Since the spring of 2011, Syria has been the site of competing performances asserting and contesting the legitimacy of Baath Party rule.¹ US press coverage in 2012 has understandably focused on the escalating violence that has defied efforts by the Arab League and the UN to quell the fighting: the February Homs offensive that caused the death of hundreds, among them US reporter Marie Colvin; attacks by the Free Syrian Army in and around Damascus; car bombings in Damascus and Aleppo for which no group has taken responsibility; and the massacres in Houla, Quebeir, Douma, and elsewhere. Much less commented on, but necessary to a full understanding of the uprising, has been activists’ use of performance and visual culture to bolster and spread an ethos of creative resistance and the failure of the regime to posit equally compelling performances and images in defense of their continued rule. A spectrum

¹. Sameer Hamady provided help with Arabic transcriptions. Any translation errors are my own. When spelling Arabic names, I have used the most common English transliterations. I have simplified my own transliteration by excluding diacritical markings.
of performances and web activism is in part responsible for the remarkable durability of the uprising, now in its second year despite brutal oppression and a virtual state monopoly of television and print media. Specifically, I will focus on activism that employs or comments on ideas of martyrdom.

Syrian activists have pursued a wide range of strategies: cartoonish send-ups of state violence, carnivalesque inversions in which the downtrodden eject the mighty, the recasting of the state as an instrument of (rather than defender against) colonialism, and the incessant mocking of the president and his circle. These strategies are widespread and extensively disseminated online. Common protest songs are heard in every corner of the country; as Syrian author Hasan Abbas explains, “Millions of Syrians chanting the same song, that is our public forum” (in Al-Zubaidi 2012). Such performances are regularly uploaded and circulated on the web. As of 2 July 2012, one YouTube channel alone (Shibika sham al-ikhbaria) featured 95 videos of different crowds chanting the song “Come on, Leave Bashar!” This same song appears in other performance actions, as when a Syrian activist recorded it and other oppositional songs on digital recorders that he hid in a government finance building, then surreptitiously videotaped guards rushing to silence the chanting, and uploaded the spectacle to YouTube (SyrianExile1 2011). Such oppositional videos are extensively shared. One YouTube video depicting the president in raptures as he surfs the internet for videos of cartoon ducks had registered over 1,075,000 views as of 2 July 2012 (SyrianFilms 2012).

While much of this activism is raucous and irreverent, its prominence on the web pales compared to the outpouring of images and videos representing the most somber and serious figure of the uprising: the martyr. This is hardly surprising given the staggering number of civilian deaths since the start of the uprising, with estimates ranging from 9,183 to 14,072 as of 29 May 2012 (Khera 2012). However, online representations of martyrs extend far beyond the recording of names and circumstances of death to include a host of complex meditations on the idea of martyrdom. Online memorials, documentation of political actions invoking martyrdom, and powerful short films exploring the social effects of death at the hands of one’s government contribute to an online martyrology that is emotional, expansive, and widely engaged. More than a year after the death of 13-year-old Hamza Ali al-Khateeb in government detention, well over 100,000 people interact with — i.e., like, comment on, or share — his Facebook memorial every week. The scope and force of this online martyrology has grown at the same time that death has grown more politically charged. As Layla Al-Zubaidi wrote in May of 2012, in Syria “every funeral is turned into a protest procession.” Untimely death initiates a politicization of the populace via a feedback loop between actions in the street and actions online.

2. For an example of each see the following posted on YouTube: “Who Wants to Kill a Million” (MasasitMati 2011a) by the Syrian puppet troupe, Masasit Mati; crowds singing for Asad’s ouster at “Syrian Revolutionary Dabke” (Freedomforeveryone20 2011); the Occupied Kafranbel banners at “Sham, adlib kafranbel, muzaharat al-ahrar daem al jaash al-hor” (SHAMSNN 2012); the Reuters image of a girl holding a poster threatening Bashar “the protector of Israel” in “Russia says West’s push on Syria ‘path to civil war’” (Al Arabiya 2012); and a video of the president’s 30 March 2011 parliamentary address punctuated with the sounds of farts and burps at “Bashar al asad speech funny” (SORIA7ORA 2011).

Figure 1. (facing page) They’re Playing (2012). Using five still images (this is the second), the film depicts childhood trauma in its relentless assertion that state violence is crippling a generation. Video by Abou Naddara. (Courtesy of the Abou Naddara collective)

Edward Ziter is Associate Professor of Theatre History at the Department of Drama at New York University. He is author of The Orient on the Victorian Stage (Cambridge University Press, 2003) and is currently working on a manuscript about political theatre in Syria from 1967 to the present. ted.ziter@nyu.edu
In any culture, dying for a cause is a powerful and emotional concept (consider the worldwide box office success of movies like *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]) but that is not to discount the specific histories that give such deaths force for each community. The invocation of martyrdom in present-day Syria by both those who oppose and those who support the government is best understood in the context of a longstanding Baath Party project of enshrining the secularized martyr as a defender of the state. Consciously or not (more often the former), uprising activists subvert state ceremonies and rhetoric when they hold up the martyr to inspire resistance and castigate power. In doing so, they intervene in a project of shaping national identity and solidifying state power, a project that grew particularly focused under Hafez al-Assad.

**Martyrs’ Day**

In 1974, the year after the October War against Israel, President Hafez al-Assad declared 6 May Martyrs’ Day. Every spring since then, the Syrian president has laid a wreath in commemoration of those who have fallen for the nation. This ceremony has taken place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Mount Qassioun outside Damascus after that cenotaph was completed in 1994. The ceremony has been central in a Baath Party project to conflate the concept of martyrdom with service to the state in an elaborate performance of legitimacy. In drawing attention to the martyrs of the uprising, opposition groups have not only underscored regime violence, they have also appropriated a key pillar of its legitimacy. According to the opposition, the martyr is a man, woman, or child who has fallen in *defiance*, rather than *support*, of the state.

Martyrs’ Day concludes a Syrian ceremonial calendar that runs from the fall to the spring; on 6 October Syrians mark the anniversary of the October War (October Liberation War Day) and on 6 May they remember their martyrs on the anniversary of the 1916 Ottoman execution of nationalist leaders (Martyrs’ Day). The five civic holidays that occur between the fall and spring enlist Syrians in a steady march back through time from the Arab world’s redemptive partial victory against Israel in 1973 to the purported birth of Syrian nationalism in 1916. In between, Syrians commemorate the November intraparty coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970 (16 November, Corrective Movement Day), the March coup that brought the Baath Party to power in 1963 (8 March, Revolution Day), and in April the evacuation of French forces from Syria in 1946 (17 April, Evacuation Day). The executions of 1916 were answered by a series of national victories concluding with the October War.

