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# Choosing Syria

Narratives of staying or returning, as told by the story-teller of SouriaLi, a Syrian non-government radio station in 2012-2018

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## Abstract

Why would someone return to Syria after 2011, or choose to stay if they had the chance to leave? This thesis explores the answers to this question as presented in 15 stories told in the Ḥakawātī (Storyteller) program in the Syrian non-government controlled Radio Souriali, in the period 2012-2018. The thesis finds that central motivations, as presented in the stories, include a desire to stay true to one's moral self, a feeling of obligation to help others, and a feeling of belonging. The thesis also finds that telling these stories could be a way of including Syrians in the story about their country, thereby providing agency and hope for change.

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Any mistakes or shortcomings are entirely my own.

## Note on transliteration

For Arabic terms, titles, names and places, I have used the IJMES transliteration system, except in cases where there exists a commonly used English word, such as Syria, Aleppo, Damascus.

For Syrian Arabic dialect, I have used the IJMES system with some modifications:

Arabic and IJMES transliteration	Syrian Arabic transliteration		Arabic and IJMES transliteration	Syrian Arabic transliteration
ذ dh	z or d, according to pronunciation		الـ al-, l-	il-, l-
ق q	q̣ when it is pronounced as glottal stop		و wa	wi
يَ ay	ē		لـ li-	la-
و aw	ō or aw, according to pronunciation		ة -a, -at (in construct)	-a or -e (according to pronunciation), -at, -et (in construct)

All translations are my own.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2012, a young Syrian man with a lot of free time on his hands was sitting by his computer, surfing on random Facebook pages and pressing 'like' on everything. When he saw a picture of a man with a protest sign in Kafranbel calling for an end to the country's bloodshed, he was very surprised. He knew the man on the picture! It was his friend Niqūlā. But what he knew was that Niqūlā had fled to Germany! Why was he in the picture from Kafranbel? Had he come back to Syria? Why?

This is the first part of one of the stories told on the *Ḥakawātī* program of the Syrian independent radio channel *Sūryālī* (often written in Latin script as SouriaLi or Souriali)<sup>1</sup>. This radio channel is one out of a landslide of new media in Syria, including radio, newspapers, magazines and even TV channels, that appeared in the course of the first eighteen months of the "revolution"<sup>2</sup> after decades of only government-controlled media.

The radio, and especially this program, caught my attention for several reasons. One is that I have an interest in activism and especially revolutions, big, people-led events that have the power to transform a society towards democracy.<sup>3</sup> The radio represented one out of several hundred Syrian initiatives and organizations geared towards creating a more democratic Syria. These nonviolent voices were soon drowned in news about all the violent incidents that happened in Syria. When I saw a diagram in the Norwegian peace magazine

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<sup>1</sup> The complete list of recordings of Ḥakawātī Souriali episodes that I have used for this project is available on Soundcloud:

<https://soundcloud.com/souriali/sets/xtakhgoxpnuh>

<sup>2</sup> The term 'revolution' (in Arabic *thawra*,) to describe events in Syria from 2011 and after is contested, because the demonstrations did not lead to the profound changes the word 'revolution' implies. While activists, including presenters in Souriali, still prefer the term 'revolution', more neutral terms include 'uprising', 'insurrection' or 'revolt'. Others just call it 'the events', or just refer to what happened later, 'civil war'.

<sup>3</sup> The movie *How to start a revolution* (2011) introduced me to Gene Sharp's extensive scholarly work on nonviolent action as a means to transform societies from dictatorship to democracy, and a research field of civil resistance where the American ICNC (The International Center for Nonviolent Conflict) is one of the leading research institutions. Another important book to further arouse my interest in this topic was *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011) by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan. Their research question was: Which is more efficient, a violent or a nonviolent campaign, when the aim is to end dictatorship, foreign occupation, or to achieve secession? Their surprising finding was that nonviolent campaigns had a double success rate compared to violent campaigns, in the cases studied: campaigns with more than 1000 participants, with the aims stated, from 1900 to 2006, from all over the world.

