

Chapter 7

RADIO DRAMA BY AND ABOUT SYRIAN REFUGEES: REIMAGING THE NATION ON SOURIALI

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Since the start of the Syrian Uprising, more than six million Syrians have fled the country, and slightly less are internally displaced. After seven years of fighting, nearly thirteen million Syrians, or roughly 60 percent of the pre-conflict population, have fled their homes.¹ As scholars have pointed out, there are tremendous obstacles to repatriation; refugees fear retaliation, and the Baath regime has passed municipal laws to dispossess those who have fled.² For the foreseeable future, the most pressing concern for Syrian cultural producers, whether at home or in exile, is to address the fracturing and dispersal of the Syrian people. In the early years of the uprising, creative resistance characterized performance culture outside of Syria's state theaters and vaudeville house; seven years into the revolution, Syrian cultural producers are looking to performance as a tool for engaging the needs and experiences of their fellow refugees.

Performance in the Syrian diaspora has taken varied forms in recent years—from closed drama therapy workshops with small groups to radio drama serials broadcast into Syria and available online. This chapter addresses the latter, focusing on the six-part serial *We Are All Refugees* broadcast and streamed on Radio SouriaLi in December 2014. In particular, I will focus on how *We Are All Refugees* presents women's increased vulnerability as a central problem facing Syrians. This is not an isolated concern for the station, I will argue but part of the station's larger project of imagining an expanded Syria that includes the diaspora and gives particular attention to the condition of women in this newly imagined "Greater Syria."

SouriaLi invokes this expanded Syria while it encourages remembering—validating the memories and losses experienced by the refugee community

at the same time that the station provides useful information for navigating statelessness. In short, I argue that the station invokes nostalgia as a balm to trauma and a means of establishing a sense of belonging after the rupturing of communal bonds. This, of course, marks a significant change from the performance culture that dominated in the early years of the uprising, widely referred to as “the creative resistance movement.” Then, people publicly sang and danced to oppositional songs (*irḥal ya bashar*), puppet troupes savagely mocked the president (Top Goon), sketch comedy pointed out the idiotic violence of the regime (*hurriya wa bas*) and animators depicted national leadership as inept and craven (Wikisham).³

While therapeutic theater, radio drama and oppositional performance are vastly different forms with different aims, they are all means of enacting Syria from outside official culture. They are, I argue, interrelated efforts of national imagining. Five of the actresses in *We Are All Refugees* had had no performance experience before participating in a therapeutic theater project for displaced Syrian women in Jordan. One of the serial’s major stars, Nawar Bulbul, had directed therapeutic theater projects with displaced Syrian children, and—before fleeing Syria—had appeared in widely circulated online footage marching with demonstrators and chanting “freedom.” Another of the serial’s stars, Mai Skaff, became an Internet meme after being jailed early in the uprising; she was one of a group of artists that had circulated a petition calling on the government to end its siege of Daraa and had helped organize and addressed one of the first anti-regime rallies in Damascus. Since fleeing to France, both have continued to create theater and films critical of the regime and drawing attention to the plight of refugees. It is not simply that refugees circulate through performance culture in different guises and from different entry points. Whether these projects are geared to small or mass audiences, and whether aesthetic or therapeutic criteria dominate, refugee performances are connected in a shared project of opening up spaces for discussion and debate in a newly imagined global Syria.

The complicated storyline of *We Are All Refugees* focuses on a formerly middle-class Syrian family in Jordan’s Zaatari refugee camp and takes up issues like forced early marriage and mental health among the displaced and anti-immigrant sentiment among Jordanians. The cast included major stars of Syrian, Jordanian and Palestinian film and television as well as the aforementioned actresses recruited from a therapeutic theater project. As such, *We Are All Refugees* reveals complexities within the Levantine ethnoscapes. Syrian international stars collaborate with women who, before the civil war, had never traveled beyond their village; both groups share the experience of forced migration. They, in turn, collaborate with actors whose own national identities were formed by earlier violent displacements: the expulsion of Palestinians

in 1948 and then again in 1967. The storyline of *We Are All Refugees* explores how different groups of traumatized peoples can heal while sharing limited resources; as a collaboration of different types of displaced people, the project itself models the future it hopes to enact.

In this chapter, I read *We Are All Refugees* as an example of SouriaLi’s efforts to reimagine the Syrian nation so as to embrace its diaspora (see Figure 7.1). With its regular programming, SouriaLi invites displaced Syrians to remember Syria as it was before and during the war and to narrate their lives in and beyond Syria’s territorial boundaries. In addition, SouriaLi provides analysis and information that creates context for these memories. SouriaLi, in the words of cofounder and programming manager Iyad Kallas, addresses the “collective memories” of Syrians. While programming initially focused on remembering Syria before the war, Kallas explains that the station is conscious that Syrians have been “building memories since 2011” and that these memories will be “more important in shaping the future identity of Syrians.”⁴ I situate *We Are All Refugees* at the juncture of these several projects. *We Are All Refugees* depicts a longing for return, while also carefully detailing the living conditions for Syrians in Zaatari and Amman. These characters are and will remain Syrian, even as they learn to make lives for themselves in the diaspora.