According to this calendar, 6 October and 6 May begin and conclude the first chapter in an ongoing war of liberation, and the link between these dates is reinforced by the virtually identical ceremonies that mark each. On 6 October, military leaders greet the president at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. They listen as the national anthem plays, they review an honor guard, the president receives flowers from the children of recent martyrs, and he greets national officials (invariably this includes the chief of staff of the Palestinian Liberation Army). The president then lays a wreath before an eternal flame and reads the first seven verses of the Quran (al-Fatiha) for the souls of martyrs. Then on 6 May they gather again at the same location and repeat the ritual. The identical ceremonies—right down to the joyful descendants of martyrs swarming the president and chanting their support at the conclusion—complete a “calendrical liturgy” (to adopt Paul Connerton’s suggestive phrase3) that unites sacrifice to combat Ottoman Imperialism with sacrifice to combat Zionism. Just as the nationalists died that Syria might one day be a sovereign nation, the soldiers of the October War died that Syria might in the future be whole; 1973 restored Arab pride if not territory. The president completes the circle. Hafez

---

3. Connerton’s analysis of Nazi commemoration of the failed 1923 Putsch and Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 provided me with a compelling model for understanding the Syrian calendar of commemorations. Connerton writes: “The political fiasco is in this way re-interpreted as neither a defeat nor meaningless nor futile. The mortal fate of those who fell in it is to be interpreted not as a senseless death but a sacrificial death. It is to be understood as a sacred event, and one which points forward to another sacred event, that of 30 January 1933” (1989:43).
al-Assad lead the nation to war in 1973, created both holidays, and first performed the ceremonies that persist today. Bashar al-Assad inherited the role of officiate after his father’s death in 2000.

It is no small thing, then, to note that the state is losing ownership of the concept of martyrdom. This loss is evident in the differences in how the state news services reported Martyrs’ Day in 2011 and in 2012—the former being much more theatrical and detailed. The state has powerful tools for disseminating imagery and ideas. It owns two terrestrial stations and a satellite station. In 2001, the state began to allow the private sector to enter the media industry. Ikhbaria, which began broadcasting in June 2011, is a “private” satellite news network funded from the state treasury (Ghorbannejad 2011). In its representation of the uprising Ikhbaria has stuck to the state’s assertion that foreign powers and militant Jihadists organized the protests and are responsible for civilian deaths. Another private satellite station, Al-Dunia, is owned by the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf, who is widely known within Syria as “Mr. Ten Percent”; the perception that Makhlouf’s connections have insured him a 10 percent stake in every national industry has made him the poster child of crony capitalism. Al-Dunia has aired some of the most strident calls for violent reprisals against the Syrian opposition and Arab nations that support the opposition, and has lambasted the US for its support of the opposition; it regularly features the same footage aired by the state news services. Through its own and allied television stations, the Syrian state has attempted to block out the idea of oppositional martyrs, reserving that term for those who defend the rule of Bashar al-Assad and the Baath Party.

The news coverage for Martyrs’ Day 2011 differed markedly from the coverage in 2012. The 2011 coverage was much more extended, celebratory, and widely disseminated, reflecting confidence that the uprising could be contained and quickly extinguished and the state’s belief that the idea of martyrdom was not widely associated with resistance to the regime. Up until March of that year opposition organizers had failed in their efforts to organize protests in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The first large protest in Syria occurred on 18 March 2011 in response to the incarceration of school children in Daraa for spraying anti-regime slogans on their school wall. The state responded with administrative changes and the promise of minor reforms. On 30 March, in his first address to the nation since the demonstrations began, the president described the uprising as a foreign conspiracy and mentioned proposals for a new anticorruption agency, promised unspecified support for the agricultural sector, and a review of the Emergency Laws in place since 1963 (Assad 2011). (The Emergency Laws were repealed in April of 2011, but authorities have preserved immunity from prosecution for the security services. Arbitrary detention and punishment have sharply escalated since then as documented on a daily basis by the Local Coordination Committees of Syria.)

On Martyrs’ Day, 6 May 2011, the Syrian national news outlets showed no hesitation in presenting the martyr as the buttress of the state and the state as the vehicle through which a grateful nation proclaimed its love of the martyr. The state news broadcast stories for that evening were entitled: “The President’s Visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier,” “The Death of an Army Officer and Police in Homs,” “Army Officers Visit the Wounded,” “Martyrs’ Fall in Defense of the Homeland during Recent Events,” “The History of Martyrs’ Day,” “Syrians on the Street Reflect on the Meaning of Martyrs’ Day,” and “Syrian Artists Pay Their Respects on Martyrs’ Day.” The lead story, documenting the president’s participation in the annual wreath-laying ceremony, included footage of the president receiving bouquets of flowers from the children of martyrs and then showed him shaking hands with 37 officials as the newsreader listed

4. See for example: “Syrian Political Scientist Calls Upon Iran to Mobilize Shiites in Saudi Arabia” (MEMRITVVideos 2011a); “Syrian Tribal Leader Threatens to Barbecue the U.S. Ambassador to Syria ‘With or Without Salt’ ” (MEMRITVVideos 2012); and “Syrian Tribal Leader Shlash: Syria Should Finance and Arm Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Rebellions” (MEMRITVVideos 2011b).
Edward Ziter

all of their names. The segment concluded with more children of martyrs surrounding the president, offering kisses and roses, and then chanting: “With our souls and our blood we sacrifice ourselves for you, Bashar.” They aspire, it would seem, to repeat the sacrifice made by their parents. The segment on the soldiers who died putting down the current unrest (described simply as “recent events”) featured interviews with several small children, all of whom repeated variations on the statement “Daddy died in defense of the homeland” (HananNoura 2011). The message was clear: Patriotic citizens continue to die to protect the nation, and will do so into the future. Sacrifice for the state—specifically President Bashar—is sacrifice for the nation.

The repetitive nature of the footage—the remarkably long sequence of handshakes, multiple children making essentially the same statement, their chants promising continued sacrifice, and the repeated use of the word “martyr” throughout the segments—assert with finality the state version of events and the state’s complete ownership of the idea of martyrdom. Al-Dunia TV’s coverage of the president’s visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier used identical footage with a different voice over. The Syrian state aspires to a mediascape in which there is no air-time, nor air for that matter, for any other version of reality. However, with 538 satellite stations available to Arab customers as of June 2011 (Satellite Markets and Research 2011), the state has had very little control over the range of representations available to Syrians. While the Syrian state has taken to jamming the signals of satellite news providers such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, viewers have been able to access the stations by tuning in to different frequencies, and to access their webpages through proxy servers. While the Syrian government has failed to prevent Syrians from accessing Gulf-financed satellite stations, the Arab League has recently succeeded in blocking Syrian satellite stations; at the League’s request the two satellite operators in the region (NileSat and Arabsat) stopped carrying Syrian broadcasts (SANA 2012).

