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## Coping with violence and displacement through media: The experiences of Syrian audiences

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Since 2011, media has played a significant role in the Syrian conflict, which started as a peaceful uprising, then escalated into a violent civil war

resulting in the [largest](#) refugee and displacement crisis in the world. Mass media played a negative role, acting as a driver of the Syrian conflict by inciting violence, hate speech, and sectarianism. In this article, I focus on successful alternative media interventions that challenge the violent, stereotypical discourse dominant in mass media. As part of a larger research project, I examine, as a case study, the discourse surrounding the Syrian television drama series *Ghadan Naltaqi* (*GN*) [*We'll Meet Tomorrow*] which generated an exemplary dialogue between the forcibly displaced segment of its audience and the writer/creator of the show, Iyad About Chamat. I consider *GN* as an alternative media intervention because it provides a case where media creators help displaced people both to mitigate the traumatic effects of a highly polarising conflict, and to find a healing space from violent and alienating dominant media discourses.

## The context of Syrian media

Before the war, Syrian media was known for its successes in regard to the Syrian drama industry, and for its failure in term of news and public affairs programming ([Kraidy, 2006](#)). However, this has changed rapidly with the emergence, since 2011, of new, alternative online spaces reporting new political perspectives ([Wall and El Zahed, 2015](#)). Regardless of these new spaces, it is widely argued that the media interventions that addressed general Syrian audiences from different political opinions were rare throughout the years of the war. Syrian TV dramas were the best medium to expose structural inequalities and the corruption of the ruling social and economic elites ([Salamandra, 2011](#)). After the war, several new challenges would face the Syrian media sector, including the television drama industry. Challenges, such as the departure of the most qualified drama makers from Syria and the severe decrease in production budgets of drama serials inside the country have negatively affected the quality of the final products, resulting in many drama series that escape from reality through the genre of soap opera. And yet, the cultural production environment of Syrian drama after the “Arab Spring” and the Syrian war has new, positive margins supporting drama that explicitly tackles the current political events in Syria

and the Arab region. A representative example is *Ghadan Naltaqi (GN)* which ran during Ramadan in the summer of 2015. It is particularly interesting because it provides a case where Syrian TV audiences used Facebook as a space to engage with the producer of the show that undertook representation of displaced Syrians experiences.

## Production and broadcast of *Ghadan Naltaqi (GN)*

*Ghadan Naltaqi (GN)* focuses on the daily lived experiences of a group of displaced Syrians who rent separate rooms in one modest building in Lebanon. The group is composed of individuals coming from different social positions in pre-war Syria, and represent diverse political views vis-à-vis the conflict. The show depicts many of the political, economic and cultural challenges that face Syrian refugees who live in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon. The series received positive reviews from Arab critics and audiences, and it was awarded the 2015 Best Comprehensive Drama series of the Year – shared with *The Godfather-East Club* – by the Television and Radio Mondiale in Egypt ([Alaraby Aljadid 2015](#)).

The show also generated controversy over gender-related themes and scenes around sexuality and virginity, which resulted in the decision of Arab TV stations such as Abu Dhabi Al Emarat TV to delete such scenes from broadcast because they did not fit with their censorship standards. However, an uncensored version of the series in high definition, was uploaded by the series production company 'Clacket Media Productions,' and is available on YouTube free of charge. The availability of *GN* on YouTube provided broader access to Syrian audiences around the world who had no other way to watch the series.

Censoring the content that tackles sexuality from the series angered some Syrian critics (such as [Brksiah, 2015](#)) because that omits new experiences of personal freedom many refugees encounter once they move out of their traditional, conservative communities inside Syria. Indeed, one of *GN* contributions – to the representation of gender issues in Arab media – is

showing the agency of refugee women and the new margins of freedom that displacement offers for women to explore newfound bodily pleasures.

## Audiences experiences and communication needs

As a coping mechanism with displacement, watching Syrian TV drama serials provided Syrian audiences with ways to connect with family, friends, and other displaced Syrians all over the world. From pre-war life in Syria, the ritual of watching TV drama serials during Ramadan—with the rest of the family members—was a common family tradition that constructed shared memories between Syrians. Separated by borders and racist politics since 2011, watching Ramadan TV serials and discussing them online with family members, friends, and other diasporic Syrians became a continuation of that nostalgic tradition.

To explore Syrian audiences' experiences with media texts that tackles the war and the refugee crisis, I interviewed the writer/creator of *GN* Iyad Abou Chamat and 25 members of his audience who friended him on Facebook after *GN* aired. Some of these interviewees reside inside Syria and others live in countries like Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, Dubai, Morocco, and the United States. The particularity of the Syrian war-related topic in *GN* and its applicability to both the creator of the series, as well as to audiences' lived experiences evoked a significant level of online participation with Chamat. He assured me that the series was inspired in many ways by his real-world experience. In 2012, he fled Syria, due to the ongoing war, to Lebanon. Then he travelled to France, a country where, in 1996, he had received post-graduate training in scenography after he graduated from the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Damascus, Syria.

