A sleek, chauffer-driven car approaches a tall building. A dignified, love-struck man in a gray suit descends and peers longingly at his office. He opens his office door, and swoons as if to a lover, “Sabah al-Khayr, Sabah al-Ward, Sabah al-Ful, al-Yasmin. Oh, if only you knew how I struggled to reach a time like this when it is just you and me.” As he approaches, the camera shows that he is not talking to a lover, but to his chair, which he caresses and embraces. Breathing heavily, he proclaims, “You’re my love, dearer to me than my children, my mother, my father. You are my life. My God, you’re beautiful. I’m prepared to sell my son, wife, sister, children for you. Allah, what fine leather. I swear nothing in this world will separate me from you. You and no one else.”

As he sits in the chair, a group of men with flowers surround the secretary saying they wish to congratulate the new director. When she approaches him for permission, he orders her to make them stand at a distance, since he is “sensitive.” Additionally, he demands that they place themselves in a straight line so no one can hide himself behind the other. He tells himself, “They need to be aware that I’m firmly established, and that if anyone thinks about attaining my chair, it will be the last day of his life.”

As the men enter the room, his suspicions heighten, in particular of Ahmad and Beshar. A nightmare that the two men are stealing his chair shakes him in the middle of the night. He quickly calls his secretary and demands that she head to the office with a file of all department heads. The next morning, he transfers Ahmad from Damascus to Qamishli. Still mistrustful, he sits on his chair as his secretary and employee push him through the hallway to sign paperwork. He then desperately searches for a way to get rid of Besher. His solution for Besher’s demise is clear when we see him entering a room full of mourners. Two thugs (shabiha) in black glasses deliver the director’s chair, which he clutches during the funeral. Though he has eliminated his rivals, his doubts do not dwindle. He dines out accompanied by his chair; shops with his wife as thugs transports his chair alongside him; he sleeps handcuffed to his chair. The sketch ends with the insecure director surrounding the chair with piles of large brown sacks. Toting a gun, he hugs and kisses his chair, vowing, “There is no power in the world that can separate us from each other. Remember what I told you thirty years ago, ‘You and no one else.’”

In this short sketch, written by Hazem Suleyman, in Buq’at Dau’ Part 9 (Ramadan 2012), it was not lost on the Syrian viewer that the director was a visual representation of Bashar al-Asad. Discussions of this sketch and others in Buq’at Dau’ this season manifested the split among intellectuals that has become accentuated during the uprising. Some discounted Buq’at Dau’, alleging that those who contributed to this season (as well as others) are muwali (supporters of the regime), an accusation often leveled against drama creators who sharply critique the regime without facing punishment. Others argue that the government is too distracted this season to really pay attention, and that the mu’arid (dissident) writers will pay the price later. Yet, others contend that these kinds of sketches are meant to paint a democratic façade to outside viewers. Previously such a sketch would have been held up as an example of Tanfis (Airing), a theoretical conception propagated by many Syrian intellectuals themselves, and aptly analyzed by Lisa Wedeen in Ambiguities of Domination. Yet, if Tanfis was intended as a means of letting out frustration in order to keep the population from protesting the regime, then surely it loses its meaning in today’s context when the wall of fear has been broken and resistance is a part of daily life in Syria.
The first season of the multi-year television mini-series *Buq‘at Dau‘* Part 1 (Spotlight, 2001), which openly discussed taboo topics such as state corruption, sectarianism, and *mukhabarat*, was indicative of the hope that intellectuals felt during the first year of Bashar al-Asad’s presidency. Media specialist Marlin Dick documented how *Suriya al-Dawliyya* (Syria Art Production International), a leading television production company with connections to the state, approached two young, talented comedic actors to create a comic mini-series for the 2001 season. The two actors, Ayman Rida and Basim Yakhor, chose Laith al-Hajjo to direct *Buq‘at Dau‘*. This group came up with a sketch-based mini-series engaging in socio-political critique, and welcomed the participation of a multitude of actors and writers. President Bashar al-Asad’s 2000 inaugural address – in which he advocated tolerance of multiple opinions and a campaign against endemic corruption – inspired their courage and audacity to push the boundaries of accepted content. Though Vice President ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam attempted to stop the show, the president intervened on its behalf. In his detailed analysis of the inauguration of *Buq‘at Dau‘*, Marlin Dick contends that this mini-series marked a departure from traditional *musalsalat* and brought together "revolutionary innovations in comedy form with more daring reformist content." He continues, “*Spotlight* has fused new approaches to comedy production – cinematic techniques combined with flourishes more in keeping with theater, an emphasis on collective talent over the individual, slapstick interspersed with social realism.”

