

Author Bio

Dr Omar Al-Ghazzi is an Assistant Professor in the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). His expertise is in global communication and comparative journalism, with a focus on digital activism and collective memory in the Middle East and North Africa. His research has appeared in journals such as *Communication Theory*, *Media, Culture & Society*, and the *International Journal of Media and Communication*. Before joining LSE, he was a lecturer (assistant professor) at the University of Sheffield's Department of Journalism. Dr Al-Ghazzi completed his PhD at the Annenberg School for Communication, the University of Pennsylvania. A former Fulbright scholar, Dr Al-Ghazzi comes from a journalism professional background. He has previously worked as a reporter for Al-Hayat Arabic daily and as a media analyst at BBC Monitoring.

Keywords

Nostalgia – Syria – Anime – Childhood – Activism

Abstract

Exploring the post-March 2011 Syrian online sphere, this article focuses on nostalgic videos and memes that take inspiration from Arabic-dubbed Japanese anime series, which were broadcast on national Arab TVs in the 1980s. As part of a dissident social media culture, amateur videos that redubbed and edited childhood cartoons have appeared on YouTube since 2011— tackling themes of revolution, war, and exile. These videos defied and mocked the Syrian Al-Assad regime, as well as the Islamic State group. A result of empowering media practices, the videos projected political meaning on childhood cartoons, which have been associated with a generational identity shared by now-adult Syrians.

Highlighting an understudied aspect of media globalization— the influence of Japanese anime on Arab popular culture— the article examines a diverse body of social media clips and memes that recycle Japanese anime. I analyze their Syrian re-appropriation by offering a typology of nostalgic online practices within contexts of war and uprising. These can be summed up in three categories of nostalgic mediation: nostalgic defiance, as expressed in calls for political action; nostalgic mockery, as reflected in subversive nostalgic humor targeting authority; and nostalgic anguish, in reaction to the trauma of war and exile, such as in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis.

Grendizer leaves for Sweden: Japanese anime nostalgia on Syrian social media

Introduction

This article examines Syrian activist YouTube videos that take inspiration from childhood cartoons and contribute to the creative dissonant digital culture, which has characterized the Syrian uprising of March 2011. It highlights one sub-theme within that digital culture— the playful reinvention of Japanese-produced and Arabic-dubbed animations, which were initially aired on Arab state TVs in the 1980s. The reimagined Japanese anime productions popped up in

a revolutionary virtual sphere as part of a new kind of Syrian political engagement. Animated robots, pirates, ninja fighters, and forest animals were mobilized in revolutionary action against both the Al-Assad regime and the Islamic State group. These cartoon characters expressed Syrians' hopes, fears and pains about becoming refugees in Europe. The reworked cartoons were used to express revolutionary fervor and to cope with the traumatic experience of losing one's country to war. In this article, I highlight playful internet memes and re-edited and dubbed YouTube clips that activists produced by infusing music and images from their childhood cartoons with subversive political messages.

My analysis focuses on the importance of adult nostalgia towards children's media and the capacity of that nostalgia to express different political impulses. I argue that nostalgic social media texts that reflect political positionality must be understood as part of a practice that is strategic, creative and empowering. Accordingly, I explore a diverse body of YouTube clips and memes and examine their deployment within a context of uprisings and trauma. I argue that the contemporary re-appropriation of Japanese anime on Syrian social media reveals multilayered and ultimately empowering sentiments of nostalgia. These can be summed up in three categories of nostalgic mediation, which I conceive of as: nostalgic defiance, as expressed in calls for political action against authoritarian rule; nostalgic mockery, as reflected in subversive nostalgia targeting authority; and nostalgic anguish, as a reaction to war and exile, and in this case mostly in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis. As I will discuss, some videos re-dub anime favorites to create narratives, in which Syrian childhood heroes also become refugees. As refugees are unable to physically bring cherished personal objects from Syria in their dangerous long journey to Europe, they can bring their memories with them. Projecting their anguish onto their favorite childhood cartoons in digital content is one way of doing that.

This rich case-study about the use of Japanese anime in the Syrian uprising relates to a number of key themes in the field of communication. It considers the analytic implications of thinking of media in terms of practices versus texts—contributing to the literature on the practice turn in media studies (Couldry, 2004, 2012). It also provides empirical evidence of how individual media practices reflect and create collective shared memories of current and bygone times. And it argues that nostalgic practices intensify different kinds of affective political impulses from mobilizing courage for revolutionary action to easing the pains of exile and homesickness.

