



**The 1980s**

Personal accounts of life, culture and society in the Arab world

**Education in Damascus, communism in Aleppo and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood**

Syrians Firas Younes and Maryam Hallak share their stories of imprisonment and civil service in Syria

**Lebanese-American photojournalist and documentary film-maker George Azar**

On his experiences reflecting societal truths through photography and film during the Lebanese civil war and the Palestinian Intifada

**Torture, interrogation, assassination and confiscation during forty-two years of Gaddafi rule**

Libyans Abubaker Shareef and Najat Kikhia talk about human rights abuses under the infamous dictator

**The Power of Graphic Stories**

A look at the use of comics in advocacy and education, and an illustrated story of the willpower of a Mauritanian woman, by Lebanese-German artist Lena Merhej

**An Arab in Manchester**

Lebanese writer Leena Saidi, on discovering her Arab roots as a student in the UK





Tarikhi, meaning *My History* in Arabic, is a digital library and print journal produced by the NGO Sharq.Org and centred around disseminating individual voices of the Arab world.

The Tarikhi website is home to hundreds of documented interviews, produced by Sharq and other organisations and individuals engaged in the region.

The Tarikhi journal presents some of these interviews as stories, as well as contributions from researchers, writers and cultural actors about and related to oral histories and storytelling in the Arab world.

[www.tarikhi.org](http://www.tarikhi.org)



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This journal is published by Sharq, a non-profit organisation that works to promote and strengthen pluralism and independent thought in the Arab world.

Sharq's mission is to better the ability of Arab citizens to hear and be heard, and to engage in honest and productive interactions. Sharq carries out this work primarily through the production of oral history collections that capture the stories and experiences of individuals across the Arab world. As such, the organisation's efforts have centred around empowering citizens to gain skills for expression and debate, through publishing, training and cultural initiatives.

To date, Sharq has produced varied collections of hundreds of video and audio recorded oral histories from across the Arab region. Recent collections focus on culture and society in Syria prior to 2011, human rights abuses during the Gaddafi era in Libya, and employment for Palestinians in Lebanon.

Sharq launched Tarikhi - The Library of Arab World Voices to house our collections of oral histories in a single, virtual library accessible to all. Through workshops and online training, visitors from around the world are invited to explore, help curate and expand the library for future generations.

All collections produced by Sharq are published under Creative Commons license in a bid to ensure maximum exposure and impact of all individual voices. The Tarikhi website also houses research papers, theatre scripts and other outputs that resulted from the study and use of oral histories in the library.

[www.sharq.org](http://www.sharq.org)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

This issue focuses on the 1980s, a decade of marked change in the region.

08

## **Maryam Hallak**

A teacher sheds light on the Baath party's education policy in Syria

12

## **Firas Younes**

A former activist and prisoner recalls Aleppo's student movement

16

## **Lebanese-American photojournalist and film-maker**

### **George Azar**

On the value and challenges of giving voice to victims of war through photography and film

28

## **The Power of Comics in Advocacy**

On why comics are increasingly seen as a creative medium for storytelling and advocacy

30

## **Mauritanian film-maker May Ekhou**

A graphic story about strength and courage, by Lebanese-German artist Lena Merhej

34

## **Abubaker Shareef**

A former political prisoner talks about torture and dissent in Gaddafi's Libya

38

## **Najat Kikhia**

An educator describes Libya's infamous public hangings and the disappearance of her brother

40

## **An Arab in Manchester**

British-Lebanese journalist Leena Saidi, on discovering her Arab roots as a student in the UK

46

## **Projects that Inspire**

Syrian and Palestinian women, survivors of trafficking and Lebanese prisoners are the focus of theatre productions aiming to give voice to the voiceless and reflect society through the eyes and experiences of individuals

# WELCOME TO OUR INAUGURAL ISSUE

◆ This journal, and  
◆ all that it holds,  
is a labour of love.

A love for the Arab world, a love for the 1980s, a love for stories, and a love for sharing.

Growing up, I heard so many stories that shaped my view of the Arab world and its people. The storytellers - mostly friends and family - didn't consciously know that they were contributing to a collective narrative brewing in my mind, nor did I realise the impact of their experiences on my understanding or love for countries I had never lived in.

That changed, when my move to the region brought about a series of questions that could only be answered through the conscious activity of listening.

Many in the region had understandably been unwilling to speak openly before 2011, but the revolutions

of that year brought about a desperate desire to engage, to share stories, to be heard, by a people who for decades had been denied a voice, as individuals and collectively.

So I listened, intently, consciously, and purposefully.

I had questions that could only be answered by collectives, but wanted details that only individuals could give, and that is when I discovered oral histories and began to capture stories and build collections.

I found others with the same curiosity and sense of wonder, and together we continue to listen and learn.

This journal is a labour of love, made possible by a collective that loves stories.

Reem Maghribi  
Editor in Chief

# Maryam Hallak

## A teacher sheds light on the Baath party's education policy in Syria

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*Written by Anas Weppi, based on an interview conducted by Omar Bakbook in Beirut in 2016*

*The interview with Maryam Hallak is part of the oral history collection "Syrian Histories" produced by Sharq and published at Tarikhi.org. Read more about the collection and the over 120 interviews it includes on page 46.*

◆ Maryam Hallak got married at the age of seventeen, then, with her husband's encouragement and her mother's help in taking care of the children, went on to continue her education at a teacher's college.

Maryam taught in Damascus schools for four years before moving from the Bab Touma neighbourhood to the city of Harasta on the outskirts of Damascus. She taught in a school there for about three years before being promoted to headmistress in 1985.

"There was an atmosphere of increasing religious conservatism in Harasta," recalls Maryam, "and there were widespread problems, especially in the tenements."

Students at the school came from different social and economic classes. Some of their families were poor, others rich. Some were well-educated, others illiterate. The school was located next to a run down area, and some students' parents used marijuana, while others were the sort Maryam describes as ignorant. Those students got special treatment from the school administration, which tried to take care of their hygiene and to intervene with their families to deal with the problem of their dropping out of school.

◆  
 "I worked hard, around the clock, and still I received neither praise nor thanks from the Department of Education"  
 ◆

Maryam attempted to solve all the issues she faced—whether with parents or teaching staff—with calm and understanding. Quite often she found herself trying to help solve some students' social difficulties, stemming from their parents' separation, and was more than once able to resolve differences between warring mothers and fathers.

"I worked hard, around the clock, and still I received neither praise nor thanks from the Department of





*Maryam Hallak,  
photographed by Nay Aoun*

Education,” says Maryam. “Meanwhile, a single mistake committed by one teacher was enough to bring rebukes and reprimands down on the entire administration and teaching staff.”

The Ministry of Education issued a decree forbidding any sort of corporal punishment within schools. The problems within the administration and faced by the teachers worsened, as there was absolutely no support of any kind to help discipline students and enforce order. This was compounded by a number of problems and adverse conditions at the school: overcrowded classrooms, the fact that certain students didn’t respond to dialogue, the rampant spread of disruptive behaviour and offensive acts among the students, inefficiency among some of the newer teachers, and the influence of nepotism in the hiring process. And so the decree, says Maryam, rather than helping to alleviate problems, exacerbated them.

