“Syria Love”: Watching Syrian Propaganda in Iraq

Edith Szanto

Ramadan 2010 was the last time I visited Syria. I have been aching to go back, but the situation there does not allow it. For the last year, I have been sitting across the street, in a manner of speaking, talking with neighbors, watching the events from a safe distance. The place from where I have been observing Syria is from neighboring Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan to be exact. From here, I have spoken with Syrians who have left before and during the current crisis. Some of my students are Iraqis who have spent years in Syria. They grew up in Syria and they miss it just as I do. In the beginning, when I first came to Iraq in the fall of 2011, Syrian friends in Iraq (but not all of my Iraqi students who lived in Syria) univocally supported the uprising. Many have reconsidered their stance. They want neither religious factions to take over, nor do they want civil war. They were optimistic in the beginning. They were certain the regime would fall quickly. Today, they expect Syria to turn into another Iraq, predicting a decade or more of violence. Among the many questions this raises is why the Syrian government has lasted this long (in contrast to the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, which fell relatively quickly). Moreover, what has the Syrian government done (besides employ sheer force) to remain in power? In this article, I examine two Syrian TV channels whereby the Syrian government has been trying to promote itself and gain support.

When I settled into my new apartment in September 2011, I browsed the satellite TV channels in search for news about Syria. I found Syria News and Syria Drama, the usual channels. However, I was surprised to discover channels entitled Syria Education, Syria Medicine, Syria Love, and Syria Balad. Syria Education and Syria Medicine simply repeated Euro-American subtitled documentaries. In contrast, Syria Love and Syria Balad were domestic productions. Syria Love was a nationalist and loyalist music video channel. Syria Balad played Arab classics such as Fairuz and hosted call-in shows while renting out the screen. As callers and the moderator in turn blessed and prayed for all of Syria to remain safe, pictures and messages flashed across the screen mainly congratulating children on their birthdays, displaying pictures of them. By May 2012, Syria Love and Syria Balad disappeared. Now, clips from these channels can only be found online, where they compete with other videos, which range from non-political patriotic songs to anti-government music. What does the death of these channels mean? The violence is still ongoing. Has the government given up on its image? Unfortunately, the task of answering these questions must be left for future research as I lack the necessary access to sources. The questions I focus on here are: What were the main themes that emerge? What do they say about the kind of social imaginaries the Syrian government promotes? And how did these channels compel support?

Syria Love was the shorter-lived of the two channels. I ceased being able to watch it around February or March. Two months later, Syria Balad was also off-air. While on the air, Syria Love played love music. It expressed love for the country and love for Bashar al-Asad. There were different themes: there were military songs, mass marching songs, songs about Syria’s heritage, and strong-men songs. Military songs mainly demonstrated the strength and dedication of the Syrian military forces. Mass marching songs showed viewers supporters of Bashar al-Asad, casting them into the same role of supporters, albeit the masses were actively displaying their loyalty publicly, while television viewers remained passive and private. Mass marching songs aimed to recreate effervescent moments and to compel viewers to identify with the “Millions of Lovers.” Heritage songs took viewers on virtual tours of the country, stopping by Roman ruins, the Umayyad mosque, crusader castles, and the old cities of Aleppo and Damascus. They celebrated a nationalist history, claiming nativist authenticity, and equating it with loyalty to the country. Notably, heritage songs often displayed groups of young people, many of whom play the role of university students, given their dress and their book bags. By having university students celebrate
nationalist history, the channel equated university education with stability, regime-loyalty, and authenticity.

The singers included both amateurs and professionals. Military, mass marching, and heritage songs sung by female performers portrayed Syrian women as patriotic and even militant. These songs emphasize a moderate (and non-rebellious) form of religiosity coexisting peacefully and even cooperating with secular and non-Muslim citizens by showing both women with and women without scarves, and by excluding munaqibat (or face-veiled women). Children occasionally sang mass marching and heritage songs. Little boys, in particular, sing praises to Bashar al-Assad.

