Visualizing Inequality: The Spatial Politics of Revolution Depicted in Syrian Television Drama

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Abstract: Space has played a central and largely overlooked role in the Syrian conflict during the past eight years. A tension surrounds the organization of urban space and its impact on cultural identity, inequality, and political mobilization. Spatial politics represent a looming threat that is implicit in the project of ISIS, an international terrorist organization that seeks to appropriate the geographical area of *al-Sham* (Greater Syria) to create a transnational Caliphate. It also appears in the 'development proposals' of the Syrian government, which capitalize on a humanitarian crisis to expropriate forcibly displaced citizens of their land and properties.[1] This article analyzes how Syrian television drama is not only an important field of cultural expression and a site of contestation but also reveals the many socio-economic spatial tensions underlying the 2011 Revolution and its aftermath. The latter aspect is demonstrated through a visual and textual analysis of two television serials that depict the '*ashwa'iyat,*[2] [arbitrary informal settlements of Damascus]. The first show, *al-Intizar*, (2006) was aired before the Syrian conflict. The second, *Zawal* (2016) was aired as the political turmoil in Syria unfolded. This comparative analysis illustrates how the organization of urban space has impacted the dynamics of the Syrian Revolution and its aftermath, and how portrayals of urban and shantytown dramas portrayed the spatial inequalities of Damascus before and during the conflict.

Key Words: Culture; Media; Revolution; Social movements; Syria; Television drama

Since the outbreak of the 'Arab Uprisings' in 2011, the social movements sweeping through the

Middle East have captured the attention of international scholars. The region long was

considered predisposed to dictatorship,[3] and some scholars as late as 2010 attributed the

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[1] Signed into law by Syrian President Bashar Al Assad in April 2018, law number 10 allows the government to seize and redevelop properties in *'ashwa'iyat* or illegal neighborhoods. For more on this see: Rania Mostapha (2018) Law 10 and the Theft of Syrian Property, in *Salon Syria;* available at: https://salonsyria.com/law-10-and-the-theft-of-syrian-property/#.W_s8tPZFxyw, last accessed February 4, 2019.

[2] The term '*ashwa'iyat'* literally translates to 'arbitraries' in English, referring to the unregulated, unlicensed and arbitrary fashion in which these slums have been erected and continue to exist. The adjective, in its plural form, has morphed into the common term used to describe the shanty towns surrounding the Damascene urban center.

[3] See Rolf Schwarz (2008) The political economy of state-formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier states, economic reform, and democratization, *Review of International Political Economy,* 15 (4), pp. 599-621. Also see, Michael Ross (2001) Does Oil Hinder Democracy? *World Politics¸*53, pp. 325-361.; For more on this discussion,

authoritarian politics of the region to Islam, or to the combined impact of Islam and oil.[4] Yet, the popular mobilization demanding democratization throughout the Middle East—including multiple Muslim-majority countries from Tunisia to Egypt to Syria—challenged such arguments and suggested new political economic frames grounded in the regional context to explore the question of democratization in the Middle East. Several scholars have taken note, calling attention to the contradiction between arguments against democracy in the Middle East and the realities of social movements that swept through the cities and villages of the region, from Aleppo to Istanbul.[5]

Particularly in Syria, geographically-grounded inequality has had a great effect on the patterns of the revolution that challenges many other perspectives that have been brought to bear on the events of the unfolding conflict. For instance, analyses of the Syrian crisis tend to rely on sectarianism to explain the patterns of the current political turmoil.[6] Admittedly, religious and sectarian divides affect Syrian civil society and impact the dynamics of the Revolution particularly after the first protests had begun. This impact is evidenced by the current tensions between Saudi and Qatari (Sunni) involvement, and Iranian (Shi'a) military interventions in the country. These considerations are complicated once more by the intervention of regional non-

also see: John Esposito & John Voll (eds) (1996) *Islam and Democracy.* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press); Charles Kurzman, (ed.) (1998) *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (New York: Oxford University Press). For treatments of this debate following the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings see: Jean-Pierre Filiu (2011) *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press).

[4] Niklas Potrafke (2010) Islam and Democracy, *Public Choice,* 1 (2), pp. 185-192.

[5] Oğuzhan Göksel (2012), Assessing the Turkish Model as a Guide to the Emerging Democracies, *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, 4(1), pp. 99-120.

