
al-Ša‘b al-Sūrī Wāḥid (The Syrian People Are One):
Syrian Artists and Intellectuals against Sectarianism

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*The prolonged violence in Syria since 2011 has unveiled the truth on a number of social issues among which sectarianism plays a central role. Any discussion on the topic was silenced in the past, but the explosion of sectarian-based hatred has sparked a serious reconsideration of the phenomenon. This contribution aims to show, firstly, how the coexistence of different religious and ethnic communities in Syria has developed, especially in the last decades. Secondly, it will try to underline the role played by the al-Assad (al-Asad) family's government in exacerbating sectarian hatred through its policies, like and more than previous regimes did. Finally, it will stress the need to recognize and freely speak about the colourful composition of Syrian society in order to switch the discourse from a sectarian perspective to a communitarian one. In order to deal with these points, this paper will introduce the reader to some excerpts from different kinds of literary expression which all deal with the issue of sectarianism in Syria. After a brief overview on the ideas of three leading intellectuals of the nahḍah (renaissance), al-Bustānī, al-Kawākibī and al-Rīḥānī, the paper will move to recent years and consider four works. Two of them, i.e. the novel *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hāḍihi al-madīnah* (No Knives in the Kitchens of This City, 2013) by Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah (1964) and the series of comics for children “*Tīn Bāl*” (The Fig Tree which is Naturally Watered by Rains, 2014), describe the sectarian situation before the start of the uprising. The other two, the diary *Taqātu‘ nīrān* (Crossfire, 2012) by Samar Yazbik (1970) and the oral stories of Ḥakawātī Sūryālī (Surrealist Storyteller), depict the development of sectarian discourse during the revolution.*

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Introduction

On March 24, 2011, Buṭaynah Ša‘bān, the political adviser to the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (Baššār al-Asad), delivered her first speech to the press after the beginning of the uprising in the country. She blamed external forces for the increasing violence that occurred in the previous days in Dar‘ā, stating as follows:

The first target is Syria as the safe embrace of resistance (*al-ḥudn al-āmin li 'l-muqāwamah*)¹ [...]. The second target is the beautiful coexistence in Syria [...]. This area has been targeted to be divided into sectarian, regional and racial zones. Everyone coming to Syria knows this beautiful coexistence in which Syria's sons can live in all their colours and with their religious and racial belonging².

Two days later, on March 26, 2011, Buṭaynah Ša‘bān released an interview in which she clearly declared that what was happening was a plan to generate sectarian clash in Syria³.

Was coexistence in Syria truly beautiful for all its citizens? Was the attack on coexistence the real target of the uprising?

With these questions in mind, this paper aims to show, firstly, how the coexistence of different religious and ethnic communities in Syria has carried on, especially in the last decades. Secondly, it will try to underline the role of the al-Assad family's government in exacerbating sectarian hatred through its policies, like and more than the previous ones did. Finally, it will argue the need of recognizing and freely speaking about the colourful composition of Syrian society to switch the discourse from a sectarian perspective to a communitarian one⁴. In order to deal with these points, the paper will introduce the reader to some excerpts from different kinds of literary expression, which all deal with the issue of sectarianism in Syria. After a brief overview on the ideas of three leading intellectuals of the *nahḍah*, al-Bustānī, al-Kawākibī and al-Riḥānī, the paper will move to recent years and consider four works. Two of them, the novel *Lā sakākīn*

¹ The expression “the safe embrace of resistance” refers to the Syrian regime's presumption of being the stronghold against Western and Zionist imperialism. Specifically the word *al-muqāwamah* (the resistance) is commonly associated with the Palestinian struggle against Israel.

² See the entire speech at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhCNJutoqrA>, accessed March 18, 2015. Here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

³ See the entire interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsapBrL16_M, accessed March 18, 2015.

⁴ It is worth defining here the key concepts of “sect” and “community” as intended in this paper. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines a sect as «a small group of people who belong to a particular religion but who have some beliefs or practices which separate them from the rest of the group». On the other hand, the term “community” simply refers to «a group of people who share the same religion, race, job, etc.». Cf. Sally Wehmeier, Colin McIntosh, Joanna Turnbull (eds.), *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 305 and 1371. The Arabic word for the same concept is *ṭā'ifah* which can be interchangeably used for both sect and community. Keeping these definitions in mind, “sect” and its derivatives, “sectarian” and “sectarianism” will be used negatively when the religious group is perceived above all in terms of its difference and separateness from the rest of society. Instead, the terms “community” and “communitarian” will be used positively when the religious group with its distinctively recognizable characteristics is perceived as integrated with other communities in a wider context.

fi maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah (No Knives in the Kitchens of This City, 2012)⁵ by Ḥālid Ḥalīfah (1964) and the series of comics for children “Tīn ba‘l” (The Fig Tree which is Naturally Watered by Rains, 2014), describe the sectarian situation before the start of the uprising. The other two, the diary *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān* (Crossfire, 2012)⁶ by Samar Yazbek (1970) and the oral stories of *Ḥakawātī sūriyālī* (Surrealist Storyteller), examine the development of sectarian discourse during the revolution.

1. *Sectarianism from the Nahḍah to the Uprising*

Throughout its history, Syria has always been composed of a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities, which from time to time have generated tensions in Syrian society. Consequently, sectarianism has been one of the greatest concerns of many Arab intellectuals of the region, starting from the beginning of the *nahḍah*, when Syria was part of a broader territory called *Bilād al-Šām*, until today. In 1860 *al-mu‘allim* (the Master) Buṭrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883) published a political journal, “*Nafir Sūriyyah*” (The Trumpet of Syria), in which he warned his fellow countrymen against the perils of the civil war which broke out in Mount Lebanon in 1860⁷. In a highly rhetorical tone, al-Bustānī reproached the Syrian people who had «surrendered with foolishness and ignorance to the power and the violence of chauvinism and of doctrinaire, sectarian and clanic prejudices»⁸. No gains derived from civil violence. Rather, the failure of the sons of the nation to solve their conflicts by themselves led to foreign military and political intervention⁹, with all the negative consequences this entails:

We are firm in the conviction that intervention by a foreign hand in the politics of whatever country, and in particular of this country, where the differences have strengthened [...] is harmful to the country itself even though it may provide some temporary benefit to a few individuals¹⁰.

⁵ Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, *Lā sakākīn fi maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2013.

⁶ Samar Yazbek, *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2012. Translations into English, French and German: Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, Foreword by Rafik Schami, Translated by M. Weiss, Haus Publishing Ltd, London 2012; EAD., *Feux croisés: journal de la révolution syrienne*, traduite de l’arabe par R. Samara, Buchet-Chastel, Paris 2012; EAD., *Schrei nach Freiheit. Bericht aus dem Inneren der syrischen Revolution*, aus dem Arabischen von L. Bender, Nagel und Kimche Verlag, Zürich 2012.

⁷ A detailed study of the journal and especially of its role in shaping the first principles of Arab nationalism can be found in Stephen Paul Sheehi, *Inscribing the Arab Self: Buṭrus al-Bustānī and Paradigms of Subjective Reform*, in “British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies”, Vol. 27, No. 1 (May, 2000), pp. 7-24. For further information about Buṭrus al-Bustānī see Anīs al-Maqdisī, *al-Funūn al-adabiyyah wa a‘lāmuhā fi ‘l-nahḍah al-‘arabiyyah al-ḥadīṭah*, Dār al-‘Ilm li ‘l-Malāyīn, Bayrūt 2000, pp. 183-222; Isabella Camera d’Afflitto, *Letteratura araba contemporanea. Dalla nahḍah a oggi*, Carocci, Roma 2007 (2^a ed.), pp. 40-42.

