

14. Biographies in Motion

An academic-artistic photo exhibition gives voice to Arab newcomers to Berlin

Eman Helal, Hanan Badr

In their own voice

In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, the massive first wave of protests in 2010/11, many Arab intellectuals, novelists, artists, journalists, and researchers were specifically targeted and forced to migrate. This led to a notable growth of diasporic communities in European cities, particularly in Berlin.

This portrait series features faces of the Arab diasporic community in Berlin, especially those who left their countries right after the Arab Uprisings of 2010/11. It intentionally focuses on the so-called newcomers to Berlin. Instead of labeling the portraits in dry language, we chose to bring them to life by sharing the words of those portrayed as they took stock of topics like migration, education, arts, language, and identities in Berlin. The more than 40 people interviewed and photographed are from many fields: fine arts, music, literature, handicrafts, entrepreneurship, culture, and tourism, to name just a few.

This exhibition de-essentializes misconstructions about Arabs and lets new migrants speak for themselves. The project critically reflects on the non-political consequences of the Arab Uprisings beyond the liberation euphoria by retracing the fates of people who voluntarily or involuntarily left their home countries.

The exhibition started as a collaboration between an academic and a photographer, both co-authors for this chapter. An accompanying special issue ‘Ten Years after the Arab Uprisings’ was published in the high-ranking journal *Media and Communication*, in a project that was funded by the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA).¹

1 The exhibition, which was funded by the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA), features 12 portraits out of 40 photographed individuals and cultural initiatives of Arab newcomers to Berlin. It is part of the tandem project ‘Arab Uprisings – Beyond Media and Liberation: Publication & Exhibition’ by AGYA member Lena-Maria Möller and AGYA alumna Hanan Badr with portraits by the Egyptian documentary photographer Eman

Letting the newcomers speak and share their stories means questioning whether Berlin is truly the city of indefinite dreams for all 2: not all featured people have had brilliant new starts. Their struggles with and thoughts about uncertainty and new personal transformation also resemble the personal struggles of the co-authors, who left their home country Egypt after the massive closure of the public spheres for academia and journalism there.

When one of the co-authors (Eman Helal) left her county in 2019 to seek professional opportunities in Germany and continue her career in photography, she was unfortunately confronted with a lack of acknowledgement of her expertise. Many treated her like a novice who had just started taking pictures yesterday. Some potential employers didn't even care to check on her previous projects in Egypt and elsewhere. It felt as if her 15 years of experience simply did not count.

In a different world, that of academia, the other co-author (Hanan Badr) felt the very same subtle and invisible lines of exclusion. The journals and academic venues where she had built her reputation in the Arab region were not well known or understood, rendering her expertise invisible.

This was where the two authors connected, and their urge to make the voices of the Arab intellectuals who live in Berlin heard seeded an exhibition. The exhibition would witness their perspectives and previous experiences before coming to Germany and make their biographies count.

Working on the photographic expression of the project "Ten years after the Arab Uprisings" gave Eman Helal a chance to remember and reflect on what she had already achieved in her career. She didn't want to forget where she and her co-author came from, or what she had experienced while she was documenting the Egyptian revolution in 2011. It became important to her to raise awareness for this shared history. Therefore, working on the project became a resonance space to reflect on their experiences and cultivate the neglected feelings that had arisen but had been ignored during the co-authors' journeys in Germany.

In and Out of Berlin: Changing perspectives

Eman Helal was living elsewhere when this project started, and the documentary exhibition focus on Berlin aligned with her original wish to move to and live in Berlin.

Helal. The published special issue featured eight peer-reviewed articles scrutinizing the role of media in the transformation period after 2011. The issue attracted contributions from a broad spectrum of different countries and disciplinary perspectives: media and communication studies, linguistics, political sciences, area studies, Islamic studies, and urban studies. The special issue is available Open Access here: <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/issue/view/275>

From her outsider perspective, first living in Hannover and then later in Hamburg, Berlin shone like a cosmopolitan city embracing its vibrant and diverse Arab community. During her frequent visits for photoshoots and interviews, the commuting photographer realized that living in Berlin could be very hectic. She understood that the city could easily lure Arab newcomers into a comfort zone, surrounded by Arabs, eating Arabic food, and hanging out with Arab friends in their favorite spots all the time. Moving from one neighborhood to another to meet with the subjects of the photographs offered her a chance to discover how big and diverse Berlin is in terms of its architecture, its cuisines, and even the appearance of its people. These were good reasons to fall in love with and return again and again to Berlin.

Berlin is the favored location for any Arab artist or concert today. The city has gained an international standing, like Paris or London, and has become the center of Arab intellectual life. This can cause envy for Arabs who live elsewhere and have to handle logistics and financial costs when they want to connect with their culture.