It is also a study in authoritarian communication systems within which media texts that may seem to have little connection to politics gain political potency. In Syria and neighboring countries, Japanese cartoons with their simple plots of good versus evil were dubbed and framed to reflect an authoritarian and nationalist political culture with themes of love of land and patriotic sacrifice. The reinvented videos within the context of the Syrian uprising indicate how Japanese anime got associated with a generational identity of Syrians who grew up in the 1980s. The newly-appropriated anime became a favorite backdrop of Syrian social media content that reclaims childhood audiovisual memory, de-associates it from authoritarianism, and uses it to voice political aspirations.

Finally, the article sheds light on an understudied aspect of media globalization by considering the durable influence of Japanese anime on Arab popular culture. The animated productions, such as the super robot, Grendizer, and the ninja boy, Sasuke, were dubbed into modern standard

Arabic, mostly in Lebanon and Syria. Through an online search for the Arabic terms of “cartoons” and “Syria” on YouTube and Facebook, I found that four anime series, which were produced in Japan in the 1970s, and aired in the Arab world in the early 1980s, inspired the making of amateur YouTube videos and memes. These series are: Grendizer, Sasuke, Sinan (original: Don Chuck Monogatari), and the Treasure Island (original: Tarakajima). These Arabic-dubbed Japanese productions were reimagined and reproduced through editing images from the anime with new revolutionary lyrics or with footage of the Syrian conflict and uploading them on YouTube.¹

Digitized nostalgia & the creative dissonance of a ‘new Arab generation’

In order to understand the use of nostalgia in the Syrian crisis, it is important to address the question: when do objects of nostalgia gain political value and become a source of inspiration for dissonant and revolutionary action? I argue that in this case, objects of nostalgia were mobilized by individuals and groups as parts of a larger discourse about a generational uprising.

Much of the literature on nostalgia has been dominated by the binary set forth by the late cultural theorist Svetlana Boym (2001), who distinguished between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia is about reconstructing an absolute past where good battles evil. While reflective nostalgia is about dwelling on longing and loss and seeing everywhere fragments of memories of a home (Boym, 2001). Keightley & Pickering (2012) complicate this division through the concept of the “mnemonic imagination”— a term that seeks to reconcile the relation between past memories and future-oriented imaginings and also between personal and collective memories. Memory is explained as an intentional form of practice that uses the past “to inspire and inform expectation and possibility” and therefore to motivate action in the present (p.78). For her part, Georgiou (2012) argues that nostalgia can be strategic as it is used to adapt to changing social fields— particularly in relation to diasporic communities (p. 3). Accordingly, nostalgia, like memory, is not simply something that we already have but something that we also produce individually and collectively and that we strategically maneuver to advance social and political aims. Within the context of this study, nostalgia for childhood cartoons was deployed to adapt to different political circumstances whether revolutionary politics or forced migration.

In fact, media play an important role in prospectively providing children with an audiovisual memory for the future. In the Syrian opposition digital sphere, it is Japanese cartoons, aired in the 1980s, that had a second life because of adult use of social media. Mediated memory, not least on social media platforms such as YouTube, magnifies the intersections between the personal and collective, the past and the future (van Dijk, 2007, p. 25). Social media platforms enable users to creatively express and playfully remember childhood memories, particularly those in audio-visual form. As Lomborg (2012) explains, though social media present themselves as texts, they are only brought into existence through communicative practices that are “emergent, editable, and undergoing a continuous process of development” (p. 221). Consequently, there is a difference between analyzing social media material as texts or as part of

¹ Given the difficulty of reaching out to the often anonymous activists who produced and uploaded the videos in question, this article’s method is limited to analyzing the YouTube videos and contextualizing their producers’ practices within the broader study of digital culture in the Syrian uprising, which I have been closely following and analyzing since 2011.

a practice. In my analysis of the re-imagination of Japanese anime on Syrian social media, I distinguish between different political impulses in the strategic use of nostalgia but I also make the larger point that the practice of mediating nostalgia itself is an empowering act.

Another theme within the study of nostalgia that emerges from this case-study is how nostalgia is simultaneously deeply personal, capable of triggering individual emotions, and collective in its formations and effects. In fact, nostalgia relies on this relationship between individuality and collectivity. Its affective force, whether instigating sentiments of pleasure or sorrow, is intensified by finding and nurturing the connections between the personal and the collective, and the private and the public. Social bonds are strengthened when one expresses a personal identification and narrative about what is actually a shared collective experience. Often, social intimacy is achieved through the discovery that what one may have assumed to be a personal experience turns out to be a collective one. This process follows the cyclical generational coming of age.

