Hanging By A Thread: Dissident Puppeteers in Assad’s Syria

An Interview with Rafat Alzakout

A.J. Naddaff

A.J. Naddaff is an Arab Studies and political science major and a research assistant for the Arab Studies Department at Davidson College. This summer he will be conducting a project under the mentorship of Rebecca Joubin, the Chair of Arab Studies at Davidson, documenting the intersection of Syrian diaspora art, the lives of the artists, and their intellectual response to crisis of varying kinds throughout Western Europe.
When a group of Syrian artists first launched their satirical YouTube-based puppet show called Top Goon months after the 2011 revolution began, they knew it would cause controversy. In a country known for its draconian crackdown on artistic dissidence, Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad, referred to in the show as Beeshu, was lampooned to an unprecedented degree. A beakish nose protrudes from the puppet’s narrow face and an exaggerated lisp rolls off his bloodthirsty tongue. In the second episode, he stars on a game show entitled “Who Wants to Kill a Million?” Top Goon’s rise and fall from prominence has mirrored waning international attention toward the seemingly interminable Syrian war. Season One caught the attention of major news outlets—including Al Jazeera, The New York Times, The Guardian, and the Los Angeles Times—at a moment when the revolution was ripe and
such dissidence was hailed as “ground-breaking.” But by the summer of 2015, when the show’s third and final season aired, the number of viewers had plummeted. As the war rages on today, the world has diverted its gaze from Syria.

Top Goon founder Rafat Alzakout, an experienced theatre actor and director, laments this loss of interest. After years of bloodshed and multiple failed attempts to resolve the conflict, he says, “no one cares about Syria.” He faults the international community for allowing the war to continue. “By showing silence around the world, nations both ignore and support the regime. They destroyed Aleppo and nothing has happened.”

Exiled in Germany, Alzakout finally feels far enough from the regime’s grip to abandon his old pseudonym, Jameel (Arabic for beautiful). We met over Skype at the beginning of summer 2016, to discuss the creation and evolution of the show and his beliefs about Syria’s future. This interview has been lightly edited and condensed.

When did you decide to form Top Goon and how did you gather the group of actors?

Eight months into the Syrian revolution, like many artists, I began participating in demonstrations in the street. This was extremely dangerous. At this point, the regime had tried to ban international journalists from coming into the country in attempt to shield Syrian stories from appearing in international headlines. It was at this moment that I realized I must do something with art. I immediately began brainstorming the type of art that would allow me to express myself without risk. From this thought process, the idea of puppets evolved.

I graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in theater acting and began teaching shortly thereafter. Some of the artists on the show I met through this teaching and some of them were my friends from a long time ago. I have a very famous artist friend who made these puppets in Damascus, while I was drafting the script for the first episode.

Because of the amount of equipment needed and the likelihood that a pro-regime force might find us filming, I decided to move to neighboring Beirut where we would be a lot safer. Each year my artists changed. It all depended on the security situation, though. As some of my staff moved, I had to find new artists to replace them.

Why did you use English subtitles and who did you envision as your target audience?

You are correct in singling out the importance of my English subtitles. English is the lingua franca. Because the regime tried to close down the country and shield the international community from its atrocities, our aim was to articulate what was happening in the most accessible manner to people outside the country. Without English, we would be in the same era as the Middle Ages, so of course I had to use subtitles. You know, since the first day, the regime has been trying to claim that they are fighting a battle against Al Qaeda and religious fanatics. But it has not been like this until very recently. And yet the regime continues to bomb the civilian movement—not even the rebels. Of course, there is a civil war now but the
indescribable tragedy of the Assad regime is its brutality towards the civilian movement. Through the medium of English subtitles, it was possible for us to reach a broad audience, which drove the regime mad.

*Do you think the regime ever had any suspicion about the identity of the show’s creators?*

They sent a lot of scary messages to our Facebook page and to our email. When they sent these messages we realized that they were in a state of panic and that they had absolutely no idea who we were.