One recent example: In early 2023, for example, Bassem Youssef, the Egyptian comedian and host of the most popular show *Albernameg* who had to leave Egypt recently, gave two consecutive sold-out shows at Tempodrom in Berlin. Another example: At the end of 2022, Eman's favorite band Cairokee performed in Berlin at Huxley's *Neue Welt* at Hermannplatz during their European tour. Crossing the street at the traffic light meant being surrounded by people speaking with an Egyptian accent. A long line of young people who had come from different cities and even from outside Germany to enjoy the concert waited outside and excitedly shared stories with strangers. You could even hear one of the band's songs playing from the kiosk around the corner. The sense of warmth and belonging was unparalleled.

But on another occasion in 2022 she asked an Egyptian friend based in Berlin whether he would like to go to the *Al Berlin Music Festival*. To her surprise, he replied that he had stopped going to those concerts because it bored him to see the same faces every time he went out.

So, after finishing the project, Eman finally reconsidered and decided not to move to Berlin after all. She has found that keeping a distance from the city, yet still traveling back and forth to attend concerts or visit friends, is her best option. That does not mean she lacks affection for the city, but she has recognized that she needs to keep her distance to miss the city.

Berlin has acquired the image of Germany's capital for Arab communities, attracting many intellectuals from outside Germany. It has a powerful attraction, not only for new residents², but also for Arab tourists who want to visit major cultural attractions like the *Berlinale Film Festival* or Arab intellectual initiatives like *AlFILM*

2 Book Editors' note: Chapters written by newcomers to Berlin like the Bahraini journalist Nazeeha Saeed and the Yemeni science communicator Hashem Al-Ghaili echo this sentiment. See also chapter by Amro Ali in this volume.

and ALFESTIVAL. The city has become powerfully linked in the collective Arab imagination to a life in freedom and prosperity. But a central message in the exhibition project has been to de-essentialize the Arab image of Germany and Berlin as overly positive and romanticized. The ambivalence between the dream and the reality can be reflected in popular culture.

In their song “Better than Berlin”, a title that alludes to their hometown of Haifa, Faraj Suleiman and Majd Kayyal lament the anonymity of Berlin despite its crowds. They see Berlin as an enigmatic but ultimately replaceable European city:

“Berlin is mentioned because of two reasons: it’s the face of a generation that travels and tries new places, lots of young people immigrate there. It’s a place that’s very artistic, cheap, they speak English, it’s easy for people to try [to be] themselves there. But Berlin is also recalled in the album by chance; but it’s not just Berlin, it’s Haifa. We just believe that Haifa is nicer” (Nabil 2022).

Similarly, in the course of this project, through her camera lens, Eman started seeing Berlin with different eyes and realized that her relationship with the city had changed. She no longer wanted to live there because she found it too hectic. Today she sees it as an excellent spot for short vacations and culture-related activities but not for long-term stays.

Moving encounters with personal stories

Back to the exhibition: Opening in May 2022 for the *Salon Sophie Charlotte* as hosted by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW), the photo exhibition “Biographies in Motion – The Arab Intellectual Community in Berlin” brought faces in the Arab communities in Berlin out of the shadows of exile and into the center of Berlin life at Gendarmenmarkt. Why the title “Biographies in Motion”? Because the Arab Berlin stories illustrate the rise and fall, the hope and courage, but also the loss and despair inherent in new beginnings.

An exhibition space was created in the famous historic Paternoster in the BBAW building for powerful impact. The idea to use the vintage elevator with its open circling cabins was developed with Dr. Sabine Dorpmüller and her colleagues Masetto Bonitz, Sebastian Fäth, and Ann-Cathrin Gabel of the AGYA Berlin Office, who also conceptualized and curated the installation as well as the opening program. Installing the photographs with captions in the circling cabins of the Paternoster brought motion both literally and figuratively into the lives of the Arab diaspora in Berlin. The installation concept presented moving stories, giving life to each photograph and inviting each subject to tell their story as they passed from floor to floor. The audience would follow the speaker from the first to the fifth floor. Following the movement of the Paternoster upwards, visitors were invited to listen and engage with the Arab Berliners portrayed, looking back at the Arab Uprisings

more than ten years ago and the reasons these people had come to Berlin and how they had carved out a new existence for themselves.

The subjects – intellectuals, artists, journalists, musicians, entrepreneurs, and cultural mediators – come from Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. They represent the diversity of the Arab diaspora in Berlin. Only 8 pictures were selected for this book to reflect diverse geographic origins and fields and to ensure gender balance. But 40 other stories from the exhibition cannot be told here. In the following, we show selected portraits with quotations from the subjects along with two pictures documenting the exhibition.

Fig. 14.1: Kheder Abdulkarim – from Syria, 55 years



“I am a Syrian Kurdish painter. I was persecuted as a political activist. Art allows me to process my experiences in prison in Syria as well as my new exile life in Berlin.”