To return to the question on the political potency of adult nostalgia towards childhood media, it is through the concept of generational belonging that the resonance of children's media into adulthood gains political significance. Guha (1997) explains that the idea of a generation helps us focus on the relationship of contemporaneity amongst individuals; and that relationship is produced through sharing narratives from across the life span, particularly childhood. Adults discover their generational identity through reminiscing about similar childhood experiences with each other. In many cases, nostalgia may be understood as a social and cultural phenomenon. But it can also fuel political unrest and collective action. As Nora (1996) argues, the idea of a generation is the backbone of revolutionary rhetoric with "its ambition to be a historical, initiatory rite of passage from the night of despotism to the bright day of liberty" (p. 502). The idea of a generation facilitates the mobilization for collective action by associating a political event not only with a specific political party or orientation but with the identity of an age cohort. Active generational consciousness is operationalized as a group united by age becomes dominated by the revolutionary event and the objectives of producing its own history and exercising the power of collective action (Nora, 1996).

In the case of the 2011 Arab uprisings, activists' discourse has been characterized from the outset by discussing generational identity and aspirations. The young Tunisians, Egyptians, and Yemenis who took to the streets in protest were dubbed by Arab media as "the revolutionary generation" (Arabic: *jeel al-thawra*). The new generation was also associated with the use of social media and new technologies that were credited for enabling what was thought to have been impossible prior to 2010— mass Arab demands for political freedoms. In both Arab and Western media, terms such as the "Facebook generation" or the "Twitter generation" were discussed. Whether the deployment of the notion of generation aimed to support or disparage the uprisings, the discourse on the "new Arab generation" mirrored the discourse on the uprisings/ revolution. And an important part of that constructed generational identity relates to its audiovisual memory, which I am arguing, in relation to Syria, has been captivated by Japanese anime.

Geopolitical anime from Japan to Syria

In the 1980s, and with the exception of a few Arab productions, Japanese anime dominated Arab government-controlled TVs. Syrian TV, like its Arab counterparts, began its daily programming schedule in the early afternoon. After the national anthem, followed by a recitation of Quranic verses, the Syrian station aired the “children’s segment” and its Japanese content. In fact, these cartoons are not only associated with regimes because of their broadcasting on state TVs, but also because their dubbing, as I will explain, contributed to Arab regimes’ “system of signification” (Wedeen, 1999). It is not a surprise then that these cartoons were reclaimed in revolutionary media practices.

I begin with the context of viewership element. For children in the 1980s (like me), waiting and watching the children’s time slot on TV after school or in the weekend became a ritual. These conditions of viewership structured the adult collective nostalgia towards these cartoons. Unlike today’s individualized children cartoon watching on 24-hour cable channels or online, children in the 1980s were watching the same cartoons on the same channel at the same time. As Anderson (2006) suggests, the ability to imagine oneself as part of a national community relies on the collective temporal contemporaneity of media consumption. While that point has mostly been applied to news media, children’s cartoons, and in this case Japanese anime, should also be taken seriously in this regard. Accordingly, the memory of watching the cartoons does not only concern their content but also their ritualized structuring of the lives of a generation of children. Cartoons remind adults today of their childhood daily lives, families, and friends.

In fact, the popularity of Japanese anime in the Arab world and its enduring impact on the region’s popular culture is an understudied aspect of the globalization of Japan’s soft power. The globalization of Japanese anime has been scrutinized by media scholars for decades, particularly their popularity in the West and in East Asia (See Iwabuchi 2002). Japanese anime exports are diverse and have varied temporal and spatial settings. Many productions have futuristic themes such as Grendizer (produced in 1975 and aired on Arab TVs in the early 1980s). Some such as Sasuke (produced in 1979), which is about a legendary ninja boy, are set in Japan (Clements & McCarthy 2006).

Grendizer, one of the most popular anime series in the 1980s Arab world, begins when Duke Fleed of Planet Fleed is forced to leave his home planet when it is attacked by the forces of the evil King Vega. Fleed together with his Grendizer spacecraft that can transform into a giant robot, reaches planet Earth (Japan) and is adopted by a kindly professor, who gives him the name Daisuke (Clement & McCarthy 2006, p.152). When King Vega attacks Earth, Daisuke (and Grendizer) fight him and eventually rescue the planet and defeat the Vegans. Pelliteri (2009) explains the plot’s symbolism through Japan’s postwar position in the world: the exorcism of Japan’s imperial past through its portrayal as victim of extraterrestrial violence, the celebration of Japanese technological advancement, in addition to applauding the Japanese-American alliance.

