



‘Trauma work’ as hindrance to political praxis during democratisation movements

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of a shift in focus from political praxis to trauma work in the context of a failed democratisation movement. It investigates the various phenomena which emerge when intellectuals, under the traumatic impact of violence and atrocities, place trauma narration at the core of their interventions. Drawing on document analysis, participant observation and semi-structured interviews with twenty nine exiled Syrian intellectuals in Paris and Berlin who had participated in the revolutionary movement of 2011, the paper suggests that an inversion of the normative power structures pertaining to how intellectuals relate to their publics occurs when they adopt, under conditions of extreme violence and trauma, what we call a radically embedded positionality vis-à-vis ‘the people’. This results in the dismantling of previous figurations of the ‘militant intellectual’ along with praxis-focused notions of the ‘responsibility of intellectuals’, ultimately undermining their ideational influence upon domestic publics and weakening their political impact and critical role within a revolutionary movement.

Keywords Intellectuals · Exile · Revolutions · Cultural trauma · Syria

This paper investigates the impact of a shift in focus from political praxis to ‘trauma work’ or mourning in the context of failed democratisation movements. More specifically, it investigates the various phenomena that emerge when intellectuals, in light of egregious atrocities and human rights violations, place trauma narration at the core of their interventions. These phenomena encompass several aspects. First, there is the inversion of normative power structures concerning how intellectuals relate to their publics. Second, there is the adoption of a position of unconditional advocacy towards the movement and uncritical solidarity from below vis-à-vis ‘the people.’ Third, there is the unsettling of previous understandings of the ‘responsibility of

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intellectuals' inasmuch as it pertains to social critique and the fostering of critical approaches that call for a deeper understanding of complex issues.

The paper takes, as its empirical reference, the case of Syrian intellectuals in France and Germany who became forcibly displaced or exiled in situ because of their activism or their political dissidence vis-à-vis the Syrian regime, particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to the 2011 uprising. It draws on document analysis and interviews with 29 Syrian writers, artists, academics, and public intellectuals. We take to be an intellectual someone who not only performs a social role involving the articulation of ideas communicated to a broad audience with the aim of influencing public opinion (Eyerman, 2011) but who is also socially recognised as an intellectual (*muthaqaf* in Arabic) in the specific Syrian context at the time of the study. The latter criterion meant that Islamic scholars and religious figures have not been considered given the cultural nature of the milieu under investigation and with it the publications and public statements that formed the basis of the sampling and interviewee selection process. The absence of Islamic scholars (*ulamaa*) and other religious figures from the category of intellectuals, *muthaqafeen* (Arabic plural), is attributable to the historical, normative, and complex relationship between intellectualism and religiosity in the Syrian context. The term '*muthaqaf*,' first came into use in the beginning of the twentieth century and almost from the onset it veiled tensions between modernity and tradition which were reflected in the first book on the Arab intellectual "The Crisis of Intellectuals" (Heikal, 1961). In this book, Heikal emphasises the impact of Western powers and cultural dominance on Arab intellectuals, and problematises the repercussions of colonisation and cultural subjugation on Arab thought and identity. Thus, the category historically positioned itself in opposition to traditional and religious authority.

Guided by Eyerman's (2011) understanding of intellectuals as socially recognised figures, our study focuses on the emergence of the *muthaqafeen*, as a socially specific category in the transnational Syrian social and public spheres. The research aims to explore the role of these intellectuals in the Syrian revolutionary movement within the socially defined milieu of *muthaqafeen*, acknowledging the important but limited scope of this specific category in the broader landscape of knowledge production around the movement.

Participants were identified in three steps. For established intellectuals, we checked the current country of residence for the 99 intellectuals who signed the 'Statement of the 99' and singled out those currently residing in France or Germany. As a second step and to identify emerging politically engaged and active intellectuals or 'movement intellectuals' (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991), we selected authors and contributors living in Paris or Berlin from the list of authors in relevant anthologies, books, and magazines such as *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Front Line* (Halasa et al., 2014) and *A Syrious Look: Syrians in Germany – A Magazine About Culture in Exile* (2016), as well as [*Syrian Cultural Work During the Years of Ember*] (Elias & Najme, 2016). We fine-tuned the resulting longlist through theoretical sampling based on themes emerging from the early stages of data collection and analysis, as well as additional suggestions and recommendations from discussions with participants identified in the previous steps, also known as snowballing.

Paris and Berlin were selected as key sites for the study, being the two European cities hosting the largest number of Syrian writers and artists, and where discernible Syrian diasporic cultural milieus were evident. Within Europe, Germany has received the highest number of Syrians, with Berlin as a significant destination (Syrian Refugees, 2016). France, while hosting fewer Syrians, attracted a significant proportion of writers and artists who settled in Paris (Salem, 2016). Although detailed socio-demographic statistics on Syrian refugee numbers are not available, it is evident that vibrant Syrian cultural scenes have emerged in these two cities.

We frame our analysis by drawing on a distinction between three types of intellectual interventions, each representing a distinctive positioning by intellectuals in relation to their publics. These three relationalities are the ‘authoritative,’ the ‘expert,’ and the ‘embedded.’ While these have been presented as ideal types of public intellectuals (Baert, 2015, p. 185), drawing on Eyal and Buchholz (2010), we will employ them here to discern types of interventions, particularly in how they describe an author’s relationality toward their publics at the time of writing.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, authoritative interventions represented the dominant mode of public engagement. Intellectuals, drawing on their significant cultural and educational capital, spoke out about a wide range of issues without necessarily possessing relevant expertise. The likes of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Russell epitomise this type. With the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the social sciences, authoritative interventions and their intellectuals came under closer scrutiny and were increasingly regarded as untenable. This partly explains why, in the latter part of the twentieth century, the model of the expert public intellectual became more prominent, as reflected in an increase of interventions that rely on acquired knowledge in specific fields of expertise to make focused arguments or share specific facts or findings.

Both authoritative and expert intellectuals maintain a position of epistemic superiority vis-à-vis the public. In this context, Foucault (1980, p. 126) described the ‘specific intellectual’ as one who shifts focus from ‘the modality of the “universal”’ to ‘specific sectors’ and ‘the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them.’ This expert knowledge still holds onto a hierarchy between intellectuals and their publics as the former provides the tools for the latter.

By contrast, intellectuals who tend to embark upon embedded interventions position themselves on equal terms with their publics, being willing to learn from them, and vice versa. They avoid imposing a political or ideological agenda and engage with their publics instead in a collaborative manner, enabled by new technologies and a general distrust towards previous hierarchies (Baert, 2015). The ‘embedded’ approach is premised on a commitment to an equal partnership with the community and equal responsibility for achieving shared political goals (Baert & Susen, 2017).

In our paper, we build on this latter category to argue that when taken to an extreme, the embedded positioning becomes politically debilitating. Here, interventions are not framed as dialogical engagements with ‘the people’ as in the previously described category of the ‘embedded intellectual’ (Baert, 2013). Instead, they adopt a position of uncritical solidarity from below, muting the intellectual’s own

critical voice. As will be demonstrated in what follows, when this type of intervention becomes the dominant form, intellectuals become not only unable to support political movements in furthering their goals but potentially hinder them.

Historical background

The Syrian uprising, which unfolded in March of 2011, emerged as a response to long-standing grievances against the authoritarian regime led by Bashar Assad and before him his father Hafez Assad since 1970, an era of roughly half a century of unique forms of authoritarian corruption that many Syrians have come to label ‘Assadism’. Sparked by the wave of pro-democracy sentiment sweeping the region during the Arab Spring, Syrians took to the streets in peaceful protests; the movement initially coalesced around demands for political reforms, social justice, and economic equality. However, the regime’s response was swift and brutal, unleashing extreme state violence to suppress the burgeoning movement. This marked a significant turning point as peaceful protests evolved into a more confrontational and violent struggle against oppressive state forces. In the absence of a centralised leadership structure, the movement faced challenges in organising and responding strategically to escalating violence.

Known figures of Syria’s intelligentsia including many of this study’s participants contributed to the revolutionary movement in various ways through writing, art, organised work, coordination committees, and physical presence in protests, all at a great personal cost. Several went into exile after long- or short-term political imprisonment and torture as a result of their public expression of this ethico-political positioning. But while many asserted that the cumulative work of critical intellectuals including themselves had at least partly created the conditions of possibility for the uprising, there was consensus among them that they did not initiate it nor that they lead it. A lack of intellectual leadership for the movement allowed various factions to emerge, reflecting the diverse nature of the opposition. Activists, students, and grassroots organisers played pivotal roles, but the absence of a unifying figurehead or a clear ideological framework led to fragmentation within the movement. As the fighting intensified, the infiltration of Islamic jihadists seeking to exploit the power vacuum altered the dynamics of the movement. This transformation affected the initially non-sectarian and democratic nature of the uprising. The confluence of state violence, internal divisions, and external interventions ultimately led to the capture of the movement by extremist elements and consequently to the demise or silencing of its initial articulations or aspirations.

