

Songs for and Regional Solidarity

يا بشار يا ملعون
مفكر علينا بتمون
دم الشهدا ما بنخون
و يلا ارحل بشار

يا بشار ويا دكتور
حاج تلف وحاج تدور
دمك في درعا مهدور
و يلا ارحل يا بشار

يا بشار و يا خسيس
انت ألعن من ابليس
ويا لله ارحل يا بشار
و بدنا شيلك يا بشار
و بهمتنا القوية

ويا بشار ويا مندرس
تضرب انت وحزب البعث
وروح صلح حرف الاس
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

وبدنا نشيلو لبشار وبهمتنا القوية
سوريا بدا حرية.. سوريا بدا حرية

وبلا ماهر وبلا بشار وهالعصابة الهمجية
سوريا بدا حرية سوريا بدا حرية

يا بشار و يا خسيس
و دم الشهداء مانو رخيص
و ضبلي غراضك بالكيس و
يلا ارحل يا بشار

Free Syria Cross-Border

Joey
Ayoub

يلا ارحل يا بشار
حماة (2011)

ويا بشار طز فيك
وطز يلي بيحيك
والله بقرف طلع فيك
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

ويا بشار حازه تدور
ودمك بحماة مهدور
وخطأك مانو مغفور
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

لسا كل فترة حرامي
شاليش وماهر ورامي
سرقوا اخواتي وعمامي
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

يلا ارحل يا بشار
ويا بشار مانك منا
خود ماهر وارحل عنا
وشرعيتك سقطت عنا
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

يا بشار ويا كذاب
تضرب أنت وهالخطاب
الحرية صارت على الباب
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

ويا ماهر ويا جبان
ويا عميل الامريكان
الشعب السوري مابنهان
ويلا ارحل يا بشار

Most of the region known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), or South West Asia & North Africa (SWANA), continues to be mired in brutal military dictatorships or monarchies.

At the time of writing, however, which is over a decade following the start of the 2011 revolution and several years into Syria's ongoing destruction, chants first heard on the streets of Syria have been since re-used in Palestine and Lebanon. For that reason, this text will argue that chants are some of the most powerful remnants of a time not permitted to survive.

On 30 December 2011, surrounded by thousands of Syrian protesters in Homs' Clock Tower Square, ex-goalkeeper Abdul Baset al-Sarout led the crowd in chanting one of the region's most famous songs:

جنة جنة جنة والله يا وطنًا
"Heaven, heaven, oh our homeland [is heaven]."

يا وطن يا حبيب يا بو تراب الطيب حتى نارك جنة
"Oh homeland, oh beloved, oh good soil, even your fire is heaven."

By the time he was killed in combat in June 2019, al-Sarout had led hundreds of chants at protests throughout the country, especially in his native Homs.

Cross-border co-conspirators

During another protest that took place just a few days later on 3 January 2012, this time in Hama, Ibrahim Qashoush led the crowd in singing the following:

جنو الجنو البعثية لما طلبنا الحرية
"They lost their mind, they lost their mind, the Baathists lost their mind when we demanded freedom."

Qashoush and his musical co-conspirators changed the term "heaven" (janna) to "they lost their mind" (jannou). As it happens, "Baathists" (Baathyyeh), a reference to the ruling Baath party in Syria which has been in power since 1970, rhymes with both freedom (Hurryeh) and thieves (Harmyyeh), so the rest of the chorus goes like this:

يلعن روحك أبو حافظ يا ابن الحرامية
"Curse your soul Abou Hafez [Bashar Al-Assad], you son of thieves."

Every verse is followed by a repeat of the chorus: Baathyyeh (Baathists) and Harmyyeh (thieves), with Hurryeh (freedom) stubbornly inserting itself between the two.

Chants are often overlooked as being nothing more than momentary. In Syria, there is even a term for the pre-2011 policy of the Assad regime to occasionally allow some critical voices to reach a wider audience: *tanfis*. In the words of Shareah Taleghani, author of "Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights", *tanfis* could be understood as a "safety valve" which "preserves the hegemony of a repressive regime by allowing the venting of frustrations that might otherwise be translated into oppositional political action"¹. Dismissing the importance of chants, therefore, risks reinforcing the structures which uphold authoritarian regimes such as that of Assad in Syria. To put it differently, ignoring chants is akin to accepting the logic of *tanfis*: they are there to let some steam out, but nothing more.

Instead, it is important to recognize that chants, alongside visual creations such as protest signs, memes, music videos, and so on, are tools of non-violent resistance, especially during times when taking to the streets becomes too dangerous. For example, when the Assad regime was dropping bombs on Eastern Ghouta in March 2018, one defiant singer in Yarmouk opted to release a video of himself singing for Ghouta, which was visible in his background, encouraging its residents to rise up.

