

The Stories We Tell Against Storytelling A Decade after our Springs

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I

After the pacifist popular insurgency forced Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee Tunisia on a plane in the dark of night of January 14th, 2011, for “safe haven” in Saudi Arabia, and less than two weeks later, the call for protest on Tahrir Square mobilized several thousand Egyptians on January 25th, champions of the “Arab exceptionalism” theory seemed to have been finally proven wrong. “Arab exceptionalism” is a widely pervasive theory that argues that Arabs were exceptionally immune to democratic systems of governance. It emerged after the third wave of “democratization” gained groundswell in the countries that formed the Soviet bloc in the

* This essay combines different versions of several essays previously published in different media. It is also a revised version of the presentation delivered during the conference “A Moment of Art”.

1990s and gained currency among social scientists in reputable western academic institutions and in moneyed think tanks, that pursued the vexing riddle of when (or if ever), Arab societies might be enticed to the winsome prospects of democracy. One of its chief proponents was British historian and Middle East specialist, Elie Kedourie, who argued in *Democracy and Arab Culture* that the expectation was vain because there was “nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world—which are the political traditions of Islam—which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government.” Furthermore he continues, people “had been accustomed to autocracy and passive obedience”.¹ Kedourie taught at the London School of Economics from 1953 to 1990, his writings carried significant sway, and while his wordsmithing and argument – “exceptionalism” – may have seemed a little too extreme or harsh to fellow scholars or experts researching the topic, the more pervasive and less strident version refers to a “democracy deficit” in Arab societies which is linked to the longevity of autocracies in the region. The currency of the theory of Arab exceptionalism is so powerful, that it has entirely blind sighted the “off-frame” and other potential perspectives, specifically whose attention is focused on the long and rich history of social protest in the entire region.

If one considers the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the May 1968 student protests, five decades seemed not to have been sufficient to correct the obtuse Eurocentric perception of that historical moment and include the student protests that took place in Buenos Aires, Lahore, Beirut and in Cairo. A cursory listing of some of the major strikes, citizen actions and mass mobilizations that have marked the contemporary history of the Arab-speaking region, reveals a radically different representation of societies. Going only as far back as the late 1970s –the moment when structural adjustment reforms began to be implemented in exchange for loans and support from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)–, one finds in the case of Egypt, for instance, that food or bread riots (or the rejection of eliminating state-funded subsidies on basic staples, the drastic withdrawal of social safety nets and privatization of vital economic sectors) occurred in 1977. In 1976, Anwar Sadat sought loans from the World Bank to relieve the country's debt burden. After the bank condemned the Egyptian government's policy of subsidizing social welfare and basic foodstuffs, Sadat announced in January 1977 that subsidies on flour, rice, and cooking oil were cancelled as well as state employee bonuses and pay increases. Known as the 'Bread Riots of 1977', the protests were spontaneous, they mobilized hundreds of thousands of workers, students and activists in major cities in the country². It was faced with brutal repression, 79 people were killed and 800 wounded and ended with the deployment of the army, but the

¹ Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1992), p. 5 – 6.

² In 1976, Anwar Sadat sought loans from the World Bank to relieve the country's debt burden. The bank condemned the Egyptian government's policy of subsidizing basic foodstuffs, and Sadat announced in January 1977 that subsidies on flour, rice, and cooking oil were cancelled as well as state employee bonuses and pay increases. The Egyptian 'Bread Riots' of 1977 affected most major cities from January 18 and 19, 1977. The spontaneous uprising by hundreds of thousands of workers, students and activists was faced with brutal repression, 79 people were killed and 800 wounded. It ended with the deployment of the army and the re-institution of the subsidies.

subsidies were reinstated. In Morocco, similar riots occurred in 1981 and 1984, in Sudan in 1985, in Tunisia in 1984 and 1986, and in Jordan in 1989. These riots were invariably quelled and disbanded with excessive ministrations of violence, but they often instigated reforms and a less cruel implementation of the drastic structural adjustment measures.

In Algeria, the October Riots that took place in 1988, mobilized workers, unemployed youth, social justice and democracy activists. The protests began on October 5 in 1988 and were caused to a large extent by sharp drops in oil prices throughout the preceding years, affecting revenue for the Algerian government, as well as by the slow pace of economic and political reform. The protests were violently repressed but they set in motion a process of internal power struggles and public criticism that eventually led to the downfall of the Algerian single-party system that had kept the military-dominated FLN in power since 1962 and instigated democratic reforms. A new constitution was promulgated in 1989, as Chadli Bendjedid accepted the introduction of a multiparty democracy. He was assassinated shortly thereafter while giving a live televised speech to the nation.

The recurrence of protests and strikes had accelerated in the years leading up to the Arab Spring. In the case of Tunisia for instance, it is impossible to write the story of the collapse of Ben Ali's regime without considering the struggles of the miners of the Gafsa Phosphate Company, the largest employer in the Gafsa region in Tunisia³. Following the structural adjustment plan implemented in 1986 and further reorganization policies, by 2006, the number of employees had dropped by 75%⁴. Formed in 2007, the Union of Unemployed Graduates was active throughout towns in the mining region, with regional and local committees. After an accident on the worksite in 2008, a protest erupted and lasted six months, it mobilized workers, unemployed youth, temporary workers, and students. It was the widest protest movement since the Bread Revolt shook the country in 1984 and deployed in a variety of actions, such as hunger strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, and work stoppages on mining sites. In addition, railway tracks were torn apart to prevent transport of phosphate. The movement was also brutally crushed by the regime, but it constituted a milestone for dissenting political groups, and invigorated the disenfranchised youth to act.⁵

Circling back to the case of Egypt, looking at the frequency of labour protests points to an emboldened involvement on behalf of political groups in challenging the culture of fear and violent reprisal from the government. In the span of the five years between 1988 to 1993, there were an estimated 162 labor protests, averaging 27 per year, but in the five years that followed from 1998 to 2003, the average increased to 118. The number of collective actions

³ "State Violence and Labor Resistance: the 2008 Gafsa Mining Basin Uprising and its Afterlives", Corinna Mullin, published on November 2018, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, at: <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/state-violence-and-labor-resistance-the-2008-gafsa-mining-basin-uprising-and-its-afterlives>.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia", Eric Gobe, 2010. HAL ID: halshs-00557826 at: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00557826>.