Noted television screenwriter Colette Bahna, argues that after these two key seasons, *Buq‘at Dau‘* lost its exemplary cooperative and democratic spirit, yielding itself to the selfishness of individuals who aspired to dominate others. Additionally, she laments that the stipulations imposed on writers became increasingly harsh. Her sketches would appear in a truncated version once they were finally presented, ultimately leading her to cease affiliation with the show.\(^5\) Actor Jihad Abdo refused roles after season three due to increased arrogance of some of its founders who each tried to usurp credit for its success. According to him, once acclaimed director Laith Hajjo exited the sketch comedy it went downhill, since only he was able to protect creative talent and standing up to the production companies to ensure a strong show.\(^6\) Scholars reiterate that due to artistic rivalries and tensions, *Buq‘at Dau‘* eventually lost some of its initial momentum, just like the reform process it was seen as representing.\(^7\)

Similar rivalries that plagued the artistic creators of early the burlesque, politically-oriented Syrian comedies of the 1960s and 1970s\(^8\) afflicted those intellectuals involved in *Buq‘at Dau‘*, and this is not without significance. Indeed the direct nature of the government’s relationship to the intellectuals involved in television production exemplifies the capacity of the leaders to distribute privilege to some and not to others. The system’s heavily ingrained divide and conquer policy prompts inequities and ignites animosities, thereby upholding the foundation of the political system. Yet, in my opinion, despite divisions in the intellectual community, *Buq‘at Dau‘* has continued to proffer innovative critique, a continuity of a long, deeply rooted tradition of political satire in Syrian drama.

Consider Season 6’s *Al-Jundi al-Majhul* (The Unknown Soldier), written by ‘Adnan Zira’i.\(^9\) Here we begin with Abu ‘Izz and his pregnant wife, Um ‘Izz, dancing in their home as a long line of *mukhabarat* forms outside their home. These *mukhabarat* believe that there are terrorists in the area and that they need to go up to a particular vantage point provided by this couple’s house to crush them. They barge into the couple’s house, and from the balcony, shoot at the “terrorists,” whom we never really see. Despite the dangers Abu ‘Izz and his wife are proud that their house is being used for nationalist purposes. As the sound of the bullets imbue the air, Um ‘Izz prepares tea and hands the tray to her husband to give the men as they are still shooting. Abu ‘Izz slides the tray of tea to the men, exclaiming,
“Who are these terrorists? Why do they want to ruin our country?” The lights go out and their house is on fire as the shooting continues. Um ‘Izz goes into labor and begs her husband to take her to a hospital. He refuses, however, saying that they have a nationalist duty to stay home and help the mukhabarat. As the gunshots pierce the air, we hear the sound of a baby born into the chaos of the night. The next day, cameras arrive at the sights of their destroyed house, praising Um ‘Izz and Abu ‘Izz for standing by the mukhabarat to banish the terrorists. Um ‘Izz, holding her infant, declares in a sad voice that they willingly sacrifice themselves for their country; a now deaf Abu ‘Izz declares: Allah Akbar (God is Great). Here, we have a clear critique of citizens who buy into government propaganda, as well as indictment of the Syrian government that is willing to destroy its own country and citizens while professing to rid itself of the terrorists. It was as if Zira’i were predicting the massive government retaliation of the 2011 uprising against “terrorists,” which is costing the country its history and people. It is noteworthy that while Zira’i had originally gotten away with his sketches, he was arrested and imprisoned during spring 2012 when several of his earlier sketches were now held responsible for inciting the population.

According to Rania Jaban, the supervisor of Buq ‘at Dau’ Part 9, the increasing leniency of the censorship committee has allowed this season to reach new levels of political critique, though it sought to eliminate all obvious references to terms such as “shabiba.” She argues, however, that Buq ‘at Dau’ suffered from marketing problems and only aired on only three channels: Al-Manar, Al-Jadid, and Al-Dunya. Despite its audacity in perspective, many argue that this season is no longer marked by the artistic collaboration that made earlier seasons exemplary, since Hazem Suleyman wrote the majority of the sketches. Critic Amer Sheikh contends that the hegemony of one writer created one vision, which could have been summarized in just a couple episodes. Ironically, despite the lack of internal democratic spirit among artists contributing to this season, this sketch comedy was one of the few mini-series of the season to make direct reference to the political uprising and society in the midst of war.