*Fredsviljen*<sup>4</sup> mapping these organisations based on their activities and their relations to each other, and just the general statement that the nonviolent protests were not dead, I was surprised that we do not hear more about it. I resolved to find out more about these organisations and initiatives.

Another reason is just that I love stories in general, and that the coherence, strong moral messages and literarisation of these stories make for really enjoyable listening.

A third reason is the interest in *history from below*. "History is always written by the victors," was a catchphrase I learned at high school, before I dropped out of this subject altogether. The almost exclusive focus on European history, combined with the focus on rulers and wars, made me lose interest and choose human rights as a subject instead.

Later I studied Middle Eastern history with great interest at university. But here I discovered that the most interesting account of the Iranian revolution and the ensuing war with Iraq was not what I read in the history books, but in two personal stories about it: One was *Iran Awakening*, the 2006 book by the Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, and the other was *Persepolis*, a story in comic strips by Marjane Satrapi about a girl's childhood in Teheran. Their personal accounts of their experiences, their perceptions of the general mood and the changes to daily lives made me learn about these momentous changes in Iran in a way that history books could not teach me.

So I listened to several of these Ḥakawātī Souriali stories and decided to make them the starting point for my master thesis. In an early phase of the project, I listened to all the 199 15-minute episodes that were broadcast from 2012 to 2018, and made a summary of each one. I found that the stories have topics ranging from humorous to serious to incredible incidents at demonstrations, to prison experiences, experiences with the security apparatus and secret police, stories of why people chose to flee, stories of well-functioning and dysfunctional relationships with family, friends and partners, stories where education, music and culture played an important part, stories of help coming from unexpected places, and stories of life after fleeing.

The overall 'story of the stories' combined, fit well with and expanded on another 'history from below'-book that I had read with great interest: Wendy Pearlman's *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled* (2017), a collection of accounts compiled from interviews with several hundred Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan, carefully selected and edited by the author.

Pearlman divides the "stories about Syria" into seven chapters: "Authoritarianism" (about Syria under Hafez al-Assad), "Hope Disappointed" (about the Damascus Spring in the years after Bashar al-Assad came to power), "Revolution" (in 2011 and after, the experience of protesting and finally speaking

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<sup>4</sup> *Fredsviljen* (The Will to Peace) is a magazine for members of the NGO Fredslaget (The Norwegian Peace Association).

one's mind), "Crackdown" (the regime's violent response to protests), "Militarization" (why some took up arms to defend themselves against the regime), "Living war" (the experiences of being caught in between warring factions), "Flight" (about fleeing, which is the experience of people interviewed for this book), "Reflections" (the interviewees' reflections on what had happened and what might have been different).

One aspect in which the Ḥakawātī Souriali material differed from Pearlman's book was that a substantial portion of the stories was about people who had chosen to return to Syria after 2011, and of people who decided to stay when they had the chance to flee. These stories are of course much harder to capture when only refugees are interviewed. It was also surprising to see the high number of stories about returning to Syria. Why would someone make this choice?

I decided to make this the research question for my thesis. In this way, I could limit the original material of 199 episodes into a more manageable 18 episodes, with 15 stories (a few of the stories are told over two or three episodes). The stories chosen satisfy one of two conditions: (1) The main character or a side character came back to Syria from abroad, or (2) The main character or a side character had the chance to flee, but decided to stay in Syria. I have left out of the analysis two stories about people who decide to go to a less safe area in Syria, and one story of a woman who came back to Syria, but only for a short visit.

The question is: What do the stories say about the motivation to come back to Syria or to stay in Syria? What do the characters say themselves about their motivation, and what can we read from the story as a whole about this decision?

To answer this question, I use thematic, structural and performative narrative analysis, and I interpret the answers in light of Pearlman's theory of moral identity as a motivator for participating in protests (2018).



## Chapter 2 Background

Where do the Souriali stories come from? In this chapter, I will present some background information that will help the reader understand the context of the stories. First, a little bit about the general media situation in Syria before and after 2011. This year brought about massive change in the media situation, as the government lost monopoly over what people saw and heard. Second, a short introduction to the radio channel SouriaLi. This section will say something about the general content and vision of the station SouriaLi, and the place of the Ḥakawātī program.