rose to 265 in 2004, mostly in the sector of textile production, and by 2007, actions expanded to other sectors of industrial production, public and civil services, transport and liberal professions. In 2011, there were only three trade unions independent of direct control by the state that organized 1,400 work stoppages and protests in which an estimated 600,000 workers participated.⁶

The recent history of Arab societies is not only punctuated by bread riots and labor protests, but also social movements pressing for equitable political and economic inclusion of marginalized ethnic and cultural minorities, pluralism, the recognition of cultural difference, and the redress of gender inequality. One landmark social movement was known as the 'Amazigh Spring' in Algeria (*Tafsut Imaziyen* in Amazigh or Kabyle, or simply *Tafsut* for "spring"). After the lecture that the Amazigh thinker Mouloud Mammeri planned to take place in Tizi Ouzou was cancelled, a general strike took place on April 20, 1983, to protest the censorship. Hundreds of Amazigh activists and students were arrested. The indignation was against two decades of the austere policy of Arabization implemented by the FLN's autocracy, and the continuous refusal of the ruling party to recognize Amazigh identity as a fundamental constituent of Algerian society. While the movement was brutally crushed, its impact was to create organizations such as, the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Berber Cultural Movement (*Mouvement Culturel Berbère* or MCB). The Amazigh Spring was also a foundational event for Algeria's nascent human rights community outside Amazigh circles. The bread riots that swept the country in 1988 referred explicitly to the "Amazigh spring" in devising strategies of mobilization and organizing civil actions.

"*Kefaya*" (Arabic for "enough"), the unofficial moniker of the Egyptian Movement for Change (*el-Haraka el-Masriyya Min Agl el-Taghyeer*), was a grassroots coalition of activists from across the political spectrum that expressed overt opposition to Hosni Mubarak's attempts to legate his son, Gamal, the presidency of Egypt, to the widespread corruption that corroded the state, to economic stagnation and to the culture of fear and total disregard for human rights. *Kefaya* first appeared in the summer of 2004, but it was more active and visible a year later, in response to Mubarak's referendum about constitutional changes to grant him an additional term and election campaign. *Kefaya* emerged from social movements that rose a few years earlier and mobilized different groups across communities, namely, protests in solidarity with Palestinians during the Second Intifada (in 2000), and anti-war protests following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The latter spurred the emergence of the March 20th Anti-War Movement and was one of the largest to ever take to the streets since Mubarak had taken office. The first rally called for by *Kefaya* was on December 12 in 2005, it marked the first instance when Egyptian citizens demanded that the president step down. Gathered on the steps of the High Court building in downtown Cairo, some 500 to 1000 activists stood

⁶ From: *Justice for All: The Struggle for Worker Rights in Egypt. A Report by the Solidarity Center*, published by the Solidarity Center, Washington DC, 2010; pp. 26 to 38.

mostly silent, their mouths shut with tape, carrying placards that were emblazoned with a large yellow sticker that read *Kefaya*.

This history is recorded, archived, and studied but it represents a marginal scholarship of the Arab region. It is also recorded and transmitted in song, poetry, literature, and film. These creative fields constitute a repository of the memory of struggle, dissidence, and standing against tyranny. Unlike songs, poetry, and novels, films travel and are exhibited with far greater difficulty, given that prior to the advent of digital media, the circulation of film was constrained by technical contingencies. Therefore, sadly, only researchers or passionate amateurs of Arab film are cognizant of this rich, subversive, and captivating patrimony.

The advent of light-weight digital cameras and post-production software democratized film production drastically, in the Arab world as in the rest of the world. While smartphones were becoming furnished with progressively more sophisticated cameras, the policing and control over the production of film was tightening in the region. And, in tandem, social and political indignation were erupting more frequently. Regimes across the Arab regions prohibited the media (audio-visual and print) from reporting on social movements. For instance, prior to January 25th, 2011, media outlets in Cairo, local, regional and international, were absolutely forbidden from reporting on, or filming the protests staged by *Kefaya*. The protests were never large, a mere handful of fifty to a hundred activists, who were allowed to march over short distances or stand in front of the building that housed the Syndicate of Lawyers, or the contiguous building housing the Syndicate of Journalists. They also gathered around symbolic sites like the Talaat Harb Square. This small group was usually confronted with national security decked in riot gear twice or thrice their number. Only residents of the area, or those who happened to be passing by became aware of them. Even radio reports on traffic were not allowed to mention them although the assembly of riot police disrupted traffic greatly. It is likely that the archives of national security from Mubarak's era holds the largest and most thorough record of these protests, but for average Egyptians, they are forever recorded in two narrative films. Ibrahim el-Batout's *Eye of the Sun (Ein Shams, 2008)* and Yousry Nasrallah's *The Aquarium (Genenet al-Asmak, 2008)*, two very different films, released in the same year, that point to the despair overwhelming quotidian life and film protests in the Wust el-Balad neighbourhood⁷.

Ibrahim el-Batout was a well-known photojournalist and cameraman who had covered several wars in the former Yugoslavia and Sudan, as well as the First Gulf War⁸. He did not

⁷ Wust el-Balad is Arabic for "centre of town", and while the sprawling megalopolis that is Cairo has many centres, the neighbourhood known as "Wust el-Balad" was built during the khedivian era with a view to emulate European modernity. It was also the site of the Egyptian revolution of 1919, and the names of the major figures of that movement emblazon the streets of Wust el-Balad.