⁸ Buṭrus al-Bustānī, *Nafir Sūriyyah aw al-waṭaniyyah al-tāsi‘ah. Arbāḥ al-waṭan al-adabiyyah* (The Trumpet of Syria or the Ninth Patriotic Declaration. Moral Gains for the Country), in “*Nafir Sūriyyah*”, IX, 1861.

⁹ Stephen Paul Sheehi, *Inscribing the Arab Self: Buṭrus al-Bustānī and Paradigms of Subjective Reform*, cit., p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, and Buṭrus al-Bustānī, *Nafir Sūriyyah aw al-waṭaniyyah al-tāsi‘ah. Arbāḥ al-waṭan al-adabiyyah*, cit.

The solution proposed by al-Bustānī is to overcome these differences and false prejudices for the sake of the nation as a whole:

Now then, isn't it more suitable to your welfare that you exchange your blind prejudice, which is nothing but a kind name for excessive self-love, with love for the nation and inter-confessional friendship? The success of the country is achieved only through concord and unity¹¹.

Concord, unity and love for the nation are the core of al-Bustānī's message, written in the strong belief that besides religious and ethnic belonging, the sons of the Arab nation «all drink one water, breath one air. Your language which you speak, your earth on which you walk, your welfare and your customs are all one»¹², as stated in his first *waṭaniyyah* (patriotic declaration).

Echoing al-Bustānī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī (1849-1902) firmly condemned the illness of sectarianism some years later and claimed that the key to heal it consisted in the separation of religion and State¹³. In *Ṭabā'i' al-istibdād wa maṣāri' al-isti'bād* (The Nature of Despotism and the Harm of Enslavement, 1902), he stated that «religion is what the individual, and not the community, believes in»¹⁴. He addressed his speech to both Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs. To the former, he said that religious differences should not have been a matter of confusion, because judgement is in God's hand and «if your Lord had so willed, He could surely have made mankind one *Ummah* [nation or community (following one religion i.e. Islām)]»¹⁵. To the latter, he asked to put aside all the hatred and the injustice committed by grandfathers and ancestors for the sake of the Arab nation¹⁶.

¹¹ Butrus al-Bustānī, *Nafīr Sūriyyah aw al-waṭaniyyah al-ḥāmisah* (The Trumpet of Syria or the Fifth Patriotic Declaration), in "Nafīr Sūriyyah", V, 1861; Stephen Paul Sheehi, *Inscribing the Arab Self: Butrus al-Bustānī and Paradigms of Subjective Reform*, cit., p. 12.

¹² Butrus al-Bustānī, *Nafīr Sūriyyah*, in "Nafīr Sūriyyah", I, 1860; Stephen Paul Sheehi, *Inscribing the Arab Self: Butrus al-Bustānī and Paradigms of Subjective Reform*, cit., p. 13.

¹³ Ġān Dayih, *'Ilmāniyyū Bilād al-Šām al-muslimūn fī 'aṣr al-naḥḍah*, in "Mağallat taḥawwulāt", n. 24, July 2007, http://www.tahawolat.com/cms/article.php3?id_article=1339, accessed March 18, 2015. Another notable intellectual of that time, Faraḥ Anṭūn (1874-1922), strongly supported the separation of temporal and spiritual authorities. His secular views which were reported in his magazine "al-Ġāmi'ah" (The League, 1899-1910) generated a controversy with *al-šayḥ* Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), who in his turn replied to Anṭūn through a series of articles published in "al-Manār" (The Lighthouse, 1898-1940). For further information about the content of the debate on the separation of religion and State see Faraḥ Anṭūn, *Ibn Rušd wa falsafatuḥu* (Averroes and his Philosophy, 1903). See also, for instance, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983, pp. 253-259; Alexander Flores, *Reform, Islam, Secularism; Faraḥ Antūn and Muhammad Abduh*, dans A. Roussillon (dir.), *Entre réforme sociale et mouvement national. Identité et modernisation en Égypte (1882-1962)*, CEDEJ, Égypte/Soudan 1995, pp. 565-576, <http://books.openedition.org/cedej/1444#ftn6>; Paola Viviani, *Un maestro del Novecento arabo: Faraḥ Anṭūn*, Jouvence, Roma 2004, pp. 185-277.

¹⁴ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī, *Ṭabā'i' al-istibdād wa maṣāri' al-isti'bād*, Kalimāt 'Arabiyyah, al-Qāhirah 2011, p. 98.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100; *al-Qur'ān*, Sūrat Hūd, 11:118; Muhammad Taqī-ud-Dīn Al-Hilālī and Muhammad Muhsin Khān, *Translation of the Meaning of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, Madinah 1999, p. 303.

¹⁶ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī, *Ṭabā'i' al-istibdād wa maṣāri' al-isti'bād*, cit., p. 98.

Even the intellectual and philosopher from the *mahğar* (emigration) Amīn al-Riḥānī (1876-1940) expressed his heartfelt hope for concord and unity among the segments of his society in the pages of the review “al-Ḥadīṭ” (The Talk, 1927-1959), for everyone is part of the same humanity:

Once I was sitting in a coffee bar on the sea observing the people who were swimming. I meditated on that natural condition of theirs, free of anything that could distinguish them one from the other. I said to myself: “Where is the Muslim now, where the Jewish, where the unbeliever and where the Christian?”. I was looking at them swimming in one single sea, under one single sky, not scorning the waves that played around their hearts and washed their bodies as if they were one heart and one body. And I said to myself: “When will our minds be flexible, active and strong like our bodies? [...] Or when will [our souls] become tolerant like our bodies and swim in the sole sea of *adab* [culture, literature, education], under the sole sky of science without conflict and discord?”¹⁷.

Even though the efforts of these pioneers were successful in sowing the first seeds of a shared national identity, they could not prevent the fall of those territories under colonial rule. According to the Syrian poet and intellectual Ūrḥān Muḃassar (1912/1914-1965), sectarianism was in fact one of the main reasons behind the weakness of national consciousness that ultimately led to their submission. As foreseen by al-Bustānī, foreign powers perceived this fragmentation and exploited it for their own interests, turning the communities into political entities that would fight against each other¹⁸. The Palestinian Syrian writer and political analyst Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Şālīḃ (1961) echoes these words when he argues that «sectarianism is firstly and basically an illness in politics and state, and only secondly in religions and schools. Sectarianism does not grow up because of the numerous religions and schools in the society, but because these social differences take a political value»¹⁹. The splitting of Syrian territories under French mandate into community-based provinces followed this direction, turning sectarianism into a tool to downsize mounting anti-colonial sentiment.

The political exploitation of sectarianism continued even after Syria’s independence in 1946. The historian Kamāl Dīb maintains that it had a significant role during the *coups d’état* which took place in 1949, 1954 and 1955²⁰ respectively. The governments that came into power afterwards were unable to deal with Syria’s ethnic and religious diversity and to implement the necessary policies for national integration²¹. Rather, this diversity overshadowed by a

¹⁷ Amīn al-Riḥānī, *al-Fawāriq al-maḃhabīyyah* (The Doctrinaire Distinctions), in “al-Ḥadīṭ”, n. 2, February 1933, p. 133.