The Arabic-dubbing of Japanese anime was not interested in the subtlety and complexity of its meanings in Japan but in adapting them to local and regional Arab political cultures. In fact, many of the cartoon jingles’ lyrics were infused with nationalist messages and slogans. They echoed an Arab (particularly Levantine) political culture that celebrates national unity, love of land, and resistance to occupation, which are themes that resonate with political rhetoric about

the conflict with Israel. Many of the cartoons were dubbed in Syria and Lebanon, both of which had parts of their national territories occupied by Israel in the 1980s. Importantly, Lebanon was in the midst of civil war (1975-1990), which has made themes of national unity gain prominence in public discourse, particularly when targeting children. For example, the following are the Arabic lyrics of the opening jingle of the ninja boy who fights villains— Sasuke (whose dubbing is executed in Lebanon):

Rise up, put your hand in my hand, rise up to defend your tomorrow and mine; we shall defend our land; with our blood we shall defend it; we shall destroy the villains and spread the peace; we shall live in happiness and joy; in love and harmony; come on comrades; come on friends; with our determination we shall overcome difficulties; put your hand in mine and we shall help everyone; Sasuke, your strength is the collective strength, with which we shall eradicate the villains and make the good victorious

This was the language that dominated the tone and content of Arab news media and any politically-explicit form of communication. The idea of rising up and defending the land was key to the political rhetoric of the Palestinian resistance leading up to the first intifada (literally meaning rising up/ shaking off), and which refers to the popular Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation (1987-1991).

In addition, many of the themes of the jingle relate to Arab authoritarian political parlance. The idea of defending the land or a country's leadership "with our blood" dominates many political slogans. For example, the favored Syrian-Ba'thist slogan, which children were made to routinely shout out in school ceremonies, is "with our soul, with our blood, we sacrifice ourselves for you Hafez" Al-Assad (in power 1971-2000). Accordingly, cartoons indirectly contributed to the Syrian regime's idealized representations of domination and national community, which Wedeen (1999) dubbed as Al-Assad's cult (p. 32). Authoritarian political communication is often dominated by that binary of portraying the world in the simplistic terms 'we are good' and 'our enemies are evil,' one is either a nationalist or a traitor, and of course support for the ruling regime is the determinant of where one is politically-placed.

While much has changed in Arab media since the 1980s, crude state political rhetoric has made a strong comeback since 2011. Facing mass popular dissent, Arab regimes amplified a paranoid politics dominated by accusations portraying dissidents as infiltrators, conspirators, traitors, meddlers, foreign agents, and terrorists. The definition of a patriotic Syrian or Egyptian as propagated by state media was communicated as synonymous with support to the ruling regime. With the internal and external pressures (and in some cases warfare) against ruling regimes, state rhetoric harked back to a polemical language that sees the world in black and white terms. In Libya, late dictator Al-Qadhafi dubbed protestors and rebels as rodents and viruses that need to be eradicated. In Syria, state rhetoric claimed the country faced a universal conspiracy. Since March 2011, the beginning of the uprising, President Bashar Al-Assad declared in front of parliament that "Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country" ("Syria speech" 2011). This was echoed by other Syrian officials, who discussed the situation as a conflict between Syrians and outsiders, patriots and traitors, and those defending the country versus blood thirsty terrorists. The official media made outlandish claims about the universal conspiracy including that what

appear to be protests in Syria are in fact cinematic enactments produced by the US and by Gulf states (See “syrian4all”2011). Any dissident or ‘conspirator’ was rhetorically ousted out of the national body politic (See Kraidy 2015).

There was a parallel tendency in opposition and activists’ rhetoric, which in their efforts for mobilization, also spoke of the uprising in terms of the national will of all Syrians and an expression of genuine Syrian patriotism. Anyone seen as criticizing or opposing the protest movement, and later the rebel operations, was often deemed as necessarily a supporter of, or a thug in the service of, the Al-Assad regime. Accordingly, expressions of sharp divisions and severe mistrust dominated the Arab public sphere, whether in pan-Arab news media and social media pages or in individual Arab countries. Within this context, it is no surprise that the simplistic plots of children cartoons lent themselves to expression of political positions and calls for collective action.

Animated sites of political expression

During the 2011 Arab uprisings, social media nostalgia facilitated the expression of sentiments of courage and revolution but also despair and homesickness as these sentiments became associated with a rebelling generation. The examples of the remediation of anime demonstrate the diversity in the use of nostalgia on social media within the fast-changing political context of Syria. I propose three different but interrelated categories of mediated nostalgia as has emerged from this study: nostalgic defiance, which refers to the mobilization of nostalgia in revolutionary calls for action against authority, nostalgic mockery, which uses nostalgia for subversively poking fun at authority, and nostalgic anguish, which is the expression of a painful longing to an abruptly lost homeland. However, the three different kinds of nostalgic sentiments are part of an empowering nostalgic media practice.