“The military character of the ruling regime dominated the educational institutions,” says Maryam. “The students were forced to memorise quotations by president Hafez al-Assad as part of their school curricula, and the Baath Party had a huge influence and widespread control, helping decide which teachers were hired, determining administrative guidelines, supervising youth military camps and encouraging students to join the Party by reinforcing the idea that they wouldn’t be able to find a job in the future unless they joined its ranks. In addition, security forces continually interfered and paid visits to schools, either on official business or on their own personal initiatives, coming to make sure there were photos of the president in the classrooms, forcing teachers and students to participate in demonstrations, ensuring that the salute to the flag was carried out and forbidding prayers or the appearance of any religious celebrations.”

◆  
“The students were forced to memorise quotations by president Hafez al-Assad as part of their school curricula, and the Baath Party had a huge influence and widespread control”  
◆

As the social makeup of the outskirts changed in the 1980s, with more and more people from the city moving to the suburbs, there was also the advent of some sects, such as the Alawites, who prioritised the education of their children. Subsequently, Maryam noticed an improvement in the state of education. A new generation of educators and university graduates emerged, while some of the girls in the area entered the workforce and the majority of teachers became female.

Maryam remembers the modern educational curricula of the first decade of the 21st century as strong and rich in substance. Overcrowding in classrooms and teacher

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neglect, however, limited the potential positive impact of the new curricula on students. This meant that education continued to rely on memorisation and rote repetition, with information usually forgotten after students completed their exams.

◆  
“The military character of the ruling regime dominated the educational institutions”  
◆

Accompanying the official state curriculum were generic activities such as weekly reading periods or health education sessions, which were supposed to be interactive and exploratory, integrating technology and using computers to engage students further. The lack of classroom time and teachers’ neglect to follow up on these activities, however, made them no more than hollow exercises. They turned into mere formalities enacted for the benefit of the educational supervisors, who were often quite conservative and fought every advent of renewal or creativity.

# Firas Younes

## A former activist and prisoner recalls Aleppo's student movement

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*Written by Anas Weppi, based on an interview conducted by Enas Alsafadi in Beirut in 2016*

*The interview with Firas Younes is part of the oral history collection "Syrian Histories" produced by Sharq and published at [Tarikhi.org](http://Tarikhi.org). Read more about the collection and the over 120 interviews it includes on page 46.*

◆ Firas Younes began his political activity at an early age, in 1978 joining a Leftist opposition party, the Communist Action Party in Syria.

"The Party's fundamental concern was democracy," says Firas, "calling on the government to lift the martial and emergency laws and demanding the release of political prisoners."

Firas's political career lasted only a few months before he was arrested in the summer of 1978, during his first year of study at the Faculty of Economics at Aleppo University. He spent a year and a half in prison, though Firas remembers it as a rich and formative experience. He spent most of his time reading—something the prisoners were allowed to do. He credits that reading in helping him establish a strong foundation of knowledge, allowing him to break the rigid Marxist indoctrination that had landed him in prison. This in turn led him to learn about and become open to different political and religious currents and introduced him to the study of anthropology and history. In prison, he also met many people, from all different walks of life in Syria, and of all different sorts of political, social and nationalist stripes.

◆

"When I arrived in Aleppo it was raining. I walked under the rain for the first time in fifteen years, finally realising a long-held dream."

◆

After Firas was released, Syria witnessed a period of political turmoil, with protests and sit-ins taking place at Aleppo University. The early 1980s also marked the arrival on the political scene of the Muslim Brotherhood, a political movement that adopted a tactic of military operations to oppose the regime.

Firas recalls how the Communist Action Party at the time chose a third line of action: opposed both to the regime's dictatorial tyranny on the one hand and the hardline religious and economic policies of the

He spent a year and a half in prison, though Firas remembers it as a rich and formative experience

Muslim Brotherhood on the other. With this stand, the Party managed to win over quite a few supporters, despite the regime's repressive crackdowns.

Firas was arrested for the second time at the end of 1981, and he remained behind bars for fifteen years. His imprisonment was spent between Aleppo Central Prison and Adra Prison in rural Damascus Province, with Firas finally ending up in the infamous Tadmor Military Prison.

"The ten months we spent at Tadmor Military Prison were equal to all the years we'd previously spent in the city prisons. Or perhaps they in fact surpass them in terms of pain, torture and the erosion of every human dignity," says Firas.

During his long period of detention, Firas followed up on all the political changes that were taking place in Eastern Europe, on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, vainly hoping that these transformations might change something for him; that they might somehow have ramifications that would reach all the way into his prison cell.

Firas describes this second period of detention as a long adventure, and says that his time in the city prisons was in fact quite enriching, as inmates were allowed to read books and play sports.

He was privy to some important milestones during his detention at Aleppo Prison, such as the arrest of twenty-six members of his Party, men and women both. The women were later released, while the men remained behind bars. The rampant arrests did not stop there: security forces took to arresting anyone they suspected of even having ties to Firas and his Party. Among these detainees were Khalid Rashid, Jamal Eddine Kalo and Omar Fawzi Bakr, who had absolutely no formal ties to the Party though they supported its liberal ideals. They refused to cooperate with the authorities and eventually died in prison, either due to disease or the circumstances of their arrest.

Firas remembers the violence that broke out in Aleppo Prison on March 10, 1986 when two prisoners from

the Muslim Brotherhood, who had cooperated with the authorities and had been promised release two days prior, mutinied because their release had been delayed. One of them stabbed a prison guard, and then they managed to seize weapons from the guards. They threatened the lives of everyone in the prison, jailers and inmates alike, particularly those who identified as Communists. Firas and his companions took shelter inside their cell for hours, until a commando team broke in under personal orders from president Hafez al-Assad, mowing the rebels down with heavy gunfire.

On 25 December 1991, a large number of political prisoners were released, but Firas was not among them. Instead, he was transferred to Saydnaya Prison, spending some months there before being moved again, this time to Adra Prison. Firas describes the conditions at Adra as better than what he'd experienced before, as prisoners had beds and access to televisions, multiple outdoor courtyards and over 15,000 books at the prison library. At the same time, however, pens and writing were not allowed. This did not stop some detainees, however, with Firas among them, from managing to get their hands on prohibited materials—even on Party newspapers—thanks to the corruption of some jailors. Other jailors were themselves members of different parties and cooperated with the prisoners, with some of them having direct links to the leaders of these parties.

A number of charges were leveled against Firas, including belonging to a secret organisation and working against the aims of the 'Baath revolution'. Several lawyers volunteered to defend him and his comrades, but the accused asked them to step down, wishing instead to establish the unconstitutional nature of the trial and the failure to fulfill the legal conditions required to mount it. They sought to undermine the value of the entire case against them, both from a constitutional and legal standpoint. Firas presented his arguments in writing, passing copies to the lawyers with the aim of having them disseminated through international and human rights organisations.