¹⁸ Ūrḥān Muḃassar, *‘Awāmil al-nağş fī šu‘ūrinā al-waṭanī* (The Reasons for our Lack of National Consciousness), in “al-Ḥadīṭ”, n. 24, n. 3, March 1950, and in “al-Awān”, October 23, 2009, <http://alawan.org/article6087.html>, accessed November 11, 2015.

¹⁹ Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Şālīḃ, *Fī ‘l-ṭā‘ifiyyah wa ‘l-niğām al-ṭā‘ifi fī Sūriyyah*, in “al-Ḥiwār al-mutamaddīn”, n. 3635, February 11, 2012, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=294901>, accessed October 28, 2015.

²⁰ Kamāl Dīb, *Ta‘rīḃ Sūriyyah al-mu‘āşirah. Min al-intidāb al-faransī ilā şayf 2011*, Dār al-Nahār, Bayrūt 2012, p. 349.

²¹ Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Şālīḃ: *al-ṭā‘ifiyyah niğāğ iftiqārinā ilā siyāsāt tadāmuğ waṭanī*, in “al-Ğarīdah”, August 7, 2012, <http://www.aljarida.com/news/index/2012531622/>, accessed October 28, 2015.

dominant and exclusive idea of panarabism, which culminated in the establishment of the United Arab Republic. Its failure and the insurgence of the Baath (*Ba't*) party in 1963 brought the process of democratization to an end, giving birth to a totalitarian regime²². Between 1963 and 1970 implementing secularism and socialism was the ruler's main concerns in sharp contrast with religious expressions²³. When Hafez al-Assad (Ḥāfiẓ al-Asad, r. 1970-2000) came into power he adopted a more flexible approach, trying to attract the Sunni segments of the population both in the city and the countryside. He went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1974 and raised Sunni clerics' salaries, while the wearing of the veil was widely allowed, new mosques and religious schools were opened, Muslim scholars were admitted to Parliament as independent members and remarkable Sunni personalities were invited to join the state institutions, such as *al-ṣayḥ* Muḥammad al-Būṭī. Through these actions, the regime was trying to appear as the guarantor of moderation in the interests of both Sunnis and minorities against the fundamentalists²⁴.

As for the *Nuṣayriyyah*, then Alawites, the group the al-Assad family belongs to, their condition improved long before Hafez al-Assad's rule²⁵. Yet, from the Seventies onwards their destiny was increasingly related to the regime. An ever larger number of Alawites accessed the public and private sectors occupying a strong position in the country's political, economic and military apparatus of the country to the detriment of Sunnis and other minorities. It is worth pointing out here that the rise of Alawites to positions of power did not mean that the regime was Alawite, but that it used sectarianism, and the Alawite community in particular, to strengthen its rule. According to Yāsīn al-Ḥāḡḡ Ṣāliḥ, it is «not the regime that is in the hands of Alawites, but the Alawites [who are] in the hands of the regime»²⁶. In actual fact, the Alawites were the first victims of the hatred generated by the regime and its discriminating policies. To a great extent, this was due to social and economic reasons but it acquired a sectarian meaning because of religious groups' opposition, like the Muslim Brotherhood²⁷. The long and violent

²² Hassan Abbas, *Between the Cultures of Sectarianism and Citizenship*, in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, Edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, Saqi Books, London 2014, pp. 48-49.

²³ Kamāl Dīb, *Ta'riḥ Sūriyyah al-mu'āṣirah. Min al-intidāb al-faransī ilā ṣayf 2011*, cit., p. 351.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 409-410.

²⁵ For further knowledge of the history of Nusayris' community prior to Hafez al-Assad's rule, see Stefan Winter, *The Nusayris before the Tanzimat in the Eyes of Ottoman Provincial Administrators, 1804-1834*, in Th. Philipp, Ch. Schumann (eds.), *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, Orient Institut Beirut, Beirut 2004, pp. 97-112; Sabrina Mervin, *L'entité alaouite, une création française*, dans *Le choc colonial et l'Islam*, J.-P. Luizard (éd.), La Découverte, Paris 2006, pp. 343-358; Kamāl Dīb, *Ta'riḥ Sūriyyah al-mu'āṣirah. Min al-intidāb al-faransī ilā ṣayf 2011*, cit., pp. 44-55. For general knowledge of Nusayris' religion see Yaron Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawīs. An Introduction to the Religion, History and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2010.

²⁶ Yāsīn al-Ḥāḡḡ Ṣāliḥ, *Fī 'l-ṭā'ifiyyah wa 'l-nizām al-ṭā'ifi fī Sūriyyah*, cit. On the clanic and sectarian nature of al-Assad regime see also Lorenzo Trombetta, *Siria. Dagli Ottomani agli Assad. E oltre*, Mondadori Università, Milano 2013, pp. 131-133.

²⁷ Kamāl Dīb, *Ta'riḥ Sūriyyah al-mu'āṣirah. Min al-intidāb al-faransī ilā ṣayf 2011*, cit., pp. 431-434.

Islamist uprising and the brutal repression carried out in Hama in 1982 by Hafez’s brother, Rifaat al-Assad (Rif‘at al-Asad), marked the beginning of a new era in al-Assad’s rule²⁸. The obsession with security and the presumption of being the sole protector of religious and ethnic diversity guided and justified all the policies implemented by the government. From that moment any criticism of the sectarian arrangement of Syrian society had to be avoided. During Bashar al-Assad’s rule nothing relevant changed in this respect, but everything was questioned again by the 2011 uprising.

2 *Sectarianism after the Uprising*

Sectarianism, in the words of the Syrian poet Rašā ‘Umrān (1964) is, along with individualism, one of the most deeply-rooted illnesses in Syrian people. They have been silent on the subject for many years, like most of the intellectuals, as Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Šālīḥ points out²⁹. The persistence of this ongoing war has uncovered the reality of the fact that even those who had never consider themselves sectarian had to deal with their sectarian belonging. Yet, as Rašā ‘Umrān sustained, «[t]o let the illness be known is a path to recovering»³⁰. Recognizing sectarianism in ourselves and talking about it are therefore the only ways to overcome this barrier and pave the way to a new concept of national belonging.

In accordance with these ideas, writers, artists, intellectuals and mostly young members of civil society have used written and oral words, art and music as means to speak about the different components of Syrian society and affirm the substantial unity of the Syrian people not on the basis of their sectarian belonging, but on their being full citizens.

2.1 *Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah, Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ ḥāḍīhi al-madīnah*

Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah is a novelist, journalist and screenwriter from Aleppo, currently living in Damascus. An author of several television series and movie scripts as well, in 1990 he was one of the founders of the magazine “Alif” (first letter of the Arabic alphabet) together with Saḥbān al-Sawāḥ (1946), Luqmān Dayrkī (1966), Aḥmad Iskandar Sulaymān, Usāmah Isbir (1963) and Aḥmad Mu‘allā (1958)³¹. He has written four novels to date³², the fourth of which, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 540-565.

²⁹ Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Šālīḥ: *al-tā’ifiyyah nitāğ iftiqārīnā ilā siyāsāt tadāmuğ waṭanī*, cit.