The Syrian state has had virtually no success influencing the way they are represented on Arab satellite television. The Al Jazeera report for 6 May 2011 made no mention of the fact that Syria was celebrating Martyrs’ Day, but they did carry a piece on crowds protesting state actions in Daraa. As the announcers introduced the segment, still images appeared on the green screen behind them: a group of protesting veiled women, the central figure with the Syrian flag painted on both cheeks; a group of young men, the central figure draped in—and flanked by—a Syrian flag, with another man holding up a sign that reads (in Arabic) “From Hama to Daraa, a Tragedy Repeated” (in 1982 the Syrian military killed tens of thousands of civilians in Hama when that city revolted against Baath Party rule); a group of protesters of all ages with flags and banners; and finally a low-angle shot of a lone protester holding up a sign that reads “freedom” (in Arabic). The images repeated similar scenes that viewers had seen three months
earlier, though at the time it was Egyptian flags that the young men waved and wore and that appeared on the cheeks of the young women. However, these photos were not shot in Syria. The Syrian government has prohibited journalists from entering the country, going so far as to detain an Iranian American Al Jazeera reporter, Dorothy Parvaz, when she tried to enter the country using her Iranian passport. Instead, Al Jazeera aired footage of Jordanians from the town of Al-Ramtha on the Syrian border chanting in solidarity with the protesters of Daraa. However, throughout the entire segment a small Syrian flag was superimposed on the top left corner of the frame, suggesting that viewers were seeing a report from Syria (mr11doublez 2011). Short on compelling images, Al Jazeera resorted to metonymy: an associated event was substituted for the unrepresentable larger event; a solidarity protest in nearby Jordan was conscripted to serve for the Syrian uprising.

In the global marketplace such densely meaningful images travel quickly. The aforementioned photograph of the young man draped in a Syrian flag was immediately reproduced in a New York Times' TimesCast uploaded that same day, 6 May 2011, though the image was cropped to make the other protester’s sign more prominent, its English translation, “From Hama to Daraa, a Tragedy Repeated,” appearing below. The TimesCast reported on the strength of the uprising, described the past brutality of the regime (focusing on the Hama Massacre — hence the sign), and concluded with speculation on the regime’s strategies and apparent confidence. This last segment used images of the Martyrs’ Day celebration provided by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) but without explaining what event was taking place. Following footage of protest and the preceding discussion of the Hama Massacre, the SANA images appeared almost surreal. The photos’ careful composition — qualities that would normally make such images compelling — seemed to announce their artificiality when contrasted with the grainy, jerky, and obviously amateur footage of protesting crowds in Jassem and Idlib. Without any explanation of the context, the SANA images seem bizarre: leader and adoring children before an imposing monument or surrounded by a military guard, like the over-the-top representations that made Kim Jong Il a source for late-night TV humor in the US. In short, the 6 May 2011 TimesCast is a striking example of the success of protesters in influencing a global mediascape (TimesCast 2011).

Of course the opposition’s ability to circulate its version of events, especially early in the uprising, is first and foremost a function of the compelling nature of the story it is telling. It is hard not to be amazed by the persistence of the protesters, gathering for weekly protests despite a civilian death toll estimated at well over 13,000 by mid-July 2012. If the Syrian state’s celebration of Martyrs’ Day has little traction in the global mediascape it is because that state has been so busy of late with creating martyrs. However, it is also true that the mediascape is crowded with atrocities and the opposition has had to fight for visibility at the same time that the state has made a concerted effort to disrupt the flow of information both out of and within Syria. The success of the opposition in getting the story out and circulating it within Syria is not only a function of the decentralized flow of information but evidence of a widespread creativity in the crafting of performances and images that dwarfs the state’s abilities.

It should be noted that the Syrian state relinquished its complete control of the visual field before Bashar al-Assad came to power. As Alan George explains, while the state threatened to confiscate satellite dishes as late as 1994, a program for doing so never materialized. Ultimately the state conceded and drafted legislation governing the legal import of receiver dishes in 2000. This was a significant concession for a state that had outlawed the importation of fax machines up until 1993. As George notes, this reversal was evidence of either the difficulty of banning the sale of satellite dishes or the fact that well-connected businessmen stood to earn huge profits from legalizing importation (2003:135). Now, The Central Intelligence Agency estimates that

5. The Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria put civilian deaths at 13,625 on 10 July 2012 (CDVS 2012).
Edward Ziter

roughly two-thirds of Syrian homes have a satellite dish. The state has similarly failed to control the internet. Though Syria banned Facebook in 2007, anyone who wished to access the site did so through proxy servers. As the Christian Science Monitor reported in 2010, even Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad maintained a Facebook page with over 2,500 friends (Duffett 2010). When Syria lifted the ban on Facebook and YouTube in February 2011, it simply gave the security services tools to monitor activity they had been incapable of stopping. Moreover, restoring the service in the midst of the Egyptian revolution allowed the regime to project an image of greater tolerance—an ultimately unsuccessful inoculation against the democracy movement. In fact, anecdotal reports suggest that many who wish to access opposition websites do so through proxy servers outside the country as Facebook membership in Syria climbed to roughly 580,000 by May of 2011, well over 37 percent of the population (Preston 2011b). Opposition activists can receive footage through untraceable cellphone services and upload it on satellite modems. There is little the state can do to control the internet short of turning off the electricity or disrupting phone service, strategies they pursue in restive neighborhoods (Preston 2011b).

With little state control over the mediascape, activists have been able to flood it with imagery. There are at least a dozen YouTube channels devoted to documenting the uprising. As of 3 July 2012, the largest, Shibika sham al-ikhbaria (Greater Syria News Network), featured 122,046 videos and boasted nearly 32 million views. There are at least as many Facebook pages and clearly their viewers are sharing material, too: The Syrian Revolution 2011 page had over 523,000 likes as of 3 July 2012, meaning that a link with material from the page had been sent to the users’ lists of friends. However, it is not simply the volume of imagery that has sustained the uprising, but the use of tropes calibrated to recall successful revolts and to strike at the regime’s history and identity. The appropriation of martyrdom has been central in this project.

The careful cultivation of the idea and image of the martyr of the uprising virtually coincided with its start—and here “virtually” modifies both the timing and the manner. One of the most galvanizing events early in the uprising was the abduction, torture, death, and mutilation of a 13-year-old boy allegedly by the government forces. Hamza Ali al-Khateeb disappeared on 29 April 2011 when gunmen broke up a rally in Daraa. His corpse was returned to his family on 24 May on the condition, according to activists, that the family never speak of the child’s death (Stack 2011). Graphic video posted online with narration in Arabic revealed mutilation that included castration. On 27 May activists created the Facebook page, “We are all the child martyr Hamza Ali al-Khateeb” (Kolna al-shaheed al-tifl Hamza Ali al-Khateeb). According to Al Jazeera, within days the page had more than 60,000 followers (Macleod and Flamand 2011). By 3 July 2012 the page had over 533,000 likes. There are additional Facebook pages in Arabic, English, and French, where people have posted tens of thousands of photos: photos of the dead both grisly and in repose; photos of protesters, especially child protesters; photomontages—some elevating the martyr and others mocking government figures; political cartoons; and a great many drawings. However, the two images that have circulated most are one that appears to be a studio portrait of Hamza before a brightly colored background,
and another that is a pencil reproduction of the same portrait with a Syrian flag substituting for the photo’s swirl of colors. When Al Jazeera reproduced the latter image, it was described as a “child’s drawing.” Whether or not that was the case, the pencil drawing, with its absence of shading or detail and its oversized eyes, projects simplicity and innocence. The state claims purity of purpose and then reifies such claims with cenotaphs, eternal flames, flowers, and adoring children. Based solely on the frequency of re-postings, such images lack the force of a child-like drawing of a child martyr.

