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## Introduction

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, art and activism in the form of cultural and media projects, street-art and public actions became part of the Syrian resilience and built a strong counternarrative to the armed hostilities. Since then, they have represented the creative side of the revolution, expressing criticism, demands and later the experiences of this horrible war. The boundary between activism and art has always been fluid, and there has been a huge amount of creative work and media documentation in and outside Syria ever since.

At the same time, artists' productions have changed a lot since 2011 due to the changes within Syria itself. In 2019, there are more than 5,6 million Syrian refugees registered in Syria's neighboring countries Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and other North African states<sup>1</sup>; nearly one million people are registered in Lebanon alone<sup>2</sup>. Since many refugees are not registered at all, it can be assumed that the number of Syrians seeking refuge there is in fact much higher. Many other Syrians live as refugees in Europe, starting a new life there. Today, the Assad-regime has regained control over approximately 60 % of the Syrian territory, and international discourse now points to reconstruction and return. In this regard, it is hard not to lose hope but at the same time it is important to search for new ways to tackle the challenges currently arising in Syria. How can artists and activists keep on fighting in a creative way for freedom in Syria? What might be new strategies for seeking justice for Syrians? How can organizations like the Heinrich Böll foundation keep on supporting artists and activists?

To reflect on these questions, I did interviews with artists and organizations who support art and cultural work in Beirut. Of course, these interviews look at a sample group of artists and cannot speak for all the artists from Syria. In this paper, I want to shed light on their ideas, and the growing challenges within their current and future situations. I would also like to discuss the importance of continued support for them, their projects and their resilience. Artists from Syria represent an important part of civil society who raise their voices, and fight in a peaceful and creative way with different weapons than those of armed groups. In some way, the cameras, paint and sounds that make up their weapons might be even more dangerous for the regime when it comes to the achievement of freedom and justice. This is because their work, often highly visible and perceived with interest from outside, challenges the regime's determination to portray the uprising as an armed struggle by "terrorists." Arts are also an empowering means for those who were forced to flee the country and those in deprived areas of Syria, because their continuation shows that a military victory does not mean the regime can force everybody into obedience and silent acceptance.

In this paper, I will first contextualize the art scene in Syria before 2011, then I will look at art, media and

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<sup>1</sup> Source: UNHCR Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

<sup>2</sup> Source: UNHCR Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>).

resistance through the lens of producers and recipients. This will bring the discussion to Beirut as a place of influence on artists from Syria, after which I will look at new challenges and the ways in which art from Syria might change due to new political developments. Finally, a short conclusion will provide an outlook on the future of the themes addressed.

## 1. Arts from Syria before 2011 and the creation of a new public space

“Since 1970 the al-Assad regime and its 15 infamous security and intelligence services have subjected Syrians to fear, invisibility and censorship in everyday life. Possibilities for resistance and dissent have been severely limited and any explicit critique of the Assad family impossible.” (Malmvig 2016: 259).

Before 2011, Syrian people were “condemned to invisibility” (Malmvig 2016: 259) with the tool of the *mukhabarat* (secret services) which controlled every step they were taking. Members of Syrian civil society were afraid of being “seen as [a] political subject in public” (Malmvig 2016: 270) as it could mean persecution and detention. When taught in university, artists were educated to produce art in a pragmatic way. The Syrian artist and activist Milad Amin described it thus: “In university in Syria [...] you concentrate on one thing. You are sculptor, so you will sculpt. When you are a painter you will paint [...]” Creativity and experimental thinking were neither desired nor supported.

Since the start of the peaceful protests in Syria in 2011, a visual revolution also took root. Visual products and alternative media were created to oppose and resist the regime (cf. Malmvig 2016: 261). They were an important instrument for breaking the fear which the Assad-regime had created for decades. While critical art was previously forbidden, the uprising opened a new “alternative public space” (Al-Refaai & Amer 2018: 17). This space was essential for the development of new Syrian art and activism as it became possible for the first time to express oneself in public. Since then, art and alternative media from Syria have flourished and contributed to the cultural and media resistance by civil society within the Syrian revolution.