For three years we were very secretive and the cast was very careful because, you know, this is no joke at all. At any moment, we could have been caught and tortured to death. You saw what happened to Ibrahim Qashoush, Ali Ferzat, and countless other artists we do not talk about, especially young ones. In 2012, they tortured and killed my friend, a Syrian-Palestinian, Hassan Hassan, so we were very cautious. Now I am not really sure if we are still mysterious to them.

*What is the role of art in the revolution?*

I just finished a long documentary film on this question called “Home.” The film depicts how a young group of hopeful friends’ dreams for artistic creativity are crushed and give way to disillusionment over a period of three years in their hometown Manbij.

On that note, I think art attempts to wake the conscience of people. Art can tell people every day—even tell the regime—that what they are doing is wrong and it must be stopped. Art can capture what is happening and be stored as an archive for future generations to understand. But to be frank, many other Syrian artists and I feel frustrated. There is a huge art culture in Syria; thousands and thousands of articles, films, and videos have been released. As evidenced by the continual suffering of the people, nothing has happened. I can screen and capture the regime’s wrongdoings, but, to be honest, I do not know the exact power of art.

*During the early days of the uprising, many Syrian artists and intellectuals were criticized for not playing a larger role and taking a firmer stance in the uprising. Some even supported the regime. How do you respond to this?*

Actually, I think there are a lot of artists who have had a very strong voice against the regime from the beginning. For five years, Syrian artists and activists have been trying to tell the world what is happening. If you type ‘Syria’ in Arabic on YouTube, you will see millions of videos of what is happening there.

I have met with many ambassadors and official figures from all over the world, who knew from the first moment that without a supporting civilian movement, any aspiration for a democratic Syria would disappear. However, many artists who had strong oppositional voices from the start are beginning to grow tired from the lack of care.

*Do you disagree with renowned Syrian artist Khaled Khalifa’s claims that art can give people strength and courage, while still acknowledging the true heroes are the civilians on the ground helping one another survive through the regime crackdown?*

I would like to think art can give people hope. I think we can at least make people laugh a bit. This is very important because I believe in laughter, comedy, and humor. In this world of absurdity, comedy provides a way of coping with oppression. As I said, the regime is not comfortable with our art so they must believe it gives some type of hope and strength to people.

*Before 2011, a so-called “wall of fear” thwarted most dissenting art within Syria. While censorship has not remained uniform, for the most part, the regime has been able to control and dominate dissenting artwork. What gave you the courage to produce Top Goon in this climate?*

Before 2011, in Syria, you couldn’t say anything political or anything regarding the president. We had a layer of silence building up throughout years and years. But when the revolution started in Tunisia and the dictator was toppled, hope began for the Syrian people too. I didn’t dream I could do something like this before
the revolution. A lot of artists including writers—even Khaled Khalifa—didn’t dream they could talk about this regime like they can now. Today, we openly talk, we make fun of and criticize the situation. The revolution literally broke this wall of fear and gave me the courage to produce Top Goon. As an artist, I knew I had to do something. The regime tries to tell people that the wall will be rebuilt, but I don’t think so.

You very easily could have chosen to dehumanize Assad in your depiction of him. Yet you emphasize your intention to show his human qualities. Why was it important for you to do so?

To make comedy you have to choose someone a little bit like Assad, with a selfish and weak character. His portrayal is based on a true narrative. His father was a very strong character, and everyone knows he is nothing like his father. In fact, even the Syrians who support the regime talk about his weak character compared to his father. We try to deal with this to make fun of him, to destroy this wall around him. Before the revolution, you couldn’t make fun of him or criticize him. Because of this, our aim was to destroy his haughty personality and charisma in any way possible.

What is your favorite scene in Top Goon?