In the context of our empirical study, Syrian intellectuals’ relationship to Syrian society has historically been influenced by their predominantly Marxist inclination (see, for example, Bardawil, 2018; Frangie, 2011). During interviews, this manifested itself in various ways: the intellectuals involved tended to adhere to a materialist conception of history and a class-based approach that places the working class or ‘the people’ (*alshaab*) and their interests at the centre of discussions. They regularly invoked Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers when discussing intellectuals and their role, and they were invariably committed to a progressivist and emancipatory understanding of the intellectual’s responsibility. In all of this, the intellectual speaks from a position of authority to call for equality.

Moroccan historian and philosopher Abdallah Laroui linked the popularity of Marxism among Arab intellectuals to its capacity to unite politics and theory (1976, cited in Frangie, 2011). It is mostly through this political dimension that Arab intellectuals have claimed a public role, usually from a vantage point of epistemic authority. Elsewhere, it has been argued that the Marxist orientation of intellectuals is the outcome of a hierarchically driven relationality with the larger public, seeking a sense of purpose and distinction by assuming a leadership role in society (Lilla, 2016). This understanding of the relationship between intellectuals and their publics takes as its starting point a ‘déclassé model’ for studying intellectuals—one that construes them as individuals who, having lost their class status, seek in education and the enlightenment model of the public intellectual a means of achieving distinction in relation to the masses, enabling them to perform the role of saviour, leader, or prophet (Alexander, 2016).

However, in addition to the egalitarian stance implied in the Marxist understanding of the role of the intellectual, the region has historically been influenced by the model of the ‘enlightenment intellectual’ (*tanwiri*) who is supposed to play a pivotal role in the context of the modernising (*nahdawi*) project of the nation (Haydari, 2013; Kassab, 2019; Bardawil, 2018). Even as they positioned themselves against the state from the 1970s onwards, Syrian *muthaqafeen* hardly questioned this secularising and modernising project. They were separated from the ‘common people’ and although their work was intended to be expressive of their needs, it was also expected to act as a ‘vector’ in the process of modernisation (Bardawil, 2018, p. 178). This separation was reflected in Said’s “Representations of the Intellectual” (1993, p.52) which valorises an ‘outsider’ position where the intellectual is always ‘at odds with their society’. Furthermore, the separation between intellectuals and the rest of the populace was reinforced by post-colonial dictatorships aiming to repress, isolate and often delegitimise the critical intellectual within society¹. Meanwhile in Europe, the position of authority through which ‘leftist’ intellectuals intervened in public affairs was resisted by a new generation of French intellectuals, particularly after the events of May ’68 through which ‘the intellectual discovered that the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge’ and that indeed ‘they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves.’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 207)

In *Truth and Power* (1984, p. 67), Foucault explained a particular notion of the intellectual that he regarded as outdated.

For a long period, the “left” intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all².”

Foucault proposed the need for ‘specific intellectuals’ who rely on their expertise to make interventions but who refuse to impose a particular vision on their publics.

¹ For example, by purging them from universities, banning their books and excluding them from cultural institutions or events where they could reach an audience.

² Ironically, despite practicing the ‘embedded intellectual’ positionality to an extreme form, Yassin al-Haj Saleh acquired the nickname ‘the consciousness of the revolution’.

At a later stage, the move away from authoritative models of public intellectualism increasingly generated a self-understanding among intellectuals as intertwined with their publics and part of communal collectives. This would be further accelerated by new technologies and the multiple ways in which they changed the type of interactions between intellectuals and their publics (Baert & Booth, 2012). With this turn, intellectuals have increasingly replaced their authoritative stance with a more egalitarian attitude toward their publics.

Syrian intellectuals were not insulated from these shifts (see for example Kassab, 2010). But if Foucault's 'special intellectual' can be seen as a middle-ground between authoritative and egalitarianist inclinations, it was a tenuous alternative to the authoritative model in a country like Syria for a variety of reasons: the academic environment that might engage intellectuals had a weak research agenda with almost non-existent funding and a securitised higher education system which purged critical intellectuals and thwarted independent social research (Dillabough et al., 2019). This made it very difficult for academics to make research-led interventions into local situations. Since the 'specific' mode of engagement was virtually unachievable, theoretical, individualist and generalist interventions continued to be the predominant mode with little reference to empirical work.

The untenable status of the 'specific' model left most intellectuals oscillating between -and internally negotiating- authoritative and egalitarianist modes of engagement with the public. In other words, they were divided between a position of epistemic superiority and political leadership on the one hand, and a position of epistemic equality and solidarity from below. Such contradictions within the public intellectual concerning leadership versus solidarity-from-below are neither recent nor unique to the context of this study. As early as 1979 Boggs (p. 22) describes the intellectual stratum as 'laden with contradictions' including the coexistence of 'technocratic' and 'emancipatory' tendencies. More recently, Baert and Booth (2012) identified four sets of contradictions or 'tensions' within the public intellectual including the tension between 'hierarchy' and 'equality'³. Both these sets of contradictions allude to the fundamental question of the relationship between the intellectual and the society they speak for; do they lead, or do they follow? Do they critique and direct, or do they articulate, accept, describe and listen?

Solidarity from below and the task of critique

In 2011, with the onset of a revolutionary movement in the form of mass protest to bring down the regime in Damascus, intellectuals' attempts to reconcile a progressive egalitarian politics with an 'enlightening' mission were significantly

³ Indeed, fieldwork data shows that both egalitarianism and vanguardism continued to mark the ways in which Syrian intellectuals related to their publics; a tension that was evident not only in the two resulting modes of positionality but also often within the same participant.

complicated by the movement's ability to demonstrate the emancipatory motivations and revolutionary potential of significant segments of the populace. Intellectuals had called for this political mobilisation but had failed to instigate it for decades. It burdened intellectuals with self-doubt and a sense of failure, because it highlighted their ineffectiveness in bringing about change. It also inspired an unprecedented respect for 'the people' broadly defined. Indeed, pro-revolution Syrian publics, particularly the subaltern, who had long been dismissed as submissive and reactionary, were now at the centre of a revolutionary movement. With the movement unfolding into massacre after massacre and eventually leading to all-out war, intellectuals' sense of celebration and respect towards the people gave way to intense empathy with their suffering. Combined with rage towards an international community that seemed apathetic towards that suffering, and a sense of survivor's guilt, particularly among the majority who were now safely in exile, intellectuals quickly diverted their efforts towards trauma narration as a means for expressing solidarity and alleviating guilt. By doing so, they drew international attention to the people's suffering, ultimately establishing and furthering their 'Syrian cause' within an international political sphere. This role of trauma narration, sometimes funded by European academic institutions or NGOs and motivated by the remnants of belief in the political efficacy of international compassion, called for identification with the suffering masses. As a result, there was a tendency to give up any 'enlightening' or socially critical role which intellectuals may still have adopted prior to the revolution. Instead, the intellectuals started to identify with 'the people', aligning themselves not only with their suffering but also with what they perceived to be their general inclinations and sentiments.

Thus, after years of estrangement, a remarkable shift in intellectuals' relationship with 'the people' became evident. Hussein Chawich⁴ describes a 'strong relationship' and effective 'two-way communication' between intellectuals and 'the people' in the first two years of the revolution (personal communication, 2018). Similarly, Al-Haj Saleh observed that a 'structural rupture between high culture -the culture of intellectuals, thinkers, and artists- and the general public had been bridged in the first two years of the revolution' (personal communication, 2018). Not only were intellectuals now closer to 'the people'; they felt indebted to them.

⁴ Hussein Chawich is a physician, psychologist and writer. He is a participant in this study. Born in 1953 to a Palestinian family in Syria he studied medicine at Aleppo University and psychology in Germany where he has been living since 1990. He has four published books intersecting various genres including political analysis, Sufism, travel journaling, comparative anthropology and political psychology as well numerous articles in leading Arabic language periodicals and academic journals. His latest book awaiting publication discusses the different narratives of Islamic sectarianism and he currently works on a book on the Grand Narratives of The Palestinian Tragedy. He was the recipient of the Ibn Battuta Prize for Travel Literature 2009 and Awda Award for newspaper fiction in 2010.

Baderddin Arodaki⁵, who believes that ‘the only true intellectual is the critical intellectual’ suggests that by overcoming the chronic trauma of persecution and breaking a decades-old ‘barrier of fear’, the revolting youth allowed intellectuals in Syria to reclaim their critical role, to be ‘rejuvenated’, and to be ‘set free’ (personal communication, 2018). Similarly, Sobhi Hadidi⁶ contends that the ‘doubly violated dignity’ of the Syrian intellectual - firstly as a subject of dictatorship and additionally as ‘disbarred, and castrated’ – was immediately restored when they ‘felt empowered by the masses and their uprising’ (personal communication, 2018).