[6] See Reva Bhalla (2011) Making sense of the Syrian crisis *Stratfor,* Available at: http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110504-making-sense-syrian-crisis, accessed on November 24, 2018.

state groups such as Hezbollah and others, with ties to Sunni or Shi'a political powers.[7] However, sectarian tensions only can explain a fraction of the divisions that plague the Syrian public. Consider this: Syria is a nation that is characterized by a relatively low level of religious diversity. It is estimated that three fourths of Syria's population are Sunni, an even larger proportion—around 85%, of Syria's population—is Muslim.[8] The vast majority are Arabic-speakers, and as far as linguistic diversity points to ethnic and cultural divisions, other groups represent a small portion of the Syrian public, including ethnic Kurds (5%), Armenian Christians (4%), and Turkmen, Circassian, Assyrian & Jewish minorities (1%).[9]

As Christa Salamandra has noted, the context of the Syrian Uprising has indeed encouraged a resurgence of sectarian affiliations[10]. Yet, the divisions that plague the Syrian public today include—and transcend—religious or sectarian tensions, exemplified by the split within the majority Sunni population between those opposing the regime and those supporting it. Nevertheless, at most, scholars concede that the Syrian crisis is at the very least 'semi-sectarian,'[11] while continuing to neglect other factors that may have sparked the initial protests and subsequent conflict. Another trend has been the use of geopolitical *Realpolitik* approaches that explain the conflict as a result of the ongoing battles between international and regional players such as Iran, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Indeed, all of these perspectives lend useful frameworks for understanding the complex dimensions of revolutionary movements.

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[7] Nour Halabi (2017b.) The Contingency of Meaning to the Party of God: Carnivalesque Humor in Revolutionary Times, *International Journal of Communication,* 11, pp. 4032–4045.

[8] Adigbuo Ebere Richard (2014) Cold War Resurgence: The Case of Syrian Uprising, *Journal Of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(8), pp. 39-47.

[9] Ibid., p.

[10] Christa Salamandra (2013) Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections. *Middle East Critique.*
[11] Christopher. Phillips (2015) Sectarianism and conflict in Syria, *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), p. 387.

Yet, none of them consider the chants of the many who marched across Syria and who expressed political goals that transcended sectarian identities and had no connection to external players.

This is not to say that sectarianism has not played a role in the dynamics of the Syrian Revolution and the ensuing conflict, but that the dynamics of sectarianism are in fact intertwined with a 'geography of distinction' in which religious and ethnic identity, socio-economic status and all vectors of privilege and status are 'alloyed with […] region'[12] in the urban geography. Thus, in recent work, I have examined the spatial politics of Syria and its impact on the conflict, considering the long-lasting impact of the ancient Roman walls surrounding Damascus and Aleppo and the binaries of within and without that they cemented into Syrian identity.[13] In this analysis, I treat these dynamics as *emplaced* within the context of Syrian geography, offering a spatial lens to examine a popular culture form which, as scholars of Syria have noted, is the arena of political expression *par excellence*.

In several ways, the events of the Arab Spring drew attention to the impact of space and the embodied economic inequality it presents on the willingness of a population to mobilize for social justice.[14] Similar to the pattern of urban development in other post-colonial cities, Syria's trajectory towards "urban modernization" took of the form of the construction of squares, plazas and orderly tree-lined boulevards. In parallel, this development resulted in the emergence of

[12] Christa Salamandra (2013) Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections, *Middle East Critique*, (22)3, p. 303.

[13] Nour Halabi, (2017) The Ancient Walls of Damascus and the Siege of Mouaddamiyya: A Historical and Spatial Analysis of Bounded Place and Cultural Identity, *Space and Culture,* 20(4), pp. 441–453.

[14] Nour Halabi (2018) If These Walls Could Speak, in Adrienne Shaw & Travers Scott (eds.), *Interventions* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang US), pp. 215-229.

informal settlements surrounding the urban centers[15]. From the half a million Egyptians residing in the Cairo's graveyards to Syria's '*ashwa'iyat* [arbitrary or informal settlements], the lower socio-economic status neighborhoods of the Middle East figured prominently in the protests from 2011 onwards, an aspect that often is overlooked in conversations on social media and technology. Syria's informal settlements first emerged in domestic policy discussions during the 2000s, when as official reported that an estimated that 42 percent of the Syrian public lived in such areas. The dissident Michel Kilo demonstrated the economic hardships that relegate life for most of the population in these neighborhoods. He noted a 28 percent drop in purchasing power that dramatic income inequality exacerbated, since the nation's labor force possessed only 24 percent of the national income.[16] He also pointed to the cultural impact of the growing disparity between the 'haves and the have nots,' as engagements, weddings, social gatherings and housing became increasingly extravagant. He pointed out that the urban peripheries languished in poverty, deprived of basic goods and services. Given their small share of national income, one could argue that around 70 percent of the Syrian population live in such informal settlements, at the periphery of the nation's geographies and economy.[17]

