

Syrians, Camps and a New Cosmopolis

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The last time I checked the UN Refugee Agency website in early April 2013, I read that there were 1,240,849 Syrian refugees in countries surrounding Syria, of which only 980,029 were registered. This number is divided almost 50-50 between male and female, the overwhelming majority being between the ages of 18 and 59, but many as young as newborn and as old as 60 and over. Taken from a total population of some 20 million, this means that over the last two years, one out of every 20 Syrians has left his or her homeland for fear of their life. According to the BBC, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent estimates that 2.5 million people have been displaced within Syria, more than double the previous estimates, a number that the UN considers “conservative.”

Why are Syrians fleeing their homeland and opting for the indignity of refugee life in neighboring countries, as opposed to the security of their own homes? The answer is now public knowledge. Beginning in March 2011, Syrians joined the rest of the Arab world in peacefully demanding democratic reform in their country. The response of Bashar Assad’s regime was swift, vicious, and cruel. Demonstrators were shot dead, others were arrested and tortured, or else executed point-blank. By May the Syrian army tanks had moved into Deraa, Banyas, Homs, and the suburbs of Damascus, crushing the protests. Assad’s forces were brutal, but they only succeeded in exacerbating their troubles. Syrians wanted democratic changes at home. By June 2011 thousands of Syrians had fled to Turkey. By the end of the summer, a number of Syrians had decided to organize and take up arms to defend themselves.

In the fall of 2011, the United Nations and the Arab League condemned the Syrian regime, and while the Syrian opposition was now actively organizing itself, China, Russia, and Iran joined together to save Assad's regime. On the opposite side, the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and their Persian Gulf allies came together to arm the uprising and to twist it their own ways, hoping to secure their own post-Assad interests. In effect, Syria became a battlefield for regional powers that scrambled to position themselves in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions.

The Arab revolutions – in full swing in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain – had arrived at a critical impasse in Syria. Syria was vital for both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. The Syrian people, the real owners of their homeland, were caught in between two claims on their home and territory: the brutality of the ruling regime on the one hand, and the machinations of the counter-revolutionary forces in the regime on the other. They had become the bricks and mortars of history.

By the spring of 2012, the UN sent Kofi Annan to act as mediator and work out a plan to meet the demands of the opposition and Assad's regime. He failed. By the end of the summer, the Syrian opposition had gained military ground, while the regime had lost diplomatic standing in the Arab world and the world at large. Meanwhile, the aggressive militarization of the opposition by the US and its allies progressed.

After the resignation of Kofi Annan, the UN appointed veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi as the new UN-Arab League envoy for Syria. By the end of 2012, the US and its regional allies officially recognized the Syrian opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. By April 2013, during the Arab League conference in Doha, Qatar, and as the carnage of Syrian civilians continued unabated, the Syrian chair was officially given to

the opposition representative Moaz al-Khatib and the Human Rights Watch charged the Syrian regime with war crimes. By late April 2013, Aleppo's Umayyad mosque was reported destroyed. Built between the 8th and 13th centuries, the mosque held a shrine to John the Baptist that is believed to contain his head. The history of Syria from ancient to medieval and up to modern times was now being held hostage by the self-destructive rampage of a thriving and rich urbanism, as the Syrians themselves became the primary victims of their quest for democracy.

Mario Rizzi is an Italian photographer, filmmaker, and video installation artist currently based in Berlin. He has been doing extraordinary work for more than a decade. Born and raised in Italy, Rizzi studied classics and psychology before turning his attention to photography at the *École Nationale de la Photographie* in Arles, France.

A quick look at his career shows his deeply caring and vastly cultivated camera work. Rizzi has a soft touch in his videography, while his camera perceptivity approaches his subject with a minimum of intrusion.

An accomplished, widely exhibited, and respected artist in his field, Rizzi has committed his art to investigating the consequences of globalized neo-liberalism on human life in its simplest and most immediate effects. He patiently and judiciously attends to the daily lives of the people he films, and through their stories teaches us consequences of the grand narratives of our history that would otherwise remain hidden.

Mario Rizzi's *Al Intithar (The Waiting)* is the first film in a projected trilogy titled *Bayt (House)* that reflects on the emergence of a new civic imagination concerning how, as

he puts it, “the narration of a revolutionary event can be closely entangled with the narration of simple everyday events in the lives of unknown people.” Rizzi continues: “I worked several times in the Muslim world, mainly in Palestine and in Turkey, exploring the relationship between privacy and civil engagement and considering the notions of border and inequality, particularly in relation to issues of identity and presence.”