A verdict was finally issued and Firas was sentenced to fifteen years in prison. He had already served thirteen

Syria witnessed a period of political turmoil, with protests and sit-ins taking place at Aleppo University in the early 1980s, a time that marked the arrival of the Muslim Brotherhood on the political scene, who adopted a tactic of military operations to oppose the regime

years at the time, and had received word that he was supposed to have been sentenced to death, but that this directive had gone unheeded because the authorities were not able to prove the charges against Firas.

Firas was released in 1996, leaving Adra prison and heading to Aleppo. "When I arrived in Aleppo, it was raining," he said. "I walked under the rain for the first time in fifteen years, finally realising a long-held dream. Many of my relatives and friends came to welcome me, as well as families of some prisoners. I remember I couldn't sleep for three days straight because I was so wound up."

After his release, Firas learned that the regime had entirely done away with the Communist Action Party. All that was left of it was a handful of comrades, some of whom had left for Europe, while the ones that remained were in a state of organisational inactivity, according to Firas.

In 2003, there were some attempts to revive the Party under the same name, and they issued their own newspaper under the new title "Al-Aan" (Now), replacing the old one, "Al-Raya al-Hamraa" (the Red Banner). Firas became active in the Party once more, writing articles and editorials for their newspaper.

The Party was one of the signatories to the Damascus Declaration in 2005 (a statement of unity by Syrian opposition figures) and worked for a time with the National Council in 2007 - which used to meet at the home of opposition member Riad Seif - before freezing their activity with the Council and announcing their resignation from it due to internal divisions.

Firas refers to some of the shifts that took place within the regime in Damascus after the year 2000, with both rhetoric and crackdowns increasing in their violence. Fearing arrest, his Party limited their activities to publishing their newspaper and maintaining some organisational ties, though the security apparatus never stopped questioning them or singling members out to warn them to tone down their speech.

# Coming of Age During a Civil War

## An interview with photo-journalist George Azar

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Written by Reem Maghribi

Reem Maghribi is Managing Director of Sharq

Photographs, taken in Lebanon and Palestine in the 1980s, courtesy of George Azar

◆ “I had watched the whole war from afar and I had tried to make sense of it by reading major American and international publications, and listening to my family and other people coming from the region. The narratives were so wildly different, I couldn’t make any sense of it all,” recalls George Azar as he sits in his home in West Beirut, not far from where he spent half of the 1980s, documenting scenes of chaos and destruction. “I came to get some clarity on the issue, and also because I found that the representation of Arab voices and the Arab point of view at the time was almost non-existent.”

Inspired by a photobook in a bookshop, Azar decided to become a photojournalist covering news. “I was hoping to document what was going on in Lebanon from an Arab perspective and with a humanist eye.”

In August 1981, as Lebanon was six years into a gruelling civil war, Azar left the United States and his studies at Berkeley and headed to Lebanon. A flight, a few hitchhikes and a couple of bus rides later, Azar arrived in Kousba, in the northern district of al Koura, the quiet, peaceful village in the northern mountains that his great grandparents emigrated from during the Ottoman era.

A few days later, he heard that a car bomb had blown up in the Bab al Tebbaneh area of Tripoli. “I went down to take a news photo for the first time. I heard it was a car bomb, so I thought I would see a car that had a bomb in it, that had exploded. When I got there, I found half an entire city block devastated, with the facades of all the buildings ripped off. It was jaw-droppingly horrible... and a shock to my system.”

Down in Beirut, Azar was later struck by the prevalence of weapons among civilians. “The city reminded me of a sort of post-apocalyptic Mad Max world where you could see that there had once been an organised, civilised society, but where now there was no rule of law and no working civil infrastructure. It was a scary place.”

In the 1960s, 70s and early 80s, Arabs were for the most part absent from international popular culture, and when they did appear they were





*George Azar arrived in Beirut in 1981, in the midst of the civil war, with two cameras, a few rolls of film and \$75*

either villainous or buffoonish, or both. This, Azar says, resulted in the unconscious internalising of self-hating, racist stereotypes. “Though I only became aware of that after I came here.”

He also went through a professional awakening in his first years as a reporter, first for Associated Press, then U.P.I. and later Newsweek. “I was in Hamra with my friend Mike Nelson, my college roommate who was also an aspiring photojournalist, when we heard shooting somewhere along the Green Line. We started walking towards the gun fire, expecting that we’d eventually find the streets deserted as we came closer to real danger.” Instead, Azar found people washing clothes barely fifty meters from where a gun battle was going on.

“Six years into the war, people had become accustomed to it, and just went about their daily lives as if nothing was happening.”

A group of teenagers with machine guns took an interest in Azar and Nelson and led them to their “headquarters” where they proceeded to take out weapons and ammunition from various

cabinet drawers, before taking the photographers on a “little raid” along the front of the Green Line in Basta. A series of six of the photographs were published by Associated Press later that day, under the title “Machine Gun Alley.”

Upon accepting the photographs, in exchange for a fee of \$150, the AP bureau chief advised the young photojournalists to take photographs that visually captured Lebanon and the war. He said that photographs of men with guns are good, photographs of children with guns are better, and photographs of women firing guns would guarantee a front page around the world.

“I spent years trying to get the most exciting and most visually dynamic bang-bang pictures I could, and it was only after a time I realised that these were really all feeding the fire of disinformation. There was little room in the spot-news photo business for more reflective photographs and for pieces that told a deeper story. Maybe there was, but having not gone to journalism school, I really didn’t have the critical facilities to deconstruct what was going on at the time. It took me a little while to catch on to that.”

◆  
“Representation of Arab voices  
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In the summer of 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon, Azar went on assignment for Newsweek. “I was so thrilled to be reporting the Israeli invasion for one of the biggest news magazines in the world that I was really gung ho.”

On the third day of the invasion, after the Israelis had crossed the border and were pouring into Lebanon, Azar headed south with a driver, Nelson and a French colleague, the photographer Annick Lacit.

Israeli helicopters and jets were strafing the roads, and so, in Jiye, saying it was too dangerous, the driver refused to go further. While the group was



*The death of photographer  
Adnan Karaki. 1984.*

photographing the smouldering wreckage of a Palestine Liberation Front (PLO) camp – they came under direct artillery bombardment. In the chaos, the driver panicked and fled. Azar’s colleagues jumped into a retreating PLO jeep. He was alone.

“The Israelis were about two kilometres away. I took cover with a group of PLO fighters and later a group of civilians. The town was overrun, the fighters I presume killed and I was taken prisoner by the Israelis. But I managed to hide some of my film in my underwear.”

After three days in captivity, observing the Israeli assault on Damour, Azar was transferred by helicopter to a military base in Israel. He then made his way to Newsweek’s Jerusalem bureau, where he handed over his rolls of colour film. “I had photographs of the Israeli tanks blowing up houses at point-blank range. I had pictures of Palestinian mothers screaming for their lives, trapped inside a house being shelled and strafed with machine gun bullets. It was quite traumatic.”