Get out, Bashar

Hama (2011)

**Get out (depart), Bashar
Bashar you are not one of us
Take Maher and leave us
Your legitimacy with us has fallen
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Oh Bashar you liar
To hell with you and your speech
Freedom is at the door
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Oh Maher you coward
You agent of the Americans
The Syrian people will not be insulted
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Oh Bashar, screw you
And screw those who salute you
God is disgusted by you
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Bashar, stop hiding
Your blood is worthless in Hama
Your mistake is not forgiven.
Yalla get out Bashar**

**There are new thieves all the time
[Dhu al-Himma] Shalish and Maher [Al-Assad] and Rami [Makhlouf]
They robbed my brothers and my uncles
Yalla get out Bashar**

Since the 2011 Arab Spring, we've seen a creative outburst of Arabic (and Kurdish) chants and songs, particularly from Syria, crossing the region's colonial borders into neighboring Lebanon and Israel-Palestine. Part of their appeal is their malleability of being adaptable to the context in which they are sung. For example, in Da'el in February 2012 protesters chanted: "Even if he [Assad], wants to kill thousands with a Shilka [Soviet-era tank] or an AK47, even if he becomes Muammar Gaddafi, we will liberate Syria."

By then, the Assad regime had already declared war on Homs and started obliterating neighborhood after neighborhood starting from Baba Amr. The protesters in Da'el referenced this by singing: "Baba Amr bleeds and the massacres are a daily occurrence, and the world does not care. Where is Arab chivalry? The [United Nations] security council, deaf to our cries, did not hear the million-man march. Tell us how many it will cost; we want to liberate Syria!"

In this song, as with many that preceded and that followed, protesters were referencing existing realities. They knew what was happening around them and they responded with death-defying chants celebrating life, solidarity, and revolution.

Adapting local contexts

Their impact has been so powerful that by the time large-scale protests were happening in Lebanon (2019) and Israel-Palestine (2021), Lebanese and Palestinian protesters took some of the Syrian chants, adapted them to their local contexts, and spread them on the streets and the internet.

Take the example of "*yalla erhal ya Bashar*" (hurry up, leave Bashar [Al-Assad]), also by Qashoush. "*Yalla erhal ya Bashar*" has since been adapted by protesters throughout the region and beyond. During the 2019 October revolution, protesters adapted the "*ya Bashar*" chant to the various warlords and oligarchs ruling Lebanon, such as Nasrallah, Hariri, Aoun, Berri, Jumblatt, Geagea, Bassil, Sinioura, and more. It exists in multiple

versions, perhaps the most iconic being the chant sung by Lebanese diaspora protesters in Paris on 17 November 2019 in which most of the major politicians were named.

A group of feminists even went beyond the specific Lebanese context and adopted the tune; they converted the "*ya/lla/er/hal/ya/ba/shar*" into "*thaw/ra/bi/kel/el/belden*", meaning "revolution in all of the countries".

In addition to its resonance across Arab-majority countries such as Iraq, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Palestine, the chant was also heard in Hong Kong, Iran, and Chile – places also engaged in struggle. When the chant first emerged, not all countries were actively engaged in struggle, but all were and are countries that have this immediate potential. Feminists created a bond in such a way, as if saying to the others "we are waiting for you": "We know that you will one day engage in struggle (again)".

As it happens, when Palestinians took to the streets against Israeli violence in May 2021, some of them looked to another Lebanese chant. "*Hela Hela Ho*", which was sung in Haifa, was first sung in Beirut against the Lebanese politician Gebran Bassil. It was adopted in Haifa and targeted Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the Palestinian Authority and a figure widely seen as complicit in the Israeli occupation.

This chant is simple and purposefully vulgar, a way of showing complete disrespect to figures who constantly demand to be respected: "*Hela Hela, Hela Hela Ho, Fuck [name of politician]*". Literally: "his mother's vagina" which means "fuck his mother" (the "Emmo" [his mother] rhymes with the "Ho" sound) as a way of saying "fuck [name of politician]". Given the gendered nature of this insult, common in Lebanon and the region, feminists have tried to reclaim it by replacing the second part of the sentence with "fuck Gebran and his uncle"; "his uncle" being a reference to the president Michel Aoun, Bassil's father-in-law. The Arabic for "fuck him" here literally translates to "my penis [in Gebran]" as means of subverting the otherwise common

