Researchers Notes: Syrian Screenwriter Samer Fahd Radwan’s *Menbar al-Mawta* (Platform of Death), Ramadan 2013

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Syrian screenwriter Samer Fahd Radwan’s *Menbar al-Mawta* (Platform of Death) – the third and final season of *al-Wilada min al-Khasira* (Born from the Loins, 2011, 2012) – experienced much drama behind the drama before it finally aired on LBC and Abu Dhabi this Ramadan 2013. The miniseries, which the Syrian Censorship Committee rejected, was filmed outside the country. After director Rasha Sharbatji had completed about one month of filming in Lebanon, she withdrew – allegedly due to problems with the production company, Klaket. Yet rumors emerged that the al-Asad regime had threatened death to those who participated in the miniseries because the storyline held the government directly accountable for bloodshed in Syria.1 Since it was already heavily invested in the project, Klaket chose director Seif al-Din Sbai’i within days to take over where Sharbatji left off.2 Shortly after, Radwan was arrested at the border as he returned to Syria from Lebanon. He was released ten days later, but soon screenwriter Fu’ad Hamira, who had declared on his Facebook pages that Radwan’s sharp writing is more dangerous to the regime than *al-Jabhat al-Nusra*, was arrested.3 There were statements in the press that actors involved in *Menbar al-Mawta* were arrested as well, and vociferous accusations that those involved in its production were betraying Syria.4

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Political opposition is not new to Syrian drama, which has a rich history of protest since the 1960s. Since the uprising, television drama has continued along this critical trajectory.5 Christa Salamandra has documented how following the antigovernment protests, observers praised a new generation of artists engaging in creative dissent. Yet, she argues that this theory of sudden rupture from a lethargic past is unfounded. She contends that for years, drama creators had been pushing the boundaries of accepted political discourse and offering truly subversive works.6 Scholars have tried to come to terms with this highly critical culture produced within state co-optation. The word *tanfis* in Arabic means “letting out air” and many Syrians themselves argue that the al-Asad regime uses politically critical television productions to operate as “safety valves” to release frustrations. Lisa Wedeen in, *Ambiguities of Domination*, proffers the theory of *tanfis* as part of her argument, but also maintains that artistic transgressions such as political parodies operate as outlets where a critical and oppositional consciousness flourishes and nourishes a counter culture.7

While Wedeen’s argument is multifaceted, scholars have drawn on her discussion of *tanfis* selectively. Miriam cooke in *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Art Official*, makes the “safety valve argument,” which means that the state permits licensed criticism in order to release pressure thereby allowing injustice to continue.8 According to Donatella Della Ratta, television drama creators during Bashar al-Asad’s rule are no longer bound together by the politics of pretense and shared conditions of “unbelief” as described by Lisa Wedeen. Della Ratta contends that while the previous generation constantly struggled to widen the boundaries of accepted discourse, this new generation of intellectuals is implicated in what she calls “the whisper strategy” – maintaining a comfortable dialogue with power.9 I argue that to link the majority of current drama creators to components of the regime as Della Ratta has done is to remove agency from these intellectuals and transforms them into passive participants rather than savvy creators who navigate through the perils of censorship, state repression, and co-optation in order to create truly subversive work. And surely the theory of *tanfis* 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.10
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With its portrayal of human suffering, attempt to show all sides of the conflict, and the participation of renowned names in Syrian drama, Menbar al-Mawta was one of the most popular miniseries of the season, and one which was heavily discussed on the Syrian streets and Facebook pages from its first episodes. Despite the unnatural setting in Lebanon, Seif al-Din Sbai’i realistically captures the bloodshed in Syria in scenes of explosions and frantic masses running to escape bombings in their neighborhoods. If we are able to look past some of the flaws in character development and sudden, inexplicable personality changes due to the fact that Seif al-Din Sbai’i had not seen the first two seasons, Menbar al-Mawta emerges as one of the most powerful miniseries of the season. It documented the transition of peaceful protests into an armed uprising, sensitively portrayed the growing thirst for revenge, and offered a glimmer of hope for reconciliation.

The story commences where part two had left off, with Abu Zain and the neighborhood men and women heading back home after their peaceful march to the minister’s office to protest the government’s affront to their dignity. Though the minister had promised Abu Zain that those who hurt them would be held to account, they soon learn that the security forces plan to arrest them. Indeed, the government soon throws Abu Zain into prison and compels him to confess on live television that terrorists who wish to eradicate the regime have been funding him. Indeed, the character, Abu Eyad, like other officials above the law, blames his inter-mafia fighting on terrorists. When Abu Nibal, a shabbiha (regime thug) figure whom Abu Eyad fired in part two, bombs Abu Eyad’s building in revenge, Abu Eyad announces that terrorists are responsible. But knowing who is really behind the attack, Abu Eyad tells Abu Nibal, “I was the one who lifted you out of the garbage cans and this is how you repay me? (Episode 7) Abu Nibal symbolizes someone created by the regime, but who then turns on the regime. This is a telling reference to the regime’s support of terrorist figures who later rose against them.