Two of Azar’s photographs were published in the following issue of Newsweek. “They were pictures of Palestinians firing at Israelis. None of the



*“The Smurfs”, Jawkal and Zutti. Chiya, Beirut 1984.*

pictures of the Israeli actions were published. They disappeared forever. When I went to New York and asked about it, my agency told me if I pushed the issue further, I'd never work in the New York news business again, and that's when I realised...”

The 1982 war was, says Azar, the first time America saw the news of the Arab/Israeli war as viewed from an Arab capital and not from correspondents based in Tel Aviv. Azar was more determined than ever to change the American media landscape. “I wanted to be part of a type of coverage that wasn't seen much at that time, so I didn't give up on it and I didn't go home. I kept working away.”

The next opportunity to cover a major historic moment in the Middle East came in the winter of 1987, at the eruption of the Palestinian Intifada. Azar was in the US at the time, working at the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper and recovering, he says in hindsight, from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

“I left for Palestine and spent a year taking photographs. This time though, I didn't take assignments from the corporate news media. I kept all the photographs for myself and eventually published a book with University of California

Press in which I shaped the narrative. I realised that I didn't want to spend my life illustrating stories I had political problems with."

Azar had also realised that despite having spent six years in Lebanon, he had no pictures of the country that he loved. "I had no pictures of what captured, to me, the spirit of the Lebanese people. I had good photographs of a horrible place at war, and stirring images of political conflict and of violence and tragedy but they didn't tell the full story of Lebanon that I had wanted to tell."

In hindsight, Azar wished he had focused more on individual human stories, reflecting the humanity of people trying to keep their dignity and retain a sense of normality in the worst of times.

"That's what really struck me more than anything else. Even though the situation was barbaric, and the actions of certain militias and militiamen were barbaric, the Lebanese people have a certain humour and lightness about them that continued in wartime."

He did document Beirut's teenage snipers and militiamen. "They were perpetrators of violence, and victims of it. They were thrust into roles that were beyond their control. I rarely got the sense that people were motivated by blind hatred, on both sides of the line. They felt that they were acting out of self-defence. To reduce all of them to stone-cold killers, I thought was unfair."

With a renewed sense of purpose and the freedom of working independently, Azar went to Palestine to take photographs not only of the insurrection itself and the people there, but also the little things that he loved about the place. "That was very rewarding to me."

The war in Lebanon had caused Azar to lose faith in political slogans and ideals, but when he went to Palestine, the feeling was rekindled. "I saw an entire nation unified across classes and genders, really united in a cause that was bigger than them. I saw people fighting an enemy that was overwhelmingly powerful, and resisting against brutal odds to assert basic human dignity."

Based in Jerusalem and Ramallah, he travelled in the West Bank and Gaza, spending many days in one town, staying with its people throughout the frequent raids on their homes. “I spent a lot of time in a town called Beit Sahour, a middle-class mostly Christian town outside Bethlehem. On Saturdays, the women would work overtime doing washing and cleaning and households chores, so that everything would be done. Sunday, they gathered in church and, defying Israeli military orders, marched in the streets holding high their hand sewn Palestinian flags.”

Israeli forces would raid the town, surround the demonstrations, beat the demonstrators, and shoot people. “I had never before seen old and young, upper-middle class and lower-class people, Christians and Muslims united together, holding hands, and singing songs in defiance of this brutal military occupation.”

It was a time of hope and daring and idealism, recalls Azar, and he is pleased to have been able to capture it, write about it and report it. Much has changed in the occupied country since the Intifada. “Before they built the wall, Palestinians and Israelis used to mingle much more than they do today. As bad as it was at that time, it wasn’t as bad as today. You felt that there was some hope, that there was an end to it all in sight. It was at a time when, I think, reconciliation was still possible.”

It wasn’t unusual in those days, he recalls, for a group of Palestinians from Ramallah to get into a car and go to Jerusalem to the Israeli side of town, to enjoy the restaurants and the theatres, or for Israelis to go to Palestinian areas to shop or do business. “There was interaction between people. And now, with the wall, it’s illegal for Israelis to enter Ramallah or the Palestinian controlled parts of the West Bank. The settlements were a fraction of what they are today.”

Azar also recalls the diversity of Ramallah. “It was a small village town at that time, a fraction of the size it is today. The policies of the Israelis have been designed to force immigration out of the country so that anyone who can leave Palestine would leave and the people who are left behind are those who aren’t able to emigrate.”



*Eighty-seven year old Salman Selim Aral takes shelter against the winter cold in the rusting school bus where he lived after Israeli forces destroyed his ancestral home and bulldozed his olive orchards. He died shortly after this image was taken. Palestine, 1988.*



*Israeli soldiers beat women attempting to free a prisoner. Al Amari Refugee Camp, Ramallah, Palestine 1988.*

*On a hilltop in the West Bank girls wave the outlawed Palestinian flag at a group of Israeli soldiers menacing them with tear gas from below. Beita, Palestine, 1988.*



The sectarian balance has also changed a great deal. “The Armenian population of Jerusalem for example has dwindled since those days. The Christian population as a whole has dwindled because of decades-long assault.” The result is that the Palestinian community has lost some of its diversity.

“At the same time NGOs, whether by design or unintended effect, have also drained the life out of the Palestinian national movement. People who would go out for demonstrations that were organised by political parties no longer do so. Instead they all work for NGOs and there’s an NGO economy. The population has lost a lot of its political organisation, and so NGOs have had a negative effect, on balance, in Palestine.”

Azar continued to work in Palestine, with intermittent stints in the US, until 2010. He lived in Ramallah for a period and also in Gaza. “I worked



as a journalist there. I was in Gaza during the Israeli withdrawal in 2005. We thought that the dawn of Palestinian statehood had arrived.”

Instead the Israelis increased their blockade on Gaza, destroying the airport and restricting access to the sea. “Instead of becoming free, Gaza became an even more impoverished prison with little contact with the outside world. Time and time again, hopes that things would transition into a better place were frustrated. That was heartbreaking. That’s why I left.”

After a while in Jordan, Azar returned to Beirut in 2012, where he has lived since. Upon returning, he made a documentary, called “Beirut Photographer,” which traces some of the people and places he had photographed during the civil war in the 1980s. “In the course of making that film, I was able to resolve a lot of the personal issues I had with Lebanon and deal with some of the psychological damage I had inflicted on myself being here. I realised that this is my place, the place where I feel comfortable. This is my society and my culture. So I moved here and planted my flag.”

◆  
“I gravitate towards telling the small stories, and trying to tell a larger political truth through these small individual stories”  
◆

As a descendant of people who left the region when it was known as Greater Syria, Azar does not have a narrow sense of nationalism. “Our family thought of themselves as Arabs and as Syrians. The distinction between Palestine and Lebanon and Syria and Jordan was to me a minor distinction. I related to all those nation-states. The cause of Palestine still burns brightly in me, but something in the culture here in Lebanon resonates within me.”

He still feels connected to Lebanon and enjoys photographing it. “I experienced a kind and civilised society torn apart, and saw how quickly the genie of violence, once let out of the bottle, can lead to

disaster, and how uncontrollable that violence is once unleashed. That was my main takeaway of the 1980s.”