**Bashar, you infiltrator
Screw you and the Baath party.
And go fix your letter 's'
Yalla get out Bashar**

**We will remove Bashar by our strong determination
Syria wants freedom**

**No Maher [Al-Assad] and no Bashar and no barbaric gang
Syria wants freedom**

**Oh Bashar you villain
The blood of martyrs is not cheap
Pack your stuff in a bag
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Oh Bashar you damned
You think you can cheat us
The blood of martyrs is not cheap
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Oh Bashar you doctor
Enough hide and seek
Your blood is worthless in Daraa
Yalla get out Bashar**

**Oh Bashar you villain
You are cursed by the devil
Yalla get out Bashar**

**We will remove you Bashar
With our strong determination**

usage of a mother's genitalia as an insult. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were the first to use the "Hela Hela Ho" song against Mahmoud Abbas in 2019, while also joining in the chants against Lebanese politicians. In other words, Palestinians across the Israel-Palestine/Lebanon border, the border that stands in the way of their right of return, saw value in a chant and used it against both Lebanese and Palestinian politicians.

Palestinians have also been singing the "Heaven, heaven, oh our homeland" song popularized by al-Sarout over the past decade, most recently in May 2021, and protesters in Lebanon adapted the Syrian chant "*hur hur hurryeh*" (free, free, free-dom) to their local context. This is how it goes:

حر، حر، حرية، نحنا بدنا حرية، غصبا عنك يا بشار، رح
نحصل عالحرية

*"Free- free- freedom, we will reach our freedom.
Despite you oh [name], we will reach our freedom."*

In Syria, the person named would be inevitably Bashar Al-Assad. In Lebanon, a country which unlike Syria doesn't have a single dictator, the main oligarchs and warlords listed before would be named instead, as done in October 2019 by a group of protesters in Beirut, for example. Having been present at this event, I can describe the mood as that of euphoria, as if we had finally managed to break the taboo of respectability against our politicians.

The most famous of them all

Finally, no overview of regional anti-government chants would be complete without mentioning the most famous of them all:

الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام
"The people want the downfall of the regime."

It was first chanted in Tunisia and Egypt. It then spread and continues to echo and travel across the region, having been heard again in the streets as recently as in 2019 in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan and Algeria and in 2021 in Israel-Palestine. In Lebanon, the chant was adopted to the local context, with "the regime" (although this word was also used many times) replaced with "sectarianism", a reference to the country's confessional political system widely seen as a major source of corruption. In Israel-Palestine, protesters in front of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque replaced "the regime" with "the president", Mahmoud Abbas.

Endnotes

- 1 R. Shareah Taleghani, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021.

Further reading/listening

thefirethesetimes.com

Video of the song "Get out, Bashar":

youtube.com/watch?v=a-qDRkZ1354

يا حيف سميح شقير

يا حيف اخ ويا حيف
زخ رصاص على الناس العزل يا حيف
وأطفال بعمر الورد تعتقلن كيف
وانت ابن بلادي تقتل بولادي
وظهرك للعادي وعليه هاجم بالسيف
يا حيف يا حيف

وهذا اللي صاير يا حيف
بدرعا ويا يما ويا حيف
سمعت هالشباب يما الحرية عالباب يما طلعو يهتفول
شافو البواريد يما قالو اخوتنا هن ومش رح يضربونا
ضربونا يما بالرصاص الحي
متنا، بايد إخوتنا، باسم امن الوطن
واحنا مين إحنا
واسألوا التاريخ، يقرأ صفحتنا

Ya heif (What a shame)

Samih Choukeir

Ya heif

Firing your guns on unarmed civilians ya heif

Young children young as roses being detained, how can this be?

You are the son of my country, and you are killing my children

Your back is turned to the enemy and you're pulling a sword in my face

Ya heif

مش تاري السجن يما كلمة حرية وحدة هزتلو اركانو
ومن هتفت لجموع يما اصبح كالمسوع
يما يصلينا بنيرانو واحنا اللي قلنا اللي بيقتل شعبو خاين
يكون من كاين
والشعب مثل القدر
من ينتخي ماين
والشعب مثل القدر
والامل باين

يا حيف

This is what's happening, ya heif,
In Dar'aa, this is what's happening, oh mother!
Young people heard that freedom is at the gates so they went out to call for it
They saw the guns and said the gunholders won't shoot for they are our brothers
But they did shoot us, oh mother, with real bullets
We were killed by the hands of our brothers in the name of national security
Who are we?
Ask history, it will show you our page

A single word, 'freedom' oh mother shooock the jailer to his core
And when the crowd chanted, o mother he became mad
We became his target and we're the ones who said:
'He who kills his people is a traitor
Whoever he may be'
Our people are like destiny
They will rise and they will be heard
Our people are like destiny
And hope is clear

Ya Heif