## 2. Art, Media and Resistance

Art, media and resistance were interconnected within the Syrian uprising, and later during the Syrian revolution and war. Within this context, the terms ‘artist’ and ‘activist’ became blurred and were no longer clearly separable. Syrian activists became artists, and artists likewise produced posters or digital media work, for example, which were used for activism inside Syria (cf. Malmvig 2016: 267). In general, visual arts are said to have a special power of mobilization (cf. Bogerts 2017: 7). Illegal art productions and their placements in public spaces challenge existing social legal orders. Artists or activists often run a high risk of being arrested or persecuted when they place their pieces in public, especially in autocratic systems and dictatorships like Syria. The placement of art in public spaces can therefore be considered as a way of turning public spaces into protest spaces. In this way, art can become part of political resistance as it is no longer restricted to a certain audience in a museum, but visible for everybody in the streets. Some public spaces might be chosen especially for their political symbolism. The city itself can thus serve as “a spatially social or political frame of reference for resistance.” (Bogerts 2017: 16).

### 2.1 The intention of the artists: When the private becomes political

On the level of the producers, the artistic product is an empowerment to express themselves as individuals, but it also gives voice to a wider section of society. In this way, (visual) arts can set off a politically emancipating effect for the producing subjects, the artists themselves (cf. Bogerts 2017: 17). The art products therefore might carry a political message which was not the artists’ intention in the first place. His or her desire lies more in expressing themselves. But as they are often facing very difficult situations, both present and past, and live in a highly politicized environment, their product itself turns out to be political. This important point of the subjectivity of political arts also became clear during the interviews with artists from Syria in Beirut: Milad Amin told me that for him art is like therapy and he uses it to express the things inside himself. And further on he explained: “And then when things became political affecting me I was expressing political things. I did not mean to liberate the world by this.”. Also Mehrak, a Syrian-Palestinian rapper living in Beirut describes his music as something very personal and subjective because he is telling about his own lived experiences in his songs. He pointed out that this is because he could not talk for all Syrians, but just for himself and about what he experiences in everyday life. The musician added that he does not talk about politics in the first instance, but since his whole environment is ruled by national and international politics, his rap inevitably becomes political. Further on, Nadine Elali, program manager at Heinrich Böll foundation Middle East in Beirut explained to me: “Once an artist is doing something there is a message which is being sent...and that message always has to do with their experiences with themselves and their surroundings.”.

By expressing themselves, they automatically have a message to be heard by others, and the resonance it finds turns the artists’ expression from a private matter into a political one.

## 2.2 Striking multiple chords – the perception of artistic productions

“Resistance only has a broader social impact when it is perceived.”<sup>3</sup> (Bogerts 2017: 22). It is difficult to know the extent to which actions in public and art with a political message reaching people. The effects on the audience are not measurable. They might range from raising awareness about an existing problem until mobilizing people into participating at demonstrations, to making them get active as well (cf. Bogerts 2017: 22). What is certain is that once artists and activists place their pieces in public, they cannot control the impact they will have on people. Besides, conveying political messages and telling stories such that people understand political issues more easily can often be better achieved by media productions. Artworks also leave freedom to the audience what to engage with the received information as they wish and often do not address political topics directly. Doing so might even be a huge advantage in a system where people are tired of political issues (cf. Merwig 2016: 265). Furthermore, cultural products do provide something new to the already known politics. Bente Scheller explained further on:

“Authoritarian systems invest themselves in artistic productions – in Syria, sculptors and painters were tasked with doing statues and portraits – but mainly of representatives of power, most often the president. Arts at the service of authoritarian systems is rather monothematic and with a clear intention: conveying the message of power. In contrast, independent, individual artistic acts tend to be more subtle and thereby speak to a number of senses at the same time. This is what allows an audience to feel it in a much more diverse way, with the art pieces striking more than just one chord. They are shared because of this value, because people find something in them that allows them to connect on a personal level.”