This use of social media is modeled on similar uses in the successful Egyptian revolution. The Hamza Ali al-Khateeb page clearly evokes the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said.” Said, a young internet activist, was brutally beaten to death by Egyptian security agents on 6 June 2010. Within five days of his death, the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” appeared, showing cellphone images taken at the morgue of his battered face. Also appearing were videos contrasting photos of Said with the image of his corpse, as well as YouTube videos contesting the authorities’ assertion that Said choked to death when he tried to swallow a plastic bag of marijuana (Preston 2011a). After the ouster of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page (as well as a second page) invited Egyptians to a 25 January 2011 protest that is credited as the beginning of the Egyptian revolution. In addition to the “We are all the child martyr Hamza Ali al-Khateeb” Facebook page, the Syrian YouTube channel SyrBouazizi is intended to evoke the Tunisian vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation after humiliation at the hands of police sparked the protests that overturned Tunisia’s government. On 21 August 2011, as Libyan rebels closed in on Tripoli, “Souria2011archives” uploaded footage of crowds in Homs chanting, “Gaddafy flew away, your turn is next Bashar” (Souria2011archives 2011). With every posting, with every Friday protest, activists announce: We repeat a drama that wins freedom and dignity.

The idea of repetition, which is central to any ceremony or ritual, contributes to the emotional force of protests that persist despite considerable danger and that are disseminated throughout the world despite a cluttered mediascape. The state asserts, in laying their wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, that all Syrians make common cause with the martyrs of 1916 and the October War of Liberation. Such events repeat throughout history and with such gestures successive generations commit themselves to repeating the commemorated actions when called to do so. When tens of thousands gather to march after Friday prayers, week after week, despite the enormous civilian death toll, they similarly commit themselves to a struggle shot through with repeated gestures of martyrdom. They make common cause with the first four activists killed while protesting the detention of 15 children in Daraa on 15 March 2011, and with Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, and with any of the dead depicted in the thousands of YouTube videos. Such repetitions extend even to online activities. On thousands of occasions, individuals in and out of Syria have downloaded images, manipulated these images, and posted them to “We are all the child martyr Hamza Ali al-Khateeb” — as if laying a wreath.

The opposition has pointedly employed forms of commemoration in defiance of state-sanctioned commemorations. In advance of the state’s 6 May Martyrs’ Day commemorations, the Local Coordination Committees of Syria named the planned 1 April protests “Martyrs’ Day” in honor of the more than 70 who had died in the unrest of the previous weeks (Duncan and Therolf 2011), and the Facebook page “Syrian Revolution 2011” organized “Martyrs’ Week,” a series of rallies beginning 5 April in honor of the dead (AFP/NOW Lebanon 2011). In doing so, activists added a new reference to the official celebrations that would take place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: those who had fallen challenging the state now ghosted the commemoration of those who had fallen defending the state. Individuals have also taken on the job of wresting the idea of martyrdom from the state. Writing in August of 2011, Anthony Shadid noted that throughout Homs, where hundreds had already died, protesters have renamed streets where the causalities once lived, “scrawling their names on buildings, walls, and signs” (Shadid 2011b). Normally the state reserves the power of institutionalizing history through the naming of public space. By scrawling the name of an unofficial martyr, these
individuals subvert state narratives and legitimate their own lived histories. Such appropriations often evoke layers of the past. Azma Square in downtown Damascus is named for the Syrian Minister of War who died leading a band of poorly armed soldiers and civilians against vastly superior forces in 1920, rather than submit to the French mandate. On Martyrs’ Day in 2012, protesters surrounded the statue of Yusuf al-Azma at Azma Square holding signs that drew attention to the then 9,000 martyrs of the revolution and the culpability of the state (adsmsasyaf 2012). Symbolically, the death of Yusuf al-Azma in an anticolonialist struggle is joined to the deaths of thousands of Syrians revolting against Baath Party rule.

Perhaps no site in Damascus is so dense with historical significance as Marjeh Square, officially known as Martyrs’ Square, though its older name is more commonly used. The Ottomans executed Syrian notables in 1916 and the French executed revolutionaries during the Mandate period. It is also the location of the Ministry of the Interior, the department responsible for security forces and prisons. Not surprisingly, Marjeh has throughout the uprising seen protests and bombings. Facing the square is the Yalbugha Mosque named for the 13th-century mosque that occupied the site until it was demolished in 1975 to make way for a new mosque and business complex. The mosque is serviceable but incomplete and the large business complex remains an empty shell after years of stalled construction. Like the square, the mosque has been renamed for a famous “martyr.” Now officially the Mosque of the Martyr Basel al-Assad, the structure memorializes the older brother of Bashar al-Assad. Basel was the intended presidential successor to his father but died in 1994 after crashing his Mercedes while driving to the Damascus airport at 80 mph in an early morning fog on route for a ski vacation (Schmidt 1994; Pipes 1996:29). The death led to a long period of national mourning. As one scholar notes: “Over a year later, the mourning remained frenzied. Pictures remained ubiquitous, appearing not just on walls, cars and in stores but also on such artifacts as dishes, clothing and watches” (Pipes 1996:29). Damascus’s international airport, schools, and numerous city squares were renamed after the martyr Basel al-Assad.

The organizers of the Facebook page “The Syrian Revolution 2011” called for a demonstration at Marjeh Square for 16 March 2011, the second demonstration in Damascus according to Al Jazeera. Organizers intended to present the Minister of the Interior with a petition for the release of political prisoners but plainclothes individuals beat and detained the protesters before they could approach the ministry (Al Jazeera 2011). The petition served as a subtle rejoinder to the state’s promise to hold the memory (rather than the living bodies) of those who fought for liberation. The state’s claim to the exclusive right to name the martyr is most flagrantly evident in the creation of the martyr Basel, as if rushing to a ski trip was the equivalent of defending one’s faith, family, country, or ideals. Subsequent protests at Marjeh Square have been much larger. A YouTube video of a 25 April 2011 demonstration shows crowds filling the square, with the silver dome of the Mosque of the Martyr Basel al-Assad and the concrete shell of the Yalbugha Business Center in the background. “God, Syria, and freedom only!” they chant, pointedly excluding the state (UgaritNews 2011). Intentionally or not, the framing of the shot joins the mosque (an increasingly unconvinving celebration of the state’s sacrifices), the business center (evidence of the state’s graft or incompetence), and the resistant crowd. More recently, on 24 April 2012, a car bomb was detonated near the mosque.