After years of expressing concerns regarding the '*ashwa'iyat*, the haphazard, unlicensed informal settlements surrounding Damascus whose name literally means 'the arbitraries,' the Syrian government in 2011 came face-to-face with the political consequences of economic disparity that is embodied, visible and mediatized on a regular basis. As such, even as urban

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[15] Gehan Selim (2014) Instituting order: the limitations of Nasser's post-colonial planning visions for Cairo in the case of the indigenous quarter of Bulaq (1952–1970), *Planning Perspectives*, 29:1, pp. 67-89, DOI: 10.1080/02665433.2013.808580.

[16] Michel Kilo (2011) Syria … the Road to Where? *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 4 (4), pp. 431-444.

[17] Ibid.

Damascus remained firmly under regime control, its suburbs became the sites of uprising that devolved into sieges of neighborhoods to contain the protests.[18]

While the Syrian regime maintained control over central Damascus, it continued sieges on multiple rural neighborhoods surrounding the city, such as *Mouaddamiyya*, *Dareyya*, The neighborhoods of *Mazzeh al-Qadeemeh* [old Mazzeh] and *Kafarsuseh al-Qadeemeh* [old Kafarsuseh] where shanty cement-block homes and dirt roads stand side-by-side to their high-rise counterparts and their orderly paved roads and wide sidewalks. This contrast presents a salient example of the importance of economic inequality and urban planning on the dynamics of the revolution. In these neighborhoods, where the contrast between the haves and have-nots is not only visible but close-knit, the mobilization of the populations of the slums was most pronounced.

Onlookers in the early moments of the Syrian revolution also pointed to an important mechanism through which urban development impacted mobilization, noting that the open areas of the *Mazzeh* highway facilitated control and retaliation against protesters; whereas the narrow alleyways of the '*ashwa'iyat* in Mezze strengthened the protests, as residents threw onions and soda cans from the windows of their houses to help mitigate the effects of the tear gas by regime forces. The informally-built environment also provide routes for dispersal. Residents scooped protestors into their homes and sheltered them from police forces [Figures 1 & 2].[19]

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18 Nour Halabi (2017) The Ancient Walls of Damascus and The Siege of Mouaddamiyya, *Space and Culture*, 20(4), pp. 441–453. Also see Halabi, If These Walls Could Speak, p. 216
19 Jafra' Baha' (2012) [The Neighborhood of Mazzeh Enters the Fray of the Revolution], *Al-Arabiya Online,* February 20, Article no longer available online, Retrieved via Wayback Machine at: https://web.archive.org/web/20120222184219/http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/20/195889.html.

As Saskia Sassen has emphasized, public spaces across the Middle East gave 'the powerless rhetorical and operational openings' to become 'present, visible, to each other [which] can alter the character of powerlessness' throughout the Arab Spring.[20] Indeed, urban space has occupied a role in the new radical geography of the Syrian Revolution. Syrian activists marched through them chanting 'The People Want the Fall of the Regime.' However, and much unlike its Egyptian counterpart, the bulk of Syrian revolutionary activity did not take place in the highways and central roundabouts of major urban areas such as Damascus, but rather along the dirt roads and informal squares of rural towns and satellite slums of the Syrian topography. The contrast between the condominiums on the *Mazzeh* highway [Left] and the unlicensed houses in *Mazzeh al-Qadeemeh* nearby [right] not only galvanized the fight for greater social democracy but also provided protestors with protection and shelter from regime retaliation.

The allocative power of space has consistently played a role in the Syrian political landscape. As Drysdale put it, Syria "has historically suffered acute geographical, as well as social, inequalities in the distribution of wealth, opportunity, and power.[21]" At the time of the Ba'ath Revolution, the two most prominent provinces of Damascus and Aleppo had 60 percent of the nation's secondary school teachers, 72 percent of its doctors, 62 percent of its hospitals[22]. The decades that followed witnessed a redistribution of political and economic power towards the rural periphery which Salamandra characterized as . This period also presided over a significant rural-urban migration. In analyzing "residential patterns" Salamandra also noted that the influx of large numbers of rural Syrians into urban Damascus during this period resulted in

the emergence of "cheaply built…dormitory suburbs" to house newcomers[23]. The ongoing

redistribution of economic and political power between the urban and rural throughout the past

four decades, highlighted the importance of space to Syrian politics.