Various factors are therefore important for creating art as resistance, such as the availability of space for presenting work, an audience which is open to receive the message but also to interchange with other artists to develop new forms of creativity and resilience. In this context the Lebanese capital Beirut has been an important place for artists and activists from Syria to open their mind to new things, including the idea of resisting through art.

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<sup>3</sup> Original in German: “Widerstand entfaltet erst eine breitere gesellschaftliche Wirkung, wenn er wahrgenommen wird.“

### 3 The importance of Beirut for artists from Syria

“When I arrived here I felt that I was able to interact with artists around me. And this is one of Beirut’s assets. There are many difficulties to be able to create art but there are still tangible things that you could feel here including the diversity of artistic perspectives. There are so many free-minds who have the ability of expression, although their circumstances do not provide the ideal context to produce.” (Osama Halal 2017, in: Ettijahat-First 5 years-Documentation).

Beirut has played an important role in the development of arts from Syria since the outbreak of the Syrian war. With its geographical proximity to the Syrian capital Damascus, it has been a reference point for Syrians even before 2011, but even more so afterwards. It was and still is a crucial place for artists to meet, exchange ideas and run projects together. Milad Amin described his first impression of Beirut as an “amazing” place for getting new perspectives on art. When he stayed there between 2011 and 2012, he learned about “conceptual art”, combining different styles and concepts of artistic productions. It was in Beirut that he got in touch with “street art in the Arab world”, and realized that art should be in the streets for everybody. Since professional street art has not really existed in Syria, it was a very new perspective for him. There were slogans on walls but no Graffiti pictures, as nobody would dare to stand in the streets for some hours painting. In 2012 when Milad came back to Eastern Ghouta it became possible because of the free zones.

But Beirut was not only about great atmosphere regarding diversity and possibility of creating and freedom of expression. Abdullah Al Kafri from *Ettijahat-independent culture*<sup>4</sup> is still impressed by the dynamics within the art scene in Beirut between 2012 and 2014. According to Al Kafri the art scene was very diverse in that time and many artists were creating joint projects, and Lebanese venues were also integrating artists from Syria and hosting them. For Al Kafri, the welcoming attitude from Lebanese artists towards artists from Syria was “very unique”. It was not a situation of competition about funding for example, but the Syrians were easily integrated in the art scene in Beirut. He sees this moment of integration as a crucial aspect for the resilience of the Syrian artists in Beirut until 2014. The integration and support were important, as Syrians arriving in Beirut faced many challenges: Beirut is a very expensive city and therefore many artists wondered how to finance their projects when it is already hard to finance food and housing on a daily basis. The existing public fund is very small and it goes to mainstream art like international festivals rather than to smaller alternative productions. This is the reason why groups or institutions like Biddayat<sup>5</sup>, Metro Al-Madina<sup>6</sup>, Ettijahat, Zoukak<sup>7</sup>, SHAMS association<sup>8</sup> as well as foundations like Heinrich Böll foundation play a very

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<sup>4</sup> Website of Ettijahat- independent culture: <https://ettijahat.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Website of Bidayyat: <https://bidayyat.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Website of Metro-al-Madina: <https://metromadina.com>

<sup>7</sup> Website of Zoukak: <http://zoukak.org/>

<sup>8</sup> Website of SHAMS: <http://www.shamslb.org/>

important role when it comes to the support of artists in Beirut.

Since 2014 the situation in Syria has changed considerably. The prospects for Syrian artists living in Beirut have also been changing in tandem: many realized that the war would not be over soon, and so Beirut became more and more of a transit place for many Syrians. Al Kafri remembers that many artists were then moving towards Europe as a final destination. Also Milad Amin mentioned that for him 2013 was a turning point when “people started to be defeated and gave up. Running to Europe and disappeared there”.