Nostalgic defiance

I use nostalgic defiance to refer to the use of nostalgia for rebellious collective action. It is nostalgic because it mobilizes objects of nostalgia to further political action. In fact, the imagery and narrative plots of cartoons have easily been adapted to defiant themes. A typical narrative trope in children’s programs is that though there may be great sacrifices, good always triumphs against evil. This idea must have been comforting during the Syrian uprising, which began with peaceful protests facing the killing machine of an army. Nostalgic defiance was expressed in videos that were inspired by Grendizer. Since 2012, a clip usually given the title “Grendizer Syrian Revolution” has been widely circulated on Syrian social media pages. Uploaded several times on YouTube with thousands of views, the one-minute clip is assembled as if it is an anthem of the Syrian revolution. It is a montage of pictures from the cartoons merged into its opening jingle but with new lyrics (“Aleppo21’s channel” 2012). It starts with the caption “the coordination committee of the Planet Flead,” the name of the planet of the protagonist in Grendizer. The “coordination committee” is a reference to the local networks of activists that popped up at the beginning of the Syrian uprising to organize protests at the level of neighborhoods and villages. The implication is that Planet Flead is a Syrian territory. It is an imagined territory where childhood memories lay. As protests should be organized across the

geography of Syria, activists humorously suggest that Syrian sites of memory (Nora, 1996), such as Planet Fleed, should also be mobilized for collective action. The new lyrics are:

It is a revolution, and we shall be victorious. We will sacrifice ourselves for your soil, O Syria. Everyone is united for one single goal: to topple the regime. We are creating a dream. We have an intellectual project, inspired by all communities. We are spreading hope. We are building a nation that includes us all.

The chorus is “Your people are free, O Syria. [Your people] move with steady and determined steps.” The song continues “We resist our enemies with goodness, righteousness, love and justice. Everyone, join our glorious Syrian revolution” (Aleppo21’s channel 2012). The lyrics capture the hopeful tone of activists’ media output at the beginning of the uprising. The clip acts as a political ad that promotes the uprising by using nostalgia towards Grendizer, which most Syrians of a certain generation recognize. Accordingly, the implication is that Grendizer is an ideal representative of the revolution, who is able to reach out to Syrians from different communities who may not have been enthusiastic about the uprising.

Other Grendizer-inspired videos are based on activists’ favorite scenes from the cartoons reworked as a confrontation between the evil forces, which are represented by the regime, and the forces of good, represented by the dissidents and rebels. That theme points to another aim of resorting to cartoons for political expression, which is to inspire courage through propagating the idea that the struggle can only end well for the revolutionary movement. For example, one video series is divided into episodes that show a confrontation between forces loyal to the villain King Vega and Grendizer. Two clips from this series borrow the Grendizer plot about the showdown between good and evil to discuss the Syrian uprising— also communicated as a good versus evil confrontation. The fight is to the death. It is also a fight that is hoped to have a happy inevitable ending, which is the victory of the good guys.

In fact, the rhetoric of the Syrian regime and the opposition was clearly reflected in the new form of a simplistic animated showdown between two opposing forces. Also, regime rhetorical claims that it will never lose power in slogans such as “Al-Assad forever” fit well within cartoon plots. For instance, the first ‘episode’ of the reworked Grendizer YouTube series starts with showing an actual protest in Syria (“recifrea's channel”2011a). A man is carried on the shoulders of another. He chants as if addressing Syrian authorities “your policy of forcing us to kneel no longer works! We want to topple the regime.” The footage of the protest is abruptly interrupted by the music of Grendizer and the cartoon. A man’s voice calls on Daisuke, the hero who operates Grendizer, “Daisuke, the shabiha (government thugs) are attacking Syria!” Daisuke runs in alarmed surprise to operate Grendizer.” We then see King Vega saying “kill them, tear them up... I don’t want to see a single revolutionary in the street.” A battle ensues between Grendizer and the Vegan enemy spacecrafts. King Vega declares “we will show them that our regime does not fall.” The other installment of the series shows Grendizer flabbergasted by the cruelty of his enemy (“recifrea's channel”2011b). The evil robot allows Grendizer to escape saying “I will spare your life. Spread the word about my brutality!” As he leaves, Daisuke mutters “By God, I shall support the revolutionaries until my last drop of blood.” Clearly, these nostalgic clips are meant to mobilize Syrians in collective defiance against the authorities. They also claim that the

uprising represents the good; while the regime is evil— and that there is no compromise in that confrontation.

The notorious Islamic State (IS) organization has also been portrayed as the villain by Syrian social media activists. One video reworks part of an episode from the *Treasure Island* cartoon, which tells the classic story of the pirate treasure hunt. The edited video starts with the pirate protagonist Silver tied to a cross, which is a form of torture used by the IS group in the territories under its control. Silver is having an argument with his captor pirate, who is described in the newly imagined version of the cartoon as an IS member (“aks alser”2014). Silver delivers a heroic speech as other pirates (representing IS) prepare to burn his body on the cross, he says:

Before you kill me, I want to ask a question. How do you expect to stay alive if the people and the rebels detest you? ... You should understand the fire of this revolution can never be put down. No matter how hard you try, you will never be able to control the Syrian people. The revolutionary fire shall burn you and burn Al-Assad. Even if you are in control now, this is only temporary. The people will eventually rise up.