The decade and his experiences during it also stripped Azar of any illusion of romance or heroism in wartime.

◆  
“If there is no one there to record it for posterity, it’s as though it never happened”  
◆

“I realised how propagandised I was by war films that romanticised the experience of war. It’s as criminal as trying to romanticise an automobile accident. The pain that you see at the time of the incident - whether it’s a car bomb or a sniper attack, or a shelling - doesn’t end there. It echoes on in the people who survived it and it echoes on in their children. It makes it all the more heartbreaking.”

That may explain why Azar is now firmly focused on telling the stories of individuals.

“I’m a simple person, and I tend to focus on simple things. I gravitate towards telling the small stories, and trying to tell a larger political truth through these small individual stories.”

The sense of responsibility he feels in telling peoples’ stories motivated him to risk his life to tell a story. “If you are the only reporter on the ground in a particular place, then recording this incident, what happened, the words spoken and the point of view of the people involved, falls on you. If there is no one there to record it for posterity, for most of the world, it’s as though it never happened. If the story is important enough for you personally, I believe it is something worth risking your life for.”

## Photography, Writing or Film?



*A human skull and Islamic flag stand at the checkpoint entrance to West Beirut. February 1984.*



*A man weeps after a night of fierce artillery bombardments as curious children peer inside. Badawi Refugee Camp, North Lebanon, 1983.*

Azar may have started out as a photojournalist, but he has since also worked in the mediums of writing and film. How do they compare?

“They all have their strengths and their drawbacks. Photography is very special because in some senses it’s the most powerful of all. It can crystallise a moment and sometimes that moment can crystallise an issue. It doesn’t happen frequently, but when it does, it’s truly magical and can be very important.

I found however that most of the time photography tells an incomplete story, so for me making documentary films – which is the form I tend to work in now – is more rewarding. I am able to tell a much fuller and richer story in film, which has the advantage of sound and continuity. It is a powerful medium to get a message across and, through broadcast or the internet, can reach millions of people. Films are however expensive to make. You need funding from either a news or a granting organisation,

so you can’t tell as many stories as a still photographer, who can work on their own with very little money.

I find writing to be the most satisfying. Whenever I prepare a picture story that includes both photographs and writing, it’s always the writing that I find most fulfilling. I feel able to express in writing what I’m thinking or seeing in a more nuanced way than in photographs. The combination of writing and photography works really well and documentaries involve the same process of mixing textual language with visual information.

Each medium has its beauty and its strengths, so it’s difficult to compare. Some subjects, some stories, simply lend themselves to one medium or the other. At this point, I’m looking to reach people that are outside my normal audience, to bring the story and the humanity to people who are not already convinced. I find that important and attractive.”

# The Power of Comics in Advocacy

Written by Lena Merhej

◆ Though their use as a form of storytelling dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, comics have in recent decades been used to tackle a growing range of topics for outreach and advocacy, giving individuals and communities a voice in a format that is universally attractive and palatable.

Comics are rightly and increasingly being recognised as an effective way to influence views on political, economic, and social systems and institutions. Their core strength lies in their ability to express complex stories and situations in a format that appeals to a wide cross section of people.

By using different layers in narration - through perspective, colour, symbolism and repetition - comics have attracted readers of all ages. Their ability to depict complexity, through the entanglement of images and text, and the use of archival material such as maps, graphs and photos, has prompted educators to develop comics that address multi-layered subjects, including science and history. Ideas related to philosophy, economics and sociology have also been presented in a number of comics and graphic novels.

Strong and impactful visual storytelling requires a great deal of research and documentation. A standout example of this is the famous book *Footnotes from Gaza* by Joe Sacco. It both presents oral histories about the Deir Yassin massacre of 1948 and portrays the author/illustrator as he conducts the interviews as part of his documentation process. This storytelling approach, combined with visuals that portray both past and present and consideration of the reliability of the testimonies and information gathered, propels the reader to connect with the characters and the injustices they faced.

With this in mind, and as part of the project HERE AND NOW supported by UNESCO, I have been training activists at Lebanese NGOs in the production of comics for social justice. The aim has been to address human rights and create educational and advocacy materials, and the results have been plentiful. One story produced focuses on the normalised discrimination of women and domestic workers, while another highlights the achievements of Lebanese feminist May Ziadeh.

Lena Merhej is a Lebanese-German visual storyteller and founder of StoryCenter

The way comics can tell a story, using different layers in narration, imagery, perspectives including colours and symbolism, make them ideal for explaining complex subjects, says Lebanese illustrator Lena Merhej

One comic book in the making is a personal narrative of a coming out story and the discrimination one often faces to love and to be loved. Another is being made for children in Beirut's Palestinian Shatila camp, to introduce them to the Baylissan cultural centre and the people that work there. A further challenging but unique initiative saw a series of interviews related to the military trials of 2015 developed into a visual reportage.

Working in and teaching visual storytelling motivated me to launch Story Center, a professional training centre where visual stories are made. Whilst the format of comics to tell stories is relatively new, compared to other formats such as poetry or song, it has grown to be such a powerful medium that there are now a number of academic courses and degrees that focus solely on the subject.

The Masters programme in Visual Narrative at the Lebanese American University enables students to explore story-telling strategies, illustration methods, character development and script writing, while the Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative at the American University of Beirut is an academic body for the study of Arabic comics that aims to promote the production, scholarship and teaching of comics, and develop and maintain a repository of Arabic comics literature.

Educators at the critically acclaimed course Graphic Novel Project taught at Stanford University believe that "through collaboration, a story can become richer, more inspired, and more layered with human experience."

I agree. A recent collaboration, with Oxfam and fellow artist Azza Abou Rebieh, resulted in the development of eight graphic stories that focused on women in Arab countries who had not yet been recognised for their courage and efforts to make the world a better place. Each account was presented as a four-page graphic story and developed into an animation for the benefit of illiterate audiences. The story of Mauritanian May Ekhou is presented overleaf.













By Lena Merhej and Azza Abou Rebieh,  
for StoryCenter and Oxfam

# Abubaker Shareef

## A former political prisoner talks about torture and dissent in Gaddafi's Libya

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*Written by Reem Maghribi,  
based on an interview conducted  
in Tripoli, Libya in 2012*

*The interview with Abubaker Shareef is part of the oral history collection "42 Years of Oppression" produced by Sharq.Org  
Read more about it on page 48*

◆ Abubaker Ali Shareef was a 22-year-old student of law at Benghazi University when he was first arrested. "I was part of the student movement in Benghazi. We were a group of students with good grades and a desire to establish an independent student union and rid the university of government interference. In those days the revolutionary councils of Gaddafi and the internal security forces put pressure on the university."

Following a conflict between the students and the authorities at the university in April 1982, many students were arrested in Benghazi and Bayda. "They arrested 52 of us at first, then whittled us down to eight. They interrogated us in the 7 April prison in Benghazi for three months and then took us to the civilian prison of Jdaida in Tripoli."