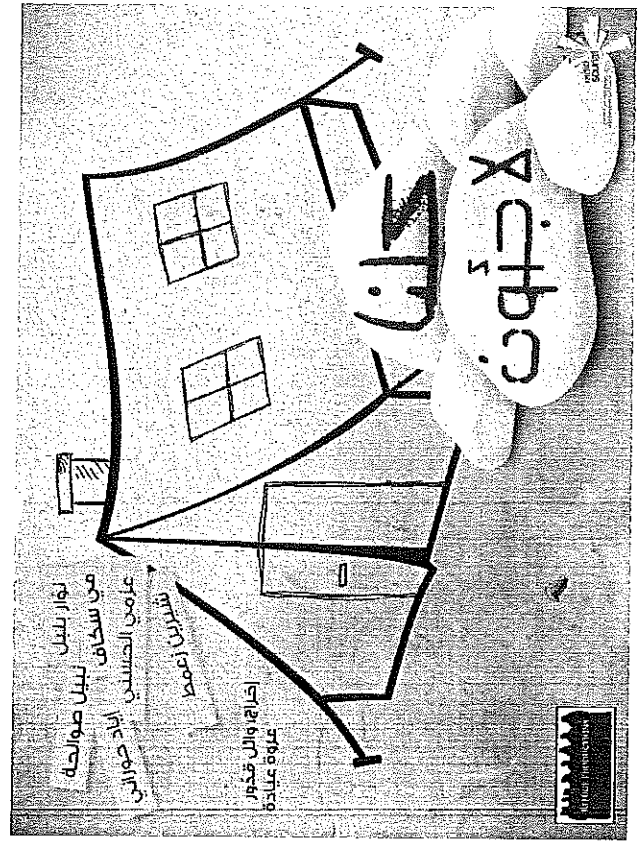


Figure 7.1 Publicity Image, *We Are All Refugees*.

The series is full of information about how women and youths can address the challenges that face them, at the same time that the series carefully analyzes the pressures within the Syrian diaspora that put these groups at risk. In short, *We Are All Refugees* performs a Syrian identity in active development outside Syrian territory.

Nostalgia is a powerful tool of performance cultures mediating the effects of twenty-first-century human, informational and ideological flows. SouriaLi and *We Are All Refugees* allows us to unpack the potentially restorative power of such performance cultures. Syria and its diaspora have seen the emergence of a host of grassroots radio and television stations, as well as theater therapy projects that have gained wider circulation via online dissemination, international tours and documentaries. I read these varied circulations as a project of national reinvention undertaken by people displaced from a national territory yet continuing to imagine national community through modern communication technologies. In applying Appadurai's concept of global flows in a discussion of radio drama, I wish to reposition performance as a potential response to the fluidity that marks the social in the global age.

I am particularly interested in the role nostalgia plays in this project of self- and national redefinition. Christa Salamandra and others have written extensively on the search for authenticity in the reinventions of tradition prominent in the Syrian marketplace and on Syrian television.⁵ I wish to extend such analysis to explore the current project of using nostalgia for self-care and community healing. In doing so, I draw on recent research into the social function of nostalgia, work that argues that nostalgia can create a sense of belonging in times of isolation, can provide a continuity of self in times of social rupture and can generate a sense of meaning in life for individuals at risk of despair.⁶ At the same time, additional research points out that collective nostalgia reduces feelings of collective responsibility, or as Michael Kammen famously wrote: "Nostalgia, with its wistful memories, is essentially history without guilt."⁷ It is a particularly important observation in the current climate of nationalism and amid calls to "make America great again." Nostalgia is a similarly fraught subject in the Arab context. The Arab World entered the twentieth century newly aware of its loss of the recently coined "golden age of Islam." Arab readers encountered this loss in the historical novels and plays of writers like Jurji Zaydan, Ahmed Shawqi and Najeeb Hadad, and in the historical analysis of Zaydan, Boutros Boustani and others. Nostalgia was present at the birth of Arab modernity and continues today, motivating acts of kindness and solidarity as well as violence.

The SouriaLi team is conscious of the potential use and abuse of nostalgia. According to Kallas, "Working on nostalgia for SouriaLi's team is not about lamenting prewar Syria, but rather an attempt to use collective memory to

look forward to a collective future. [It is] an attempt to understand why we are here today."⁸ The quote draws attention to two significant aspects of the SouriaLi approach: first, that they see remembering as a *collective* project and second, that this remembering is geared toward the *future*. Nostalgia carries the affect Nietzsche ascribed to the antiquarian historian, the man of "reverent soul" for whom "the history of his town becomes the history of himself" and who converts its features into "an illustrated diary of his youth."⁹ However, it is important to recall that for Nietzsche such affective remembering could be productive or unproductive, it could "preserve" or it could "mummify." The only criteria for knowledge of the past, according to Nietzsche was whether it served the future and present. Or to invoke SouriaLi's criteria, does it help a group understand their present and look to the future.

SouriaLi and the Demographics of Belonging

SouriaLi's reimagining of Syria to include its diaspora mirrors its own deterritorialized existence. First, SouriaLi has no specific home. Its 27 staff members and regular contributors reside in a range of European and Arab countries. At the time that *We Are All Refugees* aired, seven staff members resided in Syria with an underground studio there. Since then, the studio has closed because of security fears, and all but two of the Syria-based staff members have fled. Increasingly, SouriaLi works with freelance citizen journalists inside Syria. During the time *We Are All Refugees* was aired, SouriaLi broadcast its programming in Syria for three hours a day through transmitters owned by Hawa SMART in rebel-held territory. This enabled SouriaLi to reach audiences in 70 percent of Syria's national territory, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Deir ez-Zor. Since then, the government's territorial gains have eliminated all such broadcasts; only state-run media and its allies are able to broadcast from within Syria. Instead, listeners in and outside Syria access SouriaLi through its online platforms and satellite broadcasts. As of August 2015, SouriaLi had over 250,000 Facebook followers and over 16,000 monthly visits to its website.¹⁰ Another source reported 200,000 playbacks from SouriaLi's SoundCloud account in 2014.¹¹ More recently, Iyad Kallas reports that SouriaLi's has nearly 500,000 social media followers via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Soundcloud. In addition, SouriaLi's partners have presented their recordings in community centers and refugee centers.¹²