As such, the ongoing crisis, as well as the tensions that fed it, inevitably were *emplaced*

phenomena wherein the political economy of space motivated civilians to revolt.[24] As such,

space has been and will continue to be a key vector of identity that must be examined to

understand the full extent of the crisis. Moreover, in a struggle where the regime and its allies,

armed rebels, and ISIS battle over territory, the tangible reality of the Syrian crisis indicates that

space is key to the dynamics of the ongoing crisis.

Fictional Depictions of Spatial Inequality

Syrian television drama is a highly successful and widely popular form of cultural production

that reflects the biggest debates within Syrian popular culture.[25] This article examines two

television drama serials that fall in the local category of *drama al- ashwa'iyat* [informal

settlement dramas] to explore the influence of spatial inequality. The first program, *al-Intizar*

(2006), was broadcast before the Syrian Revolution and reflects the social and financial struggles

that shantytown inhabitants encountered in the late 2000s.[26] The second, *Zawal* (2016) addresses

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[23] Christa Salamandra (2004) *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
[24] Thomas Gieryn (2000) A Space for Place in Sociology, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, pp. 463-496. http://www.jstor.org/stable/223453.

[25] Christa Salamandra (2015) Syria's Drama Outpouring between Complicity and Critique, in Christa Salamandra & Leif Stenberg (eds) *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Culture, Society and Religion*, pp. 36-52 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).
[26] For an ethnographic treatment of *al-Intizar*, see Christa Salamandra (2017) Waiting: The Neighborhood that Eats Its Children [*al-Intizar: al-Hara alati Ta'kul Ibna'iha*], *Drama Critics* 3 (May) pp. 52-63; available at: http://drama-critics.com/?p=987, accessed September 1, 2017; Christa Salamandra (forthcoming) *Waiting for Light: Arab Television Drama Production in the Satellite Era*.

the tensions of the revolution from the perspective of a shantytown overlooking the city of Damascus. I analyze both shows with an eye toward the construction of place and the identities tied to it. The analysis thereby reveals the spatial politics that lead up to the current crisis.

Al-Intizar was positively received by critics and audiences for its portrayal of socio-spatial inequality before the Syrian Revolution. In contrast, *Zawal* was criticized for its inability to reconcile its spatial position with the contemporary turmoil that has unfolded since 2011 . I argue that this contrast demonstrates the difficulty of addressing informal settlements in the midst of political upheaval brought about in part because of the social and economic inequalities. Moreover, I argue that the mediated construction of space in *drama al-ashwa'iyat* is far from simple, as it visually represents the latent tensions that undermine the seemingly tranquil and stable politics of pre-2011 Syrian society. Thus, the treatment of space within these fictional dramas reveals the tensions of space before the conflict.

Al-Intizar

Al-Intizar [Waiting] was a highly successful television series. Released in 2006, the show continues to represent a watershed moment of Syrian drama because of its unique portrayal of the *ashwa'iyat*, the haphazard, unlicensed informal settlements surrounding Damascus whose name literally means 'the arbitraries.' These 'arbitrary' neighborhoods whose name points to the precarity of the lives of their inhabitants had remained almost completely invisible in the highly productive Syrian television drama industry until 2006, appearing in side stories or tangentially but never at the center of dramatizations of Syrian life. *Al-Intizar* thus addresses this invisibility in Syrian drama, delivering the stories of these communities, stories that had waited for over a decade after the outpouring of Syrian drama to be told on the television screen.

The show opens in the *hara ashwa'iya* [arbitrary neighborhood] of Dwail'a, as the two lead protagonists Wael, an educated struggling journalist, and his schoolteacher wife Samira 'wait' for the completion of a co-operative condominium they had purchased in order to move out of the neighborhood with their two children. From the first episode, we watch Samira pester her husband to take initiatives toward improving the family's financial situation and hasten their moving out of the neighborhood. Samira, as we learn later into the series, comes from a family in the urban center of Damascus, which engenders her feelings of being 'out of place' in the 'arbitrary' neighborhood. Samira's family in the city see her position in the neighborhood as punishment for her misguided decision to marry her poor university sweetheart. Her brothers rarely speak to her, and the family never ventures to visit her in the *hara* or neighborhood.