◆  
"We would lie in the coffin-like box and our hands and feet, protruding through holes, would be electrocuted"  
◆

The months they spent in the 7 April prison were terrible. "The prisoner in the cell next to mine, Naji bou Hawiya, died after three days of consecutive torture. I saw remnants of blood in the bathroom when I went. We suffered the same torture." Shareef recalls a coffin used as a confessional box. "We would lie in the closed box, our hands and feet protruding through small holes. There were smaller holes around our mouth area. We would be electrocuted and beaten with sticks. If we passed out, they would pour water through the holes by our mouths to wake us up. It was a very difficult experience. They put me in it on my very first day in prison. Even now, thirty years later, you can see the scars on the back from where they beat me and put out cigarettes on my body."

The facilities at the prison were also very unhygienic. "We would be allowed to use the washroom for exactly two minutes per day. There was no running water. There was blood everywhere, and the smell of sweat, urine, and other such odours filled the rooms."



*Abubaker Shareef,  
photographed by  
Naziha Arebi*

Shareef has since gained access to his intelligence file. In it was a photograph of a young handsome 22-year-old with wild hair and a grown beard. “They took this photograph of me when I arrived to Jdaida, after three months imprisoned in Benghazi.”

Five months later, on 12 December 1982, the students went before a court. “It was the permanent revolutionary court and was headed by people with no link to the law. We had no lawyers. They offered to release us on condition that they would execute us if we were later found to be supporting opposition movements in any way.”

Shareef returned to Benghazi to complete his studies. Every six months he had to complete a form for the internal security in which he would identify his car, his income, his friends, and phone calls he had made and received.

“The 1980s was a terrible time for the Libyan people. It was difficult to subdue our political thoughts, after we had experienced the torture and the injustice for ourselves. Our ties were no longer organised, but ideological. We would visit each other and try to keep the struggle alive.”

International ties were very limited and Libyans found themselves unable to gain books and international media. “Our role then was to smuggle in books and form cultural intellectual circles.”

17 months after his release, Shareef found himself back in prison, this time in the Tripoli’s military intelligence prison. “I knew I was there because I could hear the ships by the port.” He had been handcuffed and blindfolded when arrested. “There was no accusation, warrant or lawyer.”

Shareef knew they would be looking for him after the armed conflict between the authorities and the National Front for the Salvation of Libya at the Bab al-Azizia compound on 8 May 1984. “They were arresting anyone with a history of being an oppositionist. So I hid away from home, but they found me and arrested me on 13 May.”

Shareef lost 20 kilograms during his four-month stay there. “When I was released, I was a different person. I could barely walk. The food was bad and there was little of it. The rooms were damp and dark and infested with insects and rats.”

Shareef slept on a cement bed, alone in cell no 24, with no link to the outside world. “They interrogated me asking if I had any link to the foreign based oppositionists. I was electrocuted, beaten and threatened with dogs.”

The investigatory council decided to release Shareef in September of the same year, warning him that he would “be kept under observation.”

a mosaic  
of stories



# Najat Kikhia

## An educator describes Libya's infamous public hangings and the disappearance of her brother

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*Written by Reem Maghribi,  
based on an interview conducted  
in Benghazi, Libya in 2013*

*The interview with Najat Kikhia is  
part of the oral history collection  
"42 Years of Oppression"  
produced by Sharq.Org  
Read more about it on page 48*

◆ When Najat Rasheed Kikhia's brother Mansour  
◆ resigned from his post as Libyan ambassador to the UN in 1980, the whole family bore the brunt of Gaddafi's disapproval. A statistician, Najat Kikhia was on a scholarship to the United States, where her brother was based, when he resigned.

His resignation came at a time when Kikhia was visiting Benghazi in between completing her Masters degree and beginning with studies for a doctorate. She was denied the exit visa she needed to return to the USA to complete her studies and joined the academic staff of the statistics department at Garyounis University, now known as the University of Benghazi. "I was denied the opportunity to further my education, and despite my abilities and achievements, I did not receive the promotions I should have at the university."

Soon after her diplomat brother had sent his resignation from the States, the villa that his brother Abdelrahman had almost finished building in Benghazi was bulldozed. "There was nothing you could do about it in those days. The revolutionary guards would come and insult you and bulldoze what they wanted. Mansour didn't have his own house in Benghazi, so they knocked down our brother's instead."

◆  
"Mansour didn't have his own house in Benghazi, so they knocked down our brother's instead"  
◆

Kikhia kept her head down at the university, as she had heard about what the revolutionary committees were capable of. "One student came to me once and told me how she had just been harassed and had a table pushed into her stomach. Another, one of my brightest students, was denied the advancement and opportunity he deserved because he wasn't a member of the revolutionary committee."

On 21 April 1984, all the students and faculty of the university were ushered to a square on the university grounds where a show trial was underway for Mustafa Nweiry. Gallows with a noose had





Najat Kikhia

already been built and Kikhia was loath to stand and watch. “Fortunately, a student of mine who was also in the revolutionary committee unlocked one of the university doors and let me go in so I wouldn’t have to witness the hanging. The screams and wails were audible throughout the grounds.”

And then something beautiful happened, uniting all in grief and courage. “Someone switched on their car radio to the Quranic channel. Others followed suit, and suddenly the whole campus was echoing with the sound of prayer.”

Over the coming years, her defected brother Mansour Kikhia became a strong oppositionist to the regime and was among those who founded the Libyan League for Human Rights in 1989. “He was some years older than me, and I saw him as my guardian. It was difficult being separated from him while he was living in the States. We would see each other in different cities infrequently until his disappearance.”

Mansour Kikhia disappeared in 1993 while attending an Arab Organisation for Human Rights meeting in Cairo. Speculations abound about his whereabouts and fate. “We didn’t know anything for certain until after the revolution when his body was found in a freezer. Abdallah Senussi - intelligence chief under Gaddafi - stated later that Mansour had been held captive for four years before he died. He was a diabetic, which means they would have had to have been providing him with medication over the four years. But why they would have kept his body in a freezer still remains a mystery.”

# An Arab in Manchester British- Lebanese journalist Leena Saidi recalls her student days

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*Leena Saidi is currently based in Beirut, where she works as a journalist and producer*

◆ In 1980, at the tender age of 23, I was handed  
◆ control of the Mancunion, the University of Manchester Students' Union's student newspaper. This was quite a challenge for a young graduate, as the publication is the largest student newspaper in the United Kingdom and is distributed throughout Greater Manchester. Its name is a portmanteau of "Mancunian" — the demonym for residents of Manchester — and "union," to reflect its role as the newspaper of the Students' Union.

I never thought I would go into journalism. I was at the University of Manchester to earn a degree in genetics, a field of study that in the 1970s was in its infancy. Genetics is of fundamental importance to all branches of modern biology, from evolutionary biology to medicine, and extends into many practical areas, such as biotechnology and agriculture. At the time, Manchester had one of the few programs at that time in this exciting new area, offering a Bachelor of Science degree in Genetics and Cell Biology. I would be in its first graduating class.