Leaving Beirut towards Europe, feeling despair and turning ones back on Syria and the on-going war there can be possible reactions regarding the changing situation in Syria. But this reaction should not make us forget that the resistance against the regime continues in many ways. And that activists and artists still need structures who support them in their resilience.

## 4 Arts and activism from Syria within new challenges

In 2019 the political situation in Syria becomes more and more desperate for people resisting and fighting the Assad regime. The regime has regained the control in most of the provinces, excluding the mainly Kurdish dominated North-Eastern provinces of Syria, the province of Idlib and the area east of Euphrates. President Trump recently proclaimed in December 2018 that the United States of America would pull its troops out of Syria, eventually leaving those still resisting (and the Kurdish areas) alone with the high risk of getting attacked. For those who are trapped inside Syria and who are not with the regime, the situation is deteriorating. Syrians against Assad who are staying in neighboring countries like Lebanon are often waiting in terrible conditions for the day they can return to a free Syria, and are left without any prospect of return. Apart from people who claim they would never go back to a Syria where Bashar al-Assad is still ruling, there is already a media discourse on going about the reconstruction of the country and returning of refugees to Syria. This discourse focuses on the war fought by the military, but ignores the fact that military victory does not make Syria a safer place for many of its citizens, given high levels of persecution, ongoing arrests and the absence of any efforts to reconcile. Furthermore, it overlooks that there are still people and regions who are resisting the Syrian, Iranian and Russian troops.

The current discourses also lead to serious questions with which we will be confronted: How could Syria ever become safe with the same government in rule who is responsible for the killing, torturing and disappearing of thousands<sup>9</sup> of their own people? How can people in Syria be supported without playing in the hands of the Assad regime? Before talking about reconstruction and return to Syria one should at first think about how to protect and support people who are still resilient in Syria. And if this cannot be achieved, then how to allow them out of their traps (cf. Scheller et al.2018: 8).

### 4.1 Losing hope

“Many people in Syria are disillusioned. They feel that they have risked everything and lost much and have been abandoned by international actors, the United Nations, the United States and Europe in particular.” (Scheller 2018: 180).

Artists from Syria who have been resilient over the years in very creative ways are now confronted with these developments, a state of hopelessness, and the question how and if to continue the fight for freedom in Syria. They are confronted with Syrians who gave up hope and who try to forget about the past and looking forward to their new lives in Europe, for example. These Syrians often consider ongoing resistance as something useless which will not lead to anything. This desperation concerns also art and artists from Syria and the effect it has on their audiences. The public seems to be tired of the Syrian topic, while the media discourse is pushed

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<sup>9</sup> Numbers are documented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights: <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2018/09/24/death-toll-due-to-torture/>



in the direction that the war is over, and Syria will be rebuilt soon. It is therefore becoming increasingly difficult to keep the topics around Syria on the table and work against this kind of rhetoric. But also artists from Syria are moving on. Abdullah Al Kafri stated that more and more artists from Syria are interested in working on different topics than Syria, tackling problems related to what is happening in their daily lives in their new countries of residency. “Art will not touch anyone” as “most of the people are dead or in jail or dead inside”, Amin told me. He as an artist has to deal with the desperation of people, too: “In 2013-2014 the death was obvious. You could see it. Blood on TV. There was a picture of everything and you don’t have to tell about it. Now the blood.... you can’t see it. But people are still bleeding. And I think to show this is more difficult [...] when you kill a full generation’s hope you can’t tell that easily. That is what I want to show mostly.” At the same time, he believes that this period of resignation needs to be seen in a historical context, and that it opens other topics for the future of Syria and the continuation of the fight:

“Now we are in healing time. Everybody is wounded. Everybody is bleeding. Everybody was removed from his land, they are now in the north of the earth and they have to deal with new shit: new language, new everything, fear, new identity, conflict with identity itself and with what has happened [...]. After 10-15 years, people will understand who they are and what they are doing and what they should do. At that point they will need references. “

For Milad Amin, like for many other artists from Syria, the possibility of resilience lies now more and more in the documentation of what happened.

