it an aura of fatality, it is nonetheless a fatality embedded in history" (Anderson, 2006, p.145). *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* is charged with the deep love of and praise to the leader, Assad. The repetition of *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* every school morning serves as "a disciplinary device" to instill complicity and obedience in the Syrian society, using children as its political agents (Wedeen, 1999, p. 6).

The schoolchildren's *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah* parallels the national anthem in its function of creating nationalism and enhancing political ideologies through crafting an "imagined community" and national relativism. "There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests—above all in the form of poetry and songs. [...] [T]here is in this singing an experience of simultaneity" that echoes "physical realization of the imagined community. In such singing, people feel "selfless" and although "nothing connects [them] all but the imagined sound" of other people, such singing raises the feelings of nation-ness and the desire to sacrifice for its sake (Anderson, 2006, p. 145). These national songs and official praises, such as in the case of *Al-ṣaiḥāat al-Tali'iyah*, infiltrate in children's lives and linger in their minds to grow with them and become the only discourse to embrace. By employing schoolchildren as political agents, the regime creates a cult around itself and ensures its dominance through the disciplining of the future generations and constructing their political and social identity perspectives.

Textbooks and curricula in Syrian public schools, like school rituals and national anthems, have been always a fertile ground for producing the cult of Assad and aligning children's political configurations. The *Social Education* textbook constructs students' political ideologies and forms their subjectivities through featuring and instilling the image of Assad as "the leader forever", "the father," and praising his great role in the "corrective movement." The textbook aims at creating national discourse through the repeated praise of Assad's political achievements throughout children's school years. In high school, students are required to take an examination on the *Social Education* textbook and pass it successfully before they proceed with college. Print, Anderson contends, forms an imagined readership community that in its "secular, particular, visible invisibility [is] the embryo of the nationally imagined community" (2006, p. 44). The cover of the textbook used to be "adorned" by Assad's photograph, intertwining the content with form, and emphasizing the specificity of leadership and presidency that appears to be seamless. In the same manner, the students' school final report, which is known as *al-Jalā'*, deliberately features on its cover the president's photograph and effectively conveys the political message that Assad is "the leader forever," a message that is expressed strongly in the picture below:



Using children as political agents and public school textbooks to sanctify the leader seems to be widely practiced in Middle Eastern governments and essential to the construction of children's identity:

In the opening years of the twentieth century, Middle Eastern governments paid particular attention to the content of school textbooks and other publications geared towards youth. [...] Through the apparatus of text and image, the exemplary child could be molded rhetorically and visually, as well as politically and culturally. (Karimi, 2012, p. 278)

As in many other Middle Eastern cases, the school textbooks play a significant role in establishing a cult around the president whose image compels an imagined sense of nationalism in the schoolchildren and governs their social and political sensibilities through predefining their roles as citizens.

### **The Impact of the Revolution on Children's Education**

With the advent of the revolution, children's education deteriorated further. One of the ensuing results of the eruption of the revolution was that Syrian children were deprived of education, which translates into significant loss of future opportunity and the actual possibility of having the next generation of Syrians grow up illiterate. The forced displacement of Syrians, whether internally or across international borders, posed serious problems for the schooling of children and the future of their education. Most children inside Syria, especially those outside the capital Damascus, are exposed to daily shelling and combat that prevents them from pursuing their education and schooling. Children displaced inside Syria, as well as across international borders, suffer the tremendous impact of witnessing violence, and accordingly, their worldviews and view of education have changed. The uncertainty of their destiny and unpredictability of the outcome of going to school during this troubling time have changed schoolchildren's perspectives of the nation that they had assumed was responsible for their security and psychological stability. Many children refuse to go to school, as the trip to school is becoming more risky every day; either they come into range of a sniper and die, or they go home traumatized from the anxiety of being at risk.