In Episode 2, Tajara al-Qabur (The Tombstone Business), by Hazem Suleyman, members of the community fall into a mad frenzy about purchasing a gravesstone, since so many are dying. Abu Omam, played by slapstick comedian, Ayman Rida, who wears a blue headscarf and talks incoherently, owns a grave business, and is having a hard time keeping up with people’s demands for nice spacious graves in prominent areas of the graveyard. As Abu Omam tries to convince one customer to take a remote grave, they hear explosions overhead. They decide to cut discussions short and write their contract. The sketch cuts to a scene of two men in front of a fruit stand. One man tells his friend about new deals to purchase a gravesstone in installments, and his friend tells him that there now even exist graveyard projects in which you can register your name for a large plot where your entire families can be buried. We then cut back to a scene with Abu Omam surrounded by masses of people holding coffins and complaining that their corpses are starting to emit an odor. Just as Abu Omam insists that there is paucity of burial sites, they hear bombing sounds and they all enthusiastically agree to make a mass grave for the dead.

Several sketches deal directly with government manipulation of knowledge. In Episode 2, Kol Shay Tamam (Everything is Okay) by Hazem Suleyman, a Syrian news channel announces its Mojez al-Akhbar (News Highlight): “People in the world are jealous of our way of living; Syrian citizens want the price of mazotte (cheap diesel) to increase but the government refuses; there has been an increase in salaries and the people tell the government that it is doing far too much for them; one thousand new homes are ready for our youth.” After the news highlights, Lahza Haqiqiyeh (A Moment of Truth) described as a show with “credibility and transparency” commences with news broadcaster Widad holding the microphone to a villager, Abu Ahmad. As his face reddens in anger as he complains, a voiceover says, “Our life is boring, since we have no problems. The director of our region calls us every day to see if we are okay. Our governor leaves good-night messages on our cell phone. Kol Shay Tamam (Everything is okay).
Don’t worry about us.” When the voiceover ends, Abu Ahmad grows more irate, but Widad quickly dashes off. In a factory, when Widad asks Abu Hassan about his life, he talks with passion and throws papers, as a sweet voice over says, “We have more than we need. We want to work more. The director refuses to have a higher salary than us, saying he is sitting and doing nothing. So, yes, Kol Shay Tamam.” Widad then sees a woman on the street banging her own head in frustration as the voiceover repeats, “Kol Shay Tamam.”

Let us end with an examination of an important sketch satirizing the government’s attempt to exploit television drama creators, based on the true story of the 2011 mini-series Fauq al-Saqf (Above the Ceiling, originally entitled Al-Sha’b Yureed – What the People Want), which was directed by Samer Barqawi and suddenly stopped airing after only fifteen episodes. Written by a group of writers who also contribute Buq’at Dau’, according to Barqawi, “The work aimed to touch the aspects of the crisis that were not dealt with in television before the crisis. We attempted to probe the new surface of freedom.” Commissioned by the Information Minister, the mini-series was overtly political – it demanded freedom and was one of the first productions by the newly established Syrian Radio and TV Production Organization to broadcast on Syrian Arab satellite channel. Phrases and words like Al-Sha’b Yureed (The People Want), Hurriyyeh (Freedom), and Selmiyeh (Peaceful) abounded in the scripts, words that were always on the news during this crisis.

The astounding circumstances of the government commissioning the writing of Fauq al-Saqf and the resulting confusion among the screenwriter community was satirized in Bila Saqf (Without a Roof), Episode 21, written by Nur Sheeshkly in Buq’at Dau’ Part 9. This episode starts with screenwriter Hisham telling his wife Maysa that he is not able to concentrate on a new screenplay because of the fighting and instability surrounding him. Hisham immediately receives a phone call saying he is on “the list,” and his wife is immediately scared it is the “list of Ar (Shame)” compiled by the government indicating those intellectuals who are against in the regime. He runs out in fear to the meeting to which he is summoned. He sits at a table with a group of writers, anxious to know why they have gathered before him. A comical, preppy looking man comes in, with a loose blue shirt, beach hat, and sunglasses. He introduces them to Nasser, an official in a suit and dark black glasses, who hands a piece of paper to the preppy man to call out some names of the writers. Those who hear their name are introduced to Nasser, an official in a suit and dark black glasses, who hands a piece of paper to the preppy man to call out some names of the writers. Those who hear their name are ordered to stay. Nasser, speaking in long, run-on sentences, tells them that they are writers and that there are “some problems … actually many problems on the streets” and he wants the writers to write a sarcastic comedy on the upheaval they are now living in. He ensures that they are allowed to speak with complete courage about politics.