⁸ Ibrahim el-Batout earned several awards as a photojournalist, cameraman, and documentary filmmaker covering sites of conflict in Sudan, Pakistan, the former Yugoslavia, and Gaza. He worked for several international media organizations, including ZDF, Arte, and WDR in Germany, where he received the Axel Springer award twice: in 1994 and in 2000. He abandoned journalism and shortly thereafter and in 2005 directed a low-budget experimental first feature, *Ithaki*, that

complete his assignments unscathed, and upon returning to Cairo, he began to work as a cinematographer with independent filmmakers and directed several documentary films. His second narrative feature *The Eye of the Sun* braids stories from his own experiences –sorrows he witnessed and documented, and that he intentionally links together. The morbid consequence of the depleted uranium left by US troops in the first Gulf War, dwindling living conditions for the working poor in Cairo, lack of access for treatment from cancer to a taxi driver’s 11-year-old daughter and the devastation from the avian flu epidemic. Produced on a shoe-string budget, el-Batout shot the film on DV without official permissions, he blended documentary with fiction and invited actors to improvise in reaction to surroundings. He enlisted a cast willing to take the risk of facing reprisals. The film was censored from screening in Egypt and elsewhere in the world with the threat of retribution to the director and crew⁹. The Centre Cinématographique Marocain (under the directorship of late Nouredine Saïl¹⁰ offered to endorse the film, by claiming it a Moroccan production and enabling the fabrication of 35mm prints that made it possible for the film to travel to festivals and eventually screen in Egypt, after censorship was lifted. In a pivotal scene, one of the characters of the film, a taxi driver named Ramadan (Mohamad Abdel-Fattah¹¹) is driving a customer to Wust el-Balad, when they come upon a protest. As he negotiates traffic gone awry, he witnesses the police beating a protestor who manages to escape bludgeoned and needs immediate medical care. Shocked, Ramadan takes him in his taxi, overcoming his fear of violent punishment and rescues him. El-Batout shot the scene by bringing in his actors and props into a real protest that was on-going. Knowing their frequency, he could envisage a minimum of planning to seize the opportunity.

Yousry Nasrallah’s *The Aquarium* is an entirely other story, the film was an international coproduction between Egypt (Misr Films), France (Archipel 33) and Germany (Pandora Films), with funding from Arte France and the World Cinema Fund. The film cast Egyptian stars, Amr Waked, Gamil Rateb, Bassem Samra, Ahmed el-Fishawi and Tunisian-born Hend Sabry. The film’s plot tells the story of the encounter of two listless souls, Laila (Hend Sabry) a radio host for a late-night talk show who listens to people’s woes and provides advice, and Youssef (Amr

blended documentary footage with scripted fiction. He shot Nadia Kamel’s ground-breaking documentary *Salata Baladi* (*Egyptian Salad*, 2008). After *The Eye of the Sun*, he directed *Hawi* (2010), in similar vein. And after the revolution, he directed *Winter of Discontents* (2012), starring Amr Waked. *The Eye of the Sun* lists Tamer el-Said as co-screenwriter, Ahmad Abdallah as editor, and Hala Lotfy as producer. In fact, they were all close friends and were mobilized to support el-Batout in his adventure and to shoulder the artistic as well as political risks. Each of them went on to direct award-winning auteurist films in the years that followed.

⁹ See “*The Reel Estate: ‘Ein Shams’ success may inspire generations*” by Joseph Fahim, published on May 15, 2009 in *Daily News Egypt* website: <https://dailynewsegyp.com/2009/05/15/the-reel-estate-ein-shams-success-may-inspire-generations/>.

¹⁰ Nouredine Saïl was trained in philosophy but was a passionate cinephile and was widely known as a film critic. He founded the National Federation of Cine-Clubs in Morocco in 1973, that he presided until 1983, which was a fulcrum of clandestine political dissenting activity. After working in television as director of programming, he was appointed to direct the Centre Cinématographique Marocain from 2003 to 2014. He passed away from COVID in 2020.

¹¹ Mohamad Abdel-Fattah is an actor, playwright and theatre director who hails from Ain Shams. He worked with a group of amateur actors, presenting independently financed theatrical performances across the country. His troupe had taken over an alternative performance space in Wust el-Balad known as Rawabet in 2005 that was part of The Townhouse Gallery and the Factory.

Waked) a loveless, and emotionally numb anaesthesiologist, who is coming to terms with his father's slow and impending death from illness. In the build up to their encounter, secondary characters that intersect their lives speak directly to the camera, almost in confessional mode. The film's central theme is the profound *mal-être* of Cairenes, the opening sequence is especially stunning, as the camera hovers above the night-time landscape of Wust el-Balad (downtown Cairo) and in a voice-over a man says: "I am scared". In a long monologue, he then proceeds to list of all that scares him. The film includes scenes that show poultry farms in direct reference to the avian flu, as well as scenes of the recurring protests in Wust el-Balad. When the strike broke out at the Gafsa Phosphate Mines in 2008 in Tunisia, the government imposed a very tight media black-out. Eventually internet services were shut down momentarily to prevent activists from sending reports to Tunisians and to the rest of the world. Images of actions captured by striking activists emerged a few days after they started using untraceable circuitous networks of international hackers¹². Similarly, video footage captured by the striking workers of Misr Spinning Weaving Company were "smuggled" through networks of activists in defiance of a total media black-out solidly imposed by the Mubarak security forces. Some of the videos attested to previously unimaginable political acumen by striking workers, in one instance, videos documented workers occupying the space of a factory that mostly employed women, who were refusing the new management regimes. They had chained themselves to their machines, while their husbands brought them meals accompanied by their children on a visit their mothers voluntarily locked onsite.

II

For the past decade, I have given presentations and lectures about the "Arab spring", about what happened in the Arab region, making the arguments that firstly, the Arab Spring has a history, it is neither a moment of exception, nor errancy. Secondly, I have been arguing that the politically engaged creative fields have been a surrogate territory for forging radical political imaginaries. Today, as the "political gains" seem all lost, and the region seems sunk in a nightmare far worse than a decade ago, the argument I want to defend is in fact the reverse, namely that the arts have not been a surrogate field, but the refraction, the product, and the expression of emancipated political subjectivities. Subjectivities that have been irrevocably transformed by taking part in a radical political collective experience of change. Furthermore, and on the passing of a decade, drawing inspiration from Tunisian jurist and scholar, Yadh Ben Achour¹³, I am no longer hesitant from referring to the series of jacqueries that constituted our springs as a revolutionary.

¹²See: "The Making of North Africa's Intifadas" by John P. Entelis and Laryssa Chomiak, published in Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), Issue Number 259 (Summer 2011); available at: The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: meaning and significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia", Eric Gobe, 2010. HAL ID: halshs-00557826 at: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00557826>.

