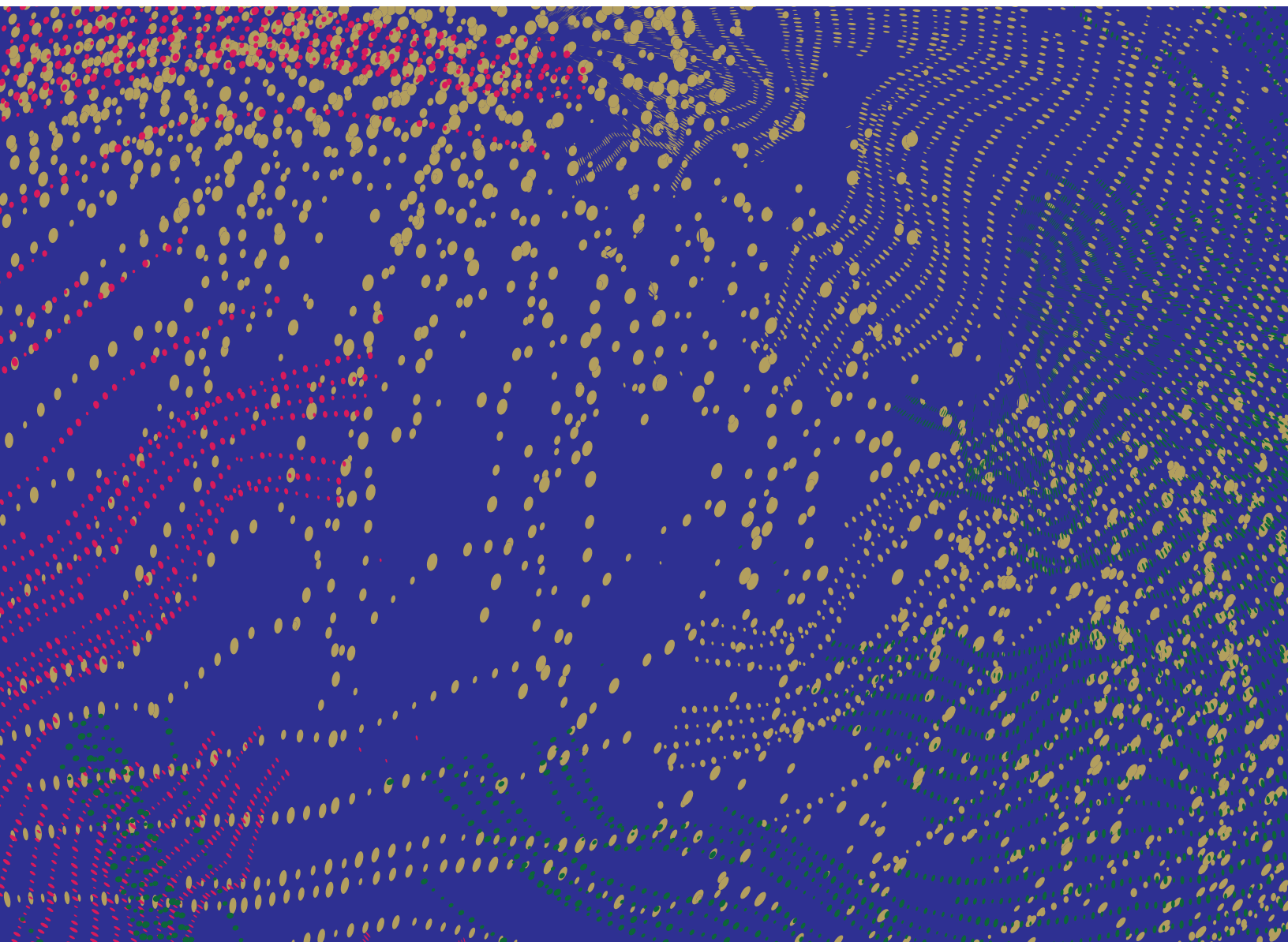


The World Humanities Report

# Case Study: Syria Untold

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# Case Study: Syria Untold

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Syria Untold is an online media site founded in 2013 that aims to disseminate “critical perspectives on Syria and Syrians”<sup>1</sup> through various forms of storytelling, including testimonies from survivors of the Syrian civil war, in-depth features on Syrian life and culture, and journalistic articles. The platform was officially registered as a nongovernmental organization in Berlin, Germany, in 2015, as the city was becoming home to a growing Syrian diasporic population. According to the World Humanities Report survey, Syria Untold’s main goals are to provide accurate and detailed information about the Syrian experience, use multifaceted writing techniques that combine storytelling with journalistic practice, provide a comprehensive mapping of the Syrian uprisings that began in 2011, and create a space that is accessible for people and groups that have been rendered invisible or are not given a platform (e.g., Syrian LGBTQI+ community).

They note that their work is critical because it tackles political, economic, and cultural topics from an alternative perspective—one that is often not covered by mainstream media outlets, citing Mada Masr in Egypt and 7iber in Jordan as platforms that carry out similar work. Syria Untold cover contentious topics, such as sectarianism and ethnic diversity in Syria and the tensions they produce, particularly since the 2011 uprisings. They create a space to discuss issues that are central to national identity and state formation, as well as Syria’s past, present, and future, adding to existing scholarship on these matters. Importantly, however, Syria Untold spotlights indigenous authors who are either living in Syria or are members of the diaspora, thus privileging firsthand accounts and narratives.