SouriaLi is part of a widespread flowering of grassroots media organizations that took place during the civil war. A 2016 study identified 196 new independent media outlets since 2011 in their survey of online and broadcast radio stations, printed magazines and online publications, and web-based news agencies.¹³ Another study notes that after 2011, nine opposition

television channels began broadcasting, and, in a 2013 study, SouriaLi itself identified 25 new grassroots radio stations since the start of the Uprising.¹⁴ SouriaLi stands out from these many media outlets for the scope of its programming and its high production values. During its six-year existence, it has featured children's programming, cooking and sports shows, parenting shows, interviews, political analysis and cultural programming. In truth, cultural and political analysis informs all of their programming. A seeming cooking show like *Fatoush* (country salad) explored "popular culture and the cultural identity of Syrians through food," in the words of Iyad Kallas.¹⁵

SouriaLi is fully independent, refusing affiliation with any military group or faction. The station gives considerable airtime to discussing the experiences of Syrians who have fled both regime and Islamist violence. SouriaLi cofounder, Honey Al Sayed, had hosted the country's second most popular radio show, "Good Morning Syria," from 2005 to 2011 on Syria's first privately owned radio station, Al Madina. The show drew an estimated seven million listeners each morning that tuned in for a mix of entertainment news, horoscopes and celebrity interviews. With the start of the Uprising, hosts on even nominally independent stations received clear directives: always refer to protestors as terrorists, air calls from regime supporters and gush with them in support of the president, and never use the word "revolution." Rather than comply, Sayed left Syria at the end of 2011.¹⁶ Another cofounder, Caroline Ayoub, had been arrested in Damascus for her nonviolent activism and fled after her release in 2012.¹⁷

SouriaLi's programming seems calculated to feed on a nostalgic sense of national belonging at the same time that it addresses the contemporary obstacles facing its audience—a dualism evident in the double entendre that is the radio station's name. The spelling of the station's name in Arabic or Latin characters suggests the pronunciation *sūryālī*, which means "my Syria." However, during broadcasts the station's name is actually pronounced *sūryālī* with the emphasis on the third syllable, rendering it close to the Arabic word for surreal (*sūryālī*). In an interview with Sky News Arabia, Sayed, speaking in Arabic, explains the significance of the double entendre: "SouriaLi has two meanings: *sūryālī*, which is to say Syria belongs to us, not to a leader or a person. But also surrealistic [*sūryālī*], which describes the conditions under which we live."¹⁸ On the one hand, the station's name affirms the idea of national belonging and an enduring connection with a state that superseded the acts of a particular government; on the other hand, the name acknowledges the fragility of this idea, that current conditions instead demonstrate that not only one's citizenship but the structure of one's life depends on circumstance. This disorienting dualism is the subject matter of *We Are All Refugees*.

We Are All Refugees as Social Analysis and Theater for Development

We Are All Refugees features multiple interconnected storylines focusing on the mental health of the well-being of male and female refugees. Each episode contains discoveries and profound reversals of fortune. Each episode ends with a startling revelation. The final episode leaves the characters facing new challenges, and one assumes that the producers had left open the possibility of future seasons. Within this soap opera structure, the authors tackle significant social problems facing refugees. The central story features a formerly middle-class family living in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan. The eldest son, Fadi, runs an electrical repair shop in the camp. He supports his 16-year-old sister, Reem, and his widowed mother, Salma. His younger brother, Firas, lives in Amman where he works illegally as a parking valet—or rather works intermittently; a combination of depression and justified anger at the plight of Syrians leaves him debilitated at times. Years earlier, Firas sacrificed his love of playing the oud, the Arab lute, to study engineering. He gave up art for the hopes of a middle-class life and now has neither. Another brother, Imad, remained in Damascus and is active in the Syrian Uprising; his whereabouts are unclear.¹⁹

A related storyline follows Yara, a young Jordanian woman, who works for an NGO providing aid and educational workshops to women in the camp. Yara's father objects to her relationship with Nabil, a film student creating a documentary about ideas of female honor in Arab society while he works as an event planner and booking agent. A tangential storyline follows a married couple, Hala and Aboud. Having emigrated to Jordan before the Uprising began, Aboud has a more stable position, but without work papers, he cannot leave the country for fear of being denied reentry. While Aboud successfully navigates uncertainty, it throws Hala into a depressive state, and she ultimately decides to return to Syria. Other prominent characters include Nour, a widow in the camp who develops a relationship with Fadi, the elder brother; Sahar, a female refugee suffering domestic abuse; and Salman, a male refugee who—in the course of the series—receives Swedish emigration papers.

A central plot element involves Fadi's decision to marry his 16-year-old sister to a Jordanian civil servant. It is the kind of arranged marriage that has become common in the camps where marrying young girls, especially when a substantial bride-price is involved, is one way that families can decrease their financial need. It also allows families to assuage concerns for female honor that are heightened by the close proximity and lack of privacy brought about by life in a camp. This comes to a head at the end of the third episode. The Jordanian suitor has been invited to the family home by Fadi, who lavishes

obsequious praise on all things Jordanian. In the midst of this, the mother, Salma, is on the phone with someone in Damascus who has information about her son Imad (the activist involved in the Uprising). However, the call keeps cutting out, and she cannot hear over Fadi's loud panegyrics. In the midst of this confusion, the Jordanian aid worker, Yara, arrives unannounced. She has been alerted to the impending marriage, and though her organization has specifically told her not to get involved, she has decided to do whatever she can to prevent it.

