Visual aspects of the Syrian revolution

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For those viewing the developments of the Syrian revolution / rebellion from afar, one of the most striking aspects may be the powerful visual imagery created through graffiti, posters, and cartoons. While some circulate via news media as part of the emergent “citizen journalism” trend, others circulate via Facebook, blogs and other web pages, and email. Collectively, they add an artistic, visual, and often highly politicized note to arguments that some of the deepest cracks wrought by the past 14 months have been to the foundations of the culture of fear so carefully constructed under Hafiz al-Assad and so carefully maintained since his death in 2000.

These materials’ reach within Syria may be debated, given the difficulty of reliable Internet access or concerns about security and government tracking of visitors to particular website. However, they seem to play an important role in reaffirming and strengthening support for the revolution among Syrians and other Arabs outside of Syria. One of the most consistently active sites has been sha3b3aref.blogspot.com, which operates also as a Facebook page and a Flickr account. Its images address a range of themes and incorporate a number of visual and artistic styles, but almost all bear the tag line or signature: al-sha`b al-suri `arif tariquhu, or “The Syrian people know their path”.

As befits the diffuse and widely spread nature of their audience, these images address a range of themes. Many focus on President Bashar al-Assad, presenting him as the author of the violence and repression associated with the current regime and its response to citizen protests and the armed uprisings. Others emphasize the nobility or historic importance of key cities whose populations have been particularly active in the uprisings, and similarly targeted for military reprisal. Still others emphasize the religious aspects of these events, using Qur’anic passages or references to key figures from early Islamic history to critique the current regime. A final category foregrounds the Syrian flag, emphasizing the rebellion as a national struggle and critiquing the regime’s use of national imagery to attempt to discredit protesters. (In any particular cartoon or poster, of course, multiple themes may coexist.)

What follows is a small sampling to illustrate the ways in which recent art has taken up and employed these themes. Translations are provided when the text is in Arabic.
Photograph from an early protest, of a boy holding up a sign made from a cardboard box. The text reads: “I am an orphan / Hafez killed my grandfather 2/16/1982 / Hama // Bashar killed my father 6/3/2011 / No Dialogue Friday”

Graffiti on wall or barricade: “Leave, Bashar / We don’t like you”
President Bashar al-Assad

Photograph of President Bashar al-Assad with super-imposed text:
“Sorry, I can’t hear your protests over the sound of how awesome I am.”
Unlike most Syria-focused visual art, this uses English rather than Arabic.
President al-Assad with five dead men hanging from his outstretched arm

Photo of President al-Assad with super-imposed text of Qur’an 90:5: “Thinketh he, that none hath power over him?”
President al-Assad steeping a teabag labeled “Syria”, with a hanged man as the teabag and the tea as his blood

Rebelling cities

Areas and neighborhoods of Homs arranged to spell “freedom” in Arabic
Old-style poster showing a photograph of one of Hama’s norias (water-wheels), stating: “Hama will not prostrate itself / The Syrian people know their way”
The word used for prostrate is that used for prayer in Islam (raka’a)
Human head with three bullet holes that bleed the colors of the Syrian flag. Top (calligraphy): “Freedom” Bottom: “The Syrian people know their way”

Cartoon by Carlos Latuff, Brazilian political cartoonist with some Lebanese ancestry. Latuff has been an active portrayer of the events of the Arab awakening, and here shows the red and black bands of the Syrian flag as the mortuary cover for two rows of dead Syrians.

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