### 2.1 Media in Syria before and after 2011

Before the Baʿth (Baath) coup, media in Syria was flourishing, with several newspapers and magazines. However, in 1963, the Baath party shut down all newspapers except for one, its own newspaper *Al-Baʿth*. This publication was joined after some years by *Al-Thawra* and in 1975 *Tishrīn*. These three newspapers were the only ones allowed in Syria for a long time, and they all published similar stories centered around two main topics: Firstly, the doings and sayings of the President, and secondly, about the Arab/Israeli conflict. They all relied on SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency), the state-run news agency, for their content. During the same time, there was also underground publishing, among others *Al-Raʿy*, the publication of the illegal Communist Party, and some Kurdish publications. (George, 2003, pp. 124–128)

When Bashār al-Asad replaced his father in 2000, there was a small opening for civil society, usually called in Western Media the "Damascus Spring". During this time, some new news sources were established. Around the same time, new technology, like internet and satellite TV, challenged the state monopoly on news. Syria was among the last countries in the world to allow satellite dishes. (George, 2003, pp. 129–134)

The events of 2011 brought along a huge change in the media landscape in Syria. Dozens, maybe hundreds of new media outlets were established<sup>5</sup>. In a matter of months, Syria went from a "country of silence" to a country of a multitude of different voices. The wall of fear had been broken, and lots of people protested and uploaded videos and pictures of the protests, and collaborated with exiled Syrians to get the message out to the world about what was happening (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). However, international media's editorial choices of covering the war and fight against ISIS and to a large extent ignoring popular initiatives on the ground, made many activists realize they needed their own channels with their own editorial boards to get this information out (Lyme, 2019, p. 32).

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<sup>5</sup> Estimates range from roughly 100 new outlets (Marrouch, 2014, p. 13) to as many as 600 [Amr Al-Hamad 2016 quoted in (*Freedom on the Net 2020 - Syria*, 2020), no longer available on the internet].

New media channels were set up for the most part by activists without former media experience. Their aim was to get closer to people, and give voice to the "Syrian street" (Dollet, 2015, p. 4). At first, they operated independently and on a voluntary basis, aiming to aid the revolution. Gradually, new media outlets managed to attract funding and training from different NGOs and agencies from USA and EU, and several of them gradually shifted focus from helping the revolution to providing independent coverage and supporting the reconstruction of civil society.

## 2.2 SouriaLi

SouriaLi is one of the several new Syrian radio projects that started in Syria after 2011<sup>6</sup>. The four co-founders are Kārūlīn 'Ayyūb (Caroline Ayoub), Dīmā Qal'ajī (Dima Kalaji), 'Iyyād Kallās (Iyad Kallas) and Hanī al-Sayyid (Honey Al-Sayyed). They have background in marketing, journalism, economy and technology, and news presentations, respectively. By 2021, the founders all live abroad, as do most of the presenters. They have their editorial meetings on Skype.

The name SouriaLi has a double meaning. One of the very often played jingles goes: *Sūriyā-lī, sūriyā-lak, sūriyā 'ilnā killnā* – "Syria belongs to me, Syria belongs to you, Syria belongs to all of us". It communicates one of the visions for Souriali: coexistence across political, religious and ethnical divides. The other meaning comes from *siryālī*, meaning "surreal", and hints to another one of the radio station's positions, namely that the situation in Syria is surreal and exceptional, and the normal state would be one of inclusiveness and active citizen participation. The participation vision is also reflected by another very much used jingle: *'alā fikra haydā mū rādiyū* – "actually this is not a radio". The implication is that the goal is not to provide one-way information, but to be a space where Syrians can meet, talk and listen.

These goals are strived for through a broad range of programs (see appendix).

I have chosen the program *Ḥakawātī* because of the insights it can offer into the daily lives of Syrians during the events of 2011 and after, and the way it preserves and develops a cultural tradition, that of the *ḥakawātī* (storyteller). These stories claim to be real, taken from real life, and experienced by real people.

However, these stories have also been through a selection process in three steps: First, these are stories of people who listen to the radio channel. Secondly, it is the stories of those who made a choice to send in their story. Thirdly, the stories have been through a selection and editing process by the *Ḥakawātī*, and it is possible that he has chosen stories to match the program's profile.