The regime's treatment of schools as institutions of education is secondary. Its view of education and the mission of schools in Syria after the eruption of the revolution are no different

from those before the revolution. After the eruption of the revolution, Assad transformed many schools into prisons, where people are executed (Yazbek, 2012, p. 253). Schools, which are supposed to be the emblem of enlightenment and freedom of speech and thinking, are becoming the darkest places in people's lives, where they lose not only their lives but also everything related to their humanity. The regime shifts the mission of institutions of education from education to the production of a generation of illiterate Syrians that is not only disfigured physically but probably also more damaged psychologically. Militarizing and politicizing institutions of education and directing the malaise towards the future generations' intellectual maturity and critical thinking is a war crime that Assad has committed against his people.

One Syrian woman I interviewed, K. M., states that in the best cases, if schools in Syria are not demolished and their infrastructure is not totally destroyed, they have been converted into shelters for displaced families (An Interview conducted by the author on September, 12, 2013).

The problems associated with the education of displaced Syrian children provoke a whole complicated and interconnected set of notions of belonging. Many of the Syrian refugees' conceptualization of their imagined nation before the violence they witnessed after the eruption of the revolution is an underlying factor in their attachment to the imagined wholeness associated with Syria before the revolution. Children refuse schooling and insist on going only to their previous particular school in Syria, as that previous image of the nation brings stability to their souls and a sense of belonging to a nation. Their previous imagined perspective of nation makes them complete and brings indispensable psychological and emotional balance that is crucial to their sense of existence.

Another Syrian woman I have interviewed, S. K., also states that children displaced across international borders face many challenges in regard to their education and schooling (An Interview conducted by the author on September, 14, 2013). The foreign language is the main obstacle faced by Syrian children displaced across international borders, especially by those who have sought refuge in countries in which Arabic is not a prime language. She adds that male teenagers are the most difficult to deal with, as they refuse to go to school, thinking of themselves as young men whose responsibility is limited to defending the nation: "Widows are the most who suffer for struggling with their male teenage children, convincing them to go to school." The situation of younger children is no better. All the Syrian women I have interviewed confirmed that the displaced young children refuse to go to schools and insist that they receive their education only at their particular previous schools in Syria; most of these women find themselves forced to homeschool their children. The displaced children's reaction toward their previous schools in Syria raises questions of and complicates the sense of belonging to the nation and place.

Displacement has drastically shifted the children's sense of belonging. The displaced children compensate for their sense of estrangement and displacement by clinging to the belongings they used to own before their displacement. Two of the women I interviewed, S.K. and H.L., expressed similar tensions with their young children who refuse to go to school without the particular backpacks that they left behind in Syria. The children's sense of belonging is inextricably intertwined with their reshaping of the national identity. H.L. expressed her fear of the ensuing results of losing the sense of belonging, not only to the nation through displacement but also to time and her past. She said sadly that when she left Syria, she left all her family's and children's belongings, including their childhood pictures and school and birth certificates. She says: "Nothing is with us that connects us to the past except our memories" (An Interview conducted by the author on September, 15, 2013)

However, *Blood of Freedom* (2013), a documentary of the Syrian revolution, shows that despite their pain and deprivation, Syrian children still have images of their friends from back home and their memories with them still lingering in their hearts. Their eyes are filled with tears, but they still have hope for a better future for them and Syria. For example, Gina, a five-and-a-half-year-old girl, remembers her extended family and friends in Syria and expresses her longing to see them:

“I miss all my friends. Thank God they are fine. I miss them so much. I love them so much but Bashar kills us. I pray God destroys him because he kills us. Bashar does not let us live. [E]ven he kills children, boys and girls. (al-Zamakshari, 2013)

As these children repeat their descriptions of the terrible and traumatic experiences they have been subjected to, it cements those experiences in their minds and conjures up their perspective on Syria today. However, despite the pain and the terror they endure, Syrian children insist on going back to their Syria and living the dream of their imagined nation. Gina says:

We want to get back everything. We want to get back the Sham jasmine to place [*sic*]. We want to live happily. Eat and drink and be happy without being worry [worried] of his [Assad] existence. (al-Zamakshari, 2013)

Syrian children’s impression of their imagined nation is reinforced by their own words, which mark their national identity and reveal the ultimate implication that only their version of the imagined Syrian nation is the one that will survive: “We want to get back everything. We want to get back the Sham jasmine to place.” They insist on building Syria and living their dream of a Free Syria (al-Zamakshari, 2013).