³⁰ See the interview with Ayman ‘Abd al-Nūr at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_UPkkyYkn4, accessed March 18, 2015.

³¹ The review closed at the end of its second year due to financial reasons, but an electronic version of the review has started its publications since 2006. Cf. <http://aleftoday.info/index.php>.

³² Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah, *Ḥāris al-ḥadī‘ah* (The Guard of Deception), Dār Alif, Bayrūt 1993; ID., *Daḥātīr al-qurbāt* (The Gypsy Notebooks), Dār Ward, Dimašq 2000; ID., *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, Amīsā, Dimašq 2006; ID., *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ ḥāḍīhi al-madīnah*, cit. For an analysis of the author and his works see Paola Viviani, *Dimašq wa ‘l-riwā’iyyūn al-sūriyyūn al-ğudud: maṭal Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah*, in AA.VV., *al-Madīnah wa ‘l-ṭaqāfah. Dimašq unmuḍağ^{am}. A ‘māl al-mu‘tamar al-mun‘aqid 11 wa 12 ayyār 2008*, tansīq Ğamāl Šīḥayyid, Dimašq 2008, ‘āšimat al-ṭaqāfah al-‘arabiyyah – Damascus 2008, Arab Capital of Culture, 2008, pp. 171-180, republished and

hāḍīhi al-madīnah, will be part of the present analysis. Nonetheless, some references to his third novel, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah* (In Praise of Hatred, 2006)³³, will be necessary. As the novel that attracted both critics' and readers' attention, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah* effectively broke the silence about a number of very sensitive issues, among which sectarianism plays a central role. Narrating the years before and after the 1982 Hama massacres, the novel seems complementary to *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hāḍīhi al-madīnah*. Not only is the latter the natural continuation of historic facts, but it shows the consequences of the political actions that were carried out in those years.

The heart of *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hāḍīhi al-madīnah* is the story of a family as narrated by one of its members, the son. The mother is the fulcrum around which the events of the rest of the family revolve. The failure of her marriage to a Kurdish rural man and of her dreams of an aristocratic existence for her sons marks the beginning of the slow but relentless decomposition of the family. One after another, each member of the family fails in his desperate attempt to react and fight against an apparently unchangeable destiny. Sawsan, the narrator's sister, tries to raise her social status by joining the party and having a relationship with an officer, only to later regret it and seek a safe but illusory haven in her faith. Nizār the uncle, the mother's brother and friend, apparently managed to follow his desires in life, yet at the cost of being humiliated by his family and society because of his homosexuality. Finally, Rašīd, another son and the narrator's brother, looks for peace in music and religion in vain. His self-destruction embodies the collapse of all the illusions those in the family who tried to change their destiny held on to. In the background, the city of Aleppo undergoes important physical and social transformations, while the regime continues to rule in a relentless way, pretending to change but still depriving citizens of basic rights.

Through the story of this family, the novel describes the material and spiritual conditions of a country under the regime of the Baathist party for more than 40 years, especially after the repression following the military struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood. It was on that moment that the peaceful coexistence between the different segments of society was definitely broken. «Living together

enlarged in EAD., *Un giovane siriano del Nord a Damasco: la città e la speranza tradita secondo Khālīd Khalīfah*, in AA.VV., *Itinerari di culture 2*, a cura di E. Falivene, S. Odab, C. Saggiomo, P. Viviani, Loffredo, Napoli 2012, pp. 287-298; EAD., *A First Approach to Dafātir al-qurbāt by Khālīd Khalīfah*, in *From New Values to New Aesthetics. Turning Points in Modern Arabic Literature*, Proceedings of the 8th EURAMAL Conference, 11-14 June, 2008, Uppsala/Sweden, 2. *Postmodernism and Thereafter*, S. Guth and G. Ramsay (eds.), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2011, pp. 215-228.

³³ Short-listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2008, it was translated into Italian, French, English and Spanish: Khaled Khalifa, *Elogio dell'odio*, traduzione di F. Prevedello, Bompiani, Milano 2011; ID., *Eloge de la haine*, traduit par R. Samara, Sindbad, Paris 2011; ID., *In Praise of Hatred*, Translated by L. Price, Transworld Publishers, London 2012; ID., *Elogio del odio*, traducción de C. Cebza, Lumen, Barcelona 2012. See also the review of the novel in Paola Viviani, *La storia recente della Siria raccontata da una giovane attivista nel romanzo Elogio dell'odio (Madīḥ al-karāhiyah) di Hālīd Hālīfah (Khaled Khalifa), nella traduzione di F. Prevedello, Bompiani, Milano 2011, pp. 529 (ed. araba: Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2008)*, in "La rivista di Arablit", a. 1, n. 2, dicembre 2011, pp. 147-149, http://www.arablit.it/rivista_arablit/numero2_2011/18_viviani_khalifa.pdf.

was just a memory full of melancholy that the people practised with caution»³⁴, Ḥālid Ḥalīfah reported in *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*. The blind hatred aroused between one religious community and the other led to total destruction. In *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah* the narrator’s father expresses his painful disappointment with his daughter and family’s ideology, «a sectarian fever that would lead us to disaster»³⁵. It was madness and a *fitnah* (discord, conflict, civil war)³⁶, whose consequences are evident in the words of the oldest living generation in *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah*. Their memories of a glorious, cultured and graceful Aleppo, the city at the centre of the novel, as well as at the centre of *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, are abandoned in the past. Both the narrator’s and the French professor Jean’s mothers in *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah* complain about the transformation of the city, now a heap of run-down neighbourhoods sold at a cheap price to poor rural men coming from the countryside.

A real festival of madness, strange smells, Aleppo had become a city in the grip of an endless fear, a punished city, moaning under the desires of corrupted intelligence officers and supervisors who didn’t know anything other than loyalty and *dabkah*³⁷ circles during the referendum for the president’s election [...]³⁸.

The city is no longer familiar and its members are like strangers who deal with each other in a dark climate of suspicion. «Faces meeting each other cannot become friends»³⁹ says a narrator’s friend one day, making him think that suspicion among people has become a natural condition in that place, where everyone is afraid to say anything that could reach an intelligence spy’s ear. It is because of this fear that the notion of sectarianism starts to grow inside people. The clan and the religious community become the safest haven where one can escape. Muḍīr, Sawsan’s lover at the time of her militancy in the party, is not able to put apart their different sectarian belonging and marry her. It is the failure of the hope embodied by Naḍīr, the military officer in *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, who refused to obey the logic of hatred of his regime and married Marwah, the narrator’s aunt. Her love was what «cleansed his soul from the dust of hatred in the air and revived his dream of living outside his holy religious community»⁴⁰. On the contrary, Muḍīr’s return to his closed community and his marriage with a girl within that circle is the only relief he can feel in his life. Yet, Sawsan cannot accept it. In her act of rebellion she cannot accept the logic of sectarianism, which in the end means nothing more than submitting to the logic of a regime where everyone is subject to the will of the president.

³⁴ Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, cit., p. 151.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148. Because it portrays the reality of a divided society and gives voice to a silenced population who legitimize violence against their fellow citizens, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah* has been considered a work of public reconciliation. Cf. Anne-Marie McManus, *Sentimental Terror Narratives: Gendering Violence, Dividing Sympathy*, in “Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies”, Vol. 9, No. 2, *Emerging Voices in Comparative Literature from the Middle East* (Spring 2013), pp. 80-107.