Each morning, Samira commutes to her teaching job outside of the neighborhood, an inconvenience she tolerates because she perceives her life in the neighborhood as temporary. In this fashion, Samira distances herself from the neighborhood, her neighbors and the area's problems. Samira encourages her family to distance themselves from the neighborhood as well, forbidding her children from befriending its children. However, Samira concentrates her efforts most intently on urging her husband Wa'il to find higher paying work. In the first episode, Wa'il argues that his efforts to improve their situation are regularly stunted because of his inability to 'ask' others for assistance (Episode 1, 19:40). Ironically however, Wa'il is shown arbitrating disputes among and socializing with the neighbors (episode 1), demonstrating his role as a community leader who helps others. It also shows that he is well-integrated into the community, where his relatively higher educational attainment places him in the role of elder. By contrast, his position within the neighborhood makes it difficult for him to request the help of individuals living outside of it, a theme that continues throughout the serial. Similarly, the contrast between

Samira's efforts to distance herself from the *hara* and Wael's embrace of the neighborhood community runs throughout the series. It reflects the inability of the privileged Damascene center to belong to or accept the 'arbitrary' neighborhoods within the Syrian topography. Samira refuses to spend time in the neighborhood, exemplifying the inability of the urban center to see and accept the struggles of those living in such neighborhoods.

Another theme becomes apparent in the show: Economic precarity within the neighborhood. Both protagonists, Samira and Wa'il pursue careers outside of the neighborhood, indicating the dearth of employment opportunities inside the neighborhood, and the financial and temporal constraints of commuting that become necessary for employed neighborhood inhabitants. In parallel, the difficulties of life in the neighborhood threaten marital and social relationships. For example, although Wa'il and Samira married for love, their life within the non-place of the 'arbitrary' neighborhood stifles their romance.[27] In episode one, as they lay to sleep, Samira regretfully tells Wa'il, 'your whole life is built on coincidence,' pointing to the arbitrariness of the space they inhabit and their lack of control over their living and financial situation. Disappointment and frustration color her tone as she turns away from him in bed, suggesting a growing distance between them. The pressure placed on Wa'il leads him to

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[27] The distinction between space and place is an ongoing discussion born out of humanistic critiques of positivistic geography toward an approach that incorporates human and social dimensions of geography. According to this view, space is understood to be a geographic location while place is argued to be a distinct location within space that has acquired social and moral meaning. For more on the debate see: John Agnew & David Livingstone (eds.) (2011) *Handbook of Geographical Knowledge* (London: Sage). For an analysis of place see Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). The discussion of space and place is complicated by the view of French anthropologist Marc Augé who argues that super-modernity has led to the proliferation of 'non-places' such as airports and supermarkets, which do not acquire meaning despite the social interactions they host. I take non-places in this article to apply also to *ashwa'iyat,* as these unlicensed settlements fulfill many of the conditions of non-places that Augé suggests, including invisibility and anonymity. For more on this see: Marc Augé (1995) *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso).

withdraw to nights drinking with his friend, escaping home to avoid facing Samira's disappointment.

The show continuously confronts the irreconcilable spaces of the urban center and its shanty peripheries. In Episode 9, when Samira's father mentions her house in a scene at Samira's parents' apartment in urban Damascus, she says, 'Don't bring up my home, I cannot stand to think of the road that leads to it.' Also, when Samira leaves her home in an argument to move in with her father, he [the father?] tells her 'stop saying *al-hara*,' stressing how comprehending the problems of the neighborhood's inhabitants or even speaking about the neighborhood outside of its geographic boundaries is unacceptable to inhabitants of the urban center. The statements highlight how a place that is home to large swathes of the Syrian public remains invisible from the public eye. It also demonstrates how the arbitrary neighborhoods remain invisible and thus morph into a non-place, devoid of the meaning its inhabitants have cultivated throughout their lives. Eventually, the place that is home to its inhabitants comes to be a hated place, losing its meaning even to the people who call it home, because of the obstacles it represents. As the urban center demonstrates unwillingness throughout the show to reconcile with its shanty counterpart, and spaces that immediately neighbor it, it instead connects with distant places. In another episode, Samira asks her students, to draw the maps of Eretria and Ethiopia from memory. Despite the invisibility of neighboring arbitraries, distant countries not only are seen but committed to geographic memory by young children.