#### 4.2 Fighting for the truth

Since the beginning of the Syrian war, independent structures were very important in the context of telling what was happening inside Syria. In the same time there was and still is a strong counter discourse which tries to put the truth in a context of being just a perspective of some terrorists or their supporters. So, one way of fighting against this propaganda was since the beginning of the war fighting back with cameras to tell the truth about what is happening. Creative productions were successfully disturbing, telling other personal perspectives and realities than those who are available on mass media platforms, state television and social media. In this way, creative productions have lead to new representations of the war and the Syrian people (cf. Malmvig: 276).

Saeed Al-Batal and Ghiath Ayoub are the directors of the documentary film *Still Recording*<sup>6</sup>, which tells the story of the two friends Saeed and Milad, who are staying inside and outside the besieged city Douma. They document their daily lives in the middle of a war, telling the story of ordinary people in a situation which is hard to bear. They witness the violence and complexity of this war and share their perspectives on how to

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<sup>6</sup> Still Recording trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYOnsi03IWw>

resist in creative ways. The film, which is a production of Bidayyat and Rousl group, was filmed between 2011 and 2015. The resulting 450 hours film-material was successfully smuggled out of the country to Beirut. After 2 years of editing the documentary *Still Recording* had its premiere in September 2018 and is since then shown in international cinemas and film festivals.

For Ghiath Ayoub, who is part of *Rousl* group, filming became a tool for resistance to tell the truth about what happened inside Syria: “The camera tells the truth, works against the propaganda. I don’t want to go to the army. It’s not my tool of fighting.” For him, a camera might be even more dangerous for the regime because it is a weapon against its propaganda. He considers the *Rousl-studio* in Douma, the street art and the filming as the friend’s ways of fighting back. Saeed and all the people filming the 450 hours of film material put themselves at risk of death, persecution and arrest. But they succeeded and brought the material out to Beirut. The result is a very impressive documentation which shows many perspectives on the issues and conflicts the civil society was facing there. Ghiath Ayoub hopes that the film will reach as many people as possible, also from next generations as it is a document for telling what happened in Syria. In his opinion, cinema can help in this matter to pass on the message also on an international level.

Artists like Saeed, Milad and Ghiath and collectives like *Rousl-group* are documenting civil life and the individual, human side of the conflict. They depict the people not as victims but as actors who take the initiative in critical situations without letting anyone tell them what to do. These films are also a good way to show outside Syria that the armed forces and groups are just one part of the Syrian reality (cf. Scheller 2018: 179).

The documentary *Still Recording* is part of a new perspective on the fight for freedom in Syria. Also Milad Amin wants to concentrate on documenting things:

“[...] now the main battle is about the history.... about what happened. It is so strange when someone from the Pro-Regime part comes to you and tells you: « You destroyed the country! » And you think: « What the fuck? Two years ago, you were telling the air force to bomb us, because we deserved it and now it was us. » They now tell: « The terrorist destroyed our country. » But we never even had an airplane. It was the air force who destroyed it.”

Amin is referring to a terrible battle about “the truth” which is going on in the international media. Within this battle, the regime and other actors have been diffusing lies, which could easily and quickly spread via social media. But as well serious media were distributing them. Facts are not considered anymore as the truth but are reduced to opinions (cf. Scheller 2018: 180f). And doubts are spread until the truth just seems like one version of what happened among others (cf. Helberg 2018). But for the truth does exist public evidence. Documentations of the UN commission and reports by international non-governmental organizations document war crimes and crimes against humanity. But still a lot of people believe more in the conspiracy

theories on the internet than in the reliability of these reports. For years, the UN Commission has also documented the targeted attacks of the regime and its supporters on civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, the starvation of civilians as a weapon of war, and the systematic killing of civilians in the regime's detention centers. Reports by international non-governmental organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Médecins Sans Frontières confirm these methods, which legally fall into the categories of crimes against humanity (cf. Helberg 2018) and still lies are distributed and the 'truth' is being considered as depending on the perspective.