³⁶ Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, cit., p. 149.

³⁷ Traditional popular dance widespread in the Middle East.

³⁸ Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah*, cit., p. 143.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁰ Ḥālid Ḥalīfah, *Madīḥ al-karāhiyah*, cit., p. 219.

She imagined all those who considered themselves strong and frightened the country, being themselves under the shadow of the president and his family who really controlled everything in the country. She then refused to be the shadow of a servant who found his certainty only by returning to his religious community⁴¹.

The regime has humiliated its citizens and emptied them of any certainty. It has become a dishonour, which the future generation has to get rid of. Jean, the French professor, whose ideas resemble the professor of Physics ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Dālī in *Madīh al-karāhiyah*⁴², reacts to the dishonour of submitting himself to the party at the price of being expelled from the teaching staff. He is entrusted by the writer to convey this message through a letter to his son Pierre:

Jean writes to his son Pierre, he goes on explaining his theory about historical dishonour. He depicts the inhabitants of one city, dividing the air of one city, fearing each other, Christians fearing Muslims, the religious minorities fearing the majority. The majority fearing the violence of the minorities. Ethnic groups, religions and communities fearing the president and his intelligence officers, the president fearing his guards, his guards looking for new ways to vilify one another and manifest their never-ending loyalty, they punish their enemies and they even accuse one another, they raise the president to the level of sanctity or divinity. Despite that, he remains in his palace fearing the guards, not daring to walk ten meters in the streets without hundreds of guards, despite the repeated images transmitted on the television of millions of people praising him in the supporting parade. [...] He always finishes his letters with a verse from French poetry and an Oriental precept because he wants his son to mix them to become half-Oriental half-Western. He concludes his advice describing his son as a world citizen who will fight against dishonour wherever he finds it like those great saviours whom his city would need in those hard times⁴³.

Fear, frustration, humiliation and disillusionment are the feelings that dominate in *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah* and lie at the roots of sectarianism, which appears as the only possible survival strategy.

2.2 The “Tīn ba‘l” Comics

The idea of a window being opened to the past to find the reasons of today’s unease is also behind the comics for children and young adults “Tīn ba‘l”⁴⁴. As it will be showed, it follows the path traced by Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah in breaking the silence on a series of issues, not least sectarianism. A monthly magazine, which started to be issued in June 2014, it takes its name from the fig tree which is naturally watered by rains. In the first issue, the title is defined as follows:

The fig tree can live in extreme situations. It can stand draught and carelessness and its roots go deep in the soil to look for water. It lives for many years and can grow very tall. Its roots split the rocks and absorb all the best in the earth, even if rare. It loves the rain that comes without notice, like an opportunity not taken into account.

⁴¹ Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah*, cit., p. 138.

⁴² Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah, *Madīh al-karāhiyah*, cit., pp. 163-165.

⁴³ Ḥālīd Ḥalīfah, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah*, cit., pp. 158-159.

⁴⁴ The comics are published and spread through the net thanks to a website (<http://www.teenbaal.com>) and a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/teenbaal>).

And it gives good, generous and satisfying fruits, not preventing anyone from eating them. In Syria, fig trees grow everywhere. They survive and continue giving, even in the hardest times⁴⁵.

The magazine has released thirteen issues up to October 2015 and is divided into a number of different series of stories, each one with an edifying message to deliver to its young readers. Two examples have been selected as representative of the attitude in the magazine in relation to sectarianism. The series *Bišr wa Hīfīn yaktašifān ālat al-zaman* (Bišr and Hīfīn Discover the Time Machine), written by Dīmāh Bīṭār Qal‘aḡī and drawn by the Syrian artist and cartoonist Ġalāl al-Māḡūt⁴⁶, has the clear aim of going back to the past to recollect lost memories. The two young characters, a boy and a girl, suddenly find a time machine in an abandoned mill, which is the start of a series of adventures that bring them back to crucial moments in Syrian history. During one of these trips, Bišr and Hīfīn go back to March 19, 1965 to look for information about Hīfīn’s grandfather’s past. They find the man in the company of a friend of his, hiding from security guards, and they listen in on their conversation:

“Did you hear what happened to our friends, the two Hamū brothers?”

“Strange matter... How could they be members of the same family, sons of the same father and mother... and be considered one Syrian and the other foreigner by the government! What nonsense...”⁴⁷.

The “strange matter” in the quotation refers to the Kurdish issue, one of the most delicate ones in terms of our discussion on sectarianism, in particular when ethnicity before religion is taken into consideration. In fact, Bišr and Hīfīn find out that in 1962, the then Syrian government issued a decree authorizing a special census in the northern Kurdish region. After this census, Syrian nationality was taken away from many sons of that area, claiming that they were not pure Arabs. Consequently, they were deprived of all their rights as citizens and classified as foreigners or, worse than this, *maktūmū al-qayd* (unregistered)⁴⁸. As Hīfīn’s grandfather tells to his friend, the Baathist Party, which seized control the following year, continued to follow that policy in the name of Arabism and Nationalism: «But they forget that we have been here for thousands of years. This truth cannot be changed. Just one human being oppressed by a regime is enough to consider that regime failed»⁴⁹. Despite the oppression, the Kurdish people have continued to maintain their traditions, culture and language, and so has Hīfīn. Yet, the language is what causes his grandfather and his friend to be captured. While

⁴⁵ *Kalimat al-‘adad*, in “Tīn ba‘l”, n. 0, June 2014.

⁴⁶ <http://www.arabcartoonaward.com/cartoonist/الماغوط-جلال/>, accessed March 18, 2015. In the eighth issue the name of Koji Kabuto – a clear reference to a character of the Japanese manga – appears in place of Ġalāl al-Māḡūt.

⁴⁷ Dīmāh Bīṭār Qal‘aḡī, Ġalāl al-Māḡūt, *Bišr wa Hīfīn yaktašifān ālat al-zaman*, in “Tīn ba‘l”, n. 3, October 2014, p. 9.

⁴⁸ For further information, see Jordi Tejel, *Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, Routledge, New York 2009, pp. 50-52; Mirella Galletti, *Storia dei curdi*, Jouvence, Roma 2004, pp. 281-290.

⁴⁹ Dīmāh Bīṭār Qal‘aḡī, Ġalāl al-Māḡūt, *Bišr wa Hīfīn yaktašifān ālat al-zaman*, cit., p. 9.

singing a Kurdish song, security accuses them of singing songs inciting against the country and puts them in prison.

The grandfather completes the story once the two adventurers return to the present time. He shared a prison cell with many others like him, some of whom were arrested just because they had a book in Kurdish. After one month, he was set free and was even more determined to speak his mother tongue and keep his identity.

The popular stories and the wedding parties were the only way to guarantee the survival of the language and its transmission to future generations. [...] And because the majority of the people there was Kurdish, even the Arabs, the Assyrians and the Syriac people learned Kurdish language in order to communicate with everyone. [...] Therefore, Kurdish songs, dance and stories spread among everyone. And “Nūrūz” (Nowruz) changed from being an intimate festivity to a real festival⁵⁰.