¹³ Yadh Ben Achour is a Tunisian lawyer with an expertise in public and in Islamic law. After the toppling of the Ben Ali regime, he presided over the Higher Political Reform Commission that was entrusted with drafting a new constitution. He is a prolific author and esteemed jurist who has received several honors and awards. Among his publications: *The Islamic*

Although mostly known for his scholarship on Islam and democracy, Yadh Ben Achour dismisses the representation of these revolutions as having “failed”, on account of the counter-revolutionary, populist forces having seized in power a decade after the insurgencies. To many, Ben Achour’s position might seem counterintuitive, or wildly unreasonable, but I endorse it whole-heartedly. He argues that the yardstick that scholars and observers have been using to evaluate the revolutions of the Arab Spring are likely not appropriate, namely comparisons with the French, Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. Revolting against royals, tsars or emperors enshrined with religious writ and ruling over feudal regimes is not the same as unseating dictators backed by junta and enshrined by an economic mafia. In fact, there is a lot to gain from expanding the fields of reference, exploring the 19th century in the wider regional scope for instance, namely insurgencies in the non-western world, like Ousmane Dan Fodio’s revolution that founded the Sokoto Caliphate (1803-1903) in Fulani and Hausa territories (present day Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Niger). Or the revolutions against the russification campaigns in the Caucasus, also in the 19th century, in Chechnya, Dagestan, and the tragic Circassian genocide. More importantly, Ben Achour proposes to shift the perspective and examine the Arab Spring from ‘within’ the events, in other words, the subjectivities that the revolutions produced, acknowledging that each one develops its own specific language, logic and momentum or temporality. The revolutions are not yet done, he says, and their future remains wide open and democratic hope glides above its territory¹⁴.

In 1965, the late Pakistani militant and scholar, Eqbal Ahmad, published a provocative essay titled “*How to Tell When the Rebels Have Won*”¹⁵, in which he argued that the American military and its South Vietnamese allies had in fact lost the war because they had failed to inspire the support of the Vietnamese people, and because their moral isolation, locally and internationally, was nearly total. Ahmad reminded readers how a few years earlier, in 1961, the French military had overpowered the Algerian Resistance in the battlefield but had lost the war politically: “France faced a sullen Algerian population that it had conquered but could not rule [...] the F.L.N. was defeated in the field, but it continued to out-administer and ‘de-legitimize’ the French.”¹⁶ Ahmad’s essay has become seminal because it crystallized a popular sentiment that the political establishment dismissed, revealed an intellectual horizon, and ushered in a new standard of critical thinking. Forty-one years after its first appearance, the essay was republished in October 2006 in the “*Positively Nasty*” issue 5 of LTTR (*Listen, Translate, Translate Record*), a journal dedicated to sustainable change, queer pleasure and critical productivity. For Emily Roysdon, who authored the preface of the re-edition, Ahmad’s

Question Before the United Nations Human Rights Committee (ed. Jovene / Università degli Studi di Ferrara, Naples-Ferrara, 2021) ; *La révolution, une espérance* (ed. Fayard/Collège de France, Paris, 2022).

¹⁴ See: Lecture delivered at the Collège de France on January “, 2022, titled « *Considérations théoriques sur les révolutions arabes et dans le monde africain et musulman actuel* », available at : <https://www.college-de-france.fr/agenda/cours/les-revolutions-dans-la-pensee-et-dans-histoire-des-faits/considerations-theoriques-sur-les-revolutions-arabes-et-dans-le-monde-africain-et-musulman-actuel>.

¹⁵ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/1965-1975-how-tell-rebels-have-won>.

¹⁶ Idem.

analysis was valuable for rethinking the production of representation and for the: “rigorous ethical research and experience-based procedure that gives precedence to the subjects of history with no capitulation to power, and no place in the analysis that reveals an eventual consolidation of power or image. It is a practice that constantly re-examines the forces acting on people, movements, history, and memory. It advocates porous boundaries and a radical process of becoming.”¹⁷ These are the subjectivities I have and continue to see manifest in film, literature, dance, music and the visual arts. I am not trained as a political scientist or theorist, but as a curator of art and film, this foray into the social sciences has helped me understand the captivating emancipation from self-censorship in the arts, the sudden salience of motifs and the emergence of new formal languages in film, literature, and the visual arts.

At the barest level, the Arab Spring consisted of protests that mobilized hundreds of thousands of people, in capitals and provincial cities, who stood and squatted public spaces demanding political freedom and economic justice, or a life of dignity. In other words, the political event was physical. They marched, stood steadfast and sometimes even danced in public spaces in defiance of prohibitions from despotic regimes that have demonstrated, time and time again, unrestrained license in resorting to violence. They gathered voluntarily and of their own will, free of coercion, fully cognizant of the risks they were taking. Across genders and generations, the groups belonged to different social classes, ethnic, cultural and community groups. Their only protection was in their numbers. Together, day after day, in lending their bodies to an act of political defiance, they were creating a new body politic, and reclaiming civic spaces. This essentially physical-political experience stripped regimes of their *hayba* —legitimacy and authority— but was first and foremost an act of emancipation from fear and complacency. The body was the first site of reclaiming agency and subjectivity.

Since 2011, representations, narratives and dramaturgies of the body were also emancipated in cinema: for the first time since the early 1970s, stories of sexual experiences have become the subjects of fiction and non-fiction films, actors have appeared in the nude, sexual acts are enacted explicitly (within the norms of mainstream cinema), and queer identity is represented in all its complexity, liberated from judgement or moralizing. Right as the pacifist civilian uprising was being pushed to devolve into a violent sectarian crisis, Lina al-Abed’s medium-length documentary film, *Damascus my First Kiss* began its international festival tour. Ten years later, the film is unduly forgotten, although it constituted an important foretelling of the profound changes in the way filmmakers would narrate and represent bodies in film. A Palestinian-Jordanian, Lina al-Abed’s *Damascus, my First Kiss* is her third film, she was motivated to probe the subject of Syrian women’s rapport with their sexuality in the conservative environment of Damascus. She cast Lina Shashazi and Asma Khashtar, two seemingly very different women, but whose experiences overlap in unexpected ways. Blonde, luscious and skimpily clad, Shashazi hails from one of the most well-known Christian families in the city, while Kashtar, a Quran teacher, is the granddaughter of the former Mufti of Syria.

¹⁷ <https://www.ltr.org/journal/5/how-to-know-when-the-rebels-have-won>.