### **“Sex Jihad” and Child Marriage: Two Sides of the Same Coin**

Young girls are the most adversely affected by the competing and challenging projection of nation that comes in the form of child marriage and what is called the “sex jihad” or *jihad al-nikah*. I argue that both of these forms of victimization of female children are equal in their damage and impact on the victim and the future of the Syrian nation. The story of a sixteen-year-old Syrian girl kidnapped by the Syrian security forces and victimized in the “sex-jihad,” is an example of the regime’s victimization and political exploitation of young girls, and its use of them as tools to deface the rebels’ vision of the future of the nation and to reshape the national identity of Syrians by “homogenizing” the Syrian accent.

According to her family, Rawan Milad Qadah was kidnapped by Syrian security forces in November 2012 and disappeared then from her hometown, Darra. The short video that Syrian official television aired features Qadah recounting her stories of being abused by her father, who offered her to the rebels as a sex object. In the video, it is obvious that she was speaking under duress: “Unedited versions of the Syrian television videos show how the girls [whom the regime kidnapped] were directed by men in the background to read their statements” (*Al-Arabiya*, 2013). She was forced to tell the story of her ordeal in the *Shami* accent, the dominant accent of Damascus and of the Syrian security forces, the accent by which the Alawites are influenced, especially those who dwell in Damascus. I argue that the Syrian security forces’ insistence on employing exclusively the *Shami* accent in their speech and forcing it onto Syrians, as in



Qadah's case, is a mechanism used by the regime to fulfill the regime's vision for the nation and to contest and oppose any other imagined nation. Through forcing Qadah, who speaks the accent of Darra, where the revolution erupted, to speak the *Shami* accent, the regime reconstructs the nation's linguistic paradigm as exclusively *Shami*. Condemning and denying Qadah's Darra accent and forcing her to speak *Shami* while she makes her claims of being forced to engage in "sex jihad" excludes Darra as well as those who speak its accent from the Syrian nation. By so doing, the regime attempts to homogenize the Syrian accent until one single accent is used within the nation, an accent that represents the nation as it is imagined by the regime.

Speaking of his time in prison, a man interviewed by Yazbek says, "Not all the interrogators were Alawites, but when they shouted at us, they all spoke with an Alwaite accent. Talk in the security branch was sectarian" (qtd in Yazbek, 2012, pp. 245-246). I argue that identifying the Alawite accent as the essential accent of the Syrian nation closes the Syrian nation to those who do not speak with that accent, which represents the regime and its authority. As Anderson claims, to be "seen as both a *historical* fatality and as a community imagined through language, the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed," I argue that the Syrian security forces were opening the door of their imagined nation to Qadah and other prisoners to be part of it as its citizens and defenders (2006, p.146). By so doing, the regime challenges the rebels' imagined nation, alternating between closing and opening the gateway of national community to exclude and include those who "speak" with the "nation's" accent, the accent that is spoken by the regime. Through enforcing the Alawite and *Shami* accents, the regime constructs Assad's nation, or "Assad's Syria," an official slogan that has been used for many years to assert that Syria is Assad's own property and so those who dwell it should comply with rules, including speaking the regime's accent.

Young girls are abused by both the regime and by the rebels. I argue that the case of Qadah's victimization at the hands of the regime is matched by the victimization of Syrian girls in refugee camps at the hands of their families, who encourage child marriage. Child marriage is one of the emerging challenges that face young Syrian girls in refugee camps. It is a crime stands as another form of gender-based violence that is caused by both the regime and the families of the girls. Given their ages, these girls are manipulated by the fear of the natural consequences of war and the harsh conditions of their displacement. Although family members, mainly parents and brothers, claim that they find themselves forced to marry their girls off to escape poverty and to protect those girls' honor from rape through integrating them into a healthy society outside the refugee camp, I argue that such assumed protection is a mode of ongoing abuse and in fact is simply sex trade. Girls displaced during the civil war are "routinely raped and forced to become "sex slaves" (Morales, 2008, ¶7). Young girls are subjected to such gender-based violence more than any other group because of their young age and easily manipulated character:

Gender-based violence can be directed against young girls and females from all cultures and socioeconomic classes—although the poor and dispossessed are more readily targeted. Women and young female children are targeted because they are most vulnerable and powerless generally—especially in underdeveloped and conflict-ridden Third World countries. (Morales, 2008, ¶15)

I argue that the Syrian child marriage is a form of war sex slavery, for it does not contribute to the actual values of building the marital institution. Women in such marriages are stripped of their dignity and treated as sex objects (Ward, 2013).

In Ward's short movie, "Syria's Women Refugees Fear Sham Marriages and Rape," Syrian women refugees describe the daily obstacles they face in camp, including the risky night trips to the toilet, kidnapping, and child marriage: "The men, mainly from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, in the guise of donors they offer charity then return demanding a wife, but these are marriages of convenience, for the men at least, often lasting a matter of weeks or even days." The movie describes this phenomenon as "a bargaining business." It features a father claiming that the camp is becoming almost "a selling-sheep market," as a marriage with a young beautiful Syrian girl does not cost more than three hundred dollars. Such marriages, Ward contends, are similar to what is called "pleasure marriages," where girls are treated as sex objects and the marriage functions as "the religious seal of approval, bringing respectability." What adds to their victimization is that after a few months, and sometime only weeks, these little girls find themselves young divorced women sent back to their camps, where they will suffer again poverty, insecurity, and, more importantly, the social stigma of being divorced.

In another short YouTube video titled "A Syrian Woman Discusses the Marriage of Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan," Um Majed, a twenty-seven-year-old Syrian female marriage broker, states that Saudi men as old as seventy years visit the camps, demanding marriage with beautiful Syrian girls ranging in age from thirteen to sixteen (*Ammon News*, 2013). I argue that the Syrian child marriage in camps is an abuse that comes from families not assuming responsibility for themselves or others. Some parents claim that they approve the marriage of their daughters to protect them, while the girls give their consent to such marriages at this age as a form of self-sacrifice, so their families can survive on the little dowry the husbands pay. Survival, Cooke claims, "like responsibility, engaged subject and object in a self-perpetuating dynamic. Survival, like responsibility, had to be given meaning" (1988, p.142). In the case of Syrian child marriage the dynamic between the subject (husband) and the object (child bride) is abrupt, as the aim of the marriage is purely a temporary sexual relationship. It is a type of physical, sexual, and financial exploitation of the girl, who is treated as an object. I claim that these girls are unable to avoid exploitation because they have not assumed responsibility towards themselves as individuals and thus are unable to assume responsibility toward their families. The parents' ultimate mistake is to refuse to take survival as what Cooke calls the "confrontation and challenge" (1988, p. 131). Um Majed, the marriage broker, admits that parents know that marrying off their daughters at this age is "a mistake"; however, she claims that it is their only option for survival. Nevertheless, I argue that the parents' inability to find ways to survive other than marrying off their daughters is a result of them lacking clear vision, and I find Cooke's statement that "[s]urvival signified also clarity of vision" (1988, p. 87) explains well the parents' situation when making such unfair decisions for their young daughters.

Child marriage marked a change for the worse in these girls' lives and their futures in a traditional society that puts too much weight on women's virginity. They are entangled in a bewildering array of assumed responsibilities that have denied them childhood and unjustly have subjugated them twice: first to the will of their own guardians, and then to their "husbands."

## **Coping With the Revolution, Re-Creating Nation Through Artwork**

While humanitarian catastrophes are ongoing and the victimization of children takes a variety of forms, Syrian nonviolence activists are more aware than others of the impact of this violence on the Syrian nation and its future generations; for that reason they are dedicated to rebuilding the nation and maintaining the flow of service and aid to civilians. They are, as they claim on their Facebook page, advocates of children's rights, and for that reason their projects are directed toward the physical, mental, and psychological care of children. Shabikit Huras, the Karama Bus, and Zayton & Zaytonah, are some of their projects that aim to stimulate displaced Syrian children's creativity and enhance their abilities to deal with the violence they suffer through artwork, handcraft workshops, group discussion, writing, and painting and drawing (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.497206743681705.1073741831.144646272271089&type=3>).