This is just an example of how this magazine deals with the subject of sectarianism. In other cases, it deals with it by describing art. For instance, in one episode of the series entitled *Sāmī, raḥḥālah bi 'l-ṣudfah* (Sāmī, Traveller by Chance), written by Layāl Ma'rūf and drawn by Būb al-Raḥḥāl, the main character is visiting the city of Damascus. He stops at the Omayyad mosque, where he learns about the history of that marvellous monument. He learns from a friend's grandfather that after the Islamic conquest, the Christians offered the Muslims to pray in the same place. The caliph al-Walīd (705-715) then decided to build a mosque in place of the church, while giving all the churches that had been taken before back to the Christians. Despite that, the mosque continued to be attended by people of both faiths, since it is considered the place where the head of St. John the Baptist is preserved. To the amazement of young Sāmī, the wise man concludes his lesson saying: «It would be childish if we thought that a religion could be established isolated and complete in itself. Religions deliver the same ideas, they complete what preceded them and prepare the way for what is to come»⁵¹.

These two first examples, *Lā sakākīn fī maṭābiḥ hādīhi al-madīnah* and “Tīn ba'l”, have underlined how the sectarian situation was before the uprising. The mosaic of different peoples, cultures and religions have always been present in Syria. In recent times, something about that richness has been silenced to make way for the loud and exclusive Arabism ideology. Since March 2011, this silence has been broken: the unease of the various members of Syrian society has exploded. Syrians of any race, religion and social status have taken to the streets to finally raise their voice and be free to speak loudly of what has been kept silent for too long.

⁵⁰ Dīmāh Bīṭār Qal'aḡī, Ġalāl al-Māḡūt, *Biṣr wa Hīḡīn yaktaṣīfān ālat al-zaman*, in “Tīn ba'l”, n. 4, November 2014, p. 8.

⁵¹ Layāl Ma'rūf, Būb al-Raḥḥāl, *Sāmī, raḥḥālah bi 'l-ṣudfah*, in “Tīn ba'l”, n. 3, November 2014, p. 6.

2.3 Samar Yazbik, *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān*⁵²

The narrative of the criminal regime on the truth of this revolution, this revolution and not a sectarian war had to be broken. And my voice, as a writer and journalist, had to be with the uprising, whatever the price⁵³.

With these words, Samar Yazbik reveals the reason why she wrote her diary *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān*. The fifth work after four novels written by the author⁵⁴, it clearly indicates the high degree of her engagement in Syria’s current events. Since the start of the uprising Samar Yazbik has stood on the side of revolution, keeping this stance even after she was compelled to leave the country. Currently living in France, she is very involved in trying to deconstruct the misleading interpretation of facts presented by mainstream Western media. In June 2012 in Paris she founded Women Now for Development, a non-governmental organization which aims to support and empower Syrian women and children under the threat of war⁵⁵.

Being an Alawite woman who opposes the blind logic of sectarian belonging, she is quite functional to the present work⁵⁶. In fact, *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān* may be read as the writer’s attempt to unmask the fragile balance that governs relationships among the communities, whose fears are easily exploited by those who want to generate a sectarian conflict in the country.

The diary is organized in chapters according to the date in which they were written. It covers a period of about four months, starting from March 25, 2011 and arriving to July 9, 2011, some days before her voluntary exile with her daughter to France. In a sort of written documentary, Samar Yazbik describes her experience of the events that occurred during the first months of the uprising. Her direct

⁵² See in this double issue Fatima Sai, *The Limits of Representation. The Transformation of Aesthetics in Syrian Artistic and Social Discourse*, pp. 106-113.

⁵³ Samar Yazbik, *Taqāṭu‘ nīrān*, cit., p. 266.

⁵⁴ Apart from this work, Samar Yazbik published *Ṭiflat al-samā’* (The Sky Girl), Dār al-Kunūz al-‘Arabiyyah, Bayrūt 2002. Cf. Annunziata Russo, *Metamorfosi della femminilità nel romanzo Ṭiflat al-samā’ di Samar Yazbak*, in *Pace e guerra nel Medio Oriente in età moderna e contemporanea*, a cura di M. Ruocco, Congedo, Galatina 2008, pp. 201-211. Other novels are: *Šalšāl* (Clay), Dār al-Kunūz al-‘Arabiyyah, Bayrūt 2005; *Rā’ihat al-qirfah* (The Smell of Cinnamon), Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2008; *Lahā mirāyā* (In her Mirrors), Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2011. *Rā’ihat al-qirfah* has been translated into Italian, English, French and German. The same can be said of her latest novel, *Bawwābāt arḍ al-‘adam* (The Doors of the Land of Nothing), Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2015, which consists of the impressions and the interviews collected between 2012 and 2014, when the author illegally entered Syria. It has been translated into English, German and Spanish: Samar Yazbek, *The Crossing: My journey to the shattered heart of Syria*, translated by N. Gowanlock and R.A. Kemp, Rider Books, London 2015; EAD., *Die gestohlene Revolution. Reise in mein zerstörtes Syrien*, aus dem Arabischen von L. Bender, Nagel und Kimche Verlag, Zürich 2015; EAD., *La frontera. Memoria de mi destrozada Siria*, Stella Maris, Barcelona 2015.

⁵⁵ <http://www.women-now.org/>.

⁵⁶ Another Syrian writer who strongly opposes an identity based on religious belonging is Salwā al-Na‘īmī (1950). Born to a Christian Greek-Orthodox mother and an Ismaili father, she is currently living in exile in France. In her semi-autobiographic novel *Šibh al-ğazīrah al-‘arabiyyah* (The Arab Peninsula, 2012) she tries to build a new concept of identity, where no space is left for sectarian partiality, which is ridiculed instead. For a deeper analysis of the novel see Martina Censi, *Šibh al-ğazīrah al-‘arabiyya di Salwā al-Na‘īmī. Per una nuova identità araba*, in “Annali di Ca’ Foscari”, Vol. 50, dicembre 2014, pp. 123-141, http://virgo.unive.it/ecf-workflow/upload_pdf/007_Censi.pdf.

participation in protests and rallies and the interviews to eyewitnesses she managed to carry out are the tools she uses to convey her reality to the reader. At the same time, she registers her reactions and feelings in front of a situation of growing personal danger. Her open support to the revolution makes her incur in her family and friends' disappointment who distance themselves from her. Security force agents burst into Samar's house and take her around the regime's torture chambers to convince her to surrender. On the other hand, not all sides of the revolution accept her presence because she is an Alawite. In all these contexts, sectarianism emerges as the successful tool used by the regime to put an end to the protests.

The aim of clarifying the sectarian discourse during the revolution is evident in the diary and it is possible to analyze it from three perspectives:

1. the reality of the demonstrations and external attempts to turn them to sectarian riots;
2. the role of security forces and official media in spreading sectarian fears;
3. the personal experience of the writer as one of the victims of the regime's sectarian discourse.

The entire diary is based on real stories documented by the writer, whether by the witnesses of the events or her personal experience. From these stories emerges a picture of a great number of demonstrations that included all segments of Syrian society under unifying slogans like «Lā sunniyyah wa lā 'alawiyyah, lā drūz wa lā ismā'īliyyah, naḥnu kullunā Sūriyyah» (Not Sunni and not Alawite, not Druze and not Ismaili, we are all Syrians)⁵⁷, or «Silmiyyah silmiyyah, lā salafiyyīn wa lā mundassīn naḥnu sūriyyīn» (Peaceful peaceful, not Salafists not infiltrators we are all Syrians)⁵⁸, or «Naḥnu Islām naḥnu 'alawiyyīn naḥnu masīḥiyyīn» (We are Islam we are Alawites we are Christians)⁵⁹. Even the Kurds join the demonstrations once they realize that the concession of citizenship and other promises are just part of the regime's game⁶⁰.