The Marjeh Square car bombing draws attention to a disturbing development in the Syrian performance of martyrdom: the emergence of martyrdom operations. According to the state news agency, the bombing only injured three and was not a suicide attack (in Al Jazeera 2012). However, a much more deadly suicide attack followed on 10 May when two cars exploded outside a military intelligence compound, killing 55 and wounding nearly 400 (MacFarquhar 2012a). It was at least the sixth instance of a suicide bombing in Syria since the start of the

The Image of the Martyr

uprising. It is a measure of Syrian opposition groups’ faith in the power of performance that individuals have shown themselves willing to copy acts of self-destruction—a fact that was made evident at the very start of the revolt. The beginning of the Syrian uprising is sometimes cited as 26 January 2011 with the self-immolation of Hasan Ali Akseh. The act repeats that of Mohammad Bouazizi, and one that had been copied within the span of a few months by at least 13 other people in Arab countries who protested government actions—or lack of action (Rosenberg 2011). With martyrdom so central in representations of the uprising, it remains to be seen what forms of martyrdom will emerge should the violence continue to escalate. There have been conflicting claims and accusations of responsibility for the suicide bombings, but given the scale of government violence the rarity of such attacks to this point is more striking than their devastating effect.

On Martyrs’ Day 2012, state news outlets provided more muted representations of the ceremonies than the previous year. In the face of the opposition’s representations of a blood-thirsty regime, the repetition and elaboration of such depictions on cable news, and the growing death toll in the Syrian army, the state may have thought better of filming the children of recent martyrs rushing to kiss the president and chanting their willingness to sacrifice their lives for him. Footage of the presidential wreath-laying ceremony excluded such scenes, only including brief footage of the president and a few youths in sober conversation. Nor did SANA broadcast interviews with the children of the dead as it had the previous year. Equally salient, the 2012 news broadcast did not list the number of soldiers who had died in the previous year. On 6 May 2011, state television news declared that 80 soldiers had died during the previous year. While the Syrian government has not reported a figure for total army casualties since then, an army general running a Damascene military hospital recently asserted that on average 15 soldiers are killed every day in the capital alone (Amos 2012).

While the 2012 broadcast reduced its emphasis on recent martyrs and their families, it raised the specter of a violent future. By including a two-minute segment on a service for martyrs at the Cathedral of St. George in Damascus, the broadcast emphasized support for the regime in minority communities, implicitly referencing concerns for minority rights and safety in a post-Assad Syria. Bishop Luca al-Khoury, a vocal supporter of the regime, lead the service, punctuating his homily with quotes by the president. Television viewers would be aware that the Orthodox Church had depicted the conflict as a mortal threat to the Christian minority: on 23 March, the Syrian Orthodox Church charged that during the siege of Homs, antigovernment militias systematically expelled Christians from their homes in a project of ethnic cleansing (McDonnell 2012). While the state has found it difficult to present the martyr as a figure of national unity, it has succeeded in fanning fears of a future of national disintegration rife with Christian dead.

Transcendence

Both the state and the activist divest the martyr of specifically religious meaning (whether that be the Islamic concept of submission to God or the Christian concepts of sacrifice and redemption) and imbue the martyr with new forms of secular transcendence. For the party regular, I have argued here, the martyr dies in the name of national liberation reified in the regime; for performance and web activists, the martyr dies for a freedom that can only come into existence once the regime has fallen. In the process, popular sovereignty gains metaphysical proportions. “In order to prove that the people are themselves the embodiment of eternal truth it is necessary to demonstrate that royalty is the embodiment of eternal crime” (1956:118). Camus of course refers to the execution of Louis XVI, but in 18th-century France as in present day Syria, revolutionaries depict a battle against a Satan who has usurped the divine right of the people. When martyrs are evoked the idea of transcendence is near.

As the images of martyrs have circulated through the Syrian mediascape, various activists have refashioned them, creating more pointed and lasting critiques. In addition to cutting
through a cacophony of tragedy, some of these works use the figure of the martyr to imagine a successful resolution of the conflict in defiance of the facts on the ground; the martyr becomes the gate through which endlessly deferred freedom will finally force its way into the present. As Walter Benjamin remarked, “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action” (1969:262). The ceaseless flow from past to present is arrested in these revolutionary performances. The clocks are stopped. The image of the martyr is held up as a talisman that effects a needed transformation, rather than being studied as one of many documents that together detail a sequence of resistance and oppression.

Perhaps the group that is most unguardedly optimistic is the puppet troupe, Masasit Mati. Their 13-episode series on YouTube, *Top Goon*, uses finger puppets to depict a comically inept Bishou (a diminutive of Bashar) along with his security head, Shabiha (the unofficial name of Assad’s paramilitary forces), as they terrorize citizens to no effect. It is a kind of messianic Punch and Judy, a completely earnest and serious *Ubu Roi*. In “*Top Goon Episode 9 Reforms*” Bishou makes a speech promising change, with a series of slips of the tongue that have him describing his regime as “sadistic” and promising to become God rather than step down. Actors, whose faces are wrapped in *kafiyas*, stand behind the puppet. With every line of his speech, machine guns sound and an actor convulses and falls below the frame until there are none. Bishou asks how many Syrians are left, and on being informed that they’re all gone, he rejoices: “it’s over because all the Syrians are gone.” In the moment of his victory the puppet freezes as a Syrian rap song calling for revolution drowns out Bishou’s laughter. The puppet is withdrawn as hands making the peace sign shoot up from where the actors had fallen (MasasitMati 2011b). Demands for peaceful change spring from the site of massacres and drive the puppet tyrant from the stage.

The full payoff for the conceit of a puppet tyrant comes in the final episode when the puppeteer confronts his creation (“Masasit Mati-*Top Goon Episode 13 Last days in hell*”). Bishou taunts the audience in a speech in which he mixes up the names of martyrs and pop singers, promises never to leave “even if the blood reaches the summit of Mount Qasioun,” and reminds the audience that the world has abandoned them. He finishes and is about to leave when the puppeteer calls him back: “I am done carrying the burden of you.” The puppet complains that the puppeteer agreed to this: “You agreed to let me speak for you, to take over for you, to exist in your place, to breathe for you, to eat for you, to make decisions for you, so go back down to where you belong” (MasasitMati 2012). The puppeteer refuses and instead makes Bishou dance to the resistance song “Come On, Leave Bashar.” He grasps the puppet in his left hand and pulls it off, revealing his finger, the sole support of the puppet head. The other puppeteers join him, all making the peace sign. In lieu of credits, the series ends with the words “For the souls of Khalidiah [the neighborhood in Homs subjected to extensive government attacks], For the martyrs of Syria, For all Syrians, Freedom is coming.” There is no longer any reason to crouch beneath the stage while the tyrant struts above. The power to claim one’s place in the open air has been secured by the blood of the people.