While their artistic work serves as an avenue to self-expression, it is also a form of escaping the harsh realities they witness in their daily lives and a way of communicating with their pain. Their writings, drawings, and literary works function as spiritual and emotional therapy that enables them to endure the suffering and cope with the persisting hardships. These children are found at the crossroads, and hence their writings, drawings, music, and artwork come out of hope and pain; they represent Syria as both a nation with a hopeful future and a bloody battlefield in the present. Their accounts visibly demonstrate and vividly recapture the intricacies of home and contrast it with the cruelty of the regime, simultaneously inviting and propelling us to take a closer look at the impact of violence on children (<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.497206743681705.1073741831.144646272271089&type=3>).

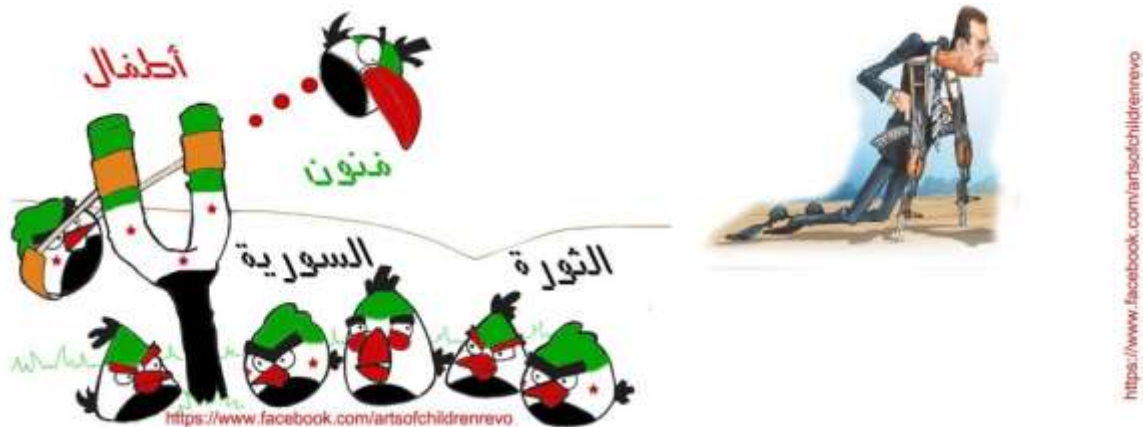
I argue that while these projects enhance children's abilities to cope with the hardships brought on by their displacement, they also reshape and re-create their national identity through their imagining of the future Syria. For example, the Karama Bus (the Dignity Bus), a project whose name resonates with the revolution's ambition and principle, aims to educate children about their rights to dignity and self-esteem, restructuring their national identity through their crafts and writings. "Creative resistance [is] another power of nonviolence activists" (Khaf, 2013, p. 23). The Karama Bus and other nonviolence activists' projects are projects of resistance.

This creative resistance appears vividly on the nonviolence activists' Facebook page "Arts of the Children of the Syrian Revolution," a page that is dedicated to creating a space for Syrian children to participate in, in their own creative ways, to express their feelings and reflect on the life conditions they face, to relieve their stress and communicate it in the form of art projects. This project serves as a space that situates them with their peers in the childhood that is missing in their lives.

Some children write poetry; others send in drawings, photos, or images of the revolution, playing the role of young journalists reporting on the revolution. Others use images from popular cartoon shows such as Dora, Sponge Bob, Sinan, and the Smurfs, changing the words of the songs that accompany the cartoon shows, vocalizing their resistance to Assad's regime. Some popular cartoon figures are rendered with the colors of the flag of the Syrian revolution—green, white, and black with three red stars in the middle (Arts of the Children of the Syrian Revolution, 2013).