Their testimonies confirm that patriarchal mores and traditions overrule religious difference, as both women could not control their destinies when they were young, and both accepted to be filmed because they wanted to avoid their daughters endure the same fate. They speak unguardedly to al-Abed's camera, Lina Shashazi describes her wedding night as rape, while Asma Kashtaro dreams of riding a bicycle with her daughter, in defiance of the prejudice that prohibits observant Muslim women from doing it. In the past three decades and more, there have been several important documentaries centred on the condition of women in Arab societies, to cite a few references, Hala Lotfy's *On Feeling Cold* ('*An el-Shu'ur bel Buruda*, 2007), Hala Galal's *Women's Chitchat* (*Dardashah Nisa'iyyah*, 2004), and Omar Amiralay's *The Sarcophagus of Love* (*Al-Hubb al-Maow'ud*, 1984), their focus veered towards the social, political and affective aspects of women's lives, the relationship to sexuality was systematically averted. Released in 2012, the film was in fact shot shortly before the revolution and became an emblem of its spirit for a short while.

Nabil Ayouch's provocative *Much Loved* (*Zin Li Fik*, 2015) a crudely realist dive into the underworld of escort girls and the commerce of sex in Marrakesh, was the outcome of years of documentary research the director had undertaken listening to sex workers and recording their experiences. The film was banned in Morocco to appease conservative and religious mores outraged by the film's transgressions of morality and denigrating representation of Moroccan women¹⁸. Hailing from a wealthy and protected family in Morocco, Ayouch is the Moroccan filmmaker with the widest international visibility, it was surprising that he would knowingly expose himself to the ire of authorities and put his actors at risk. To him, there was an urgency to denounce the hypocrisy that shrouds the commerce of sex in his country and give voice to defenceless young women. One of the most provocative elements in the film – and likely the undisclosed reason for incensing the Moroccan officialdom – is the character of an wealthy Saudi jetsetter who repeatedly fails to be aroused by his Moroccan temptress, and after she catches him watching gay porn in the bathroom to inspire an erection, proceeds to beat her senseless. Two years earlier, in 2013, critically acclaimed novelist and writer Abdellah Taia, also Moroccan, had adapted his own autobiographical (and eponymous) coming of age novel, *Salvation Army* (*L'armée du salut*) to the big screen. The film was funded entirely from international sources, without any Moroccan funds involved. Translating text into eloquent cinematic language, the film told the story of a fifteen-year-old youth who hails from a working-class family in Casablanca, and who is overwhelmed by his troubling fancy for his older brother. He understands that he is gay and has several erotic adventures with older men until he can leave Morocco to study in Switzerland and come into his own. In a country where homosexuality is penalized as a crime, Taia's success in obtaining the permission to shoot the film was unexpected, but the film was banned from theatrical release in Morocco. After a successful tour at international film festivals, it was allowed two screenings at the Moroccan National Film Festival in Tangiers in 2014. The screening raised furore in Moroccan media, but

¹⁸ See: "'*Much Loved*' ou le cinéma haram" by Driss Bamzil, published on June 2, 2015, on his blog Le Jeune Maghrébin at: <https://lejeunemaghrebin.mondoblog.org/2015/06/02/much-loved-ou-le-cinema-haram>.

eventually turned out to be only a tempest in a teacup. Perhaps what is most relevant to note here is that both filmmakers were able to enlist a cast and crew respectively, to produce their films, in other words, professionals from the industry who were willing to take the risk because they endorsed the films' missions. They were not inhibited by the fear of reprisals and shared the filmmaker's sense of necessity to bring the film to life.

The most radical in this vein is Sélim Mourad, an openly gay Lebanese actor and filmmaker, whose trilogy *Linceul* (*Linceul*, 2017; *Linceul II: Cortex*, 2018 and *Linceul III: Moss Agathe*, 2020) and personal non-fiction *This Little Father Obsession* (*Imbarator al-Namsa*, 2016) transgress by far boundaries, codes and conventions around nudity, queer representation and narrative structure. *This Little Father Obsession* is a hybrid film that travels between the filmmaker trying to reconcile the family's history and prospects for the future. Baroquely styled, it staged fictional scenes in which he dialogues with the ghost of his deceased sister and confronts old lovers. Being his parents only surviving child, as a gay man with decreasing fertility, he faces up to the responsibility that the family's lineage will end with him. Mourad decided to push taboos further in the trilogy *Linceul*. He invited five actors (across gender) to lock themselves with him in a house and explore the limits of "nakedness", physically and allegorically. At the same time, not far from the apartment where the film experiment is unravelling, ISIS combatants were rampaging through northern Iraq, throwing gay men from the top of buildings, raping Yazidi women and women from non-compliant religious and ethnic minorities. The contrast between the interior of the apartment and the outside world could neither have been starker nor more pain stricken. In the sequel, *Linceul II: Cortex*, the experiment continues but with fewer actors. The film begins with a text that reads: "*Beirut, summer 2017. Some individuals were meeting in a house to pursue an experiment they had started before. Tensions arise. It is 29 degrees in the shade. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is dead. Thus, opens the time of the initiates.*" Elliptical and more abstract, *Linceul III: Moss Agate*, begins with Mourad addressing an alarming nodule that appeared on his testicle, and evolves to reflect on death, resurrection, and art. The moss agate is a rare semi-precious stone, in which moss has been trapped inside an agate stone, petrified forever. Selim Mourad's work incarnates a wild, novel and far cry of an emancipated imaginary, because it deliberately and poetically transgresses taboos, the unsaid, the unsayable and the forbidden from representation, soaring to a space of freedom precisely at a moment when despair might have shut down the ability to regenerate a dismembered political body. *This Little Father Obsession* was censored from public screenings in Lebanon, while the trilogy (also produced on a shoe-string budget with very small funds), was made "below the radar" so to speak. All four films travelled to international film festivals, and *This Little Father Obsession* screened at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage and at the Cairo International Film Festival with a "+18" warning for viewers.

Two of Ala Eddine Slim's feature films, *The Last of Us* (*Akher Wahad Fina*, 2016) and *Sortilège* (*Tlamess*, 2019), paint stories of social and political outcasts whose bodies transform visibly

to incarnate a willed and final excision from society and its contracts. *The Last of Us* follows the journey of a migrant from south of the Sahara to Europe, crossing desert, sea, and other obstacles, until he is lost, absorbed into the forest. Gradually, as each milestone in his crossing is achieved, he rids himself of possessions and even the attributes of humanity, fusing more intricately with the natural environment around him. Slim's next feature, *Sortilège*, draws, in fantastical motifs, the transformation of a man, this time in an absconding army soldier who finds refuge in an abandoned concrete structure in the middle of a forest. Hirsute, covered in rags, when the pregnant woman he has kidnapped delivers her baby, his own breasts grow plump with milk and he is able to feed the new-born. *The Last of Us* and *Sortilège* become increasingly silent as their central protagonists (who are nameless to begin with) have fewer and fewer reasons to speak, instead communicating through other means, making sounds and signs and using their bodies. In *Sortilège*, Slim resorts to the genial device of ocular titles that magically fade in and out of the screen.