It is not surprising that interventions adopting a position of solidarity from below would gain traction in such circumstances⁷. As the earlier excerpts signal, advocacy interventions⁸ had already been growing since the early days of the movement. However, advocacy was increasingly performed in a manner so amplified, so radical in its embeddedness, that it became an echo chamber of the (perceived) sentiments of the masses. It is our contention that the resulting extreme form of solidarity from below and associated epistemic hyper-egalitarianism were aligned with intellectuals’ new role as trauma narrators and with their related quest to establish a Syrian cause on the global political arena. For such a role to be possible, an identification with the suffering masses was important, because one cannot narrate someone’s pain without empathising with it and in this empathy, there is a degree of amalgamation. Levinson (2001) further argues that the intellectual’s ability to feel for or like the suffering

⁵ Badreddine Arodaki is a writer and translator in the fields of literary and film criticism. He has been writing political opinion articles since 2011. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1942, he obtained degrees in law and literature at Damascus University. He started his career with the Syrian magazine *Al-Taleea* (The Vanguard) before briefly serving as director of planning and film studies at the Public Institute for Cinema in Damascus. In 1972, he travelled to Paris where he completed a PhD in sociology at the University of Paris. He settled in France in 1981. During his doctoral dissertation, he worked for the UNESCO, and then held several positions at the Institut Du Monde Arabe in Paris where he was appointed assistant director-general from 2008 to 2012. He was one of the founders, and later director, of the Arabic language magazine “The Seventh Day”. He published a number of studies in the sociology of culture and has been a visiting editor-in-chief for an issue of the French language Magazine *Littéraire*. His translations cover over thirty books ranging from novels and studies to sociologies and histories included works by Suzanne Taha Hussein, Jose Saramago and Milan Kundera.

⁶ Subhi Hadidi is a literary critic and translator. He is a participant in this study. Born in Qamishli in 1951, he graduated from Damascus University’s Department of English language and literature and continued his postgraduate studies in France and Britain. He has authored 11 books and numerous critical studies in leading Arab and international periodicals with a focus on the contemporary Arab poetry scene, in particular Mahmoud Darwish and the prose poem. As a translator, he has worked on seminal works in philosophy, novel, poetry and critical theory. He also presented in-depth studies on the definition of literary theory and contemporary critical schools with a focus on postmodernism, theories of post-colonial discourse, theories of reading and response, the new historicism criticism. Politically, he is a member of the Syrian Communist Party - Political Bureau or what is more recently known as the Syrian Democratic People’s Party. He lives in Paris and writes periodically for the London-based Arabic language newspaper *Al-Quds al-Arabi* and the Paris based French monthly *Le Nouvel Afrique-Asie*.

⁷ Many anti-revolution intellectuals maintained an authoritative stance (e.g., Adonis) suggesting a possible relationship between epistemic hierarchism and social hierarchism. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Adonis remains popular mostly among those who bow to Assad’s authority despite being aware of the regime’s atrocities.

⁸ Interventions that aim first and foremost to garner solidarity for the movement and to advocate for its framing and its trauma narrative.

Other, is intertwined with the construction of knowledge. There is an emphasis on the intellectual's role in bringing awareness to the pain and suffering of the subaltern, and he suggests that this feeling is essential for political intervention. Another contributing factor relates to the fact that in Syria, intellectuals and their publics inhabited the same emotional habitus. Indeed, they inhabited a similar *social* habitus too where most participants shared characteristics with what Assef Bayat (2013) calls the region's 'poor middle class'⁹. Overidentification with the 'multitude' was manifested by an expressed desire to demolish any distinction between the intellectuals and (lay) people. During interviews, questions about the relationship between intellectuals and their public(s) were challenged with a repudiation of the existence of any such binary. Ghalioun's reply started with 'I don't believe in the conception of intellectuals as a special class that is separate from the public. They are one with the people'. Yassin al-Haj Saleh said 'We are part of the multitude' adding, 'In fact, the multitude does not exist. The common man does not exist... Where a schism does exist, ... it is politically manufactured. It is not some type of distance or ivory tower created by the intellectual but the result of systematic and politically motivated actions.' (personal communication, 2018).

Historically, however, intellectuals have tended to define themselves in juxtaposition to that which they are not, whether they are referred to as the people, the masses or the public (Eyerman, 1994). Arguing by now that the 'multitude does not exist', the intellectuals ended up erasing a crucial distinction that would normally provide them with a sense of collective identity, direction and responsibility. This identity used to be centred around their ability and duty to inform and to provide guidance to others. This identity has now been erased. Two complications arise from this.

First complication: a sense of discursive inadequacy

In the context of a revolutionary movement that is inherently fast-paced and unpredictable, a discursive frame for action is necessary to maintain a sense of direction. However, a position of uncritical solidarity from below rendered Syrian intellectuals' interventions critically hesitant, conciliatory and generally politically hollow – merely mirroring their perceived consensus within the movement's public opinion. In Zalloua's words, this 'hermeneutics of scepticism' and the 'ethics of hesitation' that it engendered (see Zalloua, 2016) resulted in a discursive vacuum, leaving the movement without intellectual leadership, thereby making it susceptible to the influence of extremist and 'obscurantist' religious discourses.

Reflecting on the developments at the time, many participants felt that the intellectuals had generally been unable to provide a convincing discourse that was attuned to the extreme forms of brutality which the protesters faced. Nor were they able to offer guidance, warnings or a critical discourse when growing segments

⁹ The poor middle class exhibits characteristics that bridge the traditional middle class and the economically disadvantaged segments of society.

within the movement began to adopt a religious and sometimes sectarian discourse. Several of the participants concluded that these two failures contributed to the movement's descent into self-destruction.

Discursive vacuum

First, we will take a closer look at the discursive vacuum that resulted from the inability of intellectuals to offer a persuasive emancipatory discourse congruent with the people's lived reality, particularly in relation to regime violence and state terrorism.

We discussed earlier the unique bond between intellectuals and their fast-expanding publics as it developed in the early months of the uprising. However, the violent reaction by the regime quickly undermined this link. Burhan Ghalioun¹⁰ points out that the intellectuals were unprepared for the militarisation of the movement and did not know how to react to the regime's violence (personal communication, 2018). About Laban¹¹ (personal communication, 2018) describes how, when people first took to the streets, the intellectuals were able to produce a discourse to oppose the regime; this focused on the idea of a peaceful transformation towards democracy. When the regime resorted to extreme violence, and the movement had to choose between armed resistance or surrender, the intellectuals failed to develop a new discourse, ideology, or political program beyond sheer denunciations of the regime. 'I think this is in the background of the idea that the street is ahead of the intellectuals' About Laban explains (personal communication, 2018). Intellectuals failed to fulfil their role, he suggests, because they were unable to produce a viable discourse that would provide guidance to the movement in this new, brutally violent context.

¹⁰ Burhan Ghalioun is a professor of political sociology and of Arab civilization and society at the Université de Paris III Sorbonne. He was the first chairman of the Syrian National Council (SNC). Born in Homs in 1945, Ghalioun studied sociology and philosophy at the University of Damascus. In 1969, he moved to Paris where he completed a PhD in social science from the Université Paris VII and a Doctorat d'état in humanities from the Sorbonne. In the late 1970s, he became recognised as a proponent of democratisation in the Arab region after publishing 'A Manifesto for Democracy'. He co-founded the Arab Organization for Human Rights in 1983. In 2000, Ghalioun became an active participant in the short-lived Damascus Spring and in 2005, he took part in the Damascus Declaration. When the revolution broke out in 2011, Ghalioun was a public supporter of the protesters, working to bring together opposition groups. In August 2011, he was appointed as the first president of the Syrian National Council (SNC); an umbrella group that aimed to unify the many factions opposed to Assad's government. By February 2012 his leadership became controversial and he resigned in an attempt to heal growing divisions in the SNC. He is the author of numerous books in sociology and the politics of the Islamic world many of which have been translated, notable among these are *Assassination of the Mind*, *Democratic Choice in Syria*, *Sectarianism and Minorities*, and *The Elite Society*, *Le malaise Arabe: l'Etat contre la nation*, and *Islam et politique: la Modernité trahie*.

¹¹ O Mohammad Abu Laban is a Palestinian-Syrian screenwriter, poet, playwright and journalist. Born in Damascus in 1976, he was educated in Philosophy and Theatre Studies in Damascus where he worked on various TV films, adaptations and drama series' in addition to collaborating on several documentaries. He moved to Madrid in 2005 working as a journalist, broadcaster, and editor. His publications include four poetry collections as well as the playscript *The Last Lover* (2008). He is co-founder and editor of the magazine *A Syrian Look* and the artistic director of the Syrian Mobile Film Festival.