The writers ask about censorship, their level of freedom in expression, and Nasser responds that there is absolutely no ceiling. Then he orders them to go home and write. Hisham stays up all night trying to write, but is terrified. His wife says he should go the next day and see what others are writing. But the next day he sees that none of the other writers have an idea. Nasser insists they need to talk about freedom, but Hisham still cannot write and his wife hypothesizes that it is because they have never experienced freedom. At the next meeting, the writers are still confused, but Nasser insists, “The ceiling is gone. Complete freedom, no censorship, what else do you want? Talk… Lift the ceiling.” Hisham says he has idea of story of the son of a leader, but Nasser quickly discounts it. A woman says she has an idea about violence against women, but Nasser questions what women have to do with the current crisis. Another writer says he has a story of a spy. Nasser discounts them all and yells, “How do we benefit? What does it mean? What message? I said lift the ceiling!” The mini-series ends with the writers sweating profusely at the table, Nasser standing over them and ordering them to write their screenplay about huriya (freedom) immediately.
Syrian drama creators walk a fine line to introduce their subversive ideas. Even though television drama is not directly controlled by the government, as is the film industry, their production is extremely influential over the public and government officials closely monitor the messages that television conveys. The late poet, Mamduh ‘Adwan, a prominent Syrian drama screenwriter, lamented that intellectuals had to play an important balancing act in finding homeostasis between daily security co-opted by the state and engaging in all out creative rebellion. In turn, the best method of survival and articulation of their dissent was to find equilibrium with the bureaucratic contradictions of the ruling regime. Recently it has been argued that while the previous generation was engaged in a constant struggle to widen the boundaries of accepted discourse, this new generation is implicated in "the whisper strategy," encouraging a comfortable dialogue with power as they produce drama. I argue, however, that while there are some artists and intellectuals that the regime manages to “buy,” this kind of vast generalization not only presents Syrian intellectuals as a monolithic group, but also discredits attempts on the part of many drama creators to engage in metaphorical language in order to subvert the contradictions in official doctrine and state rhetoric. Additionally, by focusing merely on reasons the government allows this material to air, we are turning intellectuals and artists into passive participants, rather than savvy and seasoned individuals who navigate the perils to create truly subversive work. We can recall that although the censorship committee prohibited the use of the term shabiha in Season 9, murderous shabiba can be seen in the first sketch illustrated above – “You and No one Else,” for example. In my research, I argue that many Syrian cultural producers such as those involved in Buq’at Daw’ have been able to cross over the red lines of prohibited discourse, question the very foundations of regime legitimacy and subvert official discourse, through innuendo, stratagem, and guise, thus underscoring artistic agency.

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1 Hazem Suleyman, Episode 3, Anti wa la Ahad (You and No one Else), Buq’at Daw’ 9 (Spotlight Part 9), directed by Amr Fahd and produced by Syrian Art Production International, 2012.
2 Interview with television editor Eyad Shehab Ahmad, September 11, 2012.
5 Interview with screenwriter Colette Bahna, October 10, 2012.
6 Interview with actor Jihad Abdo, October 14, 2012.
8 See: Milh wa Sukkar (Salt and Sugar), written by Nihad Qalai and directed by Khaldun al-Maleh, 1973; Da’at Tishrin (The Tishrin Village), written Muhamad al-Magbout and produced by Usra Tishrin Masrahiya, 1974; For examples of tensions between artists of the time see: Rafiq Sibayi, Thaman al-Hubb: Min al-Sira al-Dhaliya (Damascus, Syria: Mu’assasa al-Wahda al-Tiba’a wa al-Nashr, 1998), 155-175.
Interview with television editor Eyad Shehab Ahmad, September 11, 2012.


“Fauq al-Saqf” (Over the Roof), directed by Samer Barqawi and produced by Syrian Arab Television, Damascus, Syria, 2011; Interview with Colette Bahna, October 10, 2011.


Nur Sheeshkely, Buq’at Dau’ 9 (Spotlight 9), Episode 21, Bila Saqf.


At an opposition event in Qatar after the 2011 uprising, Syrian novelist Zakaria Tamer exposed Durayd Lahham’s record from the 1970s recounting how he put together a march of artists to Hafiz al-Asad’s presidential palace to congratulate him for his Corrective Movement. In return, Tamer claims that Lahham was granted a tax break from imports. See Bassem Alhakim, “Duraid Lahham: No Politics, But…,” June 20, 2012, retrieved in:http://english.alkhbar.com/node/8699.