Masasit Mati’s work shifts abruptly between irony and earnestness. By contrast, the organization Freedom Days strikes a tone of poetic transcendence in the vast majority of their actions and web pieces. Freedom Days describes itself on its Facebook and YouTube pages as a “Syrian group for peaceful struggle and nonviolent civil resistance.” On their YouTube channel they document political actions and circulate animated shorts and photomontages critical of the regime and calling for popular resistance. As of 21 June 2012, the group had posted 182 videos generating over 338,000 views. Much of their work draws attention to the victims of state violence. For example, on the eve of the December 2011 local elections, Freedom Days created election posters featuring photographs of individuals killed by the regime in

---

7. The group’s name refers to the straw for drinking mate, a common drink in Syria.
lieu of the Party’s candidates. The group then posted them throughout Damascus. The two-and-a-half-minute video “Surprise election of martyrs for freedom!” is a series of close-ups of hands pasting the posters in lobbies and on exterior walls, accompanied by Lisa Gerrard’s soaring track, “Now We Are Free” (2000). The video ends with a tracking shot from a car window showing the oppositional posters on storefronts and walls, pasted over official Party posters (FreedomDaysSyria 2011).

The group repeated the action and similarly documented it for the May 2012 parliamentary election, this time extending the project to the villages surrounding Damascus (FreedomDaysSyria 2012). Each time an individual glued a poster to a wall a caption below listed the neighborhood or village as “free.” It was a particularly pointed action in 2012, for it was the first election following a new constitution supposedly ending the Baath Party’s monopoly over political life. In the face of the state’s claims of constitutional reform, activists point to a logic of sovereignty grounded in violence rather than consent. Like the individual who renames a street for a martyr, those who participated in the “election of martyrs” liberated their streets and neighborhoods by inscribing the names of the dead across state markers and iconography.

In the “surprise election” action, Freedom Days constructs what Benjamin refers to as “dialectical images.” Such images are connected to Benjamin’s understanding of revolutionary time, because they substitute a dialectical relation between the “what-has-been” to the “now” in lieu of a temporal and continuous relation between past and present. “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin 1999:462). Historical materialism has “annihilated within itself the idea of progress” substituting “actualization” (460). In substituting the face of the martyr for the party regular, in revealing the state as the entity monopolizing the legal power to exercise lethal force (to invoke Max Weber 1994:310), Freedom Days takes on the role of historian of the revolution. While groups such as Local Coordination Committees of Syria create scrupulous timelines of violence (lccsyria.org), Freedom Days cracks open this narrative of resistance and oppression with images imbued with the prescience of dreams. To return to Benjamin: “It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation” (464).
The fantastic, which is a prominent feature of “surprise election,” dominates the short film *End of Broadcast* by the documentary film collective Abou Naddara. This remarkable group uses irony and dark humor to reveal a residue of violence lingering in the everyday of a Syria under siege by its own government. The work is open-ended, demanding continued contemplation. The group has posted a short video on its Vimeo channel every week since May 2011 “as a tribute and contribution to the street protests,” according to an *AlJazeera.com* article (in Della Ratta 2011). The name, Abou Naddara (which translates as “the man with glasses”), is the pseudonym of the 19th-century Egyptian playwright and journalist, Yacub Sanu. Sanu’s journal, also *Abou Naddara*, was outlawed for its liberal and revolutionary content but smuggled editions were popular in Egypt across classes. In addition to evoking a 19th-century history of liberal Arab thought, the collective’s name also evokes the film by Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, “a film we hold dear,” according to group members (Abou Naddara 2012b). Like the films of Vertov, the videos of Abu Dadarra are shot with portable cameras using natural lighting, recording spontaneous events rather than planned-out scenarios. From the material of the everyday, the group unearths the impulse to resist and imagines a future free of violence—regardless of how removed that future might feel from the current situation.

*End of Broadcast* posits the fantastic possibility that, swayed by the sacrifices of the people, state institutions would rise up against the government. The video, which was posted on 21 October 2011, shows a television screen in a dark interior, tilted slightly from the camera. The television image indicates that it is the end of the broadcast day; a Syrian flag flaps in the wind while a brass band plays the Syrian anthem. The television image switches to an old black and white photograph of Ummayad Square, home to the Syrian Television Building, as Arabic text scrolls across the screen: “In the interest of the public good, for the honor of the souls of the martyrs, and in support of the people’s legitimate demands, the General authority for Radio and Television announces a general strike until the regime falls” (Abou Naddara 2011c). As the text ends the television switches to static, and the sound of static continues even after the television has gone dark. Abou Naddara grounds their video in a double entendre. It is literally the end of the broadcast day but one that foreshadows the end of the regime now that state institutions have decided to honor the souls of the martyrs and align themselves with the people. The sound of static, uncoupled from the television image, transforms into the dying gasp of a corrupt regime.
Death Live

Dziga Vertov’s credos—“life as it is” and “life caught unaware”—reveal much of the twin strategies of Abou Naddara. They employ footage of unplanned and unstructured events, often found footage, which they then manipulate and combine to reveal daily life. The Abou Naddara collective formed before the uprising, but now focuses exclusively on the effects of violence on everyday life; “we don’t film the revolution but its countershoot,” a spokesperson for the group explained (in Della Ratta 2011). The work is deeply political while avoiding simplistic polemics. Having said that, their videos have displayed a growing urgency as the violence has escalated. This is evident in the comparison of two related videos, both of which implicitly address the death of children, juxtaposing recent footage with beloved songs by Fairouz that sentimentalize childhood.

On 5 August 2011 Abou Naddara posted a film titled Rima, a common Arabic female name (Abou Naddara 2011b). In the 90-second film, a woman in a headscarf and long coat walks in a cemetery while the soundtrack features Fairouz singing the lullaby “Rima” (which she made popular in the 1968 Lebanese film The Guard’s Daughter [Bint al baräs]). In most of the shots the woman appears at a distance, obscured by the memorial stones. The closing shot focuses on a kite flying over the cemetery. The camera’s large depth of field and distance from its subject keep the viewer ignorant of the woman’s emotional state or purpose in the cemetery until we see her hand tending plants by a grave marker. Only the soundtrack and the image of the kite evoke the idea of untimely death, and only one’s memory of online memorials to child martyrs allows one to read the film as oppositional.