The tension in the scene mounts quickly. Yara berates the Jordanian suitor for planning to marry an underage girl. She loudly asserts that Reem has the right to finish school, and the suitor grows increasingly adamant in defending his intentions. Meanwhile, Salma fields a call, and her repeated queries end with the exclamation, "Oh my God, what has happened to my son!" suggesting a difficult outcome for the activist son she left behind in Damascus. Fadi is shouting in the background throughout, first praising the suitor and then expressing concern at his mother's interjection. Such verbal chaos is typical of the heightened drama of Syrian soap operas. It also demonstrates the production's attention to the specific problems of camp life. While Jordanian law sets the legal marriage age at 18, judges can issue waivers for girls as young as 15. Of greater concern are "informal marriages" that are conducted by unauthorized sheikhs and have been between girls as young as 12 or 13 and men decades older. According to the UNICEF, in the first quarter of 2014, 32 percent of registered marriages of Syrians in Jordan involved girls who were under 18, up from 25 percent the previous year.²⁰ Since these figures do not take informal marriage into account, the number is likely much higher.

These marriages are often referred to as *sutra* or protection marriages. The UN-run camps like Za'atari are largely unpoliced, and at night, even leaving one's home to go to the central bathrooms can be a harrowing experience for a woman.²¹ This dilemma is alluded to in the fourth episode. Fadi and Salma fret about the family, and in the process, we learn that Firas (the valet in Amman) has broken off contact with his family and changed his phone number and that Imad (the activist in Damascus) has gone missing and presumably has been taken by the authorities. Throughout this intense conversation, Reem periodically interrupts asking someone to walk her to the bathrooms, warning that she is going to pee her pants if no one goes with her. Frustrated by the interruptions, Salma shouts at her son: "Why haven't you installed one of those European toilets in our caravan like the neighbors?" Fadi responds: "Cause the neighbors stole it from the camp's central bathroom and that's not right!" Reem accuses him of being high and mighty since they are stealing electricity from the camp. "Fine," he shouts. "Tomorrow we'll disconnect it!" Now it is Salma's turn for hysterics, begging Fadi to let her keep

the electrical connection. From a sober conversation on the disintegration of a family, the conversation veers into comedy, only to be pulled back to the directness of the situation. "Mama," Fadi announces at the end of the scene, "If we haven't heard anything about Imad's whereabouts by the end of tomorrow, then I'm going back to Damascus." The scene ends with dramatic music.

Dramaturgically, the scene is a skillful introduction of critical plot element. At the same time, the family dynamic comes into greater clarity: Fadi worries about his ability to keep the family well and together and Reem questions the decisions he has made that results in their living in the camp. Fadi feels assaulted on all sides—a brother in Damascus who seems to court death, another in Amman that has grown unresponsive, and a younger sister he cannot protect. All of this is undercut by humor that builds as Reem grows more and more desperate to pee. However, the scene also draws attention to a specific reality of camp life; a woman cannot walk to the bathroom without fear of harassment or assault. Fadi's seemingly unmotivated attack on Reem—he complains, "shut up, this is all your fault"—indicates the strain of his burden. He must protect his sister's honor while residing in a refugee camp.

The series addresses other challenges faced by women in refugee camps. Sahar's husband regularly beats her, but she has no way to flee. She confides to Reem that while her husband sometimes beat her in Damascus out of jealousy, since coming to the camp, the beatings have grown constant: "He has become impatient and nervous and more jealous. He's hitting me almost every day, sometimes for no reason." Reem responds with the information she has learned from the women's workshop provided by Yara's NGO: "Sahar, there's no such thing as hitting you for a reason. There's never a reason for a husband to hit his wife." While it is true, it does not change Sahar's situation. Though she has reported her husband's actions to the NGO, and they have tried to mediate, there is little they can do. If the NGO reports the abuse to the police, and the Jordanian police conclude there is cause for concern, their first step is simply to ask the man to sign a pledge promising not to beat his wife.²² *We Are All Refugees* points out the failure of Jordanian family law to protect battered women. Yara's guilt and frustration at her inability to help Sahar grows more intense after episode four, which ends with the news that Sahar has attempted suicide.

As this summary makes clear, *We Are All Refugees* explores the challenges facing female refugees. In part, this is at the behest of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which provided funding for the production and specified that early marriage and domestic violence be addressed. Reem's explanation that there is no such thing as justified beating, a word for word repetition of information communicated in an earlier scene in the women's workshop, feels scripted in the style of theater for development.

This emphasis is also consistent with SouriaLi's programming priorities. *Binat ash-shams* (daughters of the sun) discusses important women in Syrian history. *Jadaila* (braids) dramatizes harrowing stories of flight of women who have left Syria. The title, Braids, comes from Syrian's colloquial expression, "to braid a tale," in the sense of narrating. By using the plural noun form, the act of narrating becomes feminine; both men and women "braid" stories, but only women wear "braids." Since it was founded in 2012, there have been several different cooking shows, all of which emphasized Syrian tradition and cultural heritage to varying degrees. *Tis a shuhûr* (nine months) discusses women's health, pregnancy and infant care. *Tuffah qalbî* (apple of my eye) discusses children's health, education and motherhood. Half of SouriaLi's team are women, and the station has made a public commitment to maintaining that percentage.