After this speech portraying IS and Al-Assad as the villains and the inevitable losers in the Syrian conflict, Silver then manages to win over the rest of the pirates. They free him. And the clip ends with that happy conclusion (“aks alser”2014). By equating the Al-Assad regime and the IS organization, the video perpetuates the image of the Syrian uprising’s enemies as comprising a single force of evil trying to destroy the “good” revolution. The other category that emerges from this case is the use of nostalgia for targeted mockery.

Nostalgic mockery

I use the term nostalgic mockery to refer to the subversive use of nostalgia in counterhegemonic ridicule and humorous belittlement. Indeed, these amateur Syria videos used the anime in order to mock, taunt, and poke fun at the government media and state propaganda, particularly their conspiratorial language and tone. For example, one Grendizer-inspired video takes aim at the aggrandizement of the Syrian president. It mocks Syrian members of parliament during the first session held following the start of protests in March 2011, in which the MPs upped one another in flattering the president (“Asheq al-Huriya”2011). One MP even proclaimed that Al-Assad should rule the world. The video begins with footage from the parliamentary session showing the MP addressing President Al-Assad by saying: “The Arab nation is too insignificant for you. You should rule the world, Mr. President.” The rest of the MPs applaud their colleague’s statement. The video then shows an image of President Al-Assad’s face photo shopped onto the body of Grendizer. The audio background consists of a common chant by regime supporters “God, Syria, Bashar— that’s all!” (“Asheq al-Huriya”2011). Another video shows an interview with a Syrian soldier on national TV, in which he taunts opposition rebel groups by saying that “even if they are aided by Western and Arab fighters, even if they get help from outer space, they will be defeated.” The edited clip picks up on that extraterrestrial reference by playing the music of Grendizer, with a caption saying that Grendizer is the actual enemy of the Syrian army! (“Shilet Lawad’eh” 2015).

One video mocks Al-Assad's presidential election campaign in the summer of 2014, which is largely considered as a rigged election. Here, the cartoons are used to put words into Al -Assad supporters' mouths by producing audio-visual content that mocks their assumed political rationale. The video uses the opening jingle of the cartoon, the Treasure Island. The video blends pictures from the cartoon with footage of the Syrian uprising and war. The clip is presented as if it is the opening jingle of the original cartoon, which starts with the words "here we are, on the path of our treasure" ("Syria Share" 2014a). The reworked lyrics become "Here we are. Take us to war" as the video shows images of supporters of the Al-Assad regime in popular rallies as well as other images of soldiers preparing for battle. The whole video is a spoof ridiculing the supporters of Al-Assad. The new jingle continues "Who else but us will pay the price of our brutality? We will pay the big price so you can remain as our prince, our Al-Assad." Here we see footage of soldiers assaulting Syrians. The video then shows a wall covered with posters of the pictures and names of Syrian soldiers who had lost their lives in the war— implying that that is the price Al-Assad's supporters are paying. The new jingle song ends with the words "We are afraid of freedom because it is dangerous." The video then mocks Al-Assad supporters and portrays them as enemies of freedom, who would rather die for what is deemed a lost cause rather than live freely ("Syria Share" 2014a).

Another video that spoofs pro-Al-Assad election campaign is inspired by the animated ninja boy Sasuke cartoon. Similar to the previous example, the YouTube clip uses the opening jingle of the cartoon and mixes it with new lyrics and footage to mock the supporters of the Al-Assad regime. The lyrics of the song start the same way as the original cartoon. Then the song acquires new words as it goes: "We shall sacrifice our lives for our president... Come on comrades, come on (fellow) villains, with our bullets and our brutality, we will elect Bashar!" The footage consists of a speedy mix of images of the Syrian president and his supporters, in addition to footage of warfare and acts of torture apparently perpetrated by Syrian soldiers.

Two other videos mock Syrian official media by claiming that they have purportedly accused Grendizer of instigating revolution and unrest in Syria. The first spoofs a news report on the official Syrian news TV Al-Ikhbariya saying that "foreign agents" are operating in Syria. To the music of Grendizer, the video proceeds to show a person with a Grendizer mask attack a military truck ("Asho News" 2011). Another video spoofs what seems to be a Japanese news documentary ("FreeMediaSyria" 2011). While the audiovisual material is taken from the Japanese program, captions that supposedly provide translations discuss Syria. The Arabic "translation" is basically a cynical and comic commentary about the Japanese public's shock that Grendizer, according to the Syrian Al-Ikhbariya channel, is allegedly the instigator of the Syrian uprising. The report says that the Japanese people protested to demand that their government investigate the suspected involvement of Grendizer in Syria because everyone had thought that "Grendizer had departed to Planet Flead late last century." So the Japanese government commissions a group of scientists to investigate the Syrian official media claims by subjecting monkeys to Al-Ikhbariya coverage. The "shocking result" is that the monkeys develop incurable brain damage and cases of uncontrollable nausea. The scientist concludes that Al-Ikhbariya "media catastrophe" is the cause. In reaction to the experiment, the YouTube clip shows Japanese people holding rallies in support and sympathy for the Syrian people for being subjected to government propaganda on Al-Ikhbariya TV. As these clips show, Syrian official

media have been a favorite source of mockery as activists ridicule them by making the point that what they call news may as well be wildly imaginative anime for the entertainment of children.