By contrast, They’re Playing, posted 10 months later on 22 June 2012 is relentless in its assertion that state violence is crippling a generation (Abou Naddara 2012c). The film, which is less than a minute long, depicts childhood trauma and death in five still images, which are accompanied by the opening lines from the Fairouz song, “The Children Are Playing.” The first image shows boys with toy guns—some fashioned from scrap wood and cardboard—as Fairouz sings: “The children are playing / under the blue sky they play.” The second image shows a smiling child in a hospital bed, his right arm amputated at the shoulder and his left hand holding a store-bought toy gun as Fairouz sings: “They’re lost in their beautiful games / they run without tiring.” As Fairouz repeats the line, “They are playing,” the viewer sees two images of bombed out interiors. Torn maps of the world in one and a single microscope in the other are the only indications of place (a school? a university?). The film ends with an image of simple wooden markers, the number “474” visible on one, planted in recently turned earth. The film not only mourns the death of children (who are presumably among the hundreds of dead suggested by the number 474) but the effects of a year of violence on all the children who play commando with homemade guns in bombed out streets. It is a marker of our poverty, the video asserts, that a toy gun consoles a disfigured child and a piece of scrap wood will mark his grave.

The footage in both films feels accidental and surreptitious. The distance between the camera and figure in Rima and the framing of shots that keep her partially obscured would all seem to suggest that the subject has been caught unaware. Only the close-up of the hand tending the gravesite suggests some communication between subject and camera operator. The kite in the background is the accidental event that gives the film its logic. Whether or not the woman was mourning a child, the kite necessitated a film about untimely death. The photographs of the boys in They’re Playing feel equally candid and accidental. One can imagine the photographer happening upon children playing and snatchning the first image. The photograph of the smiling boy in the hospital bed looks like a family snapshot of a child beaming over a new toy. As such the Abou Naddara project is emblematic of the time. Based on the massively expanded Syrian mediascape, one could conclude that half the country is busily filming and photographing the other half. The web is full of footage capturing “life unaware” in Syria, though that is not quite accurate since most of this footage focuses on death.
Abou Naddara’s steadfast focus on the revolution’s “countershot” differs from that of the army of videographers capturing tragedy as it unfolds. These videographers have taped civilians falling to snipers, army officers beating civilians, and relatives first encountering the bodies of loved ones. Perhaps most disturbingly, there are several instances of footage ascribed to videographers at the moment of their own deaths.\(^8\) The camera focuses on distant plumes or soldiers, a shot or explosion is heard, and the camera swings about, finally resting with a shot of sky or road.

Abou Naddara offers a countershot to such footage with the film \textit{Corrective Movement}, posted on 18 November 2011 (Abou Naddara 2011a). The title is taken from the 1970 intraparty coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power and enabled him to imprison his leftist rival, Baath Party Secretary, General Salah Jadid. \textit{Corrective Movement} refers to this imprisonment and the subsequent party purge of Jadid loyalists. As noted above, Corrective Movement Day is an important civil holiday in Syria. In naming the coup a “correction,” the Assad regime announced a continued commitment to socialism and anti-colonialism amidst a needed redirection of the party towards a more pragmatic foreign policy. However, Abou Naddara layers a very different form of correction onto party history.

\textit{Corrective Movement} starts with a close-up of a young man’s eyes. The reverse shot shows the computer screen he sees: columns running across the computer screen assign a number, list name, age, city, zone, date, and then terminate with “detained.” Most of the film consists of a single shot of the screen as the man scrolls through pages and pages of names. He stops two thirds through the document; he erases “detained” in one of the rows and types “martyred under torture.” Only now does the viewer get the joke; “correction” does not mean ideological repositioning but textual editing. The detained is now a martyr. In a certain sense it amounts to the same thing: the elimination of rivals, whether the rival is Salah Jadid or the Syrian people as a whole. In 1970 “correction” meant imprisonment, torture, and murder — just as it does today. The film metaphorically captures the moment of death, not the moment when a bullet pierces the skin but the moment when a name is added to the roll of martyrs.

Activists have used the internet to produce a massive martyrology, one that not only includes names and dates but likenesses from before and after death and records of mourning. The martyr election posters of Freedom Days recirculate this martyrology, accosting those who had refused to look or had become inured. By contrast, the Abou Naddara videos arrest such circulation, pulling the viewer’s attention from the figure to the ground; in most of their works the martyr is momentarily rendered invisible so that the viewer can better see the context. In \textit{Rima} and \textit{They’re Playing} the viewer never learns the names nor sees the faces of those interred. In

\begin{quote}
\textit{Corrective Movement} (2011). A young man makes corrections to lists of names: deleting “detained” and replacing it with “martyred under torture.” Video by Abou Naddara. (Courtesy of the Abou Naddara collective)
\end{quote}

Corrective Movement the names on the screen pass so quickly that the viewer can’t possibly register them — conscious only of the correction from “detained” to “martyred.” However, with the death of the filmmaker Basel Shehadeh, the group departed from this strategy and brought the victim to the center of the piece without ever showing his face. They withheld his name until the final credits.

I will cross tomorrow is possibly Abou Naddara’s most poignant video and by far its most viewed (Abou Naddara 2012a). The three-and-a-half-minute video is composed of three shots, each filmed with a handheld camera. The first is a night scene in which a man, protected by the wall of a building, taunts a sniper: “Freedom forever, angering you Assad.” A shot rings out. The man muses on the strange hostility of snipers towards the idea of freedom, concluding: “If I was armed and shot at him, he wouldn’t shoot back. But if I shout ‘Peaceful’ he shoots.” The man chants by way of example, “Peaceful forever, angering you, Assad,” and the promised gunshot echoes. The next scene shows an empty roadway. A man’s voice explains that you just have to say your prayers and set off and, God willing, nothing will happen. The camera tilts about as the cameraman begins to run across the street, and we see glimpses of his curly hair, the horizon, the road, and telephone lines indicating proximity to the other side of the roadway. Throughout we hear his panting and distant explosions. A final explosion sounds loudly and the camera tilts to the sky. The third and final camera shot shows a crowd of people carrying a shrouded body at night. Flashlights pointed at the body and the occasional camera flash provides the only light. The sound in this scene is entirely extra-diegetic; a man sings without accompaniment:

Oh mother, sing me a love song, sing to me
Better to be stabbed by daggers and swords than live under the rule of rascals
I walked in winter and winter quenched my thirst
But when summer came, it caught fire
My life is the sacrifice, freedom’s ransom
Oh mother, sing me a love song, sing to me
Better to be stabbed by daggers and swords than live under the rule of rascals
Our courageous martyr, more dear than the most high
Key to the passage to hope, hope in man
Oh my people, oh hero, I would give my eyes to protect you
Oh mother, sing me a love song, sing to me
Better to be stabbed by daggers and swords than live under the rule of rascals.

As the song ends, the screen fades and lines of text appear: “Camera / Bassel [sic] Shehadeh / Assassinated in Homs, May 28th 2012.”

The simple act of crossing a street can mean crossing into the world of martyrs. However this crossing is also the act that secures our hope for the future; the martyr is the “key” for our passage to hope — not victory, merely hope. That might seem like scant reward for such a huge sacrifice, but better death than life “under the rule of rascals.” The singer projects himself into Basel Shehadeh’s place. The song asserts that my life is freedom’s ransom just as the title asserts that I will cross tomorrow. This identification between viewer and martyr is reinforced when the sole credit lists Shehadeh as the camera operator. The camera makes us present in his frantic sprint across a roadway, we hear the explosion that presumably killed Shehadeh, and we share his dying vision of a cloudless sky. The funeral scene that follows was taken from a video posted to YouTube on 28 May 2012 labeled as the funeral of four martyrs, one of whom is listed as Shehadeh (MsSamer010 2012).

Within weeks of his death, Shehadeh’s sacrifice had been widely circulated in the Arab mediascape. Al Jazeera ran multiple pieces on the filmmaker, focusing on his work in Homs, describing the response of people in Damascus, and broadcasting an interview with Shehadeh’s friend, actor Ahmad Malas (who is currently in exile in Egypt). Orient TV broadcast a segment
focused on the films Shehadeh had posted on his YouTube channel before the rebellion began. These films are now receiving thousands of views. *I will cross tomorrow* is by far Abou Naddara’s most viewed film. Between 1 June and 19 June 2012, it received 5,797 plays on Abou Naddara’s Vimeo channel. In this same time span, the film received another 5,666 views on the YouTube channel whdasyria. In addition, there have been dozens of online memorials created from the limited number of photographs of Shehadeh online combined with other images culled from the rebellion’s mediascape.

Basel Shehadeh was not the first videographer killed in the uprising. In fact, three other videographers were killed with him—presumably the three other corpses visible in the YouTube video of his funeral (MsSamer010 2012)—though their names have not circulated widely. However, unlike most of the victims of Baath violence, Shehadeh was a Christian from Damascus—the demographic that reportedly has stayed on the sidelines or actively supports the regime (as suggested in the state’s coverage of the 2012 Martyrs’ Day celebrations). According to the *New York Times*, the 28-year-old Shehadeh was pursuing an MFA in film at the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University on a Fulbright scholarship when he took a leave of absence to return to Syria to document the revolution and train amateur videographers (Schwirtz 2012). As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, “Shahade [sic] didn’t fit the revolutionary profile” (McDonnell, Sandels, and Marrouch 2012).

Numerous outlets supporting the resistance have held up Shehadeh as evidence that the rebellion is not sectarian. When Souria2011 reposted footage of his funeral to YouTube, it provided the title (in English) “Funeral for Bassel Shahade [sic] and Comrades — Christian And Sunnis Killed by Assad 5-29-12” (Souria2011archives 2012). The eponymous title presents the Sunnis—Basel’s comrades—as the supporting cast in the drama of resistance and martyrdom. By contrast, when the video was first posted on the channel Roh al-thawra al-suria, the title was written in Arabic: “Wedding of a new constellation of Homs martyrs.” The word “wedding” in the title is a reference to the Hadith promising martyrs 72 virgin wives in the afterlife. The substitution of “wedding” for “funeral” when discussing the death of martyrs is a common usage, but it is hardly ecumenical. Subsequent opposition uploads have followed the lead of

Figure 14. *I will cross tomorrow* (2012). The second of three scenes in Abou Naddara’s most viewed video shows an empty roadway: the simple act of crossing a street can mean crossing into the world of martyrs.

*Video by Abou Naddara. (Courtesy of the Abou Naddara collective)*
Souria2011, avoiding language that depicts martyrdom in a Muslim context. A YouTube post of a 14 June demonstration in Kafar Sousa (a village on the outskirts of Damascus) described the crowds in the footage as calling for the “unity of the Syrian people in bringing down the dictatorship,” saluting “the martyr Basel Shehadeh and all the martyrs of Syria” and noting the participation of “all sects and regions of Syria” in the uprising (nabdsyria 2012).

The Syrian authorities are clearly aware of the performative power of funerals: this is the regime that instituted a full year of mourning for Basel al-Assad. The act of praying is not simply a petition for a soul but an assertion of a shared objective among the mourners. There is no telling where such performatives could lead. A Christian funeral in Damascus would undermine the official claim that the opposition is actually a group of foreign jihadists outside the capital. It is not surprising, then, that the state forbade any services for Shehadeh. The funeral in Homs took place at night lit only by flashlights. When friends of Shehadeh gathered in Damascus at St. Cyril’s Church for a planned memorial prayer service, they found the church locked. Government thugs hauled some mourners off to jail and chased others away, activists reported to the New York Times. In response a Jesuit priest (with Italian citizenship) invited mourners to an interfaith prayer service at a desert monastery in Deir Mar Musa about 50 miles north of Damascus. The government responded by expelling the priest on 16 June (MacFarquhar 2012b). A regime that asserts that it alone protects minority sects from a Muslim blood bath cannot tolerate images of Christians and Muslims together mourning a victim of state violence.

Basel Shehadeh, Ali al-Farra, Azmi Mohannad Najjar, Ibrahim al-Khasm, Ahmed Hamada, and Osama al-Jalam, are a few of the individuals who were shot and killed while making videos of demonstrations or shellings. Such footage is dramatic but not because it presents a violent image; these videos could be accurately titled “videographer drops her camera.” Rather, the power of the footage is that the viewer is forced into the subject position of the martyr. The viewer drops the camera immediately after a shot rings out. One would think the videos would serve as cautionary tales, but based on the escalating increase in oppositional videos it appears as though more people are heading to the streets with cameras in hand, and when they train their camera on a plume of smoke they may be reliving an experience first encountered online. No doubt they have seen a plume of smoke before, but they frame this plume of smoke with a camera knowing they enact a ritual earlier performed by the martyr Basel Shehadeh.

These instances of “twice behaved behavior,” to use Richard Schechner’s useful phrase (1985), demonstrate the power of performance to inspire and inflame, but also to generate a sense of community with actors who never meet face-to-face. Ibrahim Qashoush of Hama is credited with authoring the song “Come On, Leave Bashar” which has spread throughout the country and beyond. YouTube videos feature crowds singing it in Chicago, New York, Washington, Toronto, London, Tripoli, Yaffa, and elsewhere. Crowds in Tunis reportedly sang it on the anniversary of their own revolution, an instance of the original imitating its copy (Al-Zubaidi 2012). Qashoush was found dead on 4 July 2011, his throat cut and his vocal cords ripped out (Shadid 2011a). When that act failed to stem the song’s spread, the regime coopted it, teaching it to schoolchildren with new lyrics. However, “We Are your People, Bashar” apparently never caught on (Al-Zubaidi 2012). The intervention came too late as countless people had already enacted their demand for freedom, cementing commitment with gesture.

References


To view supplemental media related to this article, please visit www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/suppl/10.1162/DRAM_a_00238