During my first year at the university, I would often pick up a copy of the Students' Union's weekly newspaper as I went to grab my morning coffee, mainly to find out what was happening on campus.

I wasn't interested in politics, although the Union was very active, taking part in rallies against the increase of tuition fees, nuclear weapons, in support of women's rights and the like. The Broad Left — an infrastructure composed of Communist Party members, onto which were grafted independent radicals and some National Organisation of Labor Students' members — had headed the student movement until 1979. Now the Labour Party was attempting to break away and take the reins.

One day as I was sitting in the cafeteria, two students sat next to me at one end of the table. "Surely, there must be somebody we know who likes ballet?" said the shorter of the two, his brown curly hair covering his face. "Not that I can think of," replied the other, a tall blond with piercing blue eyes and prominent front teeth. "Well, find someone, anyone!" retorted the first.





*Leena's experience at her university paper awakened her passion for both journalism and the country from which her parents hailed: Lebanon. She soon found herself in Beirut reporting on the country's society and strife.*

I liked ballet, but dared I tell them? Would they think I'd been eavesdropping? And why did they want somebody who liked ballet? As these thoughts were going through my mind, I was abruptly brought back to earth as something hot and damp covered my legs. "I'm so sorry," said the tall blonde as he frantically tried to mop up the spilt coffee that was dripping from the table onto my jeans. "My name is Bernard and this is my friend Kevin, we work at the Mancunion."

As it turned out, Bernard was the newspaper's editor-in-chief, a sabbatical post that he had been elected to during his third year at university. For this budding journalist, the newspaper was brave and compelling, reflecting every journalistic ideal he aspired to. Kevin was the eternal student type and a culture vulture, who naturally was the editor of the paper's cultural section. We quickly got chatting and before I knew it I was roped into going to the ballet with Kevin. And that was how I wrote my first article for the Mancunion, a review of Northern Ballet Theatre's "Swan Lake."

The paper had been around in various guises since 1969, originally emerging out of the Manchester Independent, which itself was founded in the 1920s. The Mancunian was — and I believe still is — written and put together by students, thus creating high-quality original content focused on Manchester’s university bubble. Although it aims to keep a firm focus on student news and what’s happening in the local area, it is also open to contributions of opinion pieces about the state of the nation and the world at large, as well as feature articles on mainstream and local artists, musicians, poets, plays, and the like. From its inception, the publication has aimed to be an integral part of student life at the university, provide excellent opportunities to students wanting to get into journalism, and to get its contributors to go from thinking about what they want to write to what they want to read.

The encounter with Bernard and Kevin was the beginning of a three-year long journey to becoming the Mancunian’s editor-in-chief myself. I quickly started spending a lot of my time in the newspaper’s offices, on the first floor of the Students’ Union building right above from what we called “bureaucrats corridor” on the ground floor. At first I carved a niche for myself reviewing dance and classical music: both the Northern Ballet Theatre and the Royal Northern College of Music were just around the corner. Eventually, I took over writing about all things design, as Polytechnic Manchester encouraged diversity and the city had a rich exhibition circuit.

But in my second year at the paper I became interested in its production. Layout fascinated me and I experimented with design, something one could do at a university newspaper before heading out into the real world. Creatively I was in my element. By my third year the larger picture intrigued me, and I became the paper’s deputy editor. Many late nights were spent debating ethical and managerial dilemmas, as dozens of writers from different areas of study — each posing an organisational challenge — had to be assigned stories.

In the end, it was only natural that I would aspire to take the reins. The position of editor-in-chief meant

serving as one of 10 executive officers responsible for the day-to-day running of the Students' Union. It was an electoral post, on a one-year single term basis.

I had never stood for an election on such a grand scale before. Each member of the Students' Union, which automatically meant each member of the student body, would be eligible to vote. Known then as the Victoria University of Manchester — before its amalgamation with the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology in 2004 to form the largest single-site university in the UK — the university at the time had a student population of around 18,000. But as I projected a confident personality and nobody was standing against me, I was sure to win over even such a large body of voters. However, for the sake of democracy — a word that would become part of my daily vocabulary later in life as I moved to the Middle East as a journalist — “A. N. Other” was announced as my rival.

◆  
“On voting day a specific  
segment of Manchester’s  
student society voted against me  
just because to them I was an  
Arab and a Muslim”  
◆

Despite all the winds blowing in my favor, the election did not come off without controversy. Although my parents were originally Lebanese, I had always considered myself to be British. My father had lived in England since before the Second World War and had brought my mother as a bride to Manchester in 1946. I had gone to a Baptist Sunday school and been a Brownie, living life guided by my Brownie promise do my best, to be true to myself and develop my beliefs, to serve the Queen and my community, to help other people.... I didn't really know much about Islam or the Arab world for that matter. But on voting day a specific segment of Manchester's student society voted against me just because to them I was an Arab and a Muslim. That was my first taste of discrimination and it tasted bitter. I was confused. Why would they do

that? Didn't they read my manifesto? Didn't they know that I believed in freedom of belief and was a pacifist?

I won the election by a landslide. But my victory was tarnished and my political curiosity was born. Instead of making me despise what I had been accused of, the incident made me want to know more, to look into my heritage and discover a history that was so rich and colorful that I wanted to identify with it more and more. It led me into journalism to search out the stories of those who often didn't have voices and bring them to the world. In fact, it made me ever more determined to see both sides of every story. I guess my journey, the one that would eventually bring me to settle in Lebanon, started then. It was also the end of my plans to become a geneticist, as journalism became a consuming passion.

◆  
“Instead of making me despise  
what I had been accused of,  
I wanted to look into my  
heritage, to identify with it  
more and more”  
◆

Being the editor-in-chief of the Mancunian that year was an incredible learning experience. My editorial team was amazing, unafraid to investigate or to instigate. We investigated the role the National Union of Students played in getting Barclay's Bank to divest from South Africa, attacking it as “Boerclay Bank.” We published a series on an award winning housing development, the Hulme Crescents, where the problems were so bad that the scheme was short-lived and demolition began just 21 years after it was constructed. We helped our community cope with the Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, who was convicted of murdering thirteen women and attempting to murder seven others in the area. And we kept up with national news outlets to cover when Joy Division became New Order, the Hacienda opened its doors for the first time, The Smiths released their first album and Factory Records enjoyed fame nationwide.

When I left the Mancunion, I knew I would never have another job quite like this one. What makes university newspapers great is the fact that they aren't run by journalists, they are run by students who love journalism. Since then, I worked for three decades in places that had all the snarkiness and wit of great newsrooms but that struggle to understand how to turn a profit in a world where everyone believes information should be free.

As a university student, there's a lot to be said for having an extracurricular outlet of some kind to give deeper meaning to countless hours of study and research. The great thing about writing for newspapers is that generally one can dedicate as much or as little time as one wants. I would encourage every student who is interested in writing, editing, photographing or even handling the business side of things to show up at their university's newspaper office. You won't regret it, I didn't.

