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Makhlouf, Inc.

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Kelly Grotke



How a scion of the Assad regime's inner circle placed flattering profiles of himself in Western publications, and what this bodes for the future of online media.

Their world/our world

While reading Sam Dagher's ~~Assad or We Burn the Country~~ recently, I would occasionally search online for more information about some of the people the author mentioned. Nahed Ojeh, for example: daughter of former Syrian defense minister and close friend of Hafez al-Assad, Mustafa Tlass; widow of billionaire Saudi-Syrian arms dealer and art collector Akram Ojeh; and sister of one of Dagher's main sources, Manaf Tlass. I learned that Dominique Strauss-Kahn was a member of Nahed's Paris chess club, and that she'd also had an **affair** with Roland Dumas, François Mitterrand's former foreign affairs minister who resigned from his position as France's chief legal authority during the course of the Elf Aquitaine Oil ~~bribery scandal~~ in early 2001.

Though Google is generally awful for locating historical/scholarly information or even reputable journalism, it excels when it comes to celebrity. Following the links suggested by my search, I stumbled upon Instagram accounts belonging to more members of the ultra-rich entourage surrounding Syria's murderous dictatorship. Take, for instance, Akram and Nahed Ojeh's children, Akram Jr. and Lara, the step-siblings of Mansour Ojeh, Akram Ojeh's son by his first wife, Irene. Mansour is **currently** CEO of the Luxembourg-based TAG Holding, TAG being an acronym of "Techniques d'Avant Garde." He also owns a massive coastal California **ranch**, El Rancho Tajiguas, now on the market for US\$110 million, a price that includes a herd of 120 cows. Akram Jr. has a fondness for luxury cars, while Lara takes fashion-conscious selfies with occasional product placement. Visually, their Instagram feeds closely follow the celebrity style of the younger generation of the global public elite, in which fabulous lives are lived in fabulous locations with a casually-worn privilege

that makes their brands “relatable” to those outside their circles of wealth and power, and can also turn a nice profit for them, if they obtain lots of “followers.” The general effect is similar to the Instagram account of Olivia Jade, whose mother Lori Loughlin will soon be sentenced for her involvement in the college admissions bribery scandal here in the US. At the time the **scandal** broke, Olivia was reportedly aboard the yacht of University of Southern California Board of Trustees chairman and billionaire real estate developer, Rick Caruso.

The visual language used in such Instagram accounts is that of the corporate advertisement, which is a form of propaganda since it aims to advance private interests. Within this predominantly visual aesthetic, stylistic similarities are too consistently reproduced across contexts for people ever to emerge as distinct individuals, strictly speaking. They are instead products and “influencers”—sleek, narcissistic declensions of personality tailored according to what can be marketed and consumed. The content is always highly curated, and nothing “off-brand” ever appears. I find this style relentlessly dystopian in its sameness and repetition, because the vast possibilities and dimensions of human desires, capacities, and needs are reduced to what sells and what doesn't. Cf. <https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-2019-benchmark-report/> ; <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/guides/instagram-influencers/> ; <https://www.elisedarma.com/blog/ultimate-guide-instagram-influencer> This is the world of our established socio-economic order, beyond which we are not encouraged to see or to think, and within which we are increasingly encouraged to adapt and commodify ourselves and

become, in effect, our own personal brands. The ideal is the projection of a seamless, exclusive perfection, removed from all human vulnerability. But it doesn't always work, and in fact the deceptions are generally exceedingly easy to see.

The making of a brand

My casual Internet searches eventually led me to the “verified” Instagram account of a young billionaire real estate developer, Mohammed R. Makhoul, the 22-year old son of Bashar al-Assad’s first cousin and regime loyalist Rami Makhoul, who is **known** as “the business arm of the regime.” Mohammed is reportedly worth over \$2 billion and shares Akram Jr.’s penchant for expensive cars. In late August, the Murdoch-owned British tabloid The Sun ran an **exposé** featuring photos from Mohammed’s Instagram account, which chiefly show him oiled and shirtless, posing alongside luxury automobiles, or looking vaguely “entrepreneurial” in settings including chairs and desks. The article invited ridicule of the Makhouls for the son’s excesses, but avoided altogether the far more consequential matters of the family’s major role in the regime’s abuses and crimes against Syrians. As an American, this conservative tabloid’s apparent confidence in the utility of wealth-shaming strikes me as almost comical, in its reliance on caricature as well as the petit-bourgeois prejudice that abuses of power and wealth are somehow alien to the true and virtuous homeland. This is simply untrue.

Mohammed's Instagram account links to his personal website, which displays a quote identified as coming from The Chicago Tribune, one of that city's two main papers. I found the piece in question on the Tribune's website—not published by a reporter, but rather posted by a "community contributor" on 30 May somewhere in the bland Chicago suburb of Naperville. The piece was titled "A Car Collector's Paradise: Inside Mohammed Makhoul's Life." <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/naperville-sun/chi-ugc-article-a-car-collectors-paradise-inside-mohammad-m-2019-05-30-story.html> [since removed] The quote, apparently intended as flattering, presents the fact of his enormous wealth as merely the fortunate accident of birth:

Our personalities are an intrinsic amalgamation of who we are. What we choose to do for recreation may also differ. Some people like collecting coins and stamps while others may choose to dabble in more lavish endeavors such as collecting luxury cars and vehicles. The allure has captivated Mohammad Makhoul, who has blatantly admitted that cars are quite literally his kryptonite.

Mohammad has amassed a truly enviable collection that would leave even the most avid collector at a loss for words. Born into an affluent family, Mohammad has been free to

pursue a number of hobbies, most notably golf and a collection of luxury cars. Mohammad is the proud owner of several unique number plates. His favorites being “2” and “7” which he believes brings [sic] him a hint of good luck.

Similar language (and a similarly odd use of “kryptonite”) appear in a 2016 [article](#) profiling the Lebanese actor, Adam Sabbagh, who once owned David Beckham’s customized Porsche:

Sabbagh doesn’t let this tabloid speculation or the Hollywood media spotlight get him down; instead, he uses it as kryptonite to fuel his promising career as an entrepreneur now he has grounded steps in OIL and GAS [sic] business, accelerating on the path to be a well known entrepreneur.

Like Mohammed Makhlouf and his brother Ali Makhlouf Posts from the “unverified” Instagram account of Ali R. Makhlouf feature similar content to that of Mohammed’s., Sabbagh has also been featured on the Instagram account @rich_kids_of_syria, where everyone is portrayed as fashionable, privileged, and carefree.

Mohammed's website states that he attended the American University in Dubai (AUD) from 2014 to 2019, receiving a bachelor's of business administration, majoring in management. AUD was **founded** in 1995 as a private for-profit institution built around a curriculum focused on business and information technology. Goldie Blumenstyk, "EduTrek Is Sold to Career Education Corporation" The Chronicle of Higher Education (Vol. 47, Issue 11.), 10 November 2000. (Its founder happens to be the pro-Assad Lebanese politician Elias Bou Saab, currently serving as Beirut's defense minister.) Owned by EduTrek International until the company's finances began to falter, it was bought by the also-troubled and often-investigated Career Education Corporation (CEC) in 2000. Blumenstyk, *ibid.* Two of US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos's top aides were once executives at CEC before joining the Trump administration. **According** to a former admissions advisor for the company, the ethos of the CEC is exclusively sales-driven and "it's really a shitty place." AUD is **accredited** through the United States Department of Education by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and claims to offer "an American-style education," which **includes** a Social Media Influencers Diploma Programme teaching people how to become online influencers and "gain the conceptual knowledge and practical skills required to analyse news and detect fake news." What could be more American than marketing and business, with its allure of wealth and privilege?

Fake news/real news

Starting around the time he must have graduated from AUD, a series of flattering “articles” about Mohammed Makhlouf began appearing online in a variety of outlets, roughly at the rate of two or three a month and on pages ranging from the apparently reputable to the obscure. I have located and archived fourteen. Each of these articles emphasizes one or more of three main topics:

1. Makhlouf’s ownership of “Syria’s largest construction company,” MRM Holdings, along with his general charity, entrepreneurship, business acumen, and his plans for rebuilding his “war-torn country” (eight articles appearing from 19 May - 27 August)
2. His lavishly outfitted private jet (two articles, both first appearing in August)
3. His car collection (two articles, 30 May and 13 September)

Several appeared on American-based websites (five) and on English-language webpages either located in India or with an India-facing orientation (eight); I was unable to place one geographically, but suspect it may also have originated in India. I then set about contacting the outlets where these “articles” had appeared, requesting that they be removed because the Makhloufs were complicit in the Assad regime’s human rights violations and the destruction of the cities that Mohammed is now positioning himself to profit from rebuilding.

The quality and legitimacy of the websites on which these articles were published varied: some appear to be individual web pages with only one or a few people posting “content;” others are reputable or formerly reputable papers or sites; and a third category blends “news” with “sponsored content” in ways that are not always easy to detect and for which the publication is evidently paid. In other words, they feature “content” that has been written by PR people who contract with private clients to display that client’s preferred version of reality. In Mohammad’s case, this means profiling him as a generous and “noble” man of quality and integrity, one who will help heal his troubled country while at the same time making sound business decisions: “My intentions are what suits the best interest of the people of Syria. Better investments will give me better opportunities to reach out to more people and assist them.”“The beauty is in building big for a cause’ – Mohammad Makhoulf” by Mohit Mirchandani, Thrive Global (14 June 2019)

<https://thriveglobal.com/stories/the-beauty-is-in-building-big-for-a-cause-mohammad-makhoulf/> [now removed]

COMMUNITY // June 14, 2019

“The beauty is in building big for a cause,” Mohammad Makhlouf

Syria has been experiencing one of the most complex conflicts that the world has ever seen. The civil war of the country which began during the Arab Spring in 2011 as a peaceful uprising against the nation's president Bashar al-Assad, escalated in the past eight years, shattering the lives of local residents, ravaging cities, its [...]

By Mohit Mirchandani



Type here to search



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Most of the American or American-based publications immediately removed the “content” from their websites in response to my letters, and were grateful that I had brought the pieces to their attention (Chicago Tribune, Entrepreneur, Arianna Huffington’s Thrive Global). I suspect this was due to concerns about potentially negative effects on their “brands” more than any sense of political awareness or concern about the abuses of the Assad regime, since no one mentioned anything about the latter in their responses to my complaints. Many did not respond at all to my emails. Others kept the content up, but included (or added) disclaimers that this was “sponsored content” for which the outlet was not responsible.

Such was the case at the Baltimore Post-Examiner, the online reincarnation of a free print-edition daily that ran from 2006 to 2009, which was owned by a venture capital firm seeking to profit by reliance on advertising revenue. This website did not remove the piece as I had requested,

but instead published my letter as well as my private email address without notifying me (my private email has since been taken down). As I later learned, the website runs on a “platform” that treats all content as functionally equivalent so that a unified brand and appearance can be maintained, regardless of whether the articles posted are the work of actual reporters or that of PR professionals.

After what ended up being a mutually irate exchange between me and the editorial board of the Baltimore Post-Examiner, I contacted the former editor of the print edition and founder of the electronic edition, Timothy Meier, to complain about the piece itself as well as the publication of my email address. To his credit, he immediately resolved the latter issue. But as a private company, he explained to me, the paper would never disclose how much they had been paid to publish a piece. Someone had paid to publish the piece there and so it remains, in juxtaposition now with my letter of complaint. The identity of the client who had paid to place the piece was also a strictly private matter. My email to the author of the piece, who was linked to a PR outfit called “Facilius, Inc.,” went unanswered. Which is poor service, really, from a company that claims to be the “best content marketing agency in USA” offering “brandtastic” service with offices in Utica, Michigan and Mumbai, India.

Without exception, all of these articles are poorly written absurdities. Even if one knew nothing about the Makhoul family’s “business” and the Assad regime’s extensive crimes, they would still be ridiculous because the 22-year old at the center of it all seems nothing more than a bland, wealthy business school bro with an American-style education and a taste for the finer things in life, someone

who could have come from nearly anywhere in the globe, someone just living the life and proud of it, but who insists nevertheless that lofty humanitarian aims and good works are an integral part of his personal brand. Indeed, he must have received a very good American-style education.