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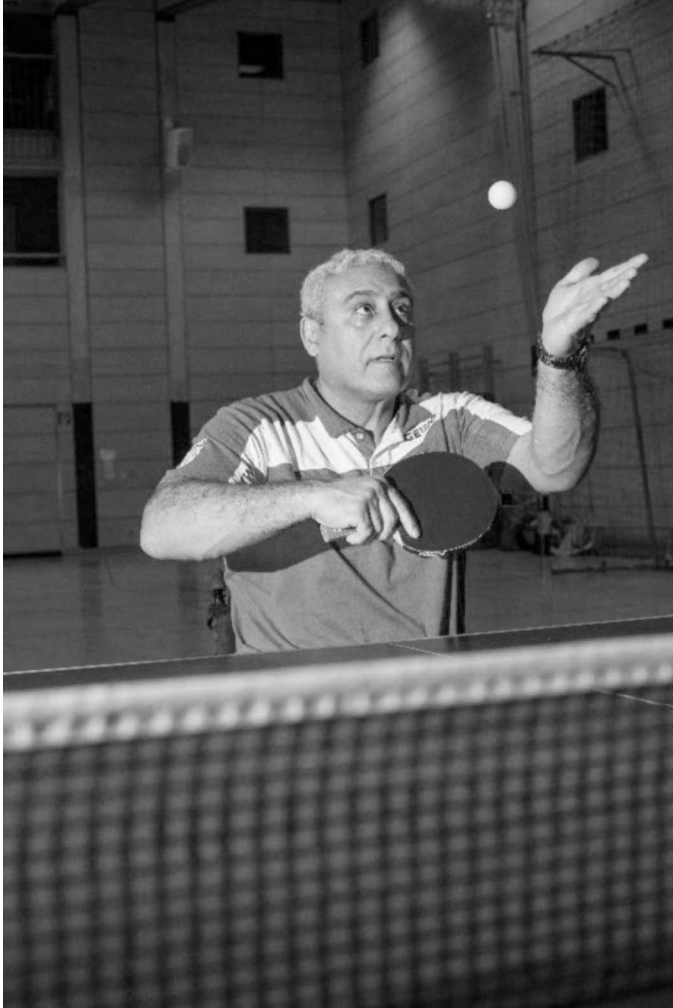
Fig. 14.2: Abir Kopty – from Palestine, 46 years



“I am an Arab mum, journalist and PhD student in Berlin. A part of my heart is still in Palestine, and while I’m grateful for the diversity Berlin offers, I think it’s equally important to stay connected with the Arab World.”

© AGYA/Eman Helal

Fig. 14.3: Adham Elsaid – from Egypt, 56 years



“Leaving my celebrity life as a professional singer, I am confined to the niche of Arabic music in Berlin. Through sports, I could make new friends beyond the Arab diaspora.”

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Fig. 14.4: Ahmed Isam Aldin – from Sudan, 31 years



“I am a visual artist and designer. I believe our artistic work needs to reflect on social changes in Europe from Arab perspectives.”

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*Fig. 14.5: Amal, Berlin!*³



“As newcomer journalists in Berlin, we produce local news for migrant publics. We cross language barriers and encourage participation in community life.” Amal, Berlin! means Hope, Berlin!
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3 Editors' note: See chapter 3 written by Abdolrahman Omaren and Julia Gerlach about Amal, Berlin!.

Fig. 14.6: Fekra Berlin



“We teach Arab kids who grew up here in Berlin. We select Arabic language books reflecting the children’s surroundings in Europe.” Fekra in Arabic means Idea.

© AGYA/Eman Helal

Fig. 14.7: Hayder Alhawani – from Iraq, 33 years



“I am an Iraqi journalist and TV reporter. After receiving death threats, I had to flee my country. In Berlin, I had to give up journalism to earn a living.”

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Fig. 14.8: Nazeeha Saeed – from Bahrain, 39 years⁴



“After covering the Arab Uprisings in Bahrain as a journalist for Western Media, I lost my accreditation. Moving to Europe meant losing a network of support, comfort, and wealth.”

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4 Editors' note: See Chapter 4 written by journalist Nazeeha Saeed.

Fig. 14.9: Baynatna



“We created a home for ourselves in Berlin through the public library that we share with others. We offer a safe space for the exile community to meet and interact.” Baynatna in Arabic means Between us.

© AGYA/Eman Helal

Fig. 14.10: Wassim Muqdad – from Syria, 36 years



“As a professional Oud player, I had to protect my hands from torture. My instrument was my most precious possession when I had to flee from Syria.”

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Fig. 14.11: Biographies in Motion Exhibition Opening



From left to right: Eman Helal, Dr. Hanan Badr (Exhibition curators and chapter authors) and Dr. Sabine Dormmüller (Managing director of Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities), at the exhibition opening at Salon Sophie Charlotte, Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften in May 2022.

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Fig. 14.12: Dr. Julia Hauser (AGYA alumna and historian at University of Kassel) and Dina Abdelhafez (featured in the exhibition) discuss migration and higher education.



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Fig. 14.13: Eman Helaland Dr. Hanan Badr at the exhibition opening



“In this exhibition, we want to give Arab newcomers to Berlin a voice to be heard beyond the stereotypical images.”

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References

Nabil, Laila (2022) ‘Better Than Berlin’: A Conversation with Faraj Suleiman and Majd Kayyal. Institute for Palestine Studies blog, March 24 (<https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1652699>).