The Syrian refugee camp Zaatari lies seven kilometers to the south of the Syrian border, inside Jordan. As Mario Rizzi reports, at the time of his filming “there are already 45,000 refugees living here, and still more people arrive: 10,000 additional refugees every week. The capacity of the camp is 70,000 people. Many Syrians would like to go home: living conditions in the camp are by no means easy, and they are often far away from their husbands and sons, many of whom have stayed behind to fight.”¹

Rizzi opts to personalize the politics of despair: “The film’s protagonist is a widow from Homs whose husband was killed in an attack by the Syrian army. Director Mario Rizzi followed this widow’s life at the camp for seven weeks. Life’s rhythms are dictated by the place, and life, here, is all about waiting.”²

As Rizzi’s camera guides us through the camps, we see how the bare life of the Syrians in these camps is a *state of exception* (Agamben) hoping for a future life. Agamben feared that the camps revealed the “nomos of the modern” and that this signaled the rise of a totalitarianism that operates not against democracy, but in fact through democracy. Here,

1 Al Intithar, 63. Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin 2013 – Katalog, p.57.
2 Ibid.

however, the Arab revolutions in these camps return to the point zero of their history. What Agamben was theorizing was the condition of the camp as a state of exception, where sovereignty becomes absolute. On the site of these camps, the bare lives of the refugees are the naked subjects of the sovereignty. Law has categorically lost its self-transcendence. Agamben considers the camp as that state of exception that does not prove the rule, but in fact is the rule. Rizzi's camera demonstrates and navigates the moment when the state of exception has become the rule, but does not sustain the rule – here that rule is being re-written.

In the same spirit that, in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*³, Agamben engages with how one can bear witness to the camp's horrors, Rizzi's camera becomes the witness that tries to bridge the gap between abiding truth and fragmentary fact. For Agamben, the central figure of the *Muselmann* is what best represents the condition of bare life, of the living dead, the dead person walking, both bearing witness and being witnessed at one and the same time. Agamben proposes the figure of the *Muselmann* as the apparition between the human and the inhuman. On the site of the Syrian camps, Agamben's *Muselmann* has become a Muslim. Fact and phenomenon have fused, and the fear of the Muslim – Islamophobia – has met the fear of the *Muselmann* in the concentration camp, which is the future promise of the Arab and Muslim world – the camp as the building block of a future urbanism.

Syrian camps are the building blocks of their own future, not death camps. They are life camps, where the children of a future Syria are born and raised, awaiting their return to their homeland. And differently from the Palestinian land, Syrians' homeland is not occupied by European colonizers.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz - The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York, 1999.

What is the difference between Zaatari and Guantanamo Bay? Guantanamo Bay is the ruin of an empire, the ruins this empire leaves behind, as it goes about trying to conquer a world that is increasingly unconquerable – precisely in the same manner that Sabra, Shatila, and other Palestinian refugee camps are the ruins of European colonialism that calls itself Zionism. Zaatari is the camp where the future citizens of the emerging Arab republics, having exhausted their postcolonial promises, are born. Zaatari is the exact opposite of Guantanamo Bay – it promises rebirth, where Guantanamo delivers only despair. In his “Al Intithar,” Mario Rizzi has captured the historic moment when the new citizens of the new Arab republics are being born. This is a moment of suspension, a momentous pause when the history of the Arabs is being re-written. It is a world historic moment, a moment no living human being has ever before witnessed, lived, or experienced. On the site of the Zaatari camp, the liberation geography of all successive generations is being mapped out. Syrians have left their cities and squares and homes as the foot soldiers of history and – whether they are fighting on the side of Bashar Assad or the side of his nemesis – are sorting out their differences. When the dust of their desperate wars settles, these Syrians will go back to reclaim their homeland and populate it with steadfast determination – and no dictator, no fanatic, no a fortiori colonial machination will be able to rule these people with despair ever again.

***Al-Intithar* marks the end of “the Middle East” and the beginning of a new cosmopolis.** The distinctly sudden rise of democratic revolutions from Morocco to Syria and from Iran to Yemen – extending far beyond the Arab and Muslim world – has placed a categorical hold on that most pernicious of all

colonial inventions, “the Middle East.” Whether it was first used by British colonial officers in the mid-nineteenth century to refer to the area between the Arabian Peninsula and India, or by the American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan to refer to the areas surrounding the Persian Gulf, what we are witnessing unfold right in front of our eyes is the fading out of that colonial geography of damnation and domination into an open-ended geography of liberation. Whatever the emerging contours of that geography, “the Middle East” is no more. What there is no more is the middle, or near, or far to no East of any colonial officer who once sat in London or Washington and cast a long, lasting, and domineering gaze across the Mediterranean. While both have a long way to go in terms of coming to any meaningful results, the Egyptian Revolution, triggered by that of Tunisia, has already re-aligned the center of the globe. The post-American world has started in earnest; “the West” has dissolved. Mario Rizzi’s camera in Zaatari Camp has captured that moment of birth for posterity.

To be sure, the principal culprits of the old-fashioned Middle East seek to read the unfolding events from their old, tired, clichéd glossary. The Israelis are at it again, using the occasion to ask for additional billions of dollars in US security assistance “to help guard against potential threats that could develop in light of recent changes occurring in the Middle East”⁴, as Defense Minister Ehud Barak has put it. That is not all they have sought to do. Other delusional Israeli politicians have rushed to their American sponsors demanding that “a universal code”⁵ be established for democracy, as former Israeli Prime Minister Tzipi Livni has put it, in which “a set of core democratic

⁴ The Jerusalem Post, 3 August 2011 (<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=211231>)

⁵ Tzipi Livni, For the Mideast a code for rising democracies, The Washington Post, 24 February 2011 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/23/AR2011022305364.html>)

principles” be established, among which is “the renunciation of violence and the acceptance of state monopoly over the use of force.” A “universal code,” no less, demanded by a settler colony that has been like a thorn in the side of the geopolitics of a region that has not seen peace since Israel – as the price for the Europeans’ murderous deeds during the Holocaust – demanded and exacted an apartheid state on the broken back of the Palestinians. If Livni’s own settler colony were to be judged by “the universal code” she proposes, if she or her clientele in Washington were in a position to decide for the rest of the world what “universal” is, she and her entire cabal would be arrested and put on trial for crimes against humanity at the Hague. But that proposition now fades in the face of a larger and more promising frame of reference, as Arabs and Muslims at large are raising their future citizens in refugee camps caused by the carnage of the old guards who have refused to see the emerging light.

Business as usual is also the delusional pastime of American lawmakers, where the reincarnation of Joseph McCarthy, Representative Peter King, a Republican, has yet again raised the color code of Islamophobic banality⁶ – himself the very picture of a terrorist intimidating millions of human beings in the sanctity of their own home and country for the crime of being Muslims. The obscenity of this particular distraction by Representative Peter King marks the fact that he will hold no hearing on Jewish synagogues as “a breeding ground for radical attitudes” in sustaining a militant Jewish apartheid state with a record of crimes against humanity. Peter King’s Islamophobia is yet

⁶ Peter King warns al-Qaeda recruiting US Muslims, BBC News, 10 March 2011 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-12703100>)

another feeble attempt to sustain the politics of despair that the Arab Spring has already overcome.

To achieve that postcolonial geography of liberation, the battle we need to wage against counter-revolutionary narratives (pulling the world back into status quo ante) is no less urgent than the heroic battles that Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians, and others are waging against the political despotism that has ruled over them for too long. Neither pan-Arabism nor, indeed, pan-Islamism – no more than the mirror images of the Islamophobia now plaguing Europe and North America – will do. Fortunately, these revolutions have no charismatic leader and are headed towards no pre-determined conclusion. Their commencement is the end of Nasserism, Musaddeqism, Nehruism, and not their regurgitation. These revolutions are not against “the West”, because “the West” – as the imaginative geography of our domination, and in the fabrication of which we ourselves have been co-conspirators – no longer exists. This round of uprising is no longer one between an abstract modernity and belligerent tradition. The tired old clichés can now be relegated to the dustbin of history. The new history begins at the site of Camp Zaatari, where Syrians have gone to give birth to their future. When the carnage of Bashar Assad and his militant nemesis is finally over, Syrians will return from Camp Zaatari to build their democracy.

“The West” – the delusion – stands to lose in that liberated geography. In so many words, Sayf al-Islam Gaddafi made a point when he assured Europeans⁷ that his vision of Libya is that of a gatekeeper for Europe, for without

⁷ Gaddafi's son warns of 'terror and pirates', BBC News, 7 March 2011, (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12666311>)

him and his father, “pirates and millions of illegal immigrants” will be “in Sicily, Crete, Lampedusa.” That is the kind of corrupt servitude that the would-be future leader of Libya had imagined for his country. “While millions in the world are celebrating the popular uprisings in North Africa,” notes Behzad Yaghmaian in “The Spectre of a Black Europe”⁸, “Europe is watching with skepticism and fear. The fall of the African dictators will deprive Europe of valuable allies in the fight against irregular migration. The political vacuum and the social and economic instability that follows will create a new wave of desperate migrants daring the high seas to reach the coasts of Europe. This will deepen the immigration crisis Europe has been trying hard to manage in recent years. Europe is responding with an increased use of force. A new humanitarian crisis is looming.”

From European intellectuals to American generals, left and right alike, are offering to explain, advise, help, or else provide moral or at least military (aka humanitarian) aid to the budding Arab Spring. The corrupt and undemocratic Security Council of the United Nations offered resolutions denouncing Gaddafi, as if his war crimes were any worse than Bush and Cheney’s. Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* hit a new plateau of utter inanity in trying to explain the events in North Africa via his usual banalities of Google and flat earth. Be that as it may, the alphabet of an entirely new political culture is being devised right in front of our eyes. The grammatology of world-altering movements is unfolding, and these are not to be marred by “Western” follies or plots which are hatched up by the upper echelons of Egyptian society to indulge the lowest denominators of our own racialized prejudices.

⁸ Behzad Yaghmaian, *The Spectre of a Black Europe*, Counterpunch, 23 February 2011 (<http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/02/23/the-spectre-of-a-black-europe/>)

One word – *arbil* (*go away*) – summarized the Egyptian revolution, as it was addressed by masses of Egyptian revolutionaries to Hosni Mubarak. The word was cathartic – with the power to rupture, puncture, dismantle, discard. The corrupt and corrupting power of a state apparatus was dismantled by the sheer democratic will of a people, opening a Pandora’s box of possibilities. A single suicide set two massive revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt ablaze. One Internet announcement that people were coming out to challenge the mendacity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the entire capital city was turned into a garrison, flooded by military and security forces. This is the power of the people. From Morocco to Iran, from Syria to Yemen, this is the banality of the evil that claims to be the state. The bizarre arrogance of the thing that still insists on calling itself “the West” is punctured by the fact that the word “democracy” is no longer sufficient to call and claim these revolutions. At Camp Zaatari, the terms of a new political emancipation are being articulated in a language that only future generations will be able to fathom and conjugate.

The direction of these revolutionary movements is ultimately Tel Aviv, when this generation of Israelis will have to recognize that they too want to join this rendezvous with history. But for the young generation of Israelis to tear down those apartheid walls and the even thicker walls that Zionism has constructed in their minds and hearts, they have to feel welcome in the magnificent block party we are having from Morocco to Iran, from Bahrain to Yemen. Arabs and Muslims everywhere must recognize the pain of the Jewish Holocaust in the sufferings of Palestinians right in front of their eyes. The Israelis must feel and be welcomed to join the party.

The world at large, and the ethnographic gaze of Euro-American anthropology in particular, must learn humility from these revolutions, now extended from the euphoria of Tahrir Square to the quiet sufferings of Syrians in Camp Zaatari – as both anticipate, in tandem, the future of the Arab and Muslim world. This is a post-imperial world, when globalization has imploded and neo-liberalism has catastrophically failed, when the center of the latest empire can no longer hold and when we no longer know where the West is, nor the East. We are facing an open-ended geography of liberation – and it begins at Camp Zaatari. The wretched of the earth are grabbing the bastards who have used and abused them by the throat. The world has been mapped out multiple times over. The colonial mapping of the world, with “the Middle East” as its normative epicenter and Israel as the last colonial flag still casting its European view on regional history, is now a witness to the shadow of its own demise. Afghanistan is the current site of imperial hubris, the Islamic republic the last aftertaste of colonized minds that crafted an Islamic ideology, looking askance at the very last Arab potentate ruling de facto postcolonial nation-states, now rising to reclaim historical agency to remap their world – and, on that emerging map, Camp Zaatari is the new cosmopolis.