In a similar fashion, Yassin al-Haj Saleh attributed the weakness of the impact of intellectuals and their ‘secular opposition’ to discursive anaemia.

The traditional secular opposition carries no weight today because it has no distinctive discourse about a post-Assad Syria that surpasses what has been said since the late seventies and throughout the Damascus Spring: political multiplicity, rule of law, and citizenship. By focusing on these particular pillars of liberal democracy, it leaves important ethnic and religious issues outside the scope of rigorous deliberation. It also neglects the question of feminism and women’s rights, problems of decentralised administration in political organisation, and to a great extent the “social issue” (al-Haj Saleh, 2017).

In an earlier article, al-Haj Saleh makes the suggested link between intellectuals’ discursive failure and the rise of militant Islamists very clear. He writes,

We joined the revolution with few new ideas, fewer new politics and fewer still new ideologies. This scarcity is opportune for the Islamists. Modern oppositional Islamism is structurally linked to our failed renewal: politically, culturally and socially. This is a fundamental principle to my mind: Islamists are better placed when our societies fail to create new meanings, values and modes of organisation. (Al-Haj Saleh, 2014a)

In our interview, he clarified that when he talks about his disappointments with intellectuals of his generation he is mainly referring to ‘the failure to introduce a new language, new concepts and ideas that constitute a discourse better suited to address today’s realities and concerns’¹².

Thus, when peaceful protestors decided to confront live ammunition, arrest, torture and mass killing with militarisation, intellectuals diverged into three main groups. One chose to accept the shift towards militarism and delegated most crucial decisions to the protestors, thus giving up the task of critique. Their role was one of articulating, representing, and often poeticising the ‘choice of the people’ but rarely informing, suggesting, or instructing. Echoing the earlier critique of the authoritative intellectual in France, they supported the view that the protestors know far better than them and that they should take the back seat. While one method of reasoning suggested that engaging in armed conflict would carry many risks including dependence on funders and eventual subservience to their agendas such as Islamisation and sectarianisation (Chawich, personal communication, 2018), many intellectuals found it difficult to ask people to persevere in their pacifism under fire while they were being slaughtered, particularly when speaking from the safety of exile. Another group pushed for the radical discourse of violent struggle while a smaller third group contributed a self-sceptical narrative which posited exile as a central obstacle to an intellectuals’ credibility in local political struggles.

¹² It is interesting to contrast this with Lilla’s (2001) complaint against ‘politically adventurous thinkers’ and his call for increased ‘intellectual modesty and self-scrutiny’ (as cited in Auckert in Desch, 2016, p. 320).

Unfortunately, and I am as implicated as anyone, we are trying to lead a revolution from behind Facebook screens in climate-controlled rooms with a cup of coffee and cigarette in hand. We aren't in touch with anything ... If the intellectual is separated from the people's lived experience, then their intellect is no struggle at all, it is metaphysics. (Daher Ayta¹³, personal communication, 2018)

Only one of 29 participants explicitly held on to the authoritative enlightening role. Through this position, this participant warned against militarism and advised protestors to insist on the initial pacifist approach. Document analysis also shows that others outside this study's sample held similarly authoritative positions. This created a discursive disjuncture between the protestors and pacifist intellectuals, particularly those who were calling for pacifism from a position of safety, whether at home or in exile, and contributed to the quick fall of intellectuals' legitimacy in the popular collective consciousness.

A practical example of this was offered by a participant who was part of an activist group which liaised with protestors from Berlin through its members inside Syria.

We used to write the slogans for the protests. I used to deliver them through a friend by Skype and from him they went to the protestors in Homs... One day he told me that they were going to take up arms. I expressed my disapproval. He said perhaps you don't see what's happening, without weapons the Mukhabarat will continue to do this to us. I told him ... this kind of program will lead to dependency on funders. I was against any external funding from the beginning (name withheld for this quote, personal communication, 2018).

The collaboration between the group and the protestors ceased after this exchange.

While more the outcome of exile than of the embedded position as such, the discursive disjuncture between pacifist intellectuals and protestors that this situation created contributed to a wave of anti-intellectual sentiment which rose exponentially in 2012 and 2013. It manifested not only in harsh and broad-scale criticism towards specific Syrian intellectuals, but also in the delegitimisation of 'the intellectual' as such. These growing anti-intellectual sentiments were accepted by many intellectuals and members of the intelligentsia and manifested in a positionality towards publics that that was marked by a fetishization of the masses and a negation of any distinctions between them and intellectuals. It also precluded the possibility of intellectuals adopting their traditionally expected role within social movements of thought leadership and critical solidarity.

¹³ Daher Ayta is a novelist, theatre director and playwright. Born in Damascus in 1966, he studied theatre criticism at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus where he later taught until his arrest by the Syrian Security Service in November 2012 for his critical position towards the regime. He won the prize for best children's theatre script award at the Arab Theatre Commission's competition in Sharjah for his text *Innocence of a Sailor*. His works include *The Last Moment of Love*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Guardians of the Environment* and others. In 2010, he published his first novel *The Last Moment of Love*. He has also been publishing literary and film critique as well as political opinion pieces for leading Arabic language periodicals.

Rapidly, the partnership between intellectuals and large numbers of protestors which was forged in the early months of the movement was overtaken by a rising role for Islamist organisations who not only offered a discourse which justified violence but also offered weapons and funding with it. In positionist terms, Islamist discourse was better aligned with the historical conditions of the movement as it was able to ‘strike a chord with their potential audience, allowing them to make sense of their current or recent experiences’ (Baert, 2015, p. 17) whereas the intellectuals’ emancipatory, secularist and sometimes pacifist discourse failed to sustain its receptivity in the public-intellectual arena because it was unable to ‘connect with the recent and present experiences of the people’ (Ibid). Furthermore, as previously theorised (Baert, 2015, p.17), the loss of credibility that one discourse suffered, in this case the secularist democratic and civil discourse, meant that its counter-discourse of Jihadism would spread more effectively both because the former no longer resonated with a large segment of the audience and because its ‘carriers’ had diminished authority.

Like most other participants, Abou Laban seemed acutely aware of this dynamic but equally helpless to change it. He says in our interview (2018):

While organised Jihadism may have been imported, Syrian society has always been conservative and in the absence of an alternative narrative that was compatible with the necessity of violence, people adopted the fundamentalist Islamist narrative even if it was extraneous... The narratives that intellectuals contributed; the emancipatory discourse against dictatorship and authoritarianism is quite old. In Syria it goes as far back as the beginning of the rule of Hafez Assad. What was missing when the revolution became armed was a discourse that could counter the violent turn; one that was not simply utopian talk... I was there at the time, all this violence by the regime was debilitating. It required a real act to parallel it. The pacifist narrative couldn’t have survived in front of this.

Furthermore, with the vast majority of openly oppositionist intellectuals going into exile after 2013, a paradoxical situation began to emerge. Exile complicated intellectuals’ perceived bond with their home publics because it resulted in a relationship in which they felt at once cognitively closer but experientially more separated from those publics. In other words, while they were firmly committed to a positioning in which the intellectual is fully ‘embedded’ within society, they were now physically removed from that home society. Yassin al-Haj Saleh¹⁴ explains:

¹⁴ Yassin Al Haj Saleh has been called the iconic intellectual of the revolution. He is a writer and public intellectual. Born in Raqqa in 1961, he went to medical school at the University of Aleppo. In 1980 and while still a medical student, 19-year-old Yassin was arrested because of his membership in the Syrian Communist Party- Political Bureau. He was released 16 years later. He spent most of 2011 and 2012 in hiding, writing on the unfolding uprising. In April 2013, he moved to Douma City in Eastern Ghouta, by then outside the control of the regime, where he was writing on-the-ground analyses and articles. In July of that year he headed towards Raqqa, his hometown, in a 19-day perilous journey. On his way there, Raqqa was captured by ISIS and Yassin was informed that his brother was kidnapped by the organization. Soon after, his wife Samira Khalil, herself a writer and activist, was held captive by Islamist fac-

The paradox which the revolution and exile have created is that our exodus out of the country made our connection to a living environment weak, but at the same time the environment that the revolution created throughout the past 7 years is the one around which our work revolves so we have a close tie with this environment which will continue to be for a long time the object of our intellectual and psychological investment (personal communication, 2018).