Nostalgic anguish

By 2014, as the Syrian conflict seemed to lose its revolutionary compass and became more fragmented and part of an international proxy war, the nostalgic deployment of anime to express determination and defiance or lightheartedness and humor seemed also to diminish. It is this affective turn that I am calling nostalgic anguish, which is the use of nostalgia to express sentiments of pain and despair—in this case in face of war, exile and a sudden loss of homeland. By 2014, many Syrians looked to permanently leave Syria and the Middle East region. Anime began to inspire activists to express melancholic sentiments. It is then that one clip shows Grendizer to have given up on the uprising in Syria and as departing to Sweden. However, while the content of that clip and others show despair, the clip is best read as part of communicative practices to actively express a political position and negotiate agency in difficult circumstances. So the process of making the video, sharing it, and commenting on it represents a compelling act of speech and an attempt to find voice against all odds.

One example is a Treasure Island-inspired video which remakes a dialogue between the protagonist boy Jim and the pirate Silver. Silver's distressed monologue seems like the inner voice of many Syrians, particularly refugees. The affective impact of a statement he makes is amplified by the fact that it is shown as the words of a favored childhood cartoon character. Silver, the pirate who is dedicating his life to find a lost treasure, is shown to represent the voice of Syria. He seems to have been imaginatively transported, along with many Syrians, to European exile. The clip in question shows Silver making an emotionally-charged monologue about exile (Al- Idilbiya 2014):

I am stuck between Turkey and Greece. I want to seek asylum. The war in Syria has not ended yet. And now the IS (group) is in the picture, my friend. What shall we do? The Free Syrian Army (the nationally-oriented and secular-leaning opposition armed group) has begun to dismantle... Even if we find the treasure, even if we settle in Sweden or Norway, our life will be sad and meaningless. We won't find anything we were looking for. We used to dream of freedom and dignity. Now we search for an alternative home... You know Jim, even if I reach Sweden; life is going to be miserable. I will live in a country that is not my own. I will yearn for Syria.

Silver sighs and reiterates “even if I reach Sweden and get the Swedish citizenship, it will not be my accomplishment. [Sweden] is not my nation. Life is bound to be miserable.” Silver's words express how Syrians feel completely abandoned in the world—targeted by the government and discriminated against and treated as pariahs everywhere they go. As Silver implies, even the best case scenario of immigrating to Sweden is not a happy ending. It may be just the beginning of a difficult and miserable life of exile and yearning to the homeland. Silver is overwhelmed with a sense of defeat and lack of political agency.

A similar clip uses Grendizer to echo the melancholic sentiment of exile and the disappointment over the fate of revolution in Syria. It shows Daisuke giving up on the fight in Syria and escaping

to Sweden. The clip is a re-dubbed part of an episode from Grendizer (Qusaybati 2015). It shows a battle between Grendizer and his Vegan enemies. The enemy strikes hard and shoots at Grendizer. This catches Daisuke (the protagonist who operates Grendizer) off-guard as he says “Goodness, I am taking a beating.” We then see Grendizer is shot down from the sky. He falls and hits the ground hard. He begins to run as many enemy spacecrafts begin shooting at him. He says “What in the world is happening. You all came here!”— a reference to the multiple pro-regime foreign armed interventions in Syria (notably from Hezbollah, Iran and Russia). As he escapes flying away, Daisuke adds “I will never step into Syria again in my life.” Daisuke returns to the operation center defeated and he prepares to leave again. “Where are you going? You should return and liberate,” he is urged. This is when Daisuke interrupts “leave me the hell alone.” We then see Daisuke in the Grendizer spacecraft flying into the sunset. The clip ends with his statement “I am going to Sweden. I quit this whole debacle.” Other spacecrafts are seen following his lead as we hear a pleading voice “take us with you to Sweden boss” and the response is “OK come along!” The clip ends here with the image of the sunset. Again, this expresses defeat and despair— while simultaneously acting as a meaningful reclaiming of memory. The heroic Daisuke is shown joining his “fellow” Syrians in leaving everything behind and going to Sweden with them.