Throughout the series, a cast of supporting characters comment on the relationships of geography and the power dynamics of Syrian society. In episode one, Fadel, the police officer living in the neighborhood marries a bride from 'the village.' He instructs her never to leave their home and not to answer the door or let anyone in, as people outside are monsters. In their first

conversation in their new home, she asks, 'How big is Damascus?' as he tells her, 'It's big, as big as you imagine but bigger.' The conversation illustrates the centrality of the urban center in the collective imagination of Syrians throughout the country, represented in the reverence of the villager's voice as she asks to hear of Damascus. The following question reveals her immediate perception of the economic inequality of the capital, as she asks her new husband if all Damascenes 'are living like this.' 'Of course not,' he responded, 'there are people above, really above, and there are others that are in more dire straits than us, so we are living pretty well here.' Here, the show demonstrates that the arbitraries do not even represent the worst conditions of the Syrian population, and understanding their condition is only to understand a relatively lower but not lowest class of Syrian society. She then asks her husband, 'Are the neighbors *awadem*,' a term that is derived from the word *adam*, or human being in Arabic. To this, her husband answers that she should trust no one in the neighborhood, indirectly refuting the humanity of the neighborhood's inhabitants. Later, in a stolen conversation with the neighbor's son she asks, 'Tell me about the Damascus,' revealing that she had married the officer to leave her village and experience the city In a sense, her comments demonstrate a cyclical aspiration for mobility toward the urban center throughout the Syrian landscape: villagers aspire to move to Damascus, while shanty town inhabitants aspire to move into the urban center.

Likewise, Samira aspires to leave her 'village' and move to urban Damascus throughout the show. For a brief time, she convinces her father to host her family in his comfortable apartment. In response, her brothers oppose the move, suggesting that Samira plans to deprive her siblings of their share in the inheritance. Upon returning to the neighborhood, their son is hit by a mini-bus while playing in a makeshift football field. The timing of the incident shortly after Samira's frustrated efforts to move to 'Damascus,' results in her blaming her family for refusing

to help her move out of the neighborhood. At the same time, Samira blames the neighborhood, which she repeatedly expresses is not 'suitable for human habitation.' She placed the greatest responsibility for the accident on her husband Wa'il, who had failed, in her opinion, to protect the family from dangers of living in the *hara*. Helpless and estranged from his wife who had moved in with her father, Wa'il withdraws from his wife and begins to admire a neighbor's daughter in the *hara*.

As the accident affects Wa'il's family and two other families in the neighborhood, another character emerges as an alternative protagonist and linchpin of the show's plot. A *laqit* or 'bastard' of unknown origins, and a native to the neighborhood, steps in to mentor the couple's son, bringing him food and helping other characters in the absence of the well-respected Wa'il. At this point, it becomes apparent that the true protagonist about a show on the informal settlements must instead be a native who fits in in the neighborhood. Thus, the unknown lineage of the 'bastard' could represent the authentic protagonist of the arbitrary geography. The invisible space of the informal settlements only truly could be personified in the image of the character who neither knows who he is, where he comes from, or where he fits in within the fabric of Damascene society through familial ties.

Zawal

A decade later, *Zawal* revisited the non-places of informal settlements first shown by Allaith Hajjo in 2006. Directed by Ahmed Ibrahim Ahmed, *Zawal* emerged in a starkly different environment of Syrian television production. By the time *Zawal* was released, *drama al-ashwa'iyat* had become a veritable genre of Syrian television. Instigated by the success of *al-Intizar* in 2006, several other series had looked into the informal settlements of the urban center in the intervening years. *Zawal* also aired after the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution and its

aftermath, thereby positioning the work during a turbulent period in Syria's history that stifled any attempt at political criticism or critical appraisal of the situation of those living in informal settlements surrounding Damascus at a time when those very areas were implicated in protest movements against the Syrian regime.

Most importantly, *Zawal* failed to receive the critical acclaim or audience approval of *al-Intizar*. The clear deficiencies may lead to assumptions about the insignificance of *Zawal.* Rather, I argue that the difficulty the latter show faced in attracting an audience and in addressing the current political situation of Damascus is central to understanding not only the relevance of spatial politics to the Syrian conflict, but also the inevitable difficulty of continuing to shed light on the difficulties of such neighborhoods during a time when the struggles within them led to their revolt against the government. In effect, a comparative approach reveals how the success of the former and failure of the latter are indicative of the increasing difficulty of confronting spaces of inequality after the outbreak of the revolution.