In this sense, when espoused from a position of exile, embeddedness within Syrian publics and society was more the product of a collective imaginary more than in lived reality. This disconnect between intellectuals and lived experience made them dependent on their less privileged compatriots inside the country for reflecting on and theorising the situation in Syria; but these were people amongst whom they no longer lived and whose experiences and circumstances they no longer shared. Accordingly, the intellectuals lost their sense of confidence or entitlement that they were the carriers of revolutionary discourse or framing. This left them with the role of witnesses and narrators of injustice and trauma and further hardened the self-positioning of uncritical solidarity from below. This unique form of solidarity also meant that the intellectual was no longer an equal partner with the public, but rather its follower and dependent. The resultant reversed leadership will be the focus of a later section in this paper, but we will first explore a second aspect of the relationship between radical embeddedness and weak ideational influence.

Quietism towards the movement's developments

So far, we have identified the discursive vacuum created by violence as the first factor that contributed to the weakening of the ideational impact of intellectuals. We have also drawn a link between this discursive vacuum and radical embeddedness. In this section, we will consider the second discursive failure: quietism in relation to the movement's perceived derailments.

With rising violence and the gradual influx of sectarian elements within the movement, intellectuals were reluctant to criticise the types of political Islam that were rapidly gaining ground. A number of established secularist intellectuals refused to recognise 'any evil creatures aside from it [the regime], until its downfall' (e.g., al-Haj Saleh as cited in Hajaj, 2019) or welcomed the influx of foreign fighters taking up arms against the dictator (e.g., Hadidi, 2012) regardless of the fact that they were Jihadists fighting for a non-democratic exclusionary future

Footnote 14 (continued)

tions in Douma. They are both still missing at the time of writing. From Raqqa, Saleh fled to Turkey and relocated in 2017 to Berlin where he was offered a fellowship at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin). He has written prolifically on political, social and cultural subjects and contributed regularly to the London-based AlHayat newspaper, the Egyptian leftist magazine Al-Bosla. He mostly writes now for the Syrian online periodical Al Jumhuriya (The Republic) of which he is a co-founder. He has published seven books to date the latest of which, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, was translated into English and published by Hurst Publishers, London in 2017. He is a participant in this study.

state. While explicit statements of support for Islamist factions were rare and disappeared quickly after the emergence of IS and their atrocities became known, critical retrospective reflection focused on the silence about Islamism. One such critic was Hussein Chawich. Chawich expressed his belief that ‘silence about Islamists, armament, and external funding was detrimental’ to the movement and undermined intellectuals’ responsibility in ‘alerting people to problematic issues’ (personal communication, 2018). ‘The positive meaning of being an intellectual is that one does not cheat the people but is able to maintain enough distance for a clear vision, with nothing left unspoken’ he told me in our interview, adding that:

I think the curse of the Syria revolution is the unspoken. The Revolution’s intellectuals were silent about how it was developing on the ground. They were completely silent about the Islamist Salafist component, especially in the beginning. In fact, in the beginning they denied its existence [...] the intellectual who does not question reality and re-evaluate their own positions, who does not try to see a situation, leaving nothing unspoken... is a politician, not an intellectual. With time those intellectuals who joined political organisations amassed more that was unspoken than that which was actually said.

Frequently discussed in interviews, the critics did not see the omissions simply as blind spots. They saw this silence as intrinsic to the way in which they had positioned themselves vis-à-vis the people. In other words, the omissions were aligned with the radically embedded positioning. As positioning depends on what is left out just as much as it does on what is stated explicitly (Baert as cited in Baert & Susen, 2017), these omissions and denial, particularly vis-à-vis the growing influence of Jihadism, compromised the critical role of the intellectuals. Denial of a Salafist threat was certainly enhanced by the fact that this was the central tenet of the regime’s discourse. But it was also rooted in absolute and uncritical solidarity with the movement as the following quote demonstrates.

To claim that the victory of the uprising would bring Islamic Emirates or religious regimes is beyond ignorant: it is to speak on behalf of the regime, and to volunteer to promote the lies of power. Syria, as a reminder, was a country that elected its first Christian prime minister, Fares al-Khoury [in 1944]. The leader of the Syrian revolution against French colonialism was The Druze Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, and his deputy in the coastal region was the Alawite Sheikh Saleh al-Ali, and the Kurdish Ibrahim Hanano was the leader of a revolution in Aleppo. In Syria, the first Arab parliamentary experience was born, and women were granted the right to vote for the first time in the Arab world [in 1953]. (Hadidi, 2011)

We do not dispute these historic truths nor are we trying to assess whether the above prognosis is accurate; it is almost impossible to say. Rather, we wish to draw attention to the fact that at the time intellectuals abstained from criticisms towards the movement, whilst they understandably intensified their critique of the regime and its atrocities. Initially, they did not raise questions about the influx of

Jihadist fighters, nor about the related complex relationship between religiosity and democratisation. By the time such issues were raised, it was too late for intellectuals to have any influence on the course of the movement.

In the next section, we will observe how this epistemic hyper-egalitarianism also weakened the role of intellectuals in the political arena.

Second complication: limited political role

Based on interview data, very few participants were directly involved in political work through oppositional political organisations whilst in exile. They found their peers' retreat from such work as both symptomatic of the historical distance between intellectuals and 'the people' and contributory to the 'derailment of the movement.' Burhan Ghalioun, who expressed deep disappointment apropos Syrian intellectuals' abstention from organised political work, attributes this to 'arrogance' and suggests that they 'became an insular group whose work was mainly internally directed and disconnected from the people' (personal communication, 2018). He construes this as a structural characteristic and attributes it to historic conditions in which intellectuals had no political role owing to 'the absence of the possibility to lecture, engage the public and tour,' arguing that this insular quality continued after exile where 'their public facing activities were limited and group-based with no expansive dynamic' (personal communication, 2018). Ghalioun was one of few public intellectuals to become a member of the Syrian National Council, one of two umbrella oppositionist organisations which aim to represent 'the Syrian people.' His decision to take up professional politics was controversial within the milieu, and he was outspoken in our interview about how detrimental to the revolution he found the retreat of his peers to have been. In our interview (2018) he says, 'There was not a single intellectual to be found to stand with me in this role. This is a disaster. I had to work with people who were almost illiterate and mostly Islamist. Where were the other intellectuals?'

Similar to Ghalioun, Paris-based academic Samira Mobaied (2018) believed it was particularly important that Syrian intellectuals undertake a direct role. 'A leap has been taken and if we remain at the level of intellectual participation in the struggle, we will remain outside what takes place within political organisations and this puts us at a disadvantage,' she explains. Like Ghalioun, Mobaied has been an active member in oppositionist organisations, including the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition.

Most other intellectuals avoided membership in any such organisations¹⁵ and defended their decision by adhering to the view that political loyalties are inherently

¹⁵ Notable exceptions include in the Syrian National Council (SNC), Basma Kodmani, a Paris-based Syrian academic and Radwan Ziadeh, who is also a senior fellow at Washington thinktank, the US Institute of Peace. A notable exception outside the SNC is Aref Dalila, an academic and previous Dean at Damascus University who served on the executive committee of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. Neither of them is a participant in this study.

incompatible with scholarship's long cherished aspiration for detachment (for more on this view see Schaar & Wolin, 1963). Others were more pragmatic in their reasoning: their concern was that in the absence of an oppositional political legacy, i.e., parties, alliances and networks that could support them, any such involvement would have been predestined to failure¹⁶.

If you see, any of those intellectuals who joined the [Syrian National] Council, ... they joined as individuals, not as members of a party. Whereas we would be working in exile with organised people who have financial and political support from entire states. What can we contribute in such a setting? Nothing. Except become a toy in their hands, and that's exactly what happened to them [in reference to intellectuals who joined in a private capacity]. (Farouk Mardam Bey¹⁷, personal communication, 2018)

In other words, without the support of a party, intellectuals thought that getting involved in the political organisations would restrict them to a weak and nominal role. But this was not the only reason for their reluctance: the idea of radical embeddedness and the related ideal of 'the deliberately leaderless character' of the movement (Glasius & Pleyers, 2013) was also crucial.

'Leaderlessness' was celebrated by many revolutionary intellectuals who explicitly refused leadership roles and denounced iconic positions within the movement. As an example, one might refer to Yassin al-Haj Saleh's article celebrating a statement by the late activist and actress Fadwa Sulaiman in which she rejects reference to her as an 'icon of the revolutionary Alawite'. Paraphrasing her words, Saleh writes: 'Truly amazing: "I'm not an idol! I'm Fadwa! Like life! I have a lover! Down with icons and long live freedom! I'm a rebel!" ... She frames her refusal to become an idol within the broader context of Syrians' movement to tear down all idols!' (al-Haj Saleh, 2011).

This distinctive outlook which emphasises resistance to hierarchies also recognises intellectuals and their publics as epistemic equals (Baert & Susen, 2017, p. 41). It has been suggested that the Arab revolutions were centred around the idea of

¹⁶ This strategy rests on the Leninist position that political agency requires a party and on an understanding that while visionary hopes rest on the emancipatory potential of a culture of critical discourse, 'it is only through parties that anything political gets done in today's world' (see also Gouldner, 1979). Mardam Bey identifies as Maoist while Hadidi is a member of the Syrian Democratic People's Party, previously named Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau).