There are a lot, but I really enjoy the last scene in “Hamlet,” Episode Three, Season Five. It describes theoretical situations. If you are a victim armed with a knife and have the opportunity to kill Assad, will you do it? It is a dark episode but it is also very philosophical one. I enjoy wrestling with this kind of question because it is now in the mind of every Syrian including myself. Can we could solve the crisis by killing Assad? Or how can we solve the problem? The war has brought a black box filled by a lot of dark questions. You can’t express these thoughts out loud or to anybody but you can still have them and ask them to yourself. I tried to address these kinds of questions. To me, there is no answer to these questions. Even if you were to tell me now, “Rafat, you have this opportunity to kill Assad,” I don’t know if it would solve the problem. It is a very difficult question, because it is one that Syrians constantly face. Today, a lot of young Syrians are defined by weapons. Yet, before the uprising, these same people weren’t soldiers or affiliated with violence. The international silence over Syria sustained a war that has forced more and more people into this dark corner. We are faced with the option between being a perpetrator of violence or a victim of one. This becomes a very difficult question, actually, and a sad truth.

What does the future of Syria look like, considering that the situation only seems to get bleaker?

You’re right. It is a very dark situation now. It is getting worse and worse every day. When we started a revolution against the dictatorship, we knew the dictatorship knew nothing about democracy or talking with its people. They are a weapons machine, a hate machine, which tries to kill and destroy us if we try to say anything. But of course I still have hope. In the end, the revolution is will change everything. For me, it is a big step for the Syrian people that we started this. I know the price we have paid is high. But what has started cannot be stopped. We will continue. Of course, I have always had this hope and I continue to have it. The regime must go. Even 10 years, 20 years, 80 years from now, it will go. Look at world history. You will see no dictatorship lasts indefinitely. Stalin is gone. Pinochet is gone. Eventually Assad will be gone too.
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In an ideal world, how could other countries like America help Syria?

When the Assad regime used chemical weapons in the summer of 2013, Obama ordered them to relinquish them. Two weeks later, the Assad regime surrendered its weapons. If America wants to stop the barrel bombs, they can stop it. But they haven't done anything. Above all, we need to support civilian people who don’t kill. This means real support, not intervention. This means an increase in humanitarian aid and zones to protect civilians. The only support we have is from Russia and Iran providing more weapons and killing. It is a big lie when people exclaim that they cannot support Syria because they do not want the country to end up like Iraq. There is a lot of support that can be given. And all of us witnessed what happened after the chemical weapon massacre. You can't say you are a democracy inside America if you are not one outside America. When you believe something, you have to believe it everywhere and support it everywhere. You can't be good with your family and allow the murder of other families.

Of course, to solve the problem, we must go to the roots. The roots are the presence of dictatorship in the Middle East. And I am not referring to Daesh [ISIS]—they are the results of dictatorship. You can't fight Daesh and support the regime simultaneously.

The system of global politics around the world is dirty. Two years ago, I did not dream of leaving the region, but I had to. I didn't have any choice. Actually now, I am frustrated. A lot of Syrian artists and activists are disillusionsed with the world. But the Syrian spirit remains. We cannot be destroyed. Syrians will win their rights by living in a normal country that has democracy and justice. I am in Germany as we speak. This is the basic right of every human being.

What can I do? What is your hope for people like me? How can I make others see beyond the numbers and understand the human connection?

You have to tell our story. You have to support the civilian movement, and, if you have a choice, you have to tell people what is happening. The revolution started because of democracy, because of a new future. The intention was not to make war or impose religion on our country. This is very important. It is important for you to share our work outside Syria so people can see what is really happening. We don't have the luxury to express frustration because we need to continue seeking help. We need to search for those who believe in human beings.

All of us have to work to fight not only against Assad and dictatorship in Syria but against all political and economic systems that exploit countries around the world. What is happening in Syria is a result of this system. People like you, like me, like your friends—from all around the world, we must stand united together to show that we will not accept this system.

Please tell me more about what you are doing now.

Like I said, I finished my last documentary film. It was screened in many countries, like France, Germany, and Turkey. I finished it four months ago, and now I'm thinking about a new play about corruption before the revolution. It will require a lot of funding since it's a huge project. I have around 25 characters in this play. I don't know yet if anyone is interested in sponsoring it. The play, if I do it, will be very important to shed light on the situation in Syria before the revolution. In the meantime, I am trying to work with young Syrian refugees. Actually, I am very confused. I don't know a lot of people here; it is only my first year [as a refugee in Berlin]. I do not have a very clear answer for you.