Hicham Lasri's "dog trilogy" neither offers narrative sequels nor concerns itself with dogs, but Lasri casts dogged, offbeat, provocative, and dysfunctional characters whose disposition, or behaviour, contravene the codes of realism. Morocco's most maverick, punk, and prolific filmmaker, Lasri has also authored novels and graphic novels where these motifs are even more striking. What he refers to as the "dog trilogy" includes *They Are the Dogs* (*Hom al-Kilab*, 2013), *Starve Your Dog* (*Jawwe'h Kalbak*, 2015) and *Jahiliyyah* (originally titled *Jahiliyyah Dog*, 2018). The title *They Are the Dogs* is an unambiguous expression of contempt, although it is deliberately not explicit as to who is accusing whom. *Starve Your Dog* is the first part of a popular Arab proverb that says, "Starve your dog and he will follow you," and here too, another reference to contempt. And lastly, *Jahiliyyah*, which refers to the period preceding the advent of Islam, is also used in Moroccan dialect as a synonym for "hogra," or contempt. The trilogy is about rule, power, abuse, impunity, submission, and material and spiritual despair. *They Are the Dogs* follows a crew of indolent journalists whose coverage of a protest goes awry. Afterward, they stumble on a haggard old man, Majhoul (Hassan Ben Badida), who has just been released from a secret jail where he served a thirty-year sentence for having participated in the bread riots of 1981. Disoriented by the changes in the city and the protests past and present, Majhoul (the name is the Arabic word for "unknown"), who has forgotten his own name, is hounded by the guileless journalist who is eager for a "story." *They Are the Dogs* and *Starve Your Dog* represent a stark portrait of Casablanca as a sun-drenched but sinister city, inhabited by folk the state has abandoned and who have become doggedly self-interested, offset by a cynical, self-censoring, and complacent media. In both films, ghosts surge from the past to derail the present. Majhoul is the emaciated, almost toothless, pathetic ghost who incarnates a past no one wants to recall or excavate. In *Starve Your Dog*, the ghost is the character of Driss Basri¹⁹, resurrected from oblivion, who in real life was minister of the

¹⁹ A former police officer who eventually was promoted to oversee the Moroccan secret police, Driss Basri served as interior minister from 1979 to 1999. He eventually became the reigning monarch at the time, Hassan II's right hand, and therefore his "iron fist". His legacy is morbid and his name is associated with state-enforced terror. He was discharged of his position in 1999 by the new monarch Mohammed VI. He moved to France where he died from cancer in 2007.

interior in the 1980s, during the country's "Years of Lead"—its years of state-imposed terror, unbridled repression, and torture against political dissenters. In the film, a television newscaster who's nearing her fifties, and whose career has become lacklustre, receives a call from Driss Basri, who explains that he did not die but only lapsed from view, and that he will grant her an exclusive tell-all, no-holds-barred interview a few hours after the call. This proposal wreaks havoc among her crew, who are afraid of reprisals from disclosures about a past everyone wants to forget. Meanwhile, his lascivious, nymphomaniac daughter roams the streets offering sexual favours to passers-by.

Set in 1996, *Jahiliyyah* harks back to the near past, to an event that shocked the country: the ruling monarch (Hassan II at the time) decided to cancel *Eid al-Adha* (the feast of sacrifice) that year. An Abrahamic religious holiday that involves the slaughter of sheep, it is a day that offers poor Moroccans a rare occasion for celebrations and satiation from eating meat. *Jahiliyyah* is a choral film that laces the lives of six characters embattled with humiliation and despair despite wide social and economic backgrounds. A small boy is stubbornly looking to eat meat despite the king's ban, while a young woman pregnant out of wedlock is desperate for a resolution as her blind father, concerned only with racial purity, rejects her suitor, who, in turn, attempts suicide. Two of Lasri's other films, *The Sea Is Behind (Al-Bahr Min Ouaraikoum, 2014)* and *Headbang Lullaby (Dharbah fi al-Ra'ss, 2017)*, are traversed by these same motifs, but it is in his graphic novels *Vaudou (2015)*, *Fawda (2017)*, and *Marroc (2019)*²⁰ that he goes much further, with transgressive and psychedelic storytelling and characters, and with unhindered depictions of sex.

In the aftermath of the Arab spring, the body as a site of political regeneration and erotic emancipation is neither glorified, idealized, nor aestheticized. The marks of years of tyranny, poverty, repression and frustration are exposed, and sometimes even amplified. A dark parable on the toxic lure of power, Néjib Belkadhi's *Bastardo (2013)*, tells the story of Mohsen (Abdel Moneem Chouayat) who was raised by Am Salah (Issa Harrath) after he found him as a baby discarded in a trash bin. The film takes place in a poor and merciless neighbourhood, where gangsters roam free and from which there is no way out. Rejected all his life because he was a "bastard", Mohsen's fortune changes when the cell phone company installs a relay tower on his rooftop, but he transforms into a vindictive and power-hungry monster. The only lucid, kind-hearted and altruistic character in the film is Bent Essengra (Lobna Noomene), a dejected woman on whose skin suddenly appears hundreds of swarming insects. She lives in serenity with the insects while they inspire horror in anyone who sees them, except for Mohsen, especially before his fortune changes.

Mohammed VI revoked his Moroccan passport in 2004, but the French authorities chose to overlook that fact and granted him freedom of movement.

²⁰ *Vaudou*, Editions Le Fennec, Casablanca, 2015; *Fawda*, Editions Kulte, Casablanca / Les presses du réel, Paris, 2017; *Marroc*, Editions Le Fennec, Casablanca, 2015.