Zawal, from the outset, highlights the intrinsic relationship between socio-economic, ethnic and sectarian differences and the urban landscape of Damascus. The events of the show unfold in *Jabal al Akrad* [The Mountain of the Kurds], as per the show's description on its official streaming portal.[28] During its opening credits, the show's theme song tells us, 'above the roofs of Damascus, the stars drip honey, above the neighborhoods of Damascus, the face of the moon is complete,' thereby elevating the importance of a glorious city where even the sky above is exceptional. Throughout the theme song, a montage of aerial photos of the urban center of Damascus and cut backs to shots of the show's characters in the shanty town neighborhood in

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[28] *Zawal,* available at: https://www.awaan.ae/show/208475/مسلسل-زوال, accessed November 24, 2018.

which most of the events of the show take place. Damascus, the theme song maintains, is exceptional, a vision that clashes with the depictions of the concerned faces of those who inhabit its *ashwa'iyat.*

The first episode opens with a scene in a well-appointed apartment in Damascus. As the camera pans, it then focuses on the television screen where breaking news of the outbreak of protests in Tunisia plays on the television. Across from the screen, a novel titled, 'the removal of masks,' suggests a physical mirroring between the news and the novel, insinuating that the Revolution represents a moment of reckoning and unmasking.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

Another shot ties the ongoing news broadcast to the space of this apartment, panning toward the living room table which is littered with papers, novels, ashtrays and espresso cups–and scotch [Insert Figure 4 here]

The saturation of color in the still-life tableaus suggests a painting. It draws on themes that have long characterized Syrian drama producers: Those of the intellectual cultural producer as an enlightened, secular and knowledgeable member of the public. The Christmas tree behind the dining table and the scotch together highlight the precarious situation of religious minorities and secular Muslims under the growing threat of ISIS. Thus, the scene reflects the harmony of a secular lifestyle under threat by the encroaching chaos of protests in Tunisia shown on television. The artist, when we finally see him, is silent and unable to offer a critical view of the events unfolding in the news. Instead he is shown enjoying his morning coffee and cigarette, while chants of protestors continue in the background.

Zawal flashes back to the artist's past, where the audience learns that Shayro grew up in *Jabal al-Arbaeen*, a *hara ashwa'iya*, where most of the events of the show will transpire. The show nods to the familiarity of the Damascene audience with the convergence of spatial, ethnic and socio-economic inequality visualized in the show's choice of setting. Damascene viewers associate the neighborhood with the Kurd, Druze and other religious and ethnic minorities. This impression is reinforced by the Kurdish name of the protagonist, 'Shayro.' *Jabal al-Arbaeen* lies just outside, on a steep incline on the slopes of Mount Qasiun, near the urban center. The neighborhood lies on a steep slope and only can be accessed by parking outside of it and riding a Suzuki. We watch the inaccessibility of the neighborhood in episode one and begin to understand the attempt to portray the struggles of the 'arbitrary neighborhood' non-place. The show flashes back to Shayro's memories from the 1990s, to the early 2000s and the contemporary moment.

The flashbacks begin with one of Shayro's childhood, sometime in the 1990s. He is walking in his neighborhood with an old man, who warns him to 'watch his steps. Those who don't watch their step, make mistakes,' he says (Episode 1, 9:14). They pass a group of men standing still, watching a news broadcast of the Gulf war; the man shakes his head in disappointment. He tells Shayro, 'The brothers have fought each other. You see my love how you make mistakes if you don't pay attention.' We then see the adult Shayro watching the news in 2010 in his apartment, seeing footage of protestors in Tunisia demanding the resignation of the Tunisian president. The Gulf War marked the first instance in which foreign powers participated in a war between two Arab countries, and the conceptual link being made in these scenes suggests a similar sense of shame and admission of foreign intervention should exist in the current protests. Thus, by strategically placing itself between the Gulf War period and the current period, *Zawal* blames the current crisis on a public that isn't 'paying attention' and thereby has

allowed foreign intervention to occur. It points an accusatory finger toward quarrelling brethren and intervening strangers, rather than acknowledging the difficulties that had pushed the populace to this breaking point. It indicts powerless citizens living in authoritarian regimes rather than the powerful factions who create these conditions. Throughout the show, this accusatory finger plagues the heavy-handed story-telling and leads to the public's perception of its 'unconvincing' narrative.

A disconnect with reality pervades the show in blatant, seemingly purposeful ways. For example, the tensions between the urban center, and the shantytown neighborhoods resurface throughout the show and are dismissed by its characters. In a memory where Shayro walks down the steep steps of his neighborhood, overlooking Damascus below them, he asks the old man, 'which is prettier, the Damascus up here or the Damascus down there?' to which the man responds, 'there is only one Damascus,' an unconvincing statement that belies the stark visual contrast visible onscreen between the urban space of the neighborhood and the visible Umayyad roundabout in the distance (16:33) [Figure 5].