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<sup>6</sup> To get an overview of new radio channels in Syria after 2011, in terms of focus, content, editorial choices, and challenges, see (Dollet, 2015) (Issa, 2016) and (Marrouch, 2014), and for an estimate of the popularity of each of the new radio stations, see (Melki, 2016).

The selection also seems to be motivated by a desire of broad representation: there are stories about children, adults, old people, women and men, people supporting the revolution, people opposed to it and people who don't care, people inside Syria and in exile, people from the cities and the countryside, people with higher education and people who don't know how to read and write.

Another selection the material presented here has gone through is, of course, my own. I have chosen stories that include the motif of returning to Syria or staying in Syria, and the presentation of the stories is motivated by the wish to present a diversity of motivations.

## Chapter 3 Method and methodology

### 3.1 Methodology

I will use narrative analysis because it can be used to see how meaning is created. Reality may be seen as an endless succession of events, without any inherent meaning or coherence. Narration is relating events to each other, interpreting them in relation to each other, hypothesising about causal links and lessons to be learned. Narration is meaning-making, and analysing narratives may let us glean some insight about how and what kind of meaning is created.

Emplotment is the organization of characters and events into plots. The narrator decides what events are important, what roles the main persons take, and how the elements of the story are connected, chronologically as well as logically. In this way the narrator adds "meaning" to the otherwise perhaps meaningless sequence of events. Storytelling and emplotment represent action and thus agency on part of the storyteller (Becker, 1997, p. 27).

The Souriali stories claim to be stories from real life, experienced by real people. In that way, they may be classified as non-fiction, a term used by Abbott (2008) as opposed to fiction. Abbott warns that stories marketed as non-fiction could have a spectacular fall from grace if it later turns out that not all details are factually true.

But in fact, all stories, including non-fiction, are narratives and, as such, show traces of emplotment. In 1973, historian and literary critic Hayden White introduced the idea that history writing, too, is narrative, and a historiographer also sorts events and decides what role certain events will have in the historical account.

"It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding", "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned in a specific motific characterization of the set to which it belongs. The death of the king may be a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories." (White, 2014, p. 6)

A historian can emplot the story in different ways: the same events may be cast as a comedy, a tragedy, a romance or a satire, according to White (2014, p.7).

White's point links elegantly with another theoretical underpinning of methodology: that of essentialist versus constructionist approaches to language. From an essentialist point of view, language mirrors or reflects reality, whereas

in the constructionist approach, language does not reflect reality, rather it creates reality. (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58)

Jerome Bruner elaborates on this point when he argues that narratives construct the world we live in. (Bruner, 1991)

When doing narrative analysis, it is common to look at one or more of three main features: Structure, content and/or performative function (Squire et al., 2014, p. 9)(Esin, 2011, p. 92)(Riessman, 2008).

In my own analysis I have drawn from all these three approaches. The content of the stories is of course important. This is the main part of the analysis. Also, it is interesting to analyse the structure of stories, as this is a central part of meaning-making. Finally, the analysis would not be complete without reference to the context and the performance of the storyteller. Before going into detail about what I have done, I would like to present in more detail the three approaches.

## **3.2 Thematic, structural and performative analysis**

### **3.2.1 Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is widely used by researchers, but it is often made seem more complicated than it is, and sometimes researchers are vague about what they actually did. Psychologists Braun and Clarke wanted to do something about this, and in 2006 presented thematic analysis as a method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, revised in 2012 and 2017) This method has been presented even more clearly to Norwegian readers by Johannessen et al. (2018). Simply put, thematic analysis is about looking for themes in the data. A theme in this regard means a category, a group of data with something in common.

Thematic analysis can be done in a few simple steps: (1) Preparation (procure and get overview of data), (2) Coding (underlining important points in the data), (3) Categorization (grouping the data into themes) and (4) Reporting (writing about the themes and presenting them for the reader) (Johannessen et al., 2018, adapted and simplified version of Braun and Clarke).