The other cartoon that inspired a lot of nostalgic expression is Sinan. The cartoon is centered on the daily adventures of a young beaver, Sinan. The plot centers on the efforts of the different forest animals to co-exist and live together in peace and ward off attacks by wild animals. The Arabic lyrics of the concluding jingle focus on the idea of national unity, which is a central trope in the political rhetoric of Arab countries with diverse ethnic and sectarian populations. The lyrics are:

How great it is to live well and in peace. How great it is to live in harmony and love. No evil harms us. No injustice harms us. Life remains full of hope for everyone. How beautiful it is to live in one house. How beautiful it is to be in a single nation.

These simple words were affectionately recalled since 2011, particularly in the form of memes that social media users shared widely on Syria-oriented pages. The memes use Sinan as a signifier of life before the current crises and wars— painting a rosy picture of what life was like. The following are some examples:



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Figure 1 shows a picture of Sinan above the caption “how great it is to live in peace and harmony.” The second part of the meme shows the map of the Arab world with the caption “we don’t get it.” The meme juxtaposes the values learnt in childhood about love and peace with the current political situation in many Arab countries dominated by war and conflict. Similarly, figure 2 shows Sinan and his beaver friend Lalah under the same caption “how great it is to live in peace and harmony.” The first image is juxtaposed with a weeping Sinan and the caption “now we understand the true meaning of this song.” Figure 3 is a meme that is more cynical in tone. Discussing the situation in Syria, it shows two pictures one of Sinan “before the crisis,” meaning before the Syrian uprising and war, in which he looks happy echoing the words “how great it is to live in peace and harmony.” The post-crisis Sinan is crying, being struck by a missile, and carrying a flagon of water in reference to the water shortages and the breakdown of services in the warring country. The “after” caption says “God damn you, you have destroyed the country.” The second caption is directed at the Syrian “other.” It implies that perhaps it is not great or may not be possible to live with others in the country because “they” have destroyed it. Indeed, many in Syria, whether they are on the side of the ruling regime or the opposition, direct blame on the other side for the downfall of the country. Sinan here then is echoing the voices of Syrians, whatever side they are on, in lamenting the country’s fractured affairs.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the circulation of Japanese anime in YouTube clips and social media memes that reverberated in the Syrian online public sphere since 2011. My approach to the analysis of these clips and memes distinguishes between their textual content and the practice of their making and sharing. The distinction influences the understanding of mediated nostalgia. The textual content of the memes and clips ranges from nostalgic defiance against dictatorship, mockery targeting authority, and anguish in reaction to the horrors of war and the pains of exile as Syrians flee their country in their millions. Regardless of the content, the imaginative recycling of these anime cartoons is empowering, even when expressing despair and helplessness over the state of the country and when anticipating further misery under the “best case scenario” of making it to Sweden or Germany. The act of using childhood cartoons for different kinds of political expressions is associated with a generation’s reclaiming and mobilizing cherished memories of the homeland. That practice of reaching out into personal and collective memory to comment on the present and the future is strategic, comforting and supportive.

The resonance of Japanese anime can be explained by several factors related to Syria’s political culture and state media ecology in the 1980s, as well as to the plots and narratives of the anime. As with many cartoon productions all around the world, plots are typically simplistic and show confrontations between forces of good and evil. In these plots, the heroic protagonist is almost certainly the victorious. Such plots lent themselves to authoritarian systems of signification in the way they were coopted by an authoritarian Arab media culture through infusing them with nationalist messages. However, about three decades later, they were given another life in counterhegemonic media practices of redubbing and re-editing. In 2011, Japanese anime series became an ideal backdrop of revolutionary political expression because of their capacity to mock the propaganda of the Syrian regime in claiming to face a “universal conspiracy”—as if the political situation was indeed as simple as a cartoon’s plot.

The anime's good versus evil themes paralleled the polarized media in post-2011 Syria. On one hand, government rhetoric did not acknowledge that Syrian dissidents are in fact Syrian—calling them infiltrators and meddlers. On the other hand, opposition activists called for a total revolution against the ruling regime. Activists mostly either dismissed supporters of the Al-Assad regime or accused them of harboring allegiances to foreign powers. Within this context, the common trope in these cartoons that the victory of the “good guys” is guaranteed despite all the hardships must have been appealing. That theme mirrored a common position that despite the immense cost in people's lives and welfare, the Syrian uprising is bound to triumph at the end.

These cartoons then became weaved into the devastating story of the Syrian uprising and the ensuing bloody conflict. The country's descent into war and devastation has been staggering. In 2016, there is a sense, which is shared by those who were forced to leave or those who remained in Syria, that the country has been lost. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise when Syrians express a renewed attachment to their childhood in the country they loved and never imagined to lose to war. Resurrected from childhood, Daisuke, Silver, and Sasuke have come to life again since 2011. Like many Syrians, they have voiced political aspirations for a better life but also expressed the pain, anger and despair of unfathomable suffering and unbearable exile.

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