A visual portrayal of how a peaceful man can turn violent when his dignity is assaulted is one of Menbar al-Mawta’s many scenes that poignantly captures how the peaceful protests in Syrian transformed into an armed uprising. Here, ‘Azzam, a low-level guard, refuses to allow pariah officer Ra’oof to enter the mukhabarat building. Ra’oof explodes at the insubordinate young man. He pushes him to his knees, forces him to undress, and shaves his head in front of the other men. When another officer pounds on him with a bat, ‘Azzam finally breaks down and takes hold of a gun. He shoots the gun into the air, then at Ra’oof’s feet. When Ra’oof presses charges against ‘Azzam, another mukhabarat officer, Fayez, tells him, “I saw how you degraded him and induced him to carry a gun” (Episode 4).

After mukhabarat officer Ra’oof humiliated him, ‘Azzam escapes to his parents’ house, knowing that he will have to pay a heavy price for his insubordinance. Although ‘Azzam’s father begs Ra’oof for forgiveness, Ra’oof demeans him to the point that he can no longer hold his head up or peer into his son’s eyes. As the good officer Fayez promises to aid ‘Azzam’s family, Ra’oof continues to abase both father and son. A broken ‘Azzam later joins Abu Zain in prison, and Abu Zain tries to convince ‘Azzam not to take the path of revenge, which will eat away at his whole life.

As the men discuss the injustices that led them to be thrown in prison, the Masakan neighborhood rises in protest. As the men and women in Masakan demand dignity, the mukhabarat officers call them cockroaches and police beat them up. Radwan portrays how the aggressive mukhabarat officers gain the upper hand. Abu Nibal watches the protests on television and asks with bewilderment, “Is that here? Or somewhere else?” (Episode 12). As men and women fight for their dignity in Masakan, other neighborhoods join the protest movement and activists film police brutality on Youtube. The regime co-
opts corrupt men such as Abu Moqdad to spy and report names. Radwan depicts with irony the scene when Abu Moqdad goes to a police officer to inform on his neighbors, and the officer thanks him for his nationalist feelings. Abu Moqdad says that he willingly sacrifices himself for the country, and the officer responds, “We can’t believe our people don’t know all the conspiracies against them and that they aren’t grateful for all the things that the government has done for them. If Syrians were to experience life in any other country, they would kiss us just for the security that we have here” (Episode 12).

Later, an influential, ruthless officer plots to scare the citizens by releasing all criminals from prison. Officer Fayez, who had just struggled to put Ra’oof back in prison, tells those higher up that he does not want this killer to be released. When the conniving officer insists that it is necessary to release criminals like Ra’oof right away in order to scare the masses, Fayez is disillusioned and decides to leave the security apparatus and join the army instead. Radwan portrays the honorable Fayez as an exception to the rule in the security apparatus; on the other hand, he depicts the army as a decent institution filled with poor Syrian men that the security apparatus manipulates. Furthermore, while the majority of officers in the mukhabarat are depicted as ruthless, the protesters in Masakan are shown as fair-minded.

The transition in the peaceful uprising, however, comes when the mukhabarat release the criminals, and an evil criminal profiteer, Mahran, emerges among the Masakan protesters. When soldiers are captured, the protesters do not want to kill them, but Mahran enters the room and shoots them all in cold blood, aspiring to kill anyone linked with regime. The protesters are devastated as they realize that, although this heinous act was the work of one man, it will taint the protest movement. When a young man named Jaber goes to help the men in Masakan, Mahran kidnaps and ransoms him for fifty million Syrian pounds. Jaber tells him that by murdering the army officers out of revenge he is acting just like the security apparatus. He tells Mahran, “You’re ruining everything that the people accomplished. You’re becoming the oppressor and stomping on the rights of the oppressed. You’re eradicating the rights of those who were killed” (Episode 18).