To reach a broad audience, Syria Untold publish their work in both English and Arabic; however, they noted in the survey that one of their biggest challenges is to translate concepts and ideas from Arabic to English. Moreover, they identify the lack of funding and the difficulty in finding critically minded writers as two more issues that slow down their work. They try to overcome these challenges by adopting a methodology that involves clear idea formulation, in-depth research, and fact-checking. Furthermore, the group is trying to broaden its scope of work through regional and international networks, notably

<sup>1</sup> Dellair Youssef, Syria Untold, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

a Norwegian online platform called Dar, Argentinian website El Interprete Digital, a collective for Syrian female journalists, and an oral history documentation project in collaboration with openDemocracy. These efforts create a rich tableau through which to understand the Syrian context. It highlights how diverse fields from the arts and humanities—gender studies, oral history, cultural studies—can help paint a more detailed picture of a conflict that has transformed over time.

One interesting area that Syria Untold focuses on is cinema and its evolution within and outside Syria. Through in-depth, critical articles, authors tackle themes like memory in film, censorship, exile, and Orientalism. An article titled “Distorting Syria” by director Orwa Al-Mokdad discusses perceptions of Syria in the West and the ways production companies contort representations of the country and the struggle on screen. He notes, “Double standards between the West and Syria are visible in the portrayal of the bodies of Syrians killed in war,” where “European laws and ethical codes on television channels and in movie festivals prohibit the exploitation of victims’ bodies . . . media corporations and festivals allow the display of such bodies in films about Syrians.”<sup>2</sup> For Al-Mokdad, this is a dangerous phenomenon. As more films about Syria are produced and disseminated in the West, nuanced depictions of the war—in its moments of beauty and hope as well as instances of terrible violence—are lost.

Syria Untold’s platform offers space for groups that were otherwise invisible or silenced to speak about their experiences. For example, the website dedicates one section for the LGBTQI+ community, with articles addressing topics such as queer readings of the revolution, a queer archive of the Syrian uprisings, and queer solidarity in the region. Nour Salem, a pseudonym for an LGBTQI+ activist, talks about the ripple effects of writer and queer activist Hegazy’s death in Syria. They note,

There was a collective fear that many Syrians might face the same fate, especially those who had just discovered and embraced their queerness. . . . To many of them, Sarah’s death was a . . . confrontation with the question: what is our fate in societies that continue to criminalize gender and sexual difference?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Orwa Al-Mokdad, “Distorting Syria: Orientalism, and What Western Film Productions Get Wrong about Syria,” Syria Untold, July 23, 2020, <https://syriauntold.com/2020/07/23/distorting-syria/>.

<sup>3</sup> Nour Salem, “Sarah Hegazi in Syria: A Tragic Loss, and Its Ripple Effects in Syria,” Syria Untold, October 20, 2020, <https://syriauntold.com/2020/10/20/sarah-hegazi-in-syria/> Sarah Hegazy (also spelled Hegazi) was a queer Egyptian activist who was imprisoned for raising a rainbow flag at a concert in Egypt in 2017 and later driven into exile. She took her own life in 2020. A letter she wrote, originally penned in Arabic, circulated on social media platforms

In this context of fear and grief, bonds of solidarity were created across Arab countries. Salem argues that Hegazy's death also brought people who had otherwise been against the LGBTIQ+ community to demonstrate support for Hegazy on a humanitarian basis. More important, Salem's article offers important threads to think through future imaginaries of a Syria that is inclusive. They note,

Between staying and leaving, homeland and exile, identity and societal norms, freedom and state oppression, we need a space in our imaginings of a future Syria that is not tied to the excruciating pain of these binary choices; one that protects gender and sexual freedoms and the rights of the LGBTIQ community, and that remains a safe space.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the organization is based in Germany, Syria Untold work directly with people in Syria as well as Syrians in diaspora. The platform affords writers, thinkers, and activists a space for emotional expression and communication. Whether the topic is grief, anger, hope, or change, these affective threads produce new understandings of journalistic practice and activism that are centered around storytelling. In the survey, Syria Untold note that the website is a way to “combine contemporary forms of storytelling with journalism,”<sup>5</sup> and although they initially began as a website collecting information about the Syrian uprising, they transformed into a platform for producing knowledge, research, and investigative reports. Omar Al-Ghazzi argues for a conceptualization of journalism in the Arab world that centers the affective, “embodied and the emotional experiences entailed in local reporting and witnessing [which] are an important part of contemporary journalism,” although they often get ignored when journalism “is exclusively defined by the values associated with distance.”<sup>6</sup> This is especially true in contexts like Syria—where instability, war, and violence prevail and where the lines between activism, reporting, and critical knowledge production are blurred.

following her death. It read: “To my siblings—I tried to survive and I failed, forgive me. To my friends—the experience was harsh and I am too weak to resist it, forgive me. To the world—you were cruel to a great extent, but I forgive.” Her death was mourned by many. In 2018, Hegazy penned an op-ed (in Arabic) describing her harrowing experience in prison. The article was republished in English in 2020 following her tragic death (<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/06/15/opinion/u/a-year-after-the-rainbow-flag-controversy/>).

<sup>4</sup> Salem, “Sarah Hegazi in Syria.”

<sup>5</sup> Youssef, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

<sup>6</sup> Omar Al-Ghazzi, “Forced to Report: Affective Proximity and the Perils of Local Reporting on Syria,” *Journalism* (2020): 12.

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