This fantastical element is one of several metaphorical motifs with which Belkadhi infused the film throughout, as all its characters have ambiguous, almost repulsive, exaggerated features, in their physique or disposition. And these aesthetic and narrative motifs find echo in several novels published around the same time by a new generation of Arab novelists that redefined the noir and the fantastical genres at once, such as Nael Eltoukhy's *Women of Karantina (Nisa' al-Karantina, 2013)*²¹, Mohammed Rabie's *Otared (2016)*²² and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad (Frankenstein fi Baghdad, 2014)*²³ as well as Hassan Blasim's short story collections *The Madman from Freedom Square (2009)*, *The Iraqi Christ (2013)*, *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories (2014)*, and *God 99 (Allah 99 – Emailat Mutarjem Emil Cioran, 2019)*²⁴. While each has its distinctive singularity, it is possible to sense the resonance of poetics and motifs as they depict worlds that come undone, ruled by despots and tyrants, where temporality is elastic, agile, moving back and forth between present, past, and future, where characters bear the markers of physical and psychological abuse overtly and explicitly, and in turn reciprocate it. The texts also contain uninhibited depictions of eroticism and sexuality that are, more often than not, steeped in violence and cruelty, shown with attention to detail. The essay lists a handful of films and novels to illustrate the argument, but the list is by no means comprehensive, there are far more works.

In addition to the radical uninhibition regarding sexuality and the emergence of queerness, the body politic was itself radically gendered. Masculinities were entirely undone and "feminities" reconfigured in the space-time of protests. That too became manifest in the various expressive creative media (films, novels, stage plays, performances, etc.). The representation of women and their bodies has changed drastically, not only are they on the frontlines of confronting the anti-riot gear clad army, but they kick back, they raise their fists in rage and they form human shields to protect men. In terms of language, spoken (colloquial) and written, a new gendered and queer vocabulary has emerged and imposed itself, howled in protest slogans and chants and virally-disseminated through memes on social media. Locution and dialogue have been also commuted, in the past decade, a remarkable number of films from the Arab region have such spare dialogue that they are practically silent. Helmed by internationally awarded Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman, whose entire filmography

²¹ *Nisa' al-Karantina (Women of Karantina, A Novel)* by Nael Eltoukhy, was first published in Arabic by Dar Merit in 2013. The English edition translated by Robin Moger was published by The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2014. It was shortlisted in its English edition for the inaugural FT/Oppenheimer Funds Emerging Voices Awards.

²² *Otared* by Mohammad Rabie was published by Dar al-Tanweer in Cairo, in 2014. The English edition translated by Robin Moger was published by The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2016.

²³ *Frankenstein fi Baghdad (Frankenstein in Baghdad)* by Ahmed Saadawi was first published by Manshurat al-Jamal (Al-Jamal Publications) in Beirut, in 2013. It received the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014. The English edition was translated by Jonathan Wright and published by Penguin Books in 2018.

²⁴ *The Madman of Freedom Square*, was translated by Jonathan Wright and first published in English by Comma Press in 2009. The book won the English PEN Writers in Translation Award. A heavily edited version of the book in the original Arabic language was finally published by the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing in Beirut, in 2012, and immediately banned in Jordan. *The Iraqi Christ* was first published in English by London-based Comma Press in 2013, also translated by Jonathan Wright. The book won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2014. *The Corpse Exhibition: And Other Stories of Iraq* was published by Penguin in 2014. *Allah 99-Emailat Mutarjem Emil Cioran (God 99)* was published by Almutawassit Books in Milan in 2018. The English edition was translated by Jonathan Wright and published by Comma Press in London in 2020.

has audaciously seceded from Arab cinema's strong proclivity for garrulousness, several post-Arab spring films dare to relinquish long-windedness. To cite an additional example besides Ala Eddine Slim's two features mentioned earlier, Egyptian filmmaker Mohamad Abdallah's *Rags and Tatters* (*Farsh wa Ghata*, 2013) was a deliberately dialogue-less sobering counterpoint to the self-congratulating clamour of the crowds that had succeeded in toppling Hosni Mubarak's regime. Following a nameless fugitive from jail (played by Asser Yassin) who wanders through Cairo looking for shelter, while protestors surge and take the city's iconic Tahrir Square. Abdallah's protagonist does not dare participate in the political mobilization, neither do the inhabitants of the economically and politically disenfranchised neighbourhoods where he finds refuge.

III

Although political systems were not overturned, but political imaginaries were emancipated. Starting with the body as the site where the repression and self-censorship of expressions of sexuality and eroticism were coerced, enforced and policed. Filmmakers, artists and writers have in fact ventured much further in their release, their criticality addresses the banality of evil (despotic regimes and police states) and its legacies, the toll of living with fear, the wages of complacency and forced submission, enduring economic and social precarity without ever finding safety in the state. They depict a lacerated, dismembered social body politic, a monstrous system that reproduces small monsters, a guileless authority that has no legitimacy but endures through the nonliable ministration of violence. In the past decade, filmmakers, artists, poets and novelists have invented allegories, metaphors, elaborated visual codes and transformed formal languages, to represent the Real, and to transpose their lived experience with provocative lucidity, playing dexterously with the structural collapse of temporality between past, present, and future. While it seems predictable that counter-revolutionary forces should seize power shortly after dictatorships have been unseated, it is a far stretch to proclaim that the insurrections were pointless, or that they did not impart change. The films, novels and visual expressions mentioned in this essay are expressions of subjectivities and imaginaries that have been transformed by the experience of radical political action. Before concluding, I wish to narrate two anecdotes of mobilizations that illustrate the vitality, creativity and audacity of imagining political action, but which traverse the reverse path I travelled throughout the essay.