The women-focused orientation of *We Are All Refugees* is also a product of the drama's origins. The idea for a radio drama about Syrian refugees developed out of a therapeutic theater project: the 2013 production of *The Trojan Women* with Syrian refugees. That piece featured an entirely female cast and combined cast members' personal narratives and their reflections on the play's relevance to their lives with monologues and choral odes from Euripides' text. One of the producers, Charlotte Eager, reports that it was while meeting women in the camps during the early planning stages that she first realized the need to create a radio drama addressing early marriage and the other dangers facing women in the camps.²³

Casting and the Diasporic Imagination

US and European media made much of the presence of the refugees in the cast. When Public Radio International's (PRI's) *The Takeaway* produced a segment on *We Are All Refugees* in January 2015, their web page featured an image of two of the five refugees who performed in the piece (Figure 7.2). In colorful headscarves and overcoats, the women reflect the characters they play, aspirant middle-class Sunnis.²⁴ However, for Syrian audiences, a principal draw was likely the presence of major stars, and in particular, two Syrians known throughout that country: Nawar Bulbul and Mai Skaff. Online, one finds a number of YouTube videos devoted to "Actors of the Revolution," which invariably feature Bulbul and Skaff.²⁵

Nawar Bulbul is one of the finest Syrian actors of his generation. He began in the theater as part of the two-actor troupe *al-Kharîf*, but he received international fame when he created the character Zebaq in the Arab television series, *The Neighborhood Gala*.²⁶ Nawar Bulbul entered Syria's popular imagination as a figure from a better time, Damascus in the 1930s, when neighbors took care of each other and were united in their resistance to

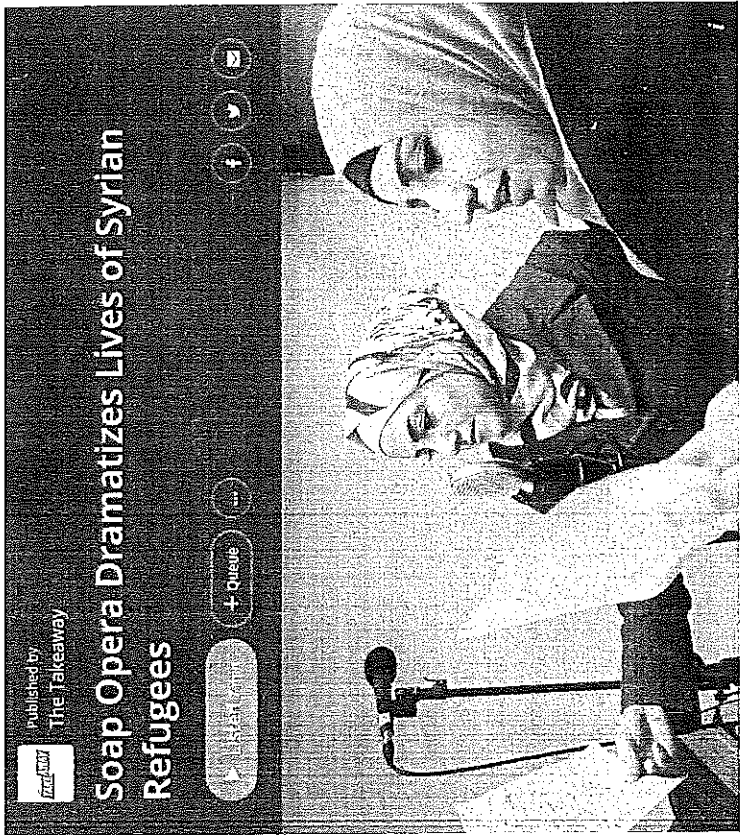


Figure 7.2 Radio SouriaLi.

French colonialism. In the midst of civil war, colonial resistance suggests a desired unity and coherence markedly absent from the present. Zebaq's tragic martyrdom in a French ambush in that series contributed to Bulbul's status as a Syrian patriot. At the start of the 2011 Uprising, Bulbul appeared in several YouTube videos leading crowds in chanting: "Freedom." These early videos often referred to him as "Zebaq" or "the actor from The Neighborhood Gate." More recent videos commonly refer to him as "the artist Nawar Bulbul"—the vast majority of which depict him not in demonstrations but working in refugee camps or discussing the refugee crisis with television hosts.²⁷ Online, he has become an activist director and spokesperson for the displaced. The earlier videos, by contrast, suggested that a new unity could be forged on the model of a popular television series. Through the figure of Zebaq, we might resurrect the imagined unity of Damascus in the 1930s, though this time, the Assad Regime rather than the French would serve as the common enemy.