Therefore, documentation was, still is and will be crucial concerning the war in Syria. If the war ends, it will be important to find ways of remembering and denouncing what happened, and which crimes the Assad regime committed against its own people. After the war another battle will take place: the battle of writing history.

### 4.3 Yours truly from Idlib

"The media covers mainly one side of the story, the part that is made out of military strikes, numbers of people killed, numbers of refugees, and the attention with which it is rewarding negotiations pretending they would not be determined to fail. Little do they cover people's day to day stories that have no choice but to be in this situation." (Alsiofi 2018: 10).

Currently, the regime tries to argue against free areas such as Idlib province by claiming these places are populated with "terrorists". Bente Scheller explained that indeed, extremist armed factions have become ever more powerful in these areas. However, as the UN has stated: more than 99% of the residents of Idlib are and remain unarmed, it is mostly civilians. The regime's narrative of reducing the population of Idlib to "terrorists" disguises the truth: that there are many resilient individuals living in these areas who fled the war and simply want to live in peace, away from the control of the regime. Scheller added that this is highly relevant because the extremist armed factions are equally opposed to independent and creative resistance. They also threaten and prosecute journalists, artists and activists: one particularly tragic incident was the assassination of Raed Fares of Kafranbel's famous media center, committed in late 2018 by armed militants. The perception of the province being controlled by extremists has been an obstacle in external aid going there, which further limits the possibilities for democratic and independent actors to survive.

As these people are mostly trapped inside a situation where it is difficult to get one's voice heard and tell an international audience what is really going on there, media projects like the film *Still Recording* or the photo book *Yours truly from Idlib* are extremely important. The latter is a project from the photojournalist Tim Alsiofi and Hani Al Sawah together with the Heinrich Böll Foundation Middle East. The resulting work is a photo book in which the stories of people from besieged Ghouta and "free Idlib can be found. They tell personal stories

of war, loss and the wish to live a normal and free life. Tim Alsiofi describes his intention of *Yours truly from Idlib* as follows:

“It is crucial therefore to show that there are civilians living here, millions of them, who have experienced so much tragedy and yet they still carry on with their lives. It is vital for them to get support and not be labeled as terrorists and extremists merely for having opposed Bashar al-Assad and his rule. [...] I want to show how strong my people are.” (Alsiofi 2018: 10f).

The photobook *Yours truly from Idlib* gives voices to the people trapped in Idlib. Art in general has the possibility to give voice to Syrian individualities (cf. Malmvig 2016: 265). At the same time, it is important that the great pieces made by activists and artists which documenting protest, war and daily life during the Syrian war are not be forgotten. To achieve this, one has to think of ways to preserve this heritage.