Again, social cohesion is stressed as an individual state-of-mind and sense of belonging without addressing systematic inequities in Syrian society that have ruptured social cohesion. By emphasizing individual behavior and choices as the bedrock of social cohesion, the show relinquishes critique of systematic inequality in favor of blaming its audience.

In episode two, *Zawal* introduces a climactic moment that results in the struggles for the rest of the show: A young woman in a wedding gown climbs the stairs toward a terrace overlooking Damascus. With a view of the city below, she sets herself on fire, a vision of wasted

youth and missed opportunity that recalls the self-immolation of fruit vendor Mohammad

Bouazizi in Tunisia, the incident that sparked the Arab Uprisings in 2011.[29]

A struggle ensues among the neighborhood families, as some blame the girl for committing

suicide. They speculate whether a potential indiscretion may have led her to suicide. Other

neighbors blame one another for tarnishing the young woman's honor and that of her family by

spreading lascivious rumors. Meanwhile, the woman's humanity is taken away from her, as

everyone refers to her as the 'crap up there,' discussing expediting a burial, the removal of her

body, and thereby expediting her evacuation from the landscape of the neighborhood. The young

woman's self-immolation, and the other characters' absurd reactions, frustrate the viewer. The

self-immolation, like that of Bouazizi sparked a series of revolutions that have since reshaped the

political landscape of the Middle East and disrupted the lives of its populations. Left

uncontextualized, however, *Zawal*'s suicide appears a disruptive and dangerous incident that

immediately must be cleared from the neighborhood.

While the young woman's self-immolation clearly resembles that of Bouazizi, the

woman's death is not taken as an expression of desperation, and it does not prompt any

reflection, let along change, of conditions. Nor does she receive anything approaching the

veneration that has been afforded the memory of Bouazizi. Instead, she is not referred to by

name, as the plot explores the petty disputes and violent outbursts that ensue without addressing

the cause of her despair, or why she curtailed her future. The show's failure to address the

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[29] Lilia Bliase (2017) 'Self-Immolation, Catalyst of the Arab Spring, is now a grim trend,' *The New York Times,* July 9; available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/09/world/africa/self-immolation-catalyst-of-the-arab-spring-is-now-a-grim-trend.html, accessed November 11, 2018.

unnamed character's struggle, while at the same time blaming her, echoes its failure to address the Syrian Revolution and its aftermath.

Conclusion

The comparison of *Zawal* with *al-Intizar* demonstrates the dominance of space as a major player in the dynamics of the Syrian conflict, particularly as a factor that informs and points to the social and economic inequalities that mobilized communities to demand political change in March 2011. The failure of *Zawal* to treat the systematic injustices in Syrian society reveals the contentious politics of representing space following the Syrian conflict. Firstly, its focus on victim-blaming reveals the inescapable figure of the dissenter in dramas set in the slums of Damascus following the conflict, because of the prominence of these areas in the protests that swept through the country. They also reveal the difficult position of Syrian drama creators and their inability to direct critique toward the Syrian regime, as well as their inability to confront systematic problems adequately in contemporary shows. As a result, *Zawal* deflects the blame for economic, social and gender inequalities.

Zawal's focus on sectarian tensions and moral norms rather than on the spatial politics of Damascus resulted in its relatively lower success vis-à-vis *al-Intizar*. Thus, an analysis of the current crisis must take into account the extent to which location defines life chances. Class and communal struggles, which were portrayed more accurately in *al-Intizar* were instrumental to the latter's success with the audience. Whereas *Zawal* blamed the neighborhood's inhabitants, *al-Intizar* showed that living in slums at the peripheries of the city center left inhabitants feeling helpless, hopeless and gave them a sense that they had nothing to lose. It is in these critical moments that revolution breaks in a nation, and any analysis that continues to overlook the

importance of space will fail to understand fully the tensions that underlie the current crisis or the means to resolve them.

Indeed, this analysis reflects the role that fictional drama plays in visually representing the spatial politics of the Syrian conflict, thereby illustrating the broader role fictional drama can play in representing the spatial dynamics of social movements across the globe. Most importantly, these fictional dramas respond to a need for physicality in social movements recognized by Judith Butler, who notes that bodies must appear and interact with other bodies to establish 'the space of appearance' that can act as a precursor to political mobilization.[30] As such, this study demonstrates how the visual representation of spatial injustice may enhance the public's understanding of the struggles that motivate political action in informal settlements across Syria. In turn, it shows how the representation of space in fictional television as a form of social commentary on contemporary socio-political formations is relevant to the study of spatial politics. At the same time, this study draws attention to the importance of spatial injustice in motivating social mobilization.

Acknowledgements

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