Bulbul fled the country in 2011 and then went on to create several theater pieces with refugee children. In 2014, he staged an adaptation of *Leah* with more than a hundred children from the Zaatari camp. Then in 2015, he created an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* again with Syrian children. This time half of the cast was in Amman, Jordan, and the other half was in Homs, Syria—Montagues and Capulets divided by family loyalties and 200 miles. The performance relied on Skype connections with actors in both countries playing to screens. The revised script addressed current conditions. “I swear, if we are not caught by bombs or explosives, and if Juliet is not fired at by a sniper, we will still be here in the next scene,” an interpolated narrator explains. Notably, this version ends happily. Romeo dashes his poison to the ground as another character announces: “Enough killing! Enough blood! Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world!”²⁸ Most recently, Bulbul directed a group of six Syrian refugees in a play depicting Syrian actors who have fled their homeland and circumnavigate the Mediterranean looking for a country to accept them. The play is largely composed of extracts from Aristophanes, Goldoni, Cervantes, Moliere and Shakespeare but selected to comment on Syria’s political and religious climate.²⁹

Mai Skaf is probably the most famous of the anti-regime Syrian actors. She was briefly imprisoned at the start of the Uprising after she organized a petition and a demonstration demanding that the Assad Regime end its blockade of Dara. Stencils of her face demanding her release soon appeared about the city. She was imprisoned a second time, released and for a period was denied an exit visa before she crossed the border illegally into Lebanon in June 2013. She has remained in the public eye because of her fiery attacks on Arab cable news, lambasting the regime and Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah. She once demanded that Hezbollah return her previous contributions to the organization after the 1982 shelling of Lebanon if they continued to victimize the Syrian people—prompting an equally sharp rejoinder from Nasrallah himself.³⁰ Skaf died suddenly in Paris on 23 July of a brain hemorrhage.³¹

Mai Skaf starred in several historical films and television series; she is associated with works that imagine a better time and with the current resistance to Baath rule. In 2008, she starred in a film version of *Damascus, The Smile of Sadness*, based on the novel by Idlibi Ulfat. That film, like the *Neighborhood Gate*, is set during the French Mandate and depicts a noble revolutionary struggle against colonialism—though in *The Smile of Sadness* Arab patriarchy is an equal threat to the heroine. Before that, in 2005, she starred in *The Last Days of Yamamah*, a desert war epic depicting the seventh-century battles when Abu Bakr solidified his rule after the death of the Prophet. Interestingly, in 1996 in *The Silk Bazaar*, she plays a character in the late 1950s leading a protesting against a corrupt government. This idea of Skaf as both figure of

resistance and feature of the nostalgia industry is implicit in the short film, *My Name is Mai*, by the online film collective Abou Nadarra. Uploaded in 2011, while Skaf was still in prison, the film features an outbreak from one of Skaf’s productions. With her hair in braids with a headscarf, and wearing a skirt and a loose blouse, she sits feeding twigs to a fire beneath a boiling metal cauldron. She suddenly pauses as something off camera grabs her attention. At this point, audio from a contemporary protest is layered into the sound design. Skaf seems transfixed as shouts for “Freedom” grow louder and louder. She rises to her feet and the scene cuts to black, followed by the words: “Mai Skaf headed the call to freedom ... and they jailed her.” The Abou Nadarra film seems to present Mai in another of her period pieces until the present—revolution followed by repression—suddenly intrudes into the scene. This sharp juxtaposition of past and present is a trope increasingly attached to Skaf’s popular persona and a stance carefully cultivated in SouriaLi programming.

Skaf’s biography, like that of her fellow cast members, adds poignancy to the storyline of *We Are All Refugees*. Skaf plays a woman adrift since leaving Syria. Her character decides to return despite the dangers. For the actress, however, return was unimaginable; she fled Syria after multiple detentions followed by numerous death threats. In fact, immediately following her death, rumors circulated online that she had been the victim of an assassination ordered by the Syrian regime. This parallel between the exile of the character and the exile of the actor is most salient with Skaf, but to a certain extent, the biographies of all of the performers reinforced their roles. Certainly, that is true of Bulbul’s Fadi and of the other Syrians in the drama. The loss of a homeland is also a part of the biography of the actress who played Yara, Shereen Zumot; her mother’s family came to Jordan after fleeing from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.³² The Palestinian film-star, Eyad Hourani, plays Yara’s boyfriend. As a West Bank Palestinian, his presence brings the complexities of national belonging into greater relief. Given that well over a third of Jordanian nationals are of Palestinian descent, it is likely that several of the Jordanians involved in the project can cite 1948 as the loss of a homeland. One writer on the team, Wael Qadour, was a Syrian refugee, the other two, Majd Hijawi and Ahmed Ameen, were from Jordan. The biographies of actors and production team underscore the social demographics the drama explores. A Jordanian restaurant owner withholds the wages of a Syrian valet, knowing that the valet has no legal recourse because he is working illegally. Rents go up in Amman because of the demand created by the refugees who either leave the camp illegally or, in rare cases, have been sponsored by Jordanian family members. Some profit from the situation, others curse the refugee as the source of social ills. How can this be, the radio drama asks, when we are all refugees?

SouriaLi and Remembering Syria

The drama combines nostalgia with rigorous attention to the conditions facing displaced Syrians—an approach that is common to the station as a whole. For example, the “story” on the SouriaLi Facebook feed contrasts a past Syria grounded in communal identity with the national fracturing currently facing Syrians. However, even as the text fondly remembers past community, it points out that a shared experience of political oppression united this community. SouriaLi offers nostalgia without selective forgetting. The text reads:

A cup of coffee, a pot of tea, or a glass of mate, and we would gather almost daily with our loved ones. We talked about everything, our troubles and our concerns, our excursions and our time at home, even of our bedrooms and our kitchens.

This image of a harmonious past is qualified by a recognition of limitations on speech: “sometimes we spoke loudly, and sometimes hushed and in whispers, and sometimes we understood because of what we did not say.” The text then shifts to the present: “The days went by, and fate intervened, and for so many reasons . . .” Ellipses suggest events too painful to account—war and displacement—followed by the simple statement: “we are no longer able to meet.” So, the feed explains, we created “this public square, SouriaLi . . . where we can meet and speak without limitations or restrictions.” Or if one reads the name of the station as an adjective: “this surrealist public square . . . where we can meet and speak without limitations or restrictions.” The war and forced migrations that have divided people has created the conditions under which those people can now finally speak openly, albeit through interviews conducted on Skype that are mixed in a third location and then broadcast to listeners scattered throughout the world: a surreal world but like Surrealism producing new freedoms.