#### 4.4 Archives of voices of the war and New Narratives

In 2012, Sana Yazigi founded the website *creativememory.org*, on which she has been collecting over 28 000 pieces of art from Syria, created between 2011 and today. Her aim is to document the story of the Syrian people and she considers the artists creations as proof of the truth: "The pieces are evidence to us. [...] We will not give up. The more evidence is provided, the more difficult it is to deny the truth."<sup>7</sup> (Interview Lafoy 2018: 2). This archive is for Sana Yazigi a way of creating new tools that continue to bring the Syrian cause to life, and carry it into the wider world (cf. Interview Lafoy 2018: 2). With *creativememory.org*, Yazigi wants to fight against the forgetting and against the narrative of the regime by capturing the history of the people opposing it. She states in an Interview with Sophie Rahal, that this website is fighting against the forgetting<sup>8</sup>. *Creativememory.org* will therefore help to preserve voices of Syrian people during the war and will become an important archive concerning the collective memory of Syrians opposing the Assad regime. Furthermore, Milad Amin thinks that fighting for the memory of the Syrian people is an important counterpart to the academic way of writing history books about the Syrian war. In his perception people already start forgetting what and how they felt and start relativizing what they experienced, often because they do not want to deal with the pain anymore. This forgetting of the people is absolutely in the interest of the regime and so it is an important task to safeguard these memories with the help of media work, art and alternative archives. Abdullah Al Kafri also finds art and cultural work important for remembering what happened in Syria. Additionally, he finds it important to create a strong alternative to the regime's narrative and the European oriented narrative to tell about the youngest Syrian history.

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<sup>7</sup> Original in French: “Les oeuvres sont des preuves pour nous. (...) Nous ne baisserons pas les bras. Plus, on fournit de preuves, plus il est difficile de nier la vérité.”

<sup>8</sup> Original in French: “Avec ce site on lutte contre l’oubli.”

## 5 Conclusions

"As long as we continue to tell these stories, both positive and negative, we haven't really lost, because our society has changed forever."<sup>9</sup> (Saeed Al-Batal, *Adopt a revolution*).

The coming years will be challenging for Syrians inside and outside of Syria. People still resisting inside the country will need possibilities to stay safely inside or to leave the country through safe passages. The questions of reconstruction and return to a country where the Assad regime has re-established itself might become vital. In such a situation, the international focus will shift inside Syria with a high engagement of international actors. After Al Kafri, new challenges might be to support artists in exile and to keep the discussion about the crimes of the Assad regime going. The documentation from media art-projects will attain a new importance when it comes to the writing of Syrian history and the achievement of so-called transitional justice. In this context, new strategies might be necessary to seek justice against the crimes committed by the Regime against civil society. In Germany, charges in June 2018 resulted in an arrest warrant against the head of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Service Jamil Hassan. In addition to Germany, similar judicial investigations have been launched against the Syrian secret services in Sweden, France and Austria, which are directed against mass and systematic torture. The aim is to issue international arrest warrants against key persons in Assad's torture system (cf. press release ECCHR 2018). The fight for justice is accompanied by the struggle against the (regime's) narratives, which turn the regime from a perpetrator into a victim and the civilians into terrorists. So even when the war in Syria will be considered as over, the people resisting the regime will still be fighting.

Artists as civil society actors will play an important role when it comes to the media presentation of what happened during the war in Syria. Their documentations and stories told by their media products will become important sources to understand the Syrian war. Moreover, documentation and archives will help to form the collective memory of the Syrian people themselves. So that they will not forget why it came to this war and what happened since 2011.

Supporting artists and activists from Syria within their on-going resistance will stand for supporting a potential civil society in future Syria. A civil society that wants justice, freedom and peace in the country and who wants to learn from the past, pass on their new knowledge and document what happened. Their struggle might feel tiring but it still makes an important contribution to another future. Through the extensive Syrian networks in other states, it will not be possible to push back the freedom of expression of Syrians (cf. Scheller 2018: 181). Furthermore, organizations who support artists and activists from Syria inside and outside the

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<sup>9</sup> Original in German: "Solange wir diese Geschichten weitererzählen, haben wir nicht wirklich verloren, denn unsere Gesellschaft hat sich für immer gewandelt."

country can help them to keep the aforementioned discussions vivid. One important way to do so is to offer artists and activists spaces for action and thought: namely, spaces for cultural and artistic projects that also create the possibility of staying creative, and reflecting on and exchanging ideas with other people. This helps to tackle despair and to create motivation to talk about the issues faced by the country and its people.

Organizations such as the Heinrich Böll Foundation can also help in spreading information and distributing the work of activists and artists to international audiences.

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