¹⁷ Farouk Mardam-Bey is a librarian, historian and publisher. He is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1944, he studied law at Damascus University before moving to Paris to study political science. He has lived in France since 1965. In 1976 he became forcibly exiled having become wanted by the Syrian regime for his participation in protests against the Syrian invasion of Lebanon and his involvement with the Palestinian resistance. He worked as a librarian at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations before being appointed director of the library and cultural advisor at the Institut du Monde Arabe from 1989 until 2008. In 1995, he became director of Sindbad editions of the publishing house Actes Sud and editor of its novels and poetry translated from Arabic. Farouk MardamBey is the author of books, essays and documents on the Arab World. He co-authored the two-volume *Itinéraires de Paris à Jérusalem: La France et le Conflit Israélo-Arabe* (1992) with Samir Kassir, and co-edited a book with Elias Sanbar titled *Jérusalem: Le Sacré et le Politique* (2000). He was awarded the French Knight of the Legion of Honor on July 14, 2018.

building a new social contract whereby law becomes ‘an expression of the people’s solidarity’ rather than the ‘sovereignty of any upright or righteous person or group (a charismatic leader)’ (Shahin cited in Glasius & Pleyers, 2013, p. 557). This hostility towards political leadership was particularly pronounced among Syrian intellectuals, who had since the 1990s gradually adopted ‘an ethos of ... social embeddedness’ (Kassab, 2019, p.115). Rosa Yaseen-Hassan (2018) puts it in a broader context when she suggests it was a ‘revolt against the personification [of movements] and mythologisation [of leaders]’ that led Syrians to reject the idea of leadership within the movement. This perception of anti-leadership sentiments among their publics contributed to intellectuals’ inclination toward advocacy interventions and trauma work, as if in anticipation of their impending devaluation within this wave of anti-leadership and ultimately anti-intellectualist sentiments.

Unsurprisingly, for those who were organisationally engaged in the movement, its leaderless character was seen as a failing rather than something to celebrate; one which created a leadership vacuum that was quickly occupied by reactionary and undemocratic forces. As we mentioned earlier, Ghalioun offered one such argument. While he is no exception to the tension between egalitarianism and vanguardism that is inherent to the role of public intellectual, Ghalioun’s egalitarianism does not trump his belief in the intellectual’s responsibility. In his reply to a letter blaming intellectuals for legitimising a movement that led to destruction and death, Ghalioun contends that Syrian intellectuals are not to blame for spreading emancipatory ideals and hopes (as his critic had indicated). Rather, they failed to perform a guiding role that might direct the movement towards positive goals and prevent it from falling into the pits of sectarianism and vengefulness toward which the regime was driving it. They are to blame, he says, for ‘leaving the people almost entirely leaderless’ (Ghalioun, 2018a, b).

It is worth noting that among many of those who initially celebrated the revolution’s ‘leaderlessness’, a sense of regret gradually emerged. It was reflected in a self-questioning sentiment that prevailed in the public sphere in the past few years and in the repeated call for collective self-reflection and revision (*muaraja’at*). This self-reflection had at least in part to do with having failed to play a more effective role in preserving the movement’s emancipatory framing i.e. performing an intellectual leadership role. In a group article published on the 8th anniversary of the revolution, a number of exiled artists, writers and activists wrote that the greatest lesson of the revolution was that they had overstated the ‘logic of deferral’: that is, they now regretted this tendency to refrain from critiquing reactionary forces within the revolution so as to maintain a united front until the fall of the regime. ‘We did not pay attention to the importance of fighting the battle for personal freedoms early on, before the conservative current – an imperially orientated force of course - led by the Islamist authoritarians was able to sideline us’ (Tansiqiyet-Alfenuidash, 2019). In other words, their greatest regret was that they failed to intervene authoritatively at the right time for fear that their views contravened anti-leadership sentiments or contradicted those of certain audiences seen as important in the fight against the regime.

Despite avoidance of political leadership and scepticism towards intellectuals’ role in organised politics, intellectuals, particularly of the middle and older

generations, insisted on an Arendtian understanding of political life as integral to the human experience. They repeatedly highlighted the importance of ending Syria's 'politicide' and enabling the resurrection of free political action and discourse in Syria. They problematised a lack of enthusiasm towards political organisation, particularly in exile, sometimes attributing it to a state of generalised despair and a 'conviction that it's all useless' (Farouk Mardam Bey, personal communication, 2018). At the same time, with few exceptions, they refrained from political organising for the movement themselves.

Al-Haj Saleh (2014b) who has remained outside organised political work since his release from prison in 1996, critiques the abstention from political work among the Syrian youth and intellectuals and problematises the way they are 'supposedly devoting themselves instead to issues of thought, literature and art' or to ostensibly nonpartisan NGO work. He attributes overall withdrawal from politics in Syria to a regime-led strategy which has isolated the public from politics by administering a regime of chronic trauma surrounding the political; 'through intimidation, fear, corruption and abuse; or by feeding public scepticism about politics and politicians'. This strategy, he suggests, has resulted in a fraught relationship to politics, evoking images of 'power and domination', 'fickleness', 'corruption', and 'elitist detachment from people's lives'. He admits to not being 'outside of this condition which he criticises' and to having repeatedly stated that he works exclusively with cultural, not political tools. He also recognises that in this way he is 'complicit in limiting the field of politics and hindering its overdue expansion which the revolution has made possible'. Nevertheless, he offers no explanation for his own position outside the organised politics of the movement.

Similarly, Farouk Mardam Bey, who has been living in France since 1965 and remains outside the political organisations of the Syrian revolution, argued as follows:

The Syrian state wanted politics to end, for people to become disinterested in politics except in the scope of applauding the ruler. But politics is an essential part of life, and it cannot be restricted to the cultural field... political change inside Syria requires political organising. (Farouk Mardam Bey, personal communication, 2018)

In addition to previously cited concerns about external support and party membership, this contradictory position vis-à-vis political engagement may also be linked with what Hösle (2016, p. 375) calls 'the true dilemma of the public intellectual' arguing that alliances are necessary if the public intellectual is to have an impact on the political arena. But joining a platform means having to make concessions which compromise intellectual independence and sometimes result in self-deception when intellectuals 'come even to believe what at the beginning was only a concession to the would-be ally' (Ibid).

It may be said that this 'true dilemma of the public intellectual' at least partially reflects the experience of Burhan Ghalioun who faced a choice between attempting to influence the movement through intellectual work and making a direct political impact through his leadership of the Syrian National Council, and who clearly prioritised the latter. To borrow from Hösle (2016 p. 376), 'between

magnificent loneliness with the dim chance of a long-term impact and immediate effect at the expense of depth', he chose 'immediate effect'. He ended up making concessions which fundamentally contradicted his intellectual position such as aligning with the Muslim Brotherhood, justifying the acceptance of Gulf funding or purportedly resorting to authoritarian leadership strategies. Whilst acknowledging that 'intellectual work is meaningful and politically fruitful' he was also aware that 'it is long term work' and he found it to be a 'selfish' activity in a context like 2011 Syria (personal communication, 2018). He explains in our interview,

I could have stayed outside and said I am not a politician. I could have written 4 or 5 books throughout this period. But that would have been a betrayal not only to my people but also to my own principles. I have been writing about democracy and mass movements for 40 or 50 years, I cannot stand on the margin when the moment comes, when people finally decide to claim their freedoms ... Intellectuals are answerable for staying on the margins of the revolution instead of throwing themselves into it so that others don't take the lead and drive the revolution into catastrophe as they did. Why did the Islamists take control? Because the intellectuals didn't. (personal communication, 2018)

For most other exilic intellectuals, alternative forms of engagement replaced political ones, leaving them first and foremost with the role of 'carrier group' in the cultural trauma construction process (on the role of intellectuals as cultural trauma carriers see also Ushiyama & Baert, 2016; Baert, 2015; Eyerman, 1994). In this capacity, they operated in the public sphere - not political organisations - and focused on articulating claims, representing interests and desires, and trying to uphold the movement's emancipatory framing. They became part of a much broader and less and insular collectivity as the description 'intellectual' no longer referred to a structurally determined group or personality type but to a group of actors mediating between the cultural and political spheres, 'not so much representing and giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but rather articulating ideas to and for others' (Eyerman, 2003, p. 3). This shift towards trauma work, particularly in its tragic form can be seen as both a cause and a result of the embedded position. It partially fuelled embeddedness because doing trauma work necessitated identification and compassion with the suffering masses. And it was partly a result of embeddedness in that trauma work became feasible once they abandoned their role as critics and leaders of the revolutionary movement.