This project of remembering has shifted in recent months and begun to focus on Syrian life since 2011 rather than Syrian life before the Uprising. One sees this in the cancellation in January 2018 of *Qasāqīs ayām al-lulu* (snippets from the good old days), a show that replaced *ayām al-lulu* (the good old days)—one of the station’s original programs and hosted by Honey Al Sayed. The first version featured documented stories and anecdotes in addition to music from the 1960s and after. The format changed with the 106th episode; Sayed was joined by cohort ‘Owar Eyade, and the two discussed their experience of the past eliminating the interviews. Sayed left SouriaLi in 2015 and at that time the show became *Qasāqīs ayām al-lulu*, cohosted by ‘Owar Eyade and Hind Attasi. They played similar music and bantered about the good old

days. According to Iyad Kallas, the expression “good old days” in the titles was employed with a degree of sarcasm as this was also a time of “oppression and economic discomfort.” Throughout the seven-year run of these shows, host and guests made frequent reference to political and economic corruption in the past even as this past was remembered warmly. A few months after the last episode of *Qasāqīs ayām al-lulu*, SouriaLi aired a 30-episode Ramadan special “Flashback,” in which Syrians recounted specific memories from the past seven years. According to Kallas, this change reflects a general reorientation to documenting post-2011 memories.³³

Perhaps the clearest indication of this shifting focus was the new show *Baītī hūn* (my house is here). On that show, guests carefully describe the neighborhoods they resided in. The show was generated by an awareness that the destruction of neighborhoods combined with government plans to confiscate and redevelop property without compensation could result in the erasure of huge parts of Syria as experienced by refugees. According to *Al Jazeera*, some analysts see Law 10, passed in April of 2018, as an effort to punish those who have opposed Assad and to cement demographic change resulting in the concentration of regime supporters in major cities.³⁴ The law allows the government to designate zones for reconstruction by decree. Property owners will have 30 days to provide proof of ownership in order to receive compensation before ownership reverts to the province or city. Few refugees will feel safe enough to return to claim their property or have the means to do so, fewer still will have documents to prove their identity let alone prove ownership of their property. In the face of such dispossession, *Baītī hūn* is proactively mapping the Syria of refugees. SouriaLi has posted dozens of photographs of these neighborhoods on its Facebook page to accompany the sound recordings.

Other programming similarly focuses on recalling recent events in Syria. As mentioned earlier, stories of flight are related in *Jadāila* (braids). *Bila tathakir safir* (without travel papers) is an interview and information program, but as the title suggests, the subjects explored usually relate to the developments in Syria prompting migration. For example, on July 20 and 28, 2018, *Bila tathakir safir* examined conditions in ISIS-controlled Raqqa with an extended interview with a woman who fled that city with her family.

SouriaLi’s coverage allows Syrians in the diaspora to feel connected to current events in Syria. An example is how the show addressed the recent *t’afish* phenomenon. *T’afish* is a recently coined term to refer to the stripping of apartments—often by the military or pro-government militias—when forces enter cities after the opposing power retreats and populations flee. Programming for July 26, 2018, was largely devoted to this subject, under the program heading “*min t’afish al-barāda li t’afish al-balāda*” (from stealing the

refrigerator to stealing the country)—a program heading that rhymes *barāda*, refrigerator, with *balāda*, country. One segment that day was a comic dialogue between the characters Um Joseph and Abu Fakir (a recurring sketch about a married couple in Syria). In this instance Abu Fakir proudly brings home a fan he has purchased. When Um Joseph asks why it doesn't have a box, Abu Fakir explains he bought it at the Thieves' Market, *souk al-harāmīa*, to which Um Joseph exclaims, "for shame, you bought that from the *ʿafsh* market." The joke refers to the fact that for years Syrians have bought goods illegally confiscated by army officials and sold near Martyrs' Square in an area that became known as the Thieves' Market. However, in the current climate there is no way to distinguish between run-of-the-mill graft and the intense pillaging of the property of refugees. A sheepish Abu Joseph agrees to return the fan but notes that without enough money to buy a new fan they will have to drive off the heat by flapping a piece of cardboard.

The comic sketch, unlike the serious segments discussing *ʿafsh* as a contemporary social problem, grounded listeners in both the present and a familiar past. The characters—the henpecked and bumbling husband, the excitable and domineering wife—are themselves familiar character types of Syrian comedy. Even Abu Joseph's defense—it is just a fan from the Thieves' Market—references the inside knowledge audiences have of daily life in Damascus. However, the sketch also makes clear that new conditions dominate, conditions of immediate relevance to the refugee audience who will likely assume that their homes have been subject to *ʿafsh*. The sketch effectively encapsulates the tone of SouriaLi, which is rigorously focused on the current conditions in Syria and the Syrian diaspora even as it imbues its broadcasts with an air of nostalgia.

