



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy

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SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES

WOMEN IN ARTS & CULTURE December 6, 2017

Summary

- Inside Syria, women are standing in opposition to the Syrian government, the [Islamic State](#), and patriarchal norms by using traditional crafts, like [weaving](#) and [storytelling](#), to call for peace and equality.
- Amid escalating violence, a large part of the Damascene art community has moved to Beirut, where it currently [flourishes](#), but refugees are also using [food](#) and [theater](#) to preserve and promote Syrian culture abroad.
- The international community has largely [focused](#) on efforts to preserve Syria's heritage sites and artifacts in response to the Islamic State's systematic [destruction](#) and [illegal trade](#) of antiquities.

Overall Situation

The ongoing violence in Syria poses a serious threat to Syrian arts and cultural heritage, but has also [provided](#) new creative spaces that previously did not exist. Artists continue to be [targeted](#) within the country, but Syrian art is undergoing a [renaissance](#) in diaspora, particularly in Beirut. In Syria, women are making their voices heard through diverse media, from weaving to animation, despite [dismissive attitudes](#) toward women's issues and sometimes even [direct violence](#). Among refugees, cooking, painting, and theater groups have helped to incorporate Syrian culture into life abroad.

There has been much international discussion and [condemnation](#) of the destruction of Syrian cultural heritage, but it has centered almost [exclusively](#) on physical artifacts. In 2016, there was an

international conference organized by UNESCO and the German Archaeological Institute on the emergency safeguarding of Syria's cultural heritage. The European Union pledged €2.46 million for the cause, but there is significantly less international focus on the cultivation and preservation of the arts and other forms of living culture.

Background

The Syrian art scene was on the rise from 2004 to 2011, with Damascus described in 2010 by the *New York Times* as a “hub of Mideast art” with galleries nearly indistinguishable from their counterparts in Paris or London. Politics, however, was usually off limits. The government kept a close watch over art and artists, requiring special permission to show work publicly and jailing or threatening those deemed too political. This greatly stifled Syrian creative expression and restricted art to the apolitical or protected elite.

During the revolutionary events after 2011, art was taken to the streets in the form of graffiti, posters, and chants. However, in the face of increasing violence, artists were forced to flee or halt their work for fear of detention. By 2014, 80–85 percent of Damascene galleries had closed. In 2015, café owner Bamar Jomaa set up an art exhibit of more than two dozen works by 15 Syrian artists who had fled the country, titled *And They Left*. The bulk of Syrian artists went to Beirut, transforming it into the de facto capital of Syrian art. One such woman, Raghad Mardini, established the Art Residence Aley, an organization that provides young Syrian artists with a place to live and materials to create their art. At the end of their stay, artists leave behind one piece, creating a collection of Syrian art from this pivotal moment in the nation's history.

Sanaa Yazigi takes a similar approach with her website, *Creative Memory*, which is aimed at documenting the wide range of experiences and creative expression that has come out of the revolution from 2011 to the present. The pieces are sorted by art form, from graffiti to radio, and include a wide variety of political stances, with the idea that to protect Syrian national intangible heritage is essential, “as it belongs to the collective Syrian memory.”

Across Syria, women are using creative means to stand against oppression from the government, armed opposition groups, and even their own male relatives through subversive uses of art forms traditionally used by women. The women of Mazaya Center in Idlib wove the largest-ever flag of the Syrian revolution to remind President Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Islamic State, and men in their own communities of the role women have played in the uprisings and to reiterate their call for equal rights. The center was burned down a month later, and after it was rebuilt, it was attacked again in 2015 by Jabhat al-Nusra fighters.

The anonymity of the internet somewhat alleviates these dangers for the women behind Estayqazat, an anonymous online feminist group that takes stories from Syrian women and turns them into short, animated films about female sexuality and empowerment focused on the collective rather than the individual. Though not exposed to physical harm, the backlash they received on their Facebook page was emblematic of the widespread resistance to the discussion of women's issues in Syria. Some commenters called the pieces inappropriate and told the women to be ashamed of themselves, while others said the topics were trivial in comparison to the violence of the war, and still others accused the women of exaggerating, arguing that women were not really oppressed in Syria.

Within the Jordanian refugee camp, Zaatari, a group called the Jasmine Necklace formed to paint the drab buildings to reflect different regions, greenspaces, and archaeological sites of Syria. Another group, *Art is Zaatari*, seeks to reconnect refugees with their heritage through three stages: recreating models of lost monuments, showcasing Syrian folk art and ancient folk traditions, and

creating original works of art that directly engage artists' experiences of the war.

Theater is also being utilized as a tool for therapy and empowerment among women refugee populations in both Jordan and Lebanon. **Syria Trojan Women** was founded in 2013 in Jordan as a therapeutic drama and advocacy group and in 2016 staged an adaptation of Euripides' anti-war play, *The Trojan Women*, to demonstrate the timelessness of war and women's plight within it. A **documentary**, *Queens of Syria*, was made about their adaptation, following the women on their tour of Britain.

Catholic charity **Caritas** runs a **cooking program** in Beirut in which each woman creates her own version of traditional cuisine, sharing experiences and techniques across ideological bounds as well as calling attention to the rich diversity within Syrian food and culture. Similarly, one of **SouriaLi Radio's** most successful programs is *Fattoush*, a radio cooking show that spotlights regional cultures and communities, including Kurdish, Alawite, and Christian voices, because "food is something that brings people together."

Policy Implications and Challenges

Despite the varied forms of cultural expression, media coverage and policy discussions surrounding the preservation of Syrian heritage have centered almost exclusively on the protection of physical artifacts. All six of the **UNESCO World Heritage Sites** in Syria have been damaged or destroyed, and this violence has been perpetrated by both the **Syrian government** and extremist groups such as **Islamic State**. In 2016, a task force compiled a report titled **#CultureUnderThreat**, and called for the Pentagon to use air strikes to protect heritage sites. The United States Senate responded by **banning** the import of ancient art and artifacts from Syria in an effort to discourage illegal trafficking. France **offered** \$30 million toward a proposed \$100 million for the protection of Syrian heritage sites. Despite the increasing **sectarianism** and **unraveling** of Syria's social fabric, the only form of intangible culture deemed "under threat" by UNESCO is falconry.

UNHCR helps to fund a few projects focused on **arts** and **culture**, such as Syria Trojan Women, but there has not been an organized, international effort to preserve non-archaeological aspects of Syrian culture. Parties on all sides of the conflict have sought to silence and subjugate the Syrian population, particularly women, but the arts are an essential means to push back against this violence. While the protection of Syrian archaeological heritage sites is important, it is equally important to preserve living cultural heritage and narratives, and international policy must take steps to reflect this.



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