I have categorized strong-men songs, such as those by Ali Deek and Wafiq Habib, separately because they can draw on elements from the other types of nationalist music, but are visually focused on the fact of the performer’s physical strength. These strong-men recordings invoke the ‘abadai or strong-man system, as examined by Michael Gilsenan in Lebanon. Traditionally, strong-men were young men who guaranteed peace in the neighborhood. The ‘abadai system has most recently been idealized in Syrian Ramadan series “Bab al-Hara (the Gate of the Neighborhood)” where ‘abadai are depicted as defenders of local values. They are chosen by the neighborhood (al-hara) and they are from the neighborhood. Ideally, the characteristics of a strong man include youthful bravery, generosity, and general leadership qualities, but not wealth, education, and certainly not old age. The ‘abadai system evokes memories of an undifferentiated coexistence between neighbors, regardless of religion and class. Under the Ottomans (and in “Bab al-Hara”), the ‘abadai system was both organic and well integrated into official imperial politics. It could facilitate rebellions against outsiders, whether rulers or enemies, or it could promote cooperation with external powers. Only few aspects of the ‘abadai system have survived the emergence of the modern nation state in the Levant. The za’im (who closely cooperates with the strong-men) is now a local clerk and administrator. As in the past, his cooperation with the state and especially the government’s executive branch, the police, lends him not only authority, but power. Yet, as a mediator between the distant state and the local community, he also invokes an image of organic support. As a part of localized structures of power and authority, the ‘abadai system includes Muslims, Christians, and other minorities. The system itself is not religious and hence, can be used to symbolize inter-sectarian coexistence and cooperation. When strong-men sing about their love for Bashar al-Assad and Syria, it links local structures of power, which are tied to the government, to local guarantors of peace, as well as folk heroes. While images of national heritage sites, military training, and mass protests flash by in the background, strong-men performers symbolically tie Syria together institutionally, socially, and religiously. They remind domestic and foreign viewers that the stability of Syrian society is at stake.

Syria Balad was more inter-active than Syria Love. While Syria Love played amateur artists to submit their patriotic performance to be judged and aired. Syria Balad allowed for more direct access. Syrians could call at almost any time in to live shows and they could pay for personal messages to be run on air. The later feature attracted upper-middle and upper-class families who congratulated their own children and the children of other important families for their birthdays. It was both a prestige contest and a way to create and consolidate family connections. The shows had little thematic content. They allowed Syrians to access air-time by calling in and requesting songs for loved ones. The only patriotic content was that at the beginning of each conversation, the hostess (invariably female) and the caller formulaically repeated that “Syria is well” (suriiya bi-khayr). Most callers were male, making interaction gendered conversations directed towards a common goal: loving Syria and implicitly, the current regime. The gendered aspect marked these as secular or at least liberal religiously. Callers never requested religious songs. They generally requested classical Arabic music, such as the songs of Abd al-Halim Hafez and Fairuz. This music invokes history, authenticity, and stability, thereby symbolically linking the current government with continuity. By allowing Syrians to post messages and call in, Syria Balad compelled Syrians to participate in official propaganda and in supporting the state.
Beyond Syria’s borders, these channels allowed the Syrian state to demonstrate that it could still muster support. Considering the fact that Iraqi and Lebanese Shi’i forces, in particular, have come out in support for the Syrian regime and others in Iraq and Lebanon have added the opposition movement, it makes sense that the Syrian government would try to influence its neighbors through aesthetic and rhetorical means. These channels are part of a larger battle. They partake in the aesthetic, the affective, and the discursive battle for the hearts and minds of Syrians and their neighbors.

According to Walter Benjamin, modern art (or “art in the age of mechanical reproduction”) does not allow viewers to concentrate and truly reflect on the events, emotions, and symbols depicted. Rather, mass produced art (or kitsch7), such as pro-government propaganda on television, distracts.8 It affects viewers viscerally by invoking nostalgia for and pride in Syria’s heritage and linking these to structures of power. It affects viewers by casting them into the role of supporters, who stand (or sit) with the masses marching in support of Bashar. Syria Love and Syria Balad elicit a kind of distracted consent. It is important to see this point because Syria Love and Syria Balad are not unique in this approach. Their tactics echo those of other nationalist and sectarian groups who produce and disseminate propaganda on VCDs, DVDs, and on YouTube today.9

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2 One of the songs which was played often in the fall was “Hamak Allah ya Asad” by Asala Nasri (accessed October 17, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=058eGyHgQqA). Notably, Asala Nasri has since allied herself with the opposition. Narmeen Ibrahim (accessed October 17, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6qTjV8b3v4&feature=related) and Manal Mousa are other female singers who sing in support of Bashar al-Asad (accessed October 17, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCpnBvUUj6c&feature=related).
3 Cf. “Malayin mithatf binhabbak.”