Yet, through a series of examples, it appears that as soon as the demonstrations take place, the fear of sectarian revenges starts to spread among people. In al-Bayḍā' for instance, the Alawite inhabitants start feeling the fear of their past persecution, which makes them get closer to the regime's narrative. Through rumours spread by security forces the regime claims in fact that the demonstrators are armed and aim to kill them. The same thing occurs in Bāniyās and al-Lāḍikiyyah, where in some cases it is discovered that the armed people that infiltrated the demonstrations are members of the security forces. Ġablah, the writer's hometown and another crucial point for the coexistence of Alawite and Sunni communities, is also threatened by the fears of a sectarian conflict:

⁵⁷ Samar Yazbik, *Taqāṭu' nīrān*, cit., p. 28. Here and in the other slogans the author opted for a mix of standard and colloquial language.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

I know what the *šabbīḥah*⁶¹ and the regime’s friends will do to incite the Alawites against Sunnis: they will shoot at the Alawites to make them think that the demonstrators want to kill them. I was waiting for the outbreak of a civil war in Ḡablah. Until now, it did not happen, but the regime will not give up inventing it anytime soon⁶².

The situation in Bāniyās is more dangerous than anywhere else. She knows that the demonstrations there would be faced as in Dar‘ā, that is laying siege to the city. Yet, the previous events in the city have led its people to buy weapons, and this would go according to the game of the regime, which, in addition to the bombing of the city, would exploit the growing sectarian tension at the expense of the Alawites⁶³.

At this point, a consideration on the position of the Alawites, which of course is particularly relevant for the writer, should be made. In her writing, the idea that the Alawites are the first victims of the regime often emerges. Since the time of Hafez al-Assad, the sons of this religious community were employed as an army of protectors and killers for the sake of the president and his family⁶⁴. At the same time, the fears of the rest of the Alawites of reliving what occurred in the past, turned them to human shields for the regime in case of a sectarian war⁶⁵.

Many of these fears are real and deep-rooted in the people, but the security forces and the official media undoubtedly play an important role in spreading them. Firstly, security forces are not completely made up of Alawites, but their behaviour towards the arrested demonstrators follows a sectarian logic⁶⁶. The arrested people’s treatment is different according to their religious community, and it is even harsher in the case of Alawites or Christians⁶⁷ because their revolting against a regime who claims to protect them is considered a treason. The official media also helps in this sense. The falsification of the images of the demonstrations by Syrian television generates a huge rage in the people and any attempt to calm them down is in vain because the official media incites people to hate and fear one another⁶⁸.

Someone in both security and the media reveals some secrets behind that system. On May 8, 2011, Samar Yazbik reports her meeting with a news presenter at the official television station, who describes its role in influencing Syrian people:

The official media discourse divided the Syrian people into two sides: with or against. That means that even if the demonstrator was not accused of being part of the armed gang, he was necessarily a traitor. [...] After recent events, media discourse has become more ideological [...]. As media people, we asked to go into

⁶¹ Literally, *šabbīḥah* means “apparitions”, but here it refers to the paramilitary militia of thugs and mercenaries that is considered the tool in the hands of the regime to repress the dissent.

⁶² Samar Yazbik, *Taqāṭu’ nīrān*, cit., p. 49.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

the streets on the side of security forces and demonstrators to know the truth, but we were prevented from this for our safety. Therefore, what we transmitted had its source in the SANA⁶⁹ agency [...]. SANA means the office of the presidential palace⁷⁰.

Later on, on July 9, the writer manages to reach an army officer. He decided to shoot himself to go back home and not be forced to carry out his commander's orders of shooting innocent citizens. He found out that the truth does not lay in what the official authority is telling. His story reveals how he started to call everything into question:

Until that moment, my duty was to have it with the Salafi armed gangs who aimed to cleanse the Alawites, but there were many matters happening in front of us. I felt as if we were an easy bait for those gangs that always appeared in the place where we were and started shooting at us. More important than this, [...] every time we captured one member of those gangs, the Air Force intelligence promptly caught him. Last time though, there was a captive in front of me, who was supposed to be one of the gangs, but once one of the soldiers punched him and directed his rifle at him. The captive began to cry, scream and stammer. He peed in his clothes, and when the chief officer from the Air Force intelligence appeared [...] he promptly caught him. There was a security man with him, who shot at the captive directly in his head [...]. I felt that this matter was really strange and that what they told us was a lie. I do not know the kind of people who take to the streets, because in the army we are isolated from the outside world. Yet, I know that the officer killed the captive because of his fear of what he could say. All these reasons made me shoot myself⁷¹.

All these stories collected by Samar Yazbik convince her that she cannot stay silent, because «Silence is crime's ally»⁷². The price for speaking is very high: after a harsh whispering campaign from security, she is deprived of her freedom of movement; she turns out to be a traitor for her community, accused of having relations with the American forces⁷³. Her family also suffers the consequences of her position. Threatening calls and letters arrive from everywhere, from the opposition that accuses her of being too silent, to the Alawites who accuse her of treason, to the regime's supporters who want her blood. She is in the crossfire⁷⁴. In addition, more than once she is forced to go on her "trip to hell"⁷⁵, as she calls it, that is detention at the security branch, to be frightened with a tour of the torture cells. Yet,

this is the price we have to pay to say a word of truth [...], what the regime [...] wants to suggest is that the popular protests that destroy Syrian cities have a sectarian mark, which is a clear falsification of the truth. Despite known procedures, such as the military partition of cities according to a sectarian asset and the bombing of the suburbs

⁶⁹ Syrian Arab News Agency.

⁷⁰ Samar Yazbik, *Taqāṭu' nīrān*, cit., pp. 80-82.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

of one community rather than another; despite the abuse, the frightening and the treason against any free Syrian citizen who belongs to the Alawite community, I say to every girl and every man who belongs to other communities [...] that I am here, and I know there are others as well as myself. We leave our souls among them, we join our voices with theirs, because their fear of the outbreak of a sectarian war has its explanation. It may be the price we will have to pay in case the language of violence and killing follows its way to the end. What do we have more than our souls?⁷⁶

2.4 Ḥakawātī sūriyālī

To overcome sectarian differences and prejudices is the most difficult challenge of multi-coloured opposition groups. Samar Yazbik’s diary should be read also in this perspective which is the same one of another expression of contemporary Syrian literary production: the oral short stories told by Abū Fākir. He is *Ḥakawātī sūriyālī*, the Surrealist storyteller, who tells his stories through the microphones of Radio Sūriyālī⁷⁷. In fact, in a moment when the circulation of books is difficult for evident reasons, internet and radio stations supply an efficient alternative to accomplish the same goals. The stories told by this modern *ḥakawātī* (storyteller) deal with a great variety of themes, which are all connected with Syrian life since the outbreak of the revolution. The problems concerning relations among the communities are faced in a number of stories, of which an example is provided here. The title of the selected story is *Filasṭīnī w sūrī wāḥid* (Palestinians and Syrians are one)⁷⁸, from which we understand that, in this case, it is the Palestinian people’s position in the uprising which is taken into account. The Palestinian community in Syria cannot be considered an ethnic or religious group. Yet, it is surely an important segment, whose prolonged presence in Syria has made of it an important part of the national frame of the country. Therefore, with the outbreak of the uprising, the Palestinians, like the other Syrians, assumed their position, supporting and rejecting it or simply dissociating themselves from it.