The character Abu Fakir took on a new life in 2018 Ramadan series that similarly combined a delight in the past and attention to the present. In the 24-part series, *Al-Ẓir Salīm*, Abu Fakir becomes a *hakawātī* or professional storyteller entertaining an audience in a coffee shop by recounting the story of Zīr Salīm, a pre-Islamic hero who fought a 40-year war with his Uncle's tribe over the murder of Zīr Salīm's brother. In Syria, the *hakawātī* tradition has largely died out; however, there are still a few of these storytellers who entertain coffee shop audiences during Ramadan. The series' sound design attempted to place the audience in a crowded café and we not only hear glasses and waiters but snatches of conversation that refer to the hardships people currently experience. Connection is implicitly made between the difficulties in the current war experienced by both the coffee shop and radio audiences and the sixth-century war described by Abu Fakir. The presentation of a Ramadan *hakawātī* prompts holiday nostalgia; the subject matter and talk of the coffee shop audience directs attention to the problems of the ongoing war.

Such tempered uses of nostalgia arguably contribute to the well-being of the station's audience. Recent psychological research has explored nostalgia in relation to "belongingness compensatory strategies." Even when denied opportunities to interact socially, nostalgia facilitates feelings of social connectedness and lessens anxiety about isolation. Nostalgia also appears to facilitate a sense of continuity. When test subjects experience disruption or disjointedness between their past and present selves, they were more likely to become nostalgic. Conversely, when nostalgia was invoked in test subjects, they report a greater sense of self-continuity. Arguably, nostalgia serves adaptive functioning when individuals are confronted with disruption. Research has suggested that nostalgia can compensate when individuals are confronted with a loss of meaning in their lives. Multiple studies have shown that when nostalgia was induced (whether through words, sounds or smells) test subjects were more likely to describe their lives as meaningful. Finally, studies indicate that nostalgia lessens accessibility to death-related thoughts and that when confronted by thoughts of mortality subjects are more receptive to nostalgia. Might it be, one researcher speculates, that nostalgia allows people to invest meaning in their lives, enabling them to travel back to times they felt connected to meaning-rich social structures.³⁵

The relevance of such study to the experience of forced migration is obvious. The disruption in individual identity is profound. A man who was once a shop keeper might now be dependent on the UNHCR; a woman who was once the matriarch of a large home and extended family might now oversee life in a small apartment for herself and her children; a family that was once connected to a city or even a home for multiple generations might now reside in a camp in which all are new arrivals and everything feels temporary. In such a context, the structures that had provided meaning for one's life must be newly created. Social identity, professional identity, family identity and national identity are all radically compromised. *We Are All Refugees* is replete with examples: isolated from her social network, Hala grows depressed and decides to risk returning to Damascus alone; once an engineering student, Firas finds it difficult to take pleasure in work as a valet; unable to provide safety for his younger sister, Fadi grows prone to angry outbursts. Only Imad back in Damascus remains connected to a prominent structure of belonging through his patriotic resistance to a corrupt regime. The series ends with news of his imprisonment.

I would like to propose that SouriaLi's programming has the potential to facilitate the adaptive functioning of displaced Syrians in its listening audience. In sharing joyful memories of one's former home, *Batīn hīn* models a sense of continued connection to the past despite emigration. *Al-Ẓir Salīm* invokes a past when its listening audience gathered in coffee shops during holidays to

experience performances of a shared heritage. The series summons memories of social connectedness and reminds individuals of their capacity to interact and enjoy the company of others. The broadcast of traditional music reminds audiences of national bonds and how those bonds were sources of shared pleasure in the past. All of this programming can help listeners remember times of greater social connectivity and reassure them that they are capable of meaningful bonds. At the same time, SouriaLi provides frank examinations of life in Syria and in the Syrian diaspora; however, it helps its audience engage such examinations with fortified self-esteem. Nostalgia, in this instance, does not prevent the examination of painful events. Instead, it makes such examinations possible. Drama and sketches on SouriaLi show the possibility of positive change. It might seem insignificant, but Abu Joseph has stopped shopping at the *t'afish* market. In the final scene of *We Are All Refugees*, a character takes a small step to control his life. Firas, as mentioned before, was once an accomplished musician. In the final episode, Firas agrees to substitute for an oud player at a Jordanian restaurant. In the penultimate scene of the series, Firas basks in the applause of the audience, and the extra income has helped him to open his home to his mother and sister. It hardly solves the many issues raised in the series. However, it does show an individual connecting to a past self (through traditional music no less) to chart a more meaningful future.

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Chapter 8

NO DEMAND NO SUPPLY: DOCUMENTARY THEATER TRANSFORMING THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Sahar Assaf

It is a very confident assertion by practitioners that verbatim theatre displaces mainstream media as the form of documentation most likely to deliver "truth." According to these practitioners, the central purpose of verbatim work has gone well beyond the staging of "hidden voices."¹

—*Brown and Wake*

Early April 2016, like many Lebanese, I woke up to the news of the special operation that the Lebanese security forces did to bust a human trafficking network and save 75 Syrian women imprisoned in two brothels east of Beirut. The news shocked me to the core; for months, I could not forget the women and the suffering they endured. In 2017 I decided to put the stories of the women survivors on stage. In an ultimate objective to retell the stories of the 75 rescued women, so they do not fall into the Lebanese collective amnesia, I embarked on a research journey that led me to discover that I was essentially telling the stories of many other forgotten women in the world of prostitution.

This chapter reflects on the process and methodology of making the documentary performance *No Demand No Supply: A Revealing of Lebanon's 2016 Sex Trafficking Scandal*.² By reflecting on the content and context of the performance, I argue that documentary theater has the potential to not only displace the mainstream media in telling the "truth" but also to influence the latter in a certain direction and ultimately alter our social consciousness.

The Play in Context

On March 27, 2016, the inquisitorial commission in Mount Lebanon raided Chez Maurice and Silver, two brothels in Jounieh area, east of Beirut, and