In addition to being full of passionate, smart peers, college newspapers are a great place to bond with people one wouldn't otherwise meet. The Mancunion was like a second family to me — the team spent so much time together working that it was actually remarkable that we would want to hang outside of meetings and production.

Writing for a university newspaper makes you appreciate your time there so much more. It allows you to go to events you wouldn't have otherwise, speak to a myriad of students and professors, and teaches you real-world skills. For me, being the Mancunion editor completely changed my life. Before, I didn't know it was humanly possible to be so invested in an extracurricular activity, and now I wouldn't have had it any other way. When I look back on my university years, I feel blessed that I had the chance to grow and discover my passion, something that isn't easy in your twenties.

# Projects Worth Showcasing

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*Introductions to some of the creative and inspiring projects that aim to give voice to the voiceless and reflect on society through the eyes and experiences of individuals.*

## Syrian Histories

◆ During the decades that the Assad regime controlled the flow of information in and out of all parts of the country, the cultural and social narrative of Syria and its people was censored.

In recent years Sharq engaged with Syrians from different ethnic and social backgrounds who had lived in towns across the country and whose memories of life in Syria can, when compiled, draw a truer and uncensored history of Syria and its people.

In 2016 and 2017 – in partnership with The Konrad Adenauer Foundation – Sharq conducted and documented over 120 interviews with Syrians about different aspects of culture and society prior to 2011. The outputs of this endeavour – which include audio and video recordings, photographs and written articles in English and Arabic – have been published as a collection at [www.tarikhi.org](http://www.tarikhi.org)

The thorough compilation of first hand accounts of life in Syria as told by a diverse cross-section of Syrians provides academics, the media, cultural actors and the public with opportunities to more fully comprehend and explore the diversity of people and experiences across Syria.

A series of six research papers about education, the role of women, co-existence and other subjects is currently in production, both highlighting and utilising the collection of oral histories.

Also in the making, with the support of the Swedish Institute and based on *Syrian Histories*, is a theatre production about the lives, experiences, challenges and successes of Syrian women.

[www.SyrianHistories.org](http://www.SyrianHistories.org)

## Ayyoubé

◆ A theatre production  
◆ written and directed by Awad Awad, a Palestinian director living in Beirut, *Ayyoubé* is based on interviews conducted with Palestinian women in Lebanon's camps.



*The protagonist is portrayed by actresses Aliya Khalidi, Mira Sidawi and Tala Nashar at different stages in Awad Awad's play "Ayyoubé"*



*Imposing chairs and their shadows represent the many men who pay for sex in Sahar Assaf's theatre production "No Demand No Supply"*

## No Demand No Supply

◆ Conceived and  
◆ directed by Lebanese thespian and director Sahar Assaf, *No Demand No Supply* is the staging of real stories of torture as told by survivors of a trafficking and sexual exploitation in Lebanon.

Recordings of testimonies offered by the women during interviews conducted by Assaf, in collaboration with Ghada Jabbour from the NGO Kafa and journalists Sandy Issa and Rania Hamze, are narrated verbatim by actresses on stage. They detail how the survivors were held captive without access to sunlight and fresh air, in some cases for years, confined and locked in rooms with painted black windows and forced to have sex with paying customers an average of 10 times a day.

This powerful and moving performance aims to leave audiences angry and motivated to fight for justice, and trigger conversations around the most lucrative business in modern day history.

The protagonist is portrayed by actresses - Aliya Khalidi, Mira Sidawi and Tala Nashar - at different stages in Ayyoubé's life. Despite the horrors of living in one of those camps, Jaber, Ayyoubé's abusive husband, turns her life into a living hell. Amidst all the unfair treatment, Ayyoubé decides against divorce to stay in the house for the sake of her children.

The story of Ayyoubé is one that depicts perseverance and strength, despite a lifetime of darkness, while presenting the intricacies and impact of Palestinian and Lebanese cultures over a period of 60 years.

[www.facebook.com/Ayoubé.play](http://www.facebook.com/Ayoubé.play)

[www.twitter.com/saharassaf](https://www.twitter.com/saharassaf)

## 42 Years of Oppression

◆ For 42 years, up until his death in October 2011, Muammar Gaddafi ruled over Libya and its people with impunity. Forced uncompensated nationalisation and confiscation of private property was prevalent in the 1970s, as were assassinations and executions of political activists in Libya and abroad in the 1980s. The massacre of over 1,000 prisoners at Abu Slim prison in the 1990s passed under-reported and unpunished, as did the false imprisonments of hundreds of Libyans, many of whom were held without trial, tortured and spent decades confined in unfathomable conditions.

All the while, Gaddafi controlled the narrative, both within Libya and abroad, and shaped people's understanding of life in the oil-rich country. Despite having lived through similar experiences of oppression under authoritarian rule for decades, even citizens of neighbouring and nearby countries often did not understand the motivation behind the people's uprising in

Libya in 2011, having unwittingly accepted the falsehoods propagated by the Libyan dictator. But contrary to the narrative Gaddafi and his entourage wielded into the minds of many, Libyans did not bask in the wealth of oil.

Simply enjoying the glory of his success as Africa's boxing champion resulted in Mahmood Abu Shkewa being violently assaulted. "Instead of honouring me, they imprisoned me and destroyed my hands," recalled Abu Shkewa during an interview conducted by Sharq in 2012.

Abu Shkewa's is one of 32 personal accounts documented by Sharq and published in Arabic and English online at [www.Tarikhi.org](http://www.Tarikhi.org) and in the book *42 Years of Oppression: Personal Accounts of Human Rights Abuses During the Gaddafi Era in Libya*.

Video recordings of the interviews conducted with those who gave their accounts of abuses suffered by them or their family members are also published on the website.

[www.Libya42.org](http://www.Libya42.org)



## Johar... Up in the Air

◆ A play produced  
◆ and performed by inmates of Lebanon's Roumieh prison, under the guidance of drama therapist Zeina Daccache, *Johar... Up in the Air* is the result of a project aiming to improve mental health in Lebanese prisons and bring about suitable



*Zeina Daccache has been putting on plays with men and women in Lebanese prisons for many years*

legislation for mentally ill inmates and inmates sentenced to life.

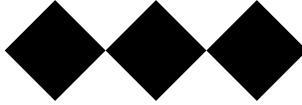
*Johar...* was produced within the framework of *The Untold Story of Forgotten Behind Bars*, a project implemented by Catharsis, an NGO founded by Daccache, funded by the European Union and run in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior & Municipalities and the Ministry of Justice.

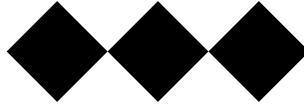
The project gives voice to previously voiceless inmates (some of them suffering from mental illness) and resulted in a study investigating the prevalence of severe mental illness among an inmate population in Lebanon ; the production of the theatre play; a legal research including a comparative law study; and, ultimately, a draft law.

The play offers the inmates an opportunity to share the stories of the forgotten, through monologues and short scenes. As one of the inmates says in one scene: "My mental illness and the prison are a double punishment".

[www.catharsislcdt.org](http://www.catharsislcdt.org)

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