*GN* fulfilled Syrian audiences' communication needs to be represented in the media in a way that resembles the reality of the war and its complexity. For instance, Reem (female, resides inside Syria) said: 'The series, for me, is my voice, my opinion, my ideas. It is everything that is going on in my head and my heart about what is happening in Syria. The series described what is

happening in a very professional and honest way.' Additionally, Syrian audiences who engaged with *GN* and its writer/creator identified with the represented experiences of the series' characters. Most interviewees identified with the whole represented lived experiences of the series' characters and preferred not to name any particular character as the one that they identify with the most. However, several interviewees named Jaber as the character that they identify with the most. The reason is because Jaber (regardless of his political positions as supporter of the Syrian regime) is the character that deals the most with the challenges of displacement and transferring from a middle-class lifestyle in Syria to an impoverished lifestyle in Lebanon. Unlike his brother Mahmood, who is a poet, and Wardeh, who continues her on-demand job in bathing the deceased, Jaber came to Lebanon after he lost everything in the war including his small shop. Thus, Jaber's storyline focuses on his search for any job while he finds a way to emigrate to Europe. The following comment explains the reason behind some participant audiences' identification with Jaber: "*Ghadan Naltaqi* represented the suffering of every Syrian inside and outside the country. I saw myself in the suffering of Jaber while he was searching for a job, while he was wandering the street selling CDs in order to live with dignity not needing anyone." (Ibrahim, male, resides in undisclosed place outside Syria).

Syrian audiences used Facebook as a platform for pedagogical exchange with TV drama creators. Like in live theater where, after the performance, audiences may be able to approach the cast to inquire about certain scenes and storylines, after each episode *GN*'s audiences were able to communicate with Chamat to praise, critique or clarify some aspects of the series' narratives. *GN* audiences' online participation with Chamat is also motivated by recognising and admiring Chamat's political intervention and reading of the Syrian conflict through the text's symbolism. [Joubin](#) (2013) argues that Syrian drama creators use metaphors of love, marriage, and gender (de)constructions indirectly to challenge and explore larger issues of political critique, nationalism, government oppression, and corruption. My research supports Joubin's argument.

Chamat confirmed that the main storyline in his series – about the love triangle between Wardeh and two brothers Jaber and Mahmood (who reside next to Wardeh’s room in the same Lebanese school building that was turned into a refugee location for Syrians who rent separate rooms) – is a metaphor of the Syrian war. Wardeh is a symbol of Syria, Jaber is a symbol of the Syrian regime, and Mahmood is a symbol of the Syrian opposition. Chamat clarified this point: ‘...this symbolism was explicit and implicit. The audience figured out quickly this symbolism and they dealt with Wardeh in a real way as if she was Syria.’ Chamat admits to having a larger pedagogical message in his series: ‘Today there is a complete political failure in tackling the Syrian war; therefore, I depend on art to speak to Syrian people’s consciences. Art is very important when politics fail.’ Several audience members explain this symbolism by referring to a scene from Episode 26 where Jaber and Mahmood fought in Wardeh’s room over who loves her and deserves her more, which accidentally causes the burning of the room. Batoul (female, resides inside Syria) said: ‘the most amazing scene was the fire scene in Wardeh’s room because this scene summarised the years of the Syrian crisis. The two brothers burnt the room of the girl who they both loved.’

[Salamandra](#) (2011) notes that Syrian drama creators, before the current war, were known for confronting audiences with the consequences of corruption and neoliberal policies by using ‘stark social realism’ (285). After the war, *GN* symbolises, for Syrian audiences, a continuity of this respected tradition of Syrian art and culture that reflects and critiques the power structures of their society. [Zeno](#) (2017) demonstrates that refugees’ experiences are dominated by feelings of loss and humiliation; thus, it is important for them to find cultural references that invoke a sense of dignity and pride to cope with their displacement. Based on that, *GN* served as a source of national pride motivating audiences to participate online and engage with Chamat and his show. Interviewees reported feeling national pride because of the series’ success in globally representing the experiences and stories of real-world people like them who suffer from and survive through the Syrian war.

In sum, *GN* functioned as an entertainment intervention that provided displaced Syrians with scripts to interpret their nostalgic past in Syria, their painful present in the diaspora, and their hopeful future that contains newfound freedom. Interviewees' perspectives show that the main intervention of drama serials like *GN* is complicating news media narratives about the Syrian conflict by representing diverse, complex characters and storylines that resemble the lived experiences of audiences in contrast to the news media that is either ideological or stereotypical or both (Alhayek, 2014). One particular strategy that *GN*'s team used was to choose famous actors who are known for supporting or opposing the Syrian government and assign them opposite political positions in the show. Syrian audiences saw and appreciated this strategy as an intervention to encourage audiences to listen to the opposite political views from their own and to acknowledge that no political side is solely responsible for the destruction of Syria.

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*Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.*

### About the author



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Katty Al Hayek is a scholar-activist from Syria pursuing a doctorate in communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Her research interests broadly center around themes of conflict, displacement, gender, media and new technologies. Katty was a 2018/19 Conflict Research Fellow on the Conflict Research Programme. Her research project was titled 'Alternative media for peace: Exploring Syrian online spaces for dialogue and reconciliation'.