In the story to which we refer, two friends are the main characters. In their entire life, they have shared everything, they used to go out together, discuss girls, jobs and politics. They become interested and excited about what happened in Tunis, and then Egypt, Libya and Yemen. They share their opinions and they agree on the relevance of those revolutions. Once March 15 arrived, that is the official start of the Syrian revolution, their opinions differ for the first time. They differ on the conspiracy against the Syrian regime, whether what happened was a revolution or not, whether the regime was the one who really loved the country or it was the people to do so instead. How could they disagree after all they thought before? The second man replies to the first: «You are a foreigner. [...] This is

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

⁷⁷ Launched in October 15, 2012, as part of the Ru’ya (Vision) Association for a Better Syria, founded by four Syrians, Kārūlīn Ayyūb (Caroline Ayoub), Īyyād Kallās (Iyad Kallas), Māzin Ġarībah (Mazen Gharibah) and Hānī al-Sayyid (Honey al Sayed), Radio Sūriyālī is a no-profit and grassroots online radio station run by independent Syrian youngsters from different backgrounds. The radio station’s name suggests a double meaning: “*Sūriyā lī*” that means “Syria is mine”, while *sūriyālī* means “surreal”, with regard to Syria’s current surreal situation. Cf. <http://souriali.com/ar/>.

⁷⁸ *Ḥakawātī sūriyālī, Filasṭīnī w sūrī wāḥid*, <http://souriali.com/ar/?p=418>, accessed March 18, 2015.

Syria's matter. It is not your business. You are Palestinian»⁷⁹. In that moment their friendship ends and no word passes between them for months, until the Palestinian sits at his laptop one day and decides to write a letter to his friend, in which he tells him his story.

His father was born in 1951 in Syria. He was born in 1984 in Damascus and both of them never moved out of there, if not for a few months. God didn't give him brothers, but in return, he has a friend from Hama, a refugee, another from Damascus, an Alawite and a Christian, who are his dearest friends. At university he met another from Damascus, one from the Horan, a Palestinian man and a Palestinian girl, a Druze. There is no way, then, of telling him about sectarianism and nationalism.

I loved this country, I cried in this country, I have been hurt in this country, I have been sad and happy, I laughed in this country [...]. I love this earth and this country with all its beauty [...]. I wish it could be better and more beautiful. Believe me. I have received a lot from this country and I have given a lot of my heart to it, and I will continue doing so. Believe me. I am the only one who has not left the country, nor do I want to do so, because I want to stay and give what I have here. [...] I love you, my friend, but if you want to tell me that I am not Syrian after all this, because 'Syrian Palestinian' is written on my identity card, and that I don't have the right to speak because I am Palestinian [...], then, I doubt your nationalism and your Arabism before your nationalism, even if it is written that you are Syrian on your identity card. A Syrian does not speak in this way. You, who are reading this letter from Dubai, you have to know that while I am writing, the laptop is shaking because of the violence of the bombing here, at our place, in Syria. But I want to write just to tell you that it is enough for me to own the two greatest nationalities: I am Syrian Palestinian⁸⁰.

Conclusions

In his direct way of expressing the key concepts of the ongoing changes in Syrian society, Abū Fākir touches upon the weak spots that are coming to light in this crisis. Everything is called into question, especially as far as the sectarian composition of society is concerned. The first step should be stopping the politicization of communities and prevent sectarianism from becoming the new criterion for national identity, as Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Šālīḥ points out⁸¹. Then, a new basis for national belonging should be looked for, excluding Arabism, religious faith or race. The foundation of the state should be citizenship, as a «political, legal and cultural framework established by a constitution, organized by law and fostered by public values»⁸², as Hassan Abbas believes. Or it could even be a culture of freedom as the only “sectarian belief” in a united Syria, as Samar

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Yāsīn al-Ḥāğğ Šālīḥ, *Fī 'l-tā'ifiyyah wa 'l-niẓām al-tā'ifi fī Sūriyyah*, cit.: ID., *Talāṭat askāl li 'l-tā'ifiyyah fī 'l-mašriq al-'arabi*, in “al-Ḥayāh”, June 28, 2014, <http://staging.alhayat.com/Opinion/Writers/3257122/المشرق-العربي-ثلاثة-أشكال-للطائفية-في>, accessed October 28, 2015.

⁸² Hassan Abbas, *Between the Cultures of Sectarianism and Citizenship*, cit., p. 54.

Yazbik claims⁸³. Nevertheless, any process should pass through a reconsideration of the communitarian nature of society. Repressed past events must be recollected, old conflicts must be solved and new ones⁸⁴ must be avoided. Several initiatives from Syrian civil society move along this direction. A recent debate about sectarianism promoted by Muḥammad Dībū shows the need to discuss the issue even within intellectual circles⁸⁵. It seems to me that also literature is making an effort to start this process. In the wake of the *nahḍah*'s leading intellectuals, Ḥālid Ḥalīfah and Samar Yazbik have given their contribution through their works, the former by recollecting the memories of a recent past where some of the seeds of the current sectarian tensions were sowed, the latter by trying to explain these tensions by revealing the real face of the regime. In addition to them, comics and oral stories are using new media, such as the internet and radio stations to spread the same ideas to the largest audience possible. This is a committed literature that, during a war fuelled by sectarian fears, is trying to fulfil the important role of educating young Syrians and building the future generation of citizens in order to spread new concepts of communitarian rather than sectarian ways of living among them.

⁸³ Samar Yazbek, *Gateways to a Scorched Land*, in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, cit., p. 7.

⁸⁴ These include the dangerous possibility of a new kind of sectarian discrimination after the fall of the regime against its faithful supporters, as the Syrian novelist Hayfā' Bīṭār (1958) pointed out. Cf. Hayfā' Bīṭār, *Mamnū' an takūn Sūriyā mu'tadil^m*, in "al-'Arabī", December 31, 2014, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/2014/12/31/ممنوع-أن-تكون-سوريا-معتدلا>, accessed March 18, 2015. For further information about Hayfā' Bīṭār see Serena Sautto, *Il malessere sociale e l'exasperazione dell'individuo nella raccolta di racconti al-Sāqīṭah della scrittrice siriana Hayfā' Bīṭār*, in "La rivista di Arablīt", a. I, n. 2, dicembre 2011, pp. 7-20, http://www.arablīt.it/rivista_arablīt/numero2_2011/01_sautto.pdf.

⁸⁵ Published within the framework of *Looking inside the uprising*, a joint project between the two platforms SyriaUntold and OpenDemocracy, this debate hosts the opinions of the Syrian Palestinian thinker Salāmah Kaylah and the Syrian writer Fiktūryūs Šams (Victorious Shams), besides Muḥammad Dībū himself. Cf. Mohammad Dibo, *Opening the debate on sectarianism in Syria*, in "OpenDemocracy", September 22, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mohammad-dibo/opening-debate-on-sectarianism-in-syria>, accessed October 28, 2015. See also <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening-tags/looking-inside-uprising#0>.