I argue that the reality of life in Syria is best grasped in the children's voices, which express all moods of deprivation and sorrow, and yet hope for a better future. The children's artistic production is a representation of their awareness of the revolution and their imagined

Syrian nation. In their works, they picture the new Syria and envision civic peace. Their colors nurture the hope of a spring coming to “free Syria.” Through negotiating and adjusting the limitations between “the private” and “the public,” the children expose to the public their personal accounts of their relevance to the revolution, offering key answers to “the state of madness” and “chaos” that Syria has been suffering for almost three years (Cooke, 1988, p. 87). Technology and social media facilitate the process of bringing the private to the public, forging an intriguing sense of belonging and an imagined reader community that decreases their sense of displacement and victimization. I contend that the examination of their work is able to bring a better understanding of “the reign of unreason,” (Cooke, 1988, p. 87). Their works offers an explanation of the chaos in Syria.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGBNhKrgnQQ#t=227>

In the above drawing, taken from the “Arts of the Children of the Syrian Revolution” Facebook page, Syrian children draw similarities between themselves and Palestinian children who have been known as “the children of the stones” for resisting the occupation there by throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. Syrian children use the same method of resisting oppression, throwing stones, at Bashar al-Assad, who appears injured and walking with crutches. The stones, which bear the colors of the Syrian revolutionary flag, are the characters from the Angry Birds game.

Similarly, Alwane’s video “The Creative Children of Raqqa” presents some creative children’s artwork that comes free of any motivations of synthesizing any political agenda or adherence to any imagined nation other than their own. The children shown in the video found themselves compelled to participate in their own ways in this revolution by leaving their remarks on the bitter present they live. It is in this children’s artistic production where the essence of the revolution and Syrian nation lies. Faithfully speaking to and expressing “the reign of unreason,” these artistic works and poems are powerful reminders to all Syrians to save the country and unite their national discourse (Cooke 87).

## Conclusion

This article examines the victimization and role of Syrian children in the Syrian Revolution 2011 in Samar Yazbek’s *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* and Abdullah al-Zamakshari’s movie *Blood of Freedom*. Through studying the victimization of children before the revolution and after its eruption, I contend that both the regime and the rebels

have caused damage and victimized children through challenging and assisting representations of nation. However, the projects undertaken by nonviolence activists have been proven to help children heal and to engulf their pain in art media that at the same time reveal their imagined Syrian nation.

While the regime concerns itself with militarizing childhood and politicizing textbooks and school rituals to create a cult around Assad, schoolchildren are used as agents to form a sense of nationhood at the cost of their education. School rituals are loaded with nationalist poems and slogans praising the leader and his great achievements. After the eruption of the revolution, the education of children has declined; many schools have been damaged, converted into prisons, or used as shelters for the displaced. Moreover, the ensuing issues of displacement and language barriers have negatively impacted the education of children in refugee camps.

Death and deprivation have marked each day for Syrian children since March 2011, and shortage of food, medicine, water, and electricity, as well as the difficulty of delivering aid because of roadblocks and military checkpoints, are still persisting as daily occurrences. In addition to that, the violence directed at young Syrian girls raises indispensable questions about gender-based victimization and the future of Syrian women's rights within an evolving nation. Young Syrian girls find themselves victims who pay the double price of the struggle in their country. Whether they are married off while still children or kidnaped and accused of participating in the "sex jihad," their victimization comes mainly as gender-based violence at the hands of both the regime and the rebels.

Yet, the nonviolence activists' projects are powerful instruments that greatly enhance children's self-esteem and their ability to cope through art with the harsh realities and trauma of war. These projects resituate children in society as active and healthy, and they offer those children a space that allows them to exercise their freedom of expression. Thus, the children's artistic production speaks to the core of humanity and represents the Syrian nation through their lens. Because the course of the Syrian Revolution of 2011 is still unfolding rapidly, definitive conclusions about Syrian children and childhood in Syria within the context of the Arab Spring is inevitably unattainable, especially while the victimization of children is still increasing.

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