I choose only two out of hundreds of anecdotes, because on the one hand, I fear they risk slipping into forgetting, and on the other hand because what they point to is significant. The first is set in Siliana (a province located in the centre of the Tunisian countryside), in 2012, a year after Ben Ali was forced to flee the country. The Tunisian Islamist Ennahdha party governed the country then, and the party's General Secretary, Hamdi Djebali, was prime minister. The government had appointed Ahmed Ezzine Mahjoub, an Ennahdha cadre, as

governor of Siliana, and the province had remained mired in severe economic marginalisation after months of his appointment. He had demonstrated gross incompetence and blatant partisan nepotism, the social and political problems had kept worsening. When unions and various civil society organizations asked him for a meeting to engage with these pressing issues, he refused to grant them an audience, denying the legitimacy of their demands with contempt. The general population of Siliana responded with a call for a general strike and for a mobilization in front of the governor's office where protestors chanted "*Dégage*"²⁵ ("Get out") on November 27, 2012. The governor gave license to the police and security forces to use violence with excess, and after four days of protests the toll had reached 300 wounded, including 20 protestors blinded by snipers. The governor and prime minister justified the use of violence by accusing the protestors of being mercenary to external and internal actors who conspired to spread chaos and undermine the government's legitimacy. They also claimed that they had initiated the acts of violence. On the following day, the inhabitants of the town of Siliana marched out of the town, on the freeway leading to Tunis chanting: "*Tu peux bien gouverner, mais tu gouvernera seul*"²⁶ ("If you want to govern, you govern alone"). The protestors walked five kilometres, calling for an end to the violence and the dismissal Ahmed Zine Mahjoubi. This form of political action took the government by surprise, and it extricated people from the terms of engagement that the regime brought to the table. The ministry was forced to dismiss the governor and appoint someone more apt for the position to avoid further embarrassment. The image of the crowds marching away from the town, leaving the governor and police behind, was a stark reminder of Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's well-known painting "*Il Quarto Stato*" (literally meaning the "fourth estate") that he completed in 1901²⁷, and that Bernardo Bertolucci filmed for the credit sequence of his seminal epic *Novecento* (1900, 1976)²⁸.

The second anecdote is set in Palestine. On January 11, 2013, a group of 250 Palestinian activists (hailing from different regions of historic Palestine) and foreign supporters set-up 25 tents on privately-owned Palestinian land in the area that the Israeli state identifies as E1, located in the environs of Jerusalem to prevent the government from building a 3000-unit settlement complex²⁹. The activists named the camp "Bab el-Shams", in reference to the

²⁵ The slogan « *Dégage* » was the rallying cry for protestors during Tunisia's jasmine revolution.

²⁶ « *Tunisie : La marche de Siliana pour la dignité. Protestation et tension contre le gouvernement d'Ennahdha* » an editorial feature of Nawaat, published on December 6, 2012, available at : <https://nawaat.org/2012/12/06/tunisie-la-marche-de-siliana-pour-la-dignite-protestation-et-tension-contre-le-gouvernement-dennahdha/>.

²⁷ The « fourth estate » is a reference to the notion of "third estate". Completed in 1901, the painting is considered to be Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's most accomplished artwork, after a compelling series dedicated to social and labour struggles, that he began in 1892, namely *Ambasciatori della fame* (The Ambassadors of Hunger), *Sciopero* (The Strike), *Il cammino dei lavoratori* (The Workers' Path). *Il Quarto Stato* hangs in the Galleria d'arte moderna di Milano.

²⁸ Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, *Novecento* (or 1900) boasted a star-studded cast that included Robert de Niro, Gérard Depardieu, Dominique Sanda, Donald Sutherland and Burt Lancaster. Bertolucci wanted to make an epic historical film to revisit Italy's modern history at the dawn of the twentieth century. The film's pictorial reference and title is Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's painting "The Fourth Estate".

²⁹ See: "*Israel, E1 and the meaning of Bab Al-Shams*", by Patrick O. Strickland, published in the Middle East Monitor webnews site on January 25, 2014. Address: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140125-israel-e1-and-the-meaning-of-bab-al-shams/>.

eponymous award-winning novel, *Bab al-Shams (The Gate of the Sun)* by Lebanese writer Elias Khoury³⁰. The novel that told the story of a Palestinian man who became a refugee in Lebanon in 1948 while his wife and parents stayed in Palestine. For decades he crossed the border secretly to see his wife. They met in a secret cave in the mountain that they called Bab al-Shams. The site was forcibly evacuated on January 12, and 100 people were arrested. On January 16, the Palestinian Authority created a formal village council for Bab al-Shams³¹. The Israeli government intended to remove the tent outpost, claiming that it was illegal, but the activists received an injunction from the Supreme Court of Israel prohibiting the government from doing so for 6 days. The following day, the occupants were evacuated by the Israeli army, the tents were left in their place. It is remarkable is that the novel was the reference for a political action.

I conclude by referencing another film that caused a great deal of tumult, namely, Nadia Kamel's documentary *Salata Baladi (Egyptian Salad)* released in 2008. The daughter of communist pro-Palestinian militants, Kamel filmed the journeys of her parents to Italy and to Israel, as they visit her mother's family members who had migrated to both countries in the 1950s. Her mother had been raised as an Italian Catholic although her father was a Jewish immigrant from the Ukraine, who had fled the pogroms at the turn of the last century. Her mother hailed from the community of Italians that were settled in Egypt since the previous century. After the Tripartite aggression against Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1956, the European communities of Egypt (mostly Italians and Greeks) were compelled to return to their "homelands". Meanwhile, the Israeli government realizing that they were demographically outnumbered by Palestinians, launched underground campaigns to lure or compel the Jewish communities of neighbouring Arab countries to settle in Israel. Seeing her parents' health deteriorate, Kamel thought that both visits were timely, the filming prompted the surfacing of the complex and forgotten history of a plural and diverse Egyptian society. Kamel shot the film without the requisite permissions, knowing they would be summarily denied. As soon as the news of its premiere at an international festival was released, the Egyptian government issued its banning. Nadia Kamel's membership in the syndicate of filmmakers was revoked, she was accused of being an Israeli collaborator, and received numerous threats. Prompted by government officials, the media waged a ruthless campaign against the film and against all those who endorsed it. And yet, in spite all of this, in the year 2009, Kamel received more than twenty-five invitations from associations and non-profit organizations to screen the film and engage in discussions afterwards. The length of the film is slightly more than two-hours, an unusually extended duration for Egyptian audiences, especially for documentaries. On average, the discussions afterwards extended further than an hour. These anecdotes can remain as such, but I believe they should be considered in how we study and draw a

³⁰ Bab al-Shams, by Elias Khoury, was originally published by Dar al-Adab in Beirut, in 1998; the English edition was translated by Humphrey Davies and published by Archipelago Press in New York in 2005.

³¹ <https://www.jpost.com/diplomacy-and-politics/pa-makes-bab-al-shams-council-as-e1-tents-demolished>.

chronology and history for the Arab Spring: Siliana, Bab el-Shams, *Salata Baladi*, are but a handful milestones out of hundreds. And the fight continues.