Like this storyline, two central stories in the miniseries revolve around the theme of revenge. One of the soldiers Mahran killed was Umm Ramí’s son, Rami, and now she believes her son is a shahid (martyr). During this time, ‘Azzam’s brother Zain is also killed as he protests peacefully. Umm ‘Azzam cradles her martyred son, whispering, “When you are a man there won’t be too much pain and hurt,” (Episode 18). As Rami’s brother, Nuwar, joins the Syrian army to fight “terrorists,” a recently released ‘Azzam vows to revenge his brother’s death. Abu Zain – who represents the pure voice in the uprising – begs ‘Azzam to remain peaceful, saying, “They also hurt me. But that didn’t turn me into a criminal,” to which ‘Azzam responds, “No one in your family was killed. You’re just good at talking” (Episode 22). Radwan depicts all sides of the conflict, even showing Fayez telling his men in the army not to shoot at peaceful protesters. As the thirst for revenge grows, however, we watch the peaceful protests transform into an armed uprising. As the Syrian soldiers and rebels fight, the government manipulates facts and news broadcasts announce that terrorists are murdering army officers. In a fifteen-minute span of time in Episode 22, one of the most poorly edited parts of the miniseries, we see extensive footage of Abu Nibal beating people, Ra’oof killing innocent people, and extended shooting between soldiers and protesters.

As the revolution becomes increasingly violent, Abu Zain declares, “What is happening here is more complicated than the story that this is a fight between the regime and us. The world is settling its accounts on our soil” (Episode 23). Fayez yells out, “We’re killing each other and we don’t even know what is happening. Where are these weapons coming from? What is happening? We’re all killing in the name of the country” (Episode 23). As ‘Azzam continues along the path of revenge, Abu Zain tells him, “You’ve ruined all that we had accomplished. How do you expect people to trust us? This is craziness. When you know the results of your work will be a catastrophe why are you making this mistake?” (Episode 24). In
an ambush soon after, a relentless ‘Azzam mistakenly kills Fayez, who was carrying an injured soldier, Nuwar, Umm Rami’s second son. When ‘Azzam realizes that he killed Fayez, he breaks down and cries out in pain that he has murdered the most honorable man in the world.

A story of quiet hope emerges when the lives of Umm Rami and Umm ‘Azzam intersect. When Umm Rami recuperates the body of her dead son, she sees ‘Azzam lying next to him. When she realizes that ‘Azzam is still alive, she brings his body home, rather than her son’s, to nurse him back to life. When he recovers, she shows him a picture of her son Nuwar, and he realizes that he killed her son along with Fayez. He calls his sister Sawsan and tells her that he is responsible for the death of the son of the woman who has saved his life. Umm ‘Azzam visits and tells Umm Rami that perhaps together they can do something positive for Syria. She tells Umm Rami the truth, saying that she has the right to kill ‘Azzam out of revenge. Umm Rami tells Umm ‘Azzam that her son is a killer, and Umm ‘Azzam replies, “Maybe your son is a killer. Who knows? I’ll go. Either I’ll hear my son is a shahid or you can call me to escort my son home. Neither you nor I chose this madness. Our disaster won’t end until we try” (Episode 30). Umm ‘Azzam and Sawsan leave, and Umm Rami ponders her choice. The episode ends, showing the faces of both mothers imbued with sadness. We do not know whether Umm Rami will choose the path of peace or revenge, and the story ends ambiguously like the future of Syria.

While the open ending caused fury among fans on Facebook pages, 17 I argue that Radwan intended to symbolize Syria’s uncertain future. Even the terminology used in this season’s miniseries to describe the current unrest in Syria – revolution, civil war, azmeh (crisis), natural disaster – shows that analysis on Syria cannot fit into one neat package. I contend that while Menbar al-Mawta portrays evil on both sides of the conflict, it ultimately holds the government responsible for stomping on the dignity of the masses and turning the peaceful protests into an armed uprising. According to actor ‘Abd a-Hakim Qatifan (Abu Eyad), the miniseries is important because it presents the government as a killer, a failure that is responsible for the destruction of Syria. 18 Furthermore, Radwan powerfully manifests how the thirst for revenge dominated during the uprisings. He portrays how pain and suffering is the natural result of death, and revenge is the natural result of oppression. 19 Menbar al-Mawta is just one miniseries of Ramadan 2013 which show us nuanced ways in which drama creators have dealt with the theme of vengeance, and have pushed for reconciliation as the only path to Syria’s survival. 20

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10 Joubin, The Politics of Love, 11; Forthcoming MERIP.


13 Eyad Shehab Ahmad, Skype interview with the author, September 6, 2013.


16 Samer Fahd Radwan, Episode 4, Menbar al-Mawta (Platform of Death), directed by Seif al-Din Sbai‘i and produced by Klaket and O3 Productions, 2013; Forthcoming MERIP.


20 Forthcoming MERIP.