For narrative analysis, an important modification to the thematic analysis method should be made. For purposes in social science, psychology, or related fields, answers given in interviews may be coded, ripped apart, regrouped and reworked, in order to find common themes. For narrative analysis, it is a central concern to keep the totality of the story intact. The assumption is that to understand the story, we need to attend to time, place and context, and resist the urge to search for generic explanations. Therefore, instead of taking out quotes from here and there and regrouping them, theorizing happens from the case (the whole story) rather than from categories across cases. (Riessman, 2008, pp. 53; 74)

I used the steps outlined by Johannessen as my method: First, I listened to all of the stories and made summaries, identified topics based on these and formulated

a research question, chose the 15 stories that are relevant for the research question, and listened to each of these and wrote down a translation of the whole story. Second, I identified and underlined the parts of the stories that had to do with the character's choice to stay in Syria or to go back.

The third step, categorization, was the most difficult. It became clear early on that two main motivations to stay in Syria or to return to Syria were the wish to help others, and the attachment to a home or the belonging to a place, and that there was possibly a third category. Several of the stories could be grouped in more than one category, and in those cases I have chosen the category I think is the most prominent one. I did not want to split each story into more than one category, rather keep the wholeness of the stories intact, as Riessmann argued. In this way, it becomes clear how the categories are related to each other in the same story.

The fourth step is reporting the findings to the reader. Again, in order to keep the story intact, I include a summary of the story first in the report. Second, I present quotes from the text that help us see the answer to the research question, and comment on them. Third, I make a comment about structure. And this brings us to the next section.

### 3.2.2 Structural analysis

In structural narrative analysis, the focus is shifted from the «told» to the «telling», from the content of a narrative to the way of telling it. A central question is: How are narratives organised to achieve a narrator's strategic aims?

At the core of structural analysis is the idea of emplotment. The same story may be told as a comedy or a tragedy, and it can take the form of a joke, a short story, a play, or lyrics in a song. A character may be cast as a protagonist, a helper or a villain (in Proppian terms, see below), and an event may be a turning point, part of a sequence leading up to a turning point, or part of the resolution of the plot.

From this it follows that the narrator has power, and that narrating one's own story is a form of empowerment. The narrator decides about the role and importance of persons and events, and the genre of the stories they tell. They also decide on the morale of the story (Becker, 1997, pp. 25–28). The morale may be communicated explicitly, but often is generated through form, i.e. implicit in the plot structure.

Narrative competence is not just a skill required by the storyteller, it is also a receptive skill. To appreciate a story, the listener needs genre fluency (Riessman, 2008, p. 80). Genres create “horizons of expectations” for the reader and “models of writing” for authors (Todorov & Berrong, 1976, p. 163). Different language communities may have different genre conventions and different ideas of what constitutes a good text. For example, Koch finds that in Arabic, repetition, both in content and form, paraphrasing and parallelism are parts of what is seen as a well-written text. She also points to a style peculiar to Arabic, that of *saj'* (rhymed prose) (Koch, 1983).

Applying Western standards of writing to texts from other cultures could lead to a lack of appreciation for well-written texts and a failure to recognize good storytelling. This could lead to marginalization. Therefore, as a European researcher studying texts from the Arabic language community, it is important to pay extra attention to specific genre conventions. This is why I have included a section on the Ḥakawātī tradition and genre conventions (see chapter 4.2).

There are several models for analysing plots: One is Labov and Waletzky's model (1967) which posits that a "fully formed" narrative includes six elements: 1) Abstract: summary, "point" of the story 2) Orientation: Time, place, characters, situation 3) Complicating action: Event sequence, plot, usually with a crisis or turning point 4) Evaluation: Narrator comments on meaning or describes emotions or thoughts 5) Resolution: the outcome of the plot 6) Coda: Ending the story and bringing action back to the present.

Another model is Propp's morphology of the fairytale (1968, first published in English in 1958 and in Russian in 1928). Propp found 31 functional sequences which he claimed were always present in Russian folk tales, and always in the same order. He also identified different character types and roles: hero, villain, helper, donor, princess, princess' father, dispatcher and false hero.

Although Labov and Waletzky's model