As a final note on the relationship between intellectuals' limited political role and the embedded position, we contend that the combination of revolutionary thinking and abstention from applied politics, reduced intellectuals to what John McGowan might call 'sentimental radicalism' - an extension of his term 'sentimental socialism' (McGowan, 2016, p. 127). Indeed, their political stance was sentimental in that it did not provide a robust intellectual and programmatic description of how political transition will be achieved in Syria, nor a vision of a desired and plausible Syrian society to be aspired for after that transition. This is in no small part attributable to the absence of a clear political ideology that can offer a shared vision of what

progress looks like: if many intellectuals across the world adhered to socialism in the second part of the twentieth century, their political ideology today is ‘vague at best’ (Ibid).

Cultural trauma and anti-intellectual populism

In lieu of ideational leadership or organised political action, cultural trauma construction took centre stage. In line with the latter’s drive to clearly assign victims and perpetrators, an amorphous construct of ‘the people’ was presented not only as the victim of a brutal dictatorship but also as a heroic figure with an emancipatory movement: the ‘popular’ as an identity ‘enters into the making of subaltern political agency’ (Ismail, 2013, p. 891). For many intellectuals, the focus was now not on how to inform, enlighten, or liberate ‘the people’ but on how to support them, follow their lead, and further their cause.

Appealing to and/or aligning with ‘the people’ was significantly energised by structural changes in the public sphere enabled by new technologies. In this new public sphere, engaged publics became more powerful than ever in determining not only an intellectual’s success but also what constitutes a ‘successful’ intellectual (Baert & Booth, 2012, p. 15). One can then suppose that intellectuals were writing in ways that resonated with the public, connected emotionally with them, and could lead to positive uptake, diffusion and symbolic recognition (Baert, 2015, pp.132–133). Among pro-movement publics, a positive emotional response was most likely to occur through narratives that honoured their suffering, aestheticized their tragedy, and maintained unconditional solidarity towards them. At least between 2012 and 2014, when a growing Jihadist discourse provided not only symbolic validation of armed resistance but also enabled its material actualisation, eliciting a positive emotional response from their publics meant that oppositionist intellectuals would have to continue to avoid critical interventions concerning the emergence of a Jihadist discourse. The implication here is not that this form of quietism about the movement’s developments was strategic or aimed at maximising an intellectual’s popularity and success. A more plausible explanation would be that it simply seemed like ‘the decent thing to do’, for at least two reasons. Firstly, Jihadist discourse was the only discourse out there which resonated with the revolutionaries’ need for defensive violence. Secondly, anti-Jihadist discourse had long been the turf of the regime and its intellectuals and reproducing it would jeopardise the intellectuals’ pro-revolution positioning. Avoiding misalignment with the movement’s Islamist component reflects a tendency on the part of the intellectuals to defer judgement and leadership to ‘the people’ as part of their self-positioning as embedded intellectuals narrating collective trauma from within.

This positioning synergised with the emergence of a form of anti-intellectualist populism; intellectuals were blamed for the failures of the revolution. Populism in this context refers to a type of cultural fetishism of the masses rather than a political programme or approach. Rather than being actively anti-establishment, it is more about minimising disagreement with the majority of the populace and avoiding controversial matters. It entails a desire to appeal to ‘ordinary people,’ for instance by

using simple language and popular cultural references. More problematically, it construes ‘the people’ as a monolithic and distinct entity, attributes certain traits to it and tends to support it uncritically and unconditionally.

This self-positioning was sometimes influenced by a narrative in which intellectuals were held responsible for the destruction caused by the failure of the revolution. The following excerpt from a letter addressed to Burhan Ghalioun summarises this narrative. After blaming intellectuals for the ‘destruction, killing and displacement’ which the revolution brought with it, the letter explains:

At first, you [intellectuals] inspired hope and made us dream of a developed, modern, and secular Syria. People like you who have entered people’s hearts and minds using their refined personalities have motivated them to reject the regime. But the way I see it, it would have been better for all of us if things had remained the same. You did not understand the Syrian people and could not see how steeped they are in the ignorance of religiosity, blind intolerance, tribal and sectarian belongings, and by misreading the people, you brought the country and the people to the abyss (cited in Ghalioun, 2018a, b).

It is worth noting that while such anti-intellectualism was evident in document analysis and frequently brought up in interviews, many of the participants in this study were critical about it, even when they critiqued other intellectuals, groups of intellectuals, or ‘Syrian intellectuals’ as such.

A case in point is Yassin al-Haj Saleh who having voiced his disappointment with intellectuals on various occasions remained vigilant concerning blanket anti-intellectualism.

I notice that there persists a populist discourse against intellectuals; one that is also exercised by some intellectuals. I find that very unfortunate... It may have always been present, but it wasn’t as visible nor was it as openly expressed as it is now after the revolution. This could be attributable to the emergence of social media which enabled large segments of society, hundreds of thousands, to enter into the field of public affairs. (personal communication, 2018)

Some suggested that anti-intellectualism was entangled with Baathist rule and its problematic relationship to culture. Liwaa Yazji¹⁸ (personal communication, 2018)

¹⁸ Liwaa Yazji is a filmmaker, playwright, screenwriter, dramaturge and poet. She is a participant in this study. Born in 1977 in Moscow to Syrian parents, she grew up in Aleppo and Damascus where she completed an undergraduate degree English literature, a postgraduate diploma in literary studies and a degree in Theatre Studies. She worked as a dramaturge and assistant director before being appointed in 2007 to the General Committee of the Damascus Capital of Arab Culture where she was in charge of programming the year’s Syrian theatre and dance repertoires. In 2011, she started working on her first feature documentary *Haunted* which was released in 2014. In 2012 she moved to Lebanon and then to Berlin in 2016. Since 2012, Liwaa’s work has been receiving increasing international attention. Her feature documentary *Haunted* (2014) won Special Mention in its premier in the FID Marseille Festival of Documentary Film the year it was released before it was awarded the Al Waha Bronz at the FIFAG- Tunisia in 2016. That same year, her play *Q&Q* which was commissioned by the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester premiered at the Birth Project in the UK and was later featured at the Edinburgh International Festival, and the Women Playwright International Conference in Chile. In 2017, her play *Goats* also premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London.

explains that intellectualism has long been a delicate topic in the militarised society under Baath party rule. She suggests that a pretence of intellectualism and an appropriation of culture operated in tandem with a contempt for them as bourgeois constructs. A systematic trivialisation of intellectualism went hand in hand with its pretence, Yazji explains. As a secular party, the Baath wanted to monopolise culture. But as a rural marginalised minority, Assad's Alawite sect nursed deep resentment towards intellectuals as traditionally urban middle-class. This resentment came from the knowledge that 'they can never fully own it [culture]' because, as Yazji suggests, 'the deeper your knowledge, the more inevitable it will become that you will take a stance against the Baath party.'

Azmeh¹⁹, distinguishes anti-intellectualism as a generalised sentiment from the construction of intellectuals as 'traitors'. He contends that generalised animosity towards intellectualism is prevalent among intellectuals themselves. It manifested in an environment where '*tanzeer*' or theorising became an offence and attempts at even the most slightly complex analysis or synthesis were dismissed as pretentious elitist performances. He contrasts these anti-intellectual sentiments among intellectuals with the public's 'largely positive views of culture and of intellectuals' from whom they 'wish to learn,' and to whom they 'have a thirst to listen, contrary to what the populist intellectuals claim' (personal communication, 2018). He differentiates, however, between this type of intellectual anti-intellectualism and the construction of intellectuals as traitors which he explains as a natural 'reaction to positions like those of Adonis²⁰ and to a past in which many intellectuals were accomplice to the regime, presented as progressive leftists but in effect no more than silent witnesses to its atrocities.' It is the former type of anti-intellectual populism, Azmeh concludes, that weakened the influence of intellectual interventions concerning the movement and limited their reach and impact. As such, he adds, it was largely responsible for the absence of an intellectual leadership for the movement and a clear working programme beyond the general demand of bringing down the dictatorship initially put forth by the protestors. What was missing, he asserts, was a 'compass or perhaps several compasses; ... a multiplicity in which different currents might interact with each other and offer a sense of deliberated direction.' He contends that anti-intellectualism's prevalence is highest within a circle of intellectuals whom the regime had co-opted but who later sided with the revolution. 'They were part of an intellectual body which the regime patronaged to some extent, regularly persecuting radical voices whenever they emerged from it' (personal

¹⁹ Hazem Azmeh is a poet, academic and medical doctor. He is a participant in this study. Born in 1946, he studied medicine at Damascus University and completed his clinical training in pulmonology at the University Hospital Llandough in Wales. It was not until 2004 that he published his first poetry collection titled *Poems of Andromeda*. In 2006 he published *Short Road to Aras* and in 2012 *Front of the Chariot Edge of the Night*. He is a co-signatory of the 'Statement of the 99' a statement made by 99 Syrian intellectuals in September 2000 during the Damascus Spring calling for the return of civil rights and demanding to 'free public life from the laws, constraints and various forms of surveillance imposed on it'. He quickly became an outspoken supporter of the 2011 uprising against the Assad regime which resulted in his internal displacement and eventual exile in 2014.

