



Scene from the performance Above Zero at Sunflower Theatre in Beirut, which was supported by Ettijahat – Independent Culture as part of its April 2016 Focus Syria event. Photo: Antoine Entabi.

Syrian art and social change: “Art helps us rethink the future of the country“

In the course of the Syrian conflict, the country’s cultural scene is increasingly hard hit. This is why Ettijahat – Independent Culture tries to create new frameworks for Syrian artistic work. Leonie Harsch met Abdullah Alkafri, the Executive Director in the organization’s regional office in Beirut, to talk about the role of art in political processes and in shaping public discourses on refugees.

The nonprofit organization *Ettijahat – Independent Culture* was founded by a group of Syrian activists towards the end of 2011. Through supporting independent artistic projects and culture-related research in Syria and Syrian diasporas, the organization seeks to strengthen the relationship of the Syrian cultural sector and different societal groups. The overall aim is to contribute to cultural, political, and social change towards a plural and diverse Syria. *Ettijahat* has offices in Beirut and Brussels, from where they manage projects in Syria itself, its neighboring countries, and since recently also Europe.

Alsharq: The logo of Ettijahat shows a dandelion whose seed heads are dispersing. How does this image reflect your organisation's work?

Abdullah Alkafri: We chose this symbol because it illustrates the nature of Syrian independent culture in two ways. Firstly, there is an aesthetic component in its unique character. Secondly, it reflects the motive of exploration. There is a starting point, but also a possibility to travel and to see what is beyond. This represents the imaginations of the artists and researchers whom we support inside and outside Syria. Perhaps it also reflects the changes which the Syrian cultural sector has undergone during the previous six years. *Ettijahat* is Arabic for directions. We are exploring all these directions within the frame of independent culture.

How has the landscape of Syrian culture changed over the past years?

First of all, the location of many Syrian artists has changed. Nowadays, they are all over the world. At the beginning of the events since 2011, many moved from Syria to the neighboring countries. During the past three years, many have moved on to Europe. There are also changes regarding the mechanisms and possibilities of work. The most important transformation, however, concerns the role of the artists and cultural practitioners themselves. They are facing the question how to insert cultural issues into the discussions of decision makers and politicians through their work.

What does this mean for individual artists with regards to their work?

These changes put artists under huge pressures. How should they respond to the big questions raised by the revolution and its sad development? Also, there are currently no sustainable frameworks to support the work of Syrian artists, neither in Syria nor in exile, despite the urgent need for them. The faculties at which art can be studied in Syria are struggling to keep up their work. And artistic higher education here in Lebanon, for example, is too expensive for the majority of Syrian students. This is where *Ettijahat* comes in. We want to pave the way for cultural practitioners who deal with questions of the present and the future in artistic ways.

How does Ettijahat work?

Ettijahat conducts its work on the basis of three primary goals: to support established and budding young Syrian artists in producing their work; to improve the general environment for Syrian cultural and artistic work, and to integrate cultural work with social change initiatives. Most of the projects we have supported were based inside Syria or here in Lebanon. One of our key principles is that we don't create art ourselves, but that we support artistic practices through grants, training, research, and policy work.



Abdullah Alkafri. Photo: Talal Afifi

To what extent does contemporary Syrian artwork reflect the current situation?

The effects of the current situation on art are very powerful. Since the beginning of the revolution in 2011, it has been almost impossible for Syrian artists to ignore events in Syria in their work.

How do you mean this?

During recent years, Syrian art has often just documented the tragedy. We haven't seen many fictional films. We have mostly seen documentaries and testimonial work. The questions which we are facing are, in a way, attacking us. What is happening in Syria is extremely strong. It has left its mark on all Syrians. This influence has made itself felt in artistic work, too. Consequently, there is a risk of Syrian art becoming merely reactive to events in Syria, with less room for originality and creativity. Therefore, in my view, one of the main challenges which the contemporary Syrian artistic scene is facing is creating artwork that is not limited to documentation. This is not to say that a documentary way of working is not important: it can help create a space for the voices of the revolution, the voices of ordinary people who tell their stories.

What other functions can art take on?

Let's take a look at Lebanon to illustrate this. Nowadays, there are more than 1.5 million Syrians living here. Most of them are unable to continue their normal lives for social, economic, and political reasons. For example, many inhabitants of refugee camps don't have access to education, and they face many obstacles when trying to build a social life. In such circumstances, art can assume an important role in transforming people from war victims to active citizens. It can give them the feeling that there are major challenges, but that they have the ability to handle that. Art can help people to express themselves and to increase the resilience that every Syrian needs at the moment.

So art can have empowering effects on individuals. What kind of role can it play in society at large?

Art can play a role in changing society. It helps us to imagine and to rethink the future of the country – and not merely on the political level. Or rather: in ways which are political in a deeper sense. This is one of the motivations behind our “Create Syria” project, which is a partnership between us, the *British Council* and *International Alert*. This project aims to enhance the expertise of Syrian artists and cultural practitioners residing outside Syria. We wish to enable them to play increasingly active roles in improving the lives of their fellow citizens.

We support those chosen by the programme in implementing their own projects, with a focus on those projects that develop long-term cooperation between Syrians and host communities, strengthen constructive dialogue, and break down ingrained stereotypes. For example, in one of our projects titled “Tota Tota”, we trained Syrians, Palestinians, and Lebanese in theatre production. After a year of training, they created a play in cooperation with a theatre collective. The play was performed in several Lebanese cities and even three refugee camps. This is something very important for us: working for Syrians doesn't mean that we work only with Syrians. Through our work, we are hoping to bring about a different discourse about Syria.

In your perception, how are Syria and Syrians represented in current discourses?

There is a tendency to imagine Syria as a black box. This concerns Western discourses just like discourses in Syria's neighboring countries. To some extent it even concerns discourses within Syria, I don't want to draw a clear line in this regard. Descriptions of the region often generalize, they don't reflect a clear understanding of the circumstances which led to the revolution. Syrians are mainly seen as refugees. And this image has the connotation of someone being totally displaced and powerless, just thinking about the past. I definitely think that this connotation is not appropriate – and it is not fair, either.

In which ways is Ettijahat trying to challenge such discourses?

We are always trying to challenge discourses which define people in a blanket fashion – in this case as just refugees. We consider them citizens. This is our deep conviction. They are displaced, and legally they might be refugees. But they are not just that. Syrian refugees are simply ordinary people. They have great dreams, they have hope, they are creative and full of talents, they are active and they would like to develop something in their life. Yes, they are facing an immensely tragic and challenging situation, but they will be able to survive with some support. They are human.

What is a long-term goal for you?

It is easy to see the region as simply burning. We from *Ettijahat* are trying to avoid generalizations and to show that it is possible to act. And we try to do that through art.

What have Ettijahat's most recent steps looked like?

Recently, we have begun to support the Syrian art scene in Europe. For example, led by the organization *Action for Hope*, we created the platform "Landscapes for Hope – Landschaften der Hoffnung" in Berlin, which for a few days brought together artists for music and theatre performances, panels and discussions. Through such projects, we are hoping to not only support the artists who are based there. We hope to support all displaced persons through positively impacting public discourses on refugees in Europe.

Thank you very much for the conversation!