I was unable to determine precisely how or why these articles began to appear, and never did write to Mohammed Makhoulf via the email listed on his website to inquire. Based on the pieces I saw and what I know of the family's dealings in Syria, I doubt we could have had a frank conversation about Syria, the sources of his wealth, and his plans for MRM Holdings. Are these pieces a vanity project, something to pass around his circle of friends and acquaintances as indications of his international influence and prestige? Are they an advertisement that Makhoulf, Inc. is open and ready for business, despite rumors of house arrest? The regime is now **pushing** for normalization and help in rebuilding the cities it destroyed, despite the Assad regime's blatant crimes against humanity and outright expropriation of the property of many who fled the country. Perhaps these puff pieces, which essentially show a naïve young man sitting on a huge pile of money, are intended to prime the pump of business and investment? Unlike his father, Mohammed is not under US sanctions <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp834.aspx> But see the following re: ICIJ's investigation of the Paradise Papers and Makhoulf's efforts to go around the sanctions: <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/20160404-sanctioned-blacklisted-offshore-clients/>, although all members of the Makhoulf family still stand under **EU sanctions**.

On Facebook, I got into a disagreement with a friend who thought the articles should stay up, because they make Mohammed look ridiculous. It is true, they do. But I am not sure that we are the intended audience, and ridicule is ultimately a shallow and unsatisfying response. It is too easy, and the global challenges posed by what has happened in Syria are frankly very, very difficult, particularly when it comes to successfully protecting the human rights of people from their own state, the principal violator of these rights. If the Assad regime is normalized, it will mean business as usual within the sovereign realm of Assad, Inc., a privately-held corporation answerable to no one. Makhoul, Inc. is merely a subsidiary of Assad, Inc., which has very strict rules for its employees, and very strict punishments for any violations. It has, in effect, fired and expelled millions in order to maintain its consistent brand. If there is a return to business as usual, the message will be that revolution, resisting tyranny, demands for basic freedom, dignity, and respect, will all be considered very “off-brand.”

In the context of the extreme violence visited upon the bodies and minds of those targeted by the regime, Mohammed’s little public relations pieces are outrageous. Because it should be quite obvious what the regime is and what it stands for, even to those who have the luxury of examining it from the outside. At the same time, they are utterly banal, in their basic similarity to all other PR placements, each intended to sell a version of reality on behalf of a private client, with no accountability or transparency. Increasingly, legitimate journalism exists side by side with paid-for or placed “content,” often without any apparent editorial oversight, and the financial viability of some outlets is linked directly to “sponsored content.”

Given how predominant this private takeover of the public informational sphere is becoming, we should take advantage of the opportunity to consider and study the extent to which what we think we see is what someone has paid for us to see. This is a world in which money accords enormous advantages when it comes to “message placement.” In consequence, it is increasingly anti-democratic. The refusal of people to live under a brutal, corrupt dictatorship—something requiring more courage than I have ever had to summon up—is not something that occurs because a “brandtastic” PR agency has been hired that is positioned to sell a “product” within the “marketplace” of ideas. This is absurd, and dehumanizing in the extreme. Ironically, however, such a view is very close to the depopulating message of certain Western anti-imperialists who deny the agency, the real and actual individual personhood, of those who rebelled by claiming the revolution in Syria was “fake news.” Because that is their personal brand. Syria, Venezuela, Hong Kong, no matter—it is all the same to them, and the reason for this is simply brand consistency.

Ours is a bleak situation for anyone with any democratic aspirations at present, because the structure of the corporation and of for-profit business is hierarchical and, organizationally speaking, authoritarian. In Syria, one can see extreme versions of increasingly global phenomena: the privatization and corruption of the state as guarantor of the public good, the abuse of citizens in the name of private power or authority that is unanswerable to the public, and the fact of a very wealthy global class that is seemingly either above the laws by which the rest of us must live or which has itself made those laws for its own benefit.

Struggling with the occasional feeling of despair as I was writing this, I pulled out a collection of Camus' writing from the Second World War, and found a piece called "The Murderer's Great Fear," suitable for inclusion here because of the ways those who resort to extreme violence are all alike:

Their job was to prove that human dignity is a lie and that the idea of a self-conscious individual, master of his own fate, is but a democratic myth...These torturers have a very specific mission: it is to wipe out anything that isn't vile, anything that isn't cowardly, and to demonstrate by their own example and by making an example of others that man is made to live in chains and terror. If they were to succeed, there would be no more witnesses, and their own personal ignominy would be identified with the flaws of human nature. Albert Camus, *Combat*, *Clandestine* No. 58 (July 1944) in *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, ed. Jacqueline Lévy-Valensi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p 6-7.

Countless Syrians knew, and still know, that they were not made to live in chains and terror, and that human dignity is

not a lie. In this, they have given something very valuable and useful to our world, despite its evident ingratitude.

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