²⁰ Adonis is a renowned Syria poet and critical intellectual who took a stance against the Syrian protest movement from its onset.

communication, 2018). The implication is that intellectuals' anti-intellectualism was often an act of retroactive atonement for past guilt; a rejection of an identity now deemed complicit with the regime.

Indeed, as some participants observed, anti-intellectualism transposed past culturalist critique of Syrian society or Arab culture into its opposite: a type of fetishism of the masses. Sulafa Hijazi²¹ describes how after the revolution, 'elitist ideas became unethical and everything popular became the new elite.' (personal communication, 2018) Similarly, Salam Kawakibi²² suggested that 'Syrian intellectuals went straight from elitism to populism' and instead of playing a meaningful role in the popular movement of 2011, 'they started to transform their discourse from a complicated esoteric one to a populist one' which is 'inflammatory, oversimplistic, and nebulous'. (personal communication, 2018).

Samira Moubayed²³ speaks critically of populism among intellectuals pointing that it is mostly noticeable 'among older intellectuals, especially those who were imprisoned for a long time.' She attributes it to a dependence on and vital connection with the masses: intellectuals have become so committed to protecting this

²¹ Sulafa Hijazi is a director, visual and multimedia artist. She is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus in 1977, she studied at the Higher Institute of the Dramatic Arts and later at the Städelschule Fine Art Academy in Frankfurt Am Main. She began her career as a writer and an animation and multimedia artist receiving several awards including best animation awards in Hollywood, Russia, India, Cairo and Iran for her feature animation film *The Jasmine Birds* (2009). She was a founding member of Spacetoon the first free Arabic satellite channel for children and a board member of CIFEJ International Center of Films for Children and Young People from 2012 till 2017. At the beginning of 2010 she established *Bluedar*, a digital art production house initially operating in Damascus and Beirut and now Berlin. Hijazi's enthusiasm for the protests of 2011 manifested in creating and publishing digital artworks that became highly circulated and often iconic of the uprising. With the dictatorship still in power two years later, she had to leave for Frankfurt in 2013 where she studied contemporary art and started to experiment with a variety of conceptual art and multimedia forms. Her work has been exhibited in several galleries in Europe and featured in on-line platforms, newspapers, and books. Some of her pieces are now part of acclaimed art collections such as the British Museum in London, Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, and International Media Support (IMS) in Copenhagen.

²² Salam Kawakibi is a researcher and commentator on political reform in the Arab world, writing essays, research papers and policy analysis for various publications and organisations. He is a participant in this study. Born in Aleppo in 1965, he completed undergraduate and graduate degrees in Economics and International Relations at Aleppo University and his graduate studies in Political Sciences from l'Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Aix-En-Provence. He holds a number of academic and civil society positions and is an active member of the opposition. He is the Director of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Paris, having previously served as its Deputy Director, and of the Arab Reform Initiative. He is also board member of The Day After association, President of the board of trustees of *Ettijahat – Independent Culture*, and a member of the Consultative Council of the Mediterranean Citizens'.

²³ Samira Mobaied is an academic researcher in Eco-Anthropology. She is a participant in this study. Born in Damascus, she completed her undergraduate studies at Damascus University where she later became a faculty member before going to Paris to complete her master's and doctoral degrees. She was in Paris when the 2011 uprisings broke out and immediately became involved in the movement cofounding and joining several civic groups, including Syrian Christians for Peace, Renaissance des Femmes Syriennes and Liberimage. She is also a founding member and board member of several political groups, including the Syrian Bloc Takattol Al Sooriyin, the Nucleus Group Majmoo'at Nawat, the Damascus National Charter, and the Declaration of Federal Syria. She participated in the Syrian political dialogues for peacebuilding in Syria and represented the Civil Society Bloc in the Syrian Constitutional Committee. She has published two books in Arabic: *How to See the Syrian Revolution* and *The First Syrian Martyr* in addition to a large number of articles in Arabic and French.

relationship that they always side with and are always influenced by the tendencies of the masses no matter what course they might take ‘even if it was in the wrong direction.’ Moubayed attributes this inclination to ‘follow’ rather than lead to an ‘organic relationship with the masses which makes the intellectual’s very existence dependent on it.’ Moubayed suggests that their concern is that ‘If they disagreed with the popular opinion, they might lose some of their popularity which is very important to them. Thus, they somewhat internalise popular views and are influenced by the street.’ (personal communication, 2018)

Conclusion

This paper has argued that after the 2011 revolution, particularly after its violent turn and first wave of exile, the leadership role of intellectuals was seriously questioned by both intellectuals and their publics. Trauma narration took centre stage, fostering an ideal of radical epistemic egalitarianism and embeddedness within society. This resulted in two complications. At the cultural-epistemic level, it softened the nature of intellectual interventions, undermining their ideational influence upon domestic publics and weakening their critical role within the movement. At the structural-political level, the focus on trauma narration came at the expense of political praxis and were congruent with a general avoidance of political participation in the organisations that emerged from the movement.

Drawing on the notion of the embedded intellectual (Baert & Shipman, 2013), we have described how an extreme version of this positionality has resulted in a focus on trauma work, advocacy, and mourning at the expense of interventions with revolutionary ideas or visionary political analyses. Indeed, intellectual positioning can fundamentally be impacted by the process of cultural trauma construction where the intellectual’s identity is primarily shaped by shared suffering and by identification with victims. Such identification steers intellectuals away from previously understood critical or educational interventions and distracts them from the critical roles of political thought and political organising. By over-emphasising their embeddedness within the masses and denying distinctions between the two, advocacy and trauma work tend to obscure any leadership or critical responsibilities that intellectuals were once thought to bear.

In the case of Syria, weakened discursive influence manifested in interventions which were politically hollow, critically hesitant, intellectually stale or socially appeasing; these interventions failed to guide the movement, inspire publics or propose post-revolutionary alternatives when the need for them was most critical. Abstinence from institutional politics was reflected in the weak representation of intellectuals in the political organisations that emerged from the movement. Despite insistence on the importance of ending Syria’s ‘politicide’ and enabling the resurrection of free political life in Syria, intellectuals explicitly problematised and refrained from participation in the movement’s institutions or what they critically referred to as ‘professional politics’. It is difficult to work out whether such avoidance was caused primarily by the focus on trauma narration and overidentification with ‘the people’ or whether it resulted

from it. What is clear, however, is that both are congruent and entangled with each other. For example, we have argued that refusing to perform a leadership role was influenced by a perception of an anti-leadership ethos amongst their movement publics. The position of uncritical solidarity from below and its resulting interventions were best aligned with this critical stance towards the idea of leadership and therefore denunciation of leadership can be seen as both a cause and a symptom of the embedded positionality.

It is paradoxical that the embedded position is premised on the idea of interdependency between theory and praxis whereby the intellectual is in close dialogue with the community, learning from the public and teaching them all at once. And yet, in its extreme form, this embeddedness resulted in interventions that not only performed a position of equality and reciprocity with ‘the people’ but expressed a certain sense of awe, guilt, and inferiority towards them and towards their suffering. In this way the work of advocacy, trauma narration and mourning took centre stage becoming a hindrance to political programming and praxis. Not only did intellectuals abandon organisational responsibilities but they became advocates of public sentiment, offering uncritical solidarity towards what they perceived to be the people’s will. Paired with a politically turbulent context in grave need of clear, timely, critical and performatively potent intellectual interventions, radical embeddedness may have been a hindrance to the movement in that it politically neutralised an important discursive current - the secular democratic current - all too soon and left the opposition even more susceptible to competing discursive currents supported by geopolitically motivated external agendas.

Furthermore, the paradox of feeling embedded but being uprooted, complicated existing tensions within the intellectual, whilst fostering new ones. Asylum in the West enabled free expression and resuscitated a long stifled Syrian public sphere, giving intellectuals a renewed sense of discursive agency. But it simultaneously undermined their credibility and influence at home, a sentiment that many willingly embraced. In other words, as intellectuals tried to maintain a self-concept of being engaged and revolutionary, doing so from the safety of exile weakened their credibility: the risk and sacrifice that are traditionally entailed in earning such symbolic power had now been relinquished, particularly when exile itself was seen as a privilege not a sacrifice. Thus, they found themselves negotiating the elation of a new-found freedom of expression with the frustration of irrelevance. Combined with the perceived political failure of diasporic institutions of the opposition, this weakened the intellectuals’ perceived social status and sense of self-worth, exacerbating even further anti-intellectual sentiments towards and amongst them.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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