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Working with NGOs in Damascus: The escape from helplessness

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A young Damascus resident questions the value of the cultural initiatives sponsored by international NGOs in the regime-held capital.

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To live today in half a city; to live confounded between death and life, between the Damascus of the regime and the Damascus besieged by the regime, means being overwhelmed by guilt about your safety, and your obligatory silence in light of the impossibility of movement or action. You are an ineffectual actor here, no different present than absent.

The choice taken by most young people inside Syria today is to exercise their humanity in whatever way they can. In this manner the humanitarian space, as defined by the policies of various non-governmental organizations, has managed to incorporate many of these young people from all walks of life.

To live in Damascus today

You have to lose your senses in Damascus today. There's no need for them here, as the entire world will soon become this relatively-safe half of a city, as if nothing exists beyond its borders. In this half of a dead city, you can move around and go out, study or work, attend concerts and theater, sing in the streets, make friends and raise a pet. It's a half-city offering all the aspects of a normal life.

Living the paradox

Life amid the chaos of the Syrian war has created new means through which many young Syrians have been able to change the shape of their lives. These means combine humanitarian work, private sector work, cultural and artistic activities, and more, since artistic work is no longer

reserved to artists, and the divisions in lifestyles no longer correspond rigidly to one's material means in Damascus or Homs or other places as they did before. Someone hailing from a middle-class household may now be able to spend an evening at a pub they weren't able to enter before. The same applies to shopping for "brands," and other things once considered exclusive to those from other socio-economic backgrounds.

Today, youths from all different strata can work in the field of community development, and they can palpably sense their contribution to the making of their reality. In line with the new conditions, young Syrians are able today to go beyond the old borders separating different sectors of social work from one other, making it possible to enter realms previously closed unto themselves and defined by certain social identifiers, such as the artistic scene, for example. It's also become possible to make relatively decent money within new fields of work.

It is the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with their various names, types, and affiliations, which have opened these doors or helped to do so, including international NGOs, quasi-governmental organizations, and ones linked to others outside the country, the numbers of which have become increasingly substantial. Any civil initiative can today be sponsored by one of these large organizations.

The NGOs are no longer merely a substitute for state institutions or a supplement to them in social, technical, and development work. Rather, it is the role of government institutions that has today become secondary in these fields. NGOs concerned with development work alongside others which have maintained their relief missions, such as

the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, in which youth also volunteer.

From short-term necessity to development

In the beginning, everything was spontaneous. Moral necessity, coupled with despair over the tight security grip in Damascus and other areas of regime control, made the pro-revolution youth turn to humanitarian aid work, which was safer but just as necessary. The prevailing relief efforts were inadequate, and so local committees were formed for relief and humanitarian work based on the individual initiatives of young people, on a fully volunteer basis.

These initiatives helped shelter displaced civilians, and were active in secret under difficult conditions to deliver aid to some areas of military escalation. After a short period of time, in a quick and sudden shift, these committees increasingly became part of initiatives sponsored by international organizations, especially the United Nations, alongside its developmental and relief work, and departments of ecumenical relations, among others. Naturally, the resumption of such work was not possible through individual efforts alone, and assistance was made available through NGOs and associations that provided premises and funding, or secured protection and privacy for this type of work, which soon became part of the mission and activities of the sponsor organizations, protected and independent of state institutions.

As simply as this, we progressed to what we see today, as everyday lifestyles began to resemble the activities of initiatives and organizations that imposed themselves gradually, leading to total hegemony.

I’ve been taken aback on numerous occasions by the changes in work opportunities, which were previously divided between government work, self-employment, or work in the private services, industrial, or commercial sectors. As for those with university degrees, state employment was the only option that might correspond, if only slightly, with their field of study. Today, however, work opportunities fall either under the umbrella of NGOs or the whims of the state institutions. The second option is the most difficult, and is almost nonexistent today in the minds of the younger generation. State employees have remained as they always were, being primarily made up of the parents of today’s youth, because to obtain employment within governmental departments requires entering numerous competitions and application processes, in addition to the need for a university degree in most cases. Besides, salaries in public employment have stayed almost constant, aside for a few nominal increases, and no longer suffice to support a family.

I met Rana in the Jaramana area, at an exhibition of paintings by a group of displaced children, combined with a theater production for children with special needs. A 27-year-old graduate from Damascus University’s Faculty of Education and an employee of the Center for Curriculum Development and Modernization, Rana was the production’s supervisor.

“Working in the center is like living with your enemies,” said Rana. “Everyone aspires to improve their relationship with the center’s director to earn extra income, and no one tries to be rational for a moment, especially after the scandal of the new curricula which were full of mistakes. No one seeks a solution. We do have expertise, but egos reign

supreme.”

Speaking about her second job on the side, Rana added, “I work at the Curriculum Development Center six days a week for a salary of 30,000 Syrian pounds (US$58), while here I train children for two or three days, and earn 60,000 (US$117). There are personal considerations in both cases, but the egotism in government work makes it dull, rigid, and resistant to change. It’s the same old mold that can’t be altered. Meanwhile, in employment outside the public sector, personal considerations can be mitigated by other things such as time spent, friendships with colleagues, the novelty of the work, and the possibility of establishing new contacts.”

Human development is a stated priority for many of the international organizations in their crisis management programs, and this is also the path taken by local organizations overseen and sponsored by Asma al-Assad (Bashar’s wife), the most important of which are the Syria Trust for Development and the Syrian Society for Social Development.

What distinguishes the work of international organizations from that of local ones is the existence of long-term plans around the concepts of citizenship and the civic state; two objectives virtually absent from local organizations. There’s also the greater financial support, which renders local associations and organizations dependent on international ones for a large part of their funding.

Development projects, especially those in the art sector, are long-term projects based on programs made up of short-term activities, but the goal, according to their

directors, is to impact Syrian society in the long run, as well as to convey an image or message about life in Syria today.

The image of art and life in Syria

It’s remarkable how much importance is attached to art in these initiatives, which have generated new art that is today at the forefront of the Syrian art scene as a whole, under the auspices of international organizations as well as local institutions.

I had previously assumed artists had been jolted by the turbulence and deterioration of the country’s situation, but the reality is it created a new art community, one that produces work daily, rapidly, and sometimes haphazardly. Syria today is a space in which to enter the art game, for art has indeed become a game, with its own rules and specifics, and its growing number of players, ever imposing new rules of their own.

A lot of these youth gatherings and art initiatives were formed in Damascus, and later extended their activities to other provinces. Their activities vary, and include “artistic relief” events catering to displaced persons, concerned with exporting a image of post-displacement life, depending generally on children to that end. There are also painting exhibitions and children’s choirs in shelter schools. These activities are various, intensive, and periodic, and typically culminate in a public event involving the sponsor and an international organization; a ceremony such as raising the largest flag for peace over a destroyed neighborhood in the city of Homs by local children, who also exhibit their drawings and talents along with some volunteers, who conduct an interactive play; or a concert performed by the

youths of the Syrian Society for Social Development, under the patronage of the United Nations.

I often wonder: what is the point of these activities? What's the use of making displaced children paint and sing over the destruction of their homes? I remember the first such activity that I witnessed by mere happenstance, after regime forces first entered the town of al-Hosn in the countryside of Homs, when volunteers from the Syrian Society for Development arrived to hold an artistic event.

The children of the town—those who weren't displaced by the fighting—were assembled above the ruins of their homes, and watched without participating as others painted on the roads. It was summer, and most of the local children worked cracking and collecting walnuts, which tinged their fingers black. Most had never painted before, and were not allowed to join in the activity because of the difficulty of controlling them. One young girl, however, snuck her way in and wet her hands in the colors, and rejoiced, saying it was more beautiful than the color of walnuts, only to promptly receive multiple slaps from an older girl, her fifteen-year-old cousin, who was smoking and watching the visiting delegations as though they were from another planet. As for the volunteers, they dealt with the children as means to an end, never speaking to them or addressing them in any way. They were stood in a line and forbidden from taking part, until eventually being told to smile at the camera as they posed next to the drawings.

Sahar, the older girl, said, "What's going to happen after they're done painting? I want to run away and join them, but I have to wait for my mother to return." Sahar's mother disappeared after being detained in Homs prison in 2012.

The second type of artistic activity carried out by organizations is the funding and supporting of youth music and dance ensembles, as a means of communicating their voice and gaining a wider reach.

Why art, then?

“Art was our means of preserving some of the civility remaining within us,” says Rami, a young man performing in one of the youth ensembles founded in 2014. After starting off playing in cafes, the band members went on to participate in initiatives organized by the United Nations within their cultural programs, and their project expanded. Having begun by relying solely on the distinction of their music, innovating new styles by incorporating electronic elements with “Eastern” singing, among other techniques, these groups then began presenting a social and cultural discourse through the music, say their members.

Their need for sponsorship was essential, and today, they have access to security facilitation and licensing, and their programs have become more clearly defined, enabling them to obtain production grants.

The same question was asked later about a wide-ranging artistic initiative launched with the aim of presenting multi-faceted art to the various strata of Syrian society, starting from the idea of holding an exhibition entitled “For Humanity,” featuring works ranging from music to photography to sculpture, recycled materials, collage, and more. The initiative was founded by collective efforts, but is managed and organized by a young woman who has already received support and security licensing, after prolonged efforts and experience in volunteer work.

Regarding the reason for choosing Damascus to conduct the project, as opposed to other regions, the young woman in question, Reem, said, “In Damascus, we found more suitable private spaces that don’t exist in other governorates, and we need the privacy, because we can’t hold a dance show in a street in Homs or Hama, for example, as that would cause a backlash from local residents. So Damascus provided us with a space of freedom.”

The initiative was based on the collective efforts of a diverse group of young people, including academics and amateur artists, and the activities of the initiative were presented in the Old City’s Bab Sharqi quarter.

“It’s a former tourist destination in Damascus, which has several art galleries among its alleyways,” said one of the youths of the initiative. “The neighborhood has witnessed a seismic shift in recent years, and is today a sanctuary for any young person seeking a night out or companionship. Full of young people, it’s a place of music and clamor with its garden and cafes, and streetside bars, which multiply daily. It’s become a street where life doesn’t stop. To us, it represents what remains of Syria, where we bade our loved ones farewell, and created shared memories, and feel that which remains of life.”

This neighborhood, revived by the remaining youths, is an anchor attracting such initiatives. Looking at the subject a second time, after talking to a number of volunteers and the director of the initiative about the outcome of their initiative and their satisfaction with it, there was a clear divergence in the answers. Most of the volunteers described their roles with resentment. They didn’t feel it achieved the

desired goals, as funding for the project was not secured, and the materials used were not refunded, nor did they achieve any profit from sales to speak of. As for the others, the initiative was a way of communicating their artistic output to the public, but they felt there was a disparity in the standard of output between professionals and amateurs.

The initiative was presented in a district whose regular visitors belong to a single social class with similar characteristics. I don't believe there's a need for them to encounter art again and again in order to create a civil movement, for had such an initiative been held in a different Damascene neighborhood, or in a suburb of Damascus, it would have clashed with a grim reality, which is exactly what happened when the activities were replicated in Homs.

Homs differs from Damascus in its lack of a neighborhood such as Bab Sharqi, and of spaces for youth activity. As such, the initiative that was quickly able to hold events in Damascus was unable to conduct any in Homs until more than eight months had passed. When it was done in the street, it caused a shock for onlookers, who saw a group of boys and girls playing music and singing in Homs for perhaps the very first time.

The issue with such initiatives lies not in their content, but rather in the goals and the grand objectives, as new criteria for art and its practice have emerged, irking the academically-inclined. One fine arts graduate said, "What's the point of working on my own exhibition? First, I'll face difficulties getting approvals, or I'll have to take part in the annual exhibitions such as the Spring and Autumn Festivals,

where we all know that the level of output is that of beginner students and amateurs. Everyone today can paint and sculpt, this is no longer reserved for academically-trained artists. I can participate in such an initiative, but I can’t receive instructions from someone whose only interest in art lies in the fact they’re a director of some initiative, nor can I restrict my work. That’s why I won’t work in Syria today.”

Art has always faced multiple problems in our country, including those of authenticity and identity, as well as direct association with politics and ideology. In Syria today, with the sheer magnitude of art sponsored by NGOs, art has become a tool that is re-produced over and over again, in different forms, to convey the same social discourse, undermining the aesthetic value of art, and its existence becomes more like a halo defining the artistic thought and discourse of the era, which is what we see today under the headline, “The discourse of the Syrian crisis.”

This commoditization of art, and its transformation into a tool for the transmission of discourse from multiple sources, aims to reinvent Syria’s image globally, drawing from heritage but also redrafting and colorizing it, while advocating the rights of women, children, the homeless and displaced and others. Despite the multiple forms of this discourse, it bears the same cultural and intellectual vision that has made a single form prevalent in the art presented today by organizations of various forms. This is not confined to contemporary Syria, for the concept of international art and guided art has always existed, and NGOs have long been concerned with sponsoring the arts. What’s notable in the Syrian case, however, is the increasing demand for all forms and genres of art. In Damascus, you now hear people

complaining of their boredom with photography, for example, and their growing preference for sculpture.

These notions have formed a halo around Syrian art, and criteria for “crisis art” established to validate the importance and usefulness of NGO-sponsored artistic output. The factors most relevant in making NGO art the most prominent in Syria today were aesthetics, and the enjoyment of promoting participation in art, which today requires little effort compared to the past.

The doors of workshops, for different types of arts and with trainers and experts, are always open to young people, but the applicant must be prepared in advance for an interview, which aims to examine his or her attitudes and ideas, and waits for them to allude to some of the notions and phrases that fit the inclinations of directors. I experienced this myself, when I enrolled in a training course for interactive theater. I attended a group interview, along with six other people I met there. The questions chiefly concerned the goals and dreams that the young applicants wished to carry out if given the opportunity to experiment with interactive theater. The committee probed the applicants’ readiness to believe in the utility of what they were doing, and its ability to have a real impact. In their responses, the young applicants often name-dropped associations and civil society initiatives, saying they were seeking practical experience to then be presented through those organizations. The more NGOs that were mentioned, the wider the interviewer’s smile grew. The interview didn’t include anything about theater as a choice. My reply to the question of what I intended to do after participating in the course focused on my love of theater and excitement about the experience. Naturally, my application was rejected.

The third form of art sponsorship that we see on the ground is funding and production grants, which most often come from sources outside the country, such as cultural institutions dealing specifically with art. They often have a more complex and academic approach, and their programs, ranging from grants for writing to those for theater and music, are targeted towards the elites already engaged in art.

Dealing with these organizations is typically more individual and specific. They require a certain standard of professionalism from the applicant, as well an artistic subject with more developed elements, but which nonetheless deals, directly or indirectly, with the Syrian reality. “The first time is always the hardest, but once we grasped the mechanism of dealing with the donors and their orientations, we understood how to secure grants,” says Alaa, a recipient of a writing grant. “I’m now awaiting a new research grant, and am also seeking another for a theater workshop. We have to derive everything from this reality.”

The intruder

I have not been able myself to take part in any work under the auspices of NGOs. I feel no regret today, having seen much of the product of such work; instead my sense, and that of others like me, is one of alienation. People’s eyes are always watching those who don’t get involved in the routine of daily life, casting aspersions and isolating us from their milieu. We are then rendered cumbersome and inactive observers, amidst the momentum and chaos of life created by volunteer work.

This exclusion from everyday Syrian life begins with the question, “Why didn’t you travel?” as though it were self-evident that one either traveled or joined the so-called “we want to live” bandwagon. At this particular stage, one sees “humanitarian recruiters” creating and promoting “organization-oriented” culture and art. They are recruiters in the full sense of the word, with their own discourse, and enough rhetoric to defend it to be able to exclude others, who are today rendered outsiders.

Am I the stranger in this environment in which all curiosity and logical thinking has been destroyed? As far as I’m concerned, humanitarian work is supposed to apply in all sectors and regions, or else it must cease claiming to be humanitarian. Are Damascus, Homs, Latakia, Tartous, Aleppo and the handful of other relatively-safe areas really in need of burgeoning civil society organizations, without the need for these organizations to tackle, discuss, or even think about the situation of the “other part,” the part that’s broken and destroyed, and is still being killed everyday before their eyes? Is this contributing to the development of Syria? Today, thousands are being displaced, and not a single international or relief organization has been able to secure protection for even one silent sit-in demanding a halt to the bombardment of any area.

The saying that “In Syria, we were created to eat” has become closer than ever to a reality. Everyone is working to live, without the ability to think about the reality of the terror in which they do so. The spaces provided by NGOs are no more than insulated rooms in which we vent our energy, and avoid looking at the suffocating security siege which has grown more terrifying than it was at the start of the revolution, to the point that everyone living in the

regime’s areas has become a hostage, their options being support or silence.

Silence, the eternal friend

Nearly three years ago, at the entrance to the town of Jaramana, adjoining Damascus, a series of cement barriers was erected to form a wall providing cover from sniper fire. These barriers, previously used to separate the streets, now bore slogans of support for the regime written all over them. Due to the speed and haphazardness with which these barriers were thrown together at night, one morning a message was formed for the employees, university students, and all others leaving the city: “We kill.”

We kill…

The phrase has stuck with me ever since, and I never believed it was accidental. Truly, “we kill;” we who are alive here.

We kill our memories of the past, so as to adapt to the present, to try and create a future built upon silence, and to kill the passions and the mind at one and the same time.

I walk around in Damascus today, where there is traffic, noises, the many faces and wandering eyes. You can’t know Damascus by seeing only one neighborhood, but a tour of al-Thawra Street next to the Victoria Bridge is enough for a quick glance. Torn faces, tortured eyes, sometimes appearing eager to die. Wandering there makes one want to weep, amid the sounds of the vendors in the small “thieves’ market.”

I suffocate as I behold those eyes and wrinkles; even the

kids here have these wrinkles on their faces. People don’t speak here, they only scream. After returning empty-handed from a job hunt, I walk around al-Thawra St. as a shortcut to reach Bab Touma and complete the walk towards my house in Jaramana. After the thieves’ market and the entrance to the tailors’ market, a checkpoint stops me to search my bag, silently, and gestures for me to cross into a completely different realm. Around the Damascus Citadel, a strange calm prevails, broken only by the sounds of the pigeons, as if one hadn’t just been in the middle of the bustle moments ago. Wholesale stores and many buyers, and some young men and women sit along the walls of the Citadel. This scene expands until we reach the Nawfara quarters, and al-Qaymariyye thereafter, as if we were moving between different worlds, absurdly conjoined. What lies beyond the Citadel checkpoint is a realm that completely erases that of al-Thawra St. This sharp contrast is Damascus; bear in mind these two adjacent streets are not in the affluent part of town, but rather in the heart of the city. One street for work, and another for pleasure. The Jobar district is only a few kilometers away from these two streets, and it has long been bombed around the clock.

Silence is the only friend held in common by these neighborhoods and the other, sleeping ones. Silence, and acclimatization to the randomness and contradictions. Silence, the eternal synonym of “We kill,” the indispensable precondition for awareness of this reality, living and seeing, and continuing to wish and to persevere. Nothing will remain; the ephemeral and transient acts and chaos of youth will all pass. No sound will be louder than that of the killing, the bullets, the missiles and shells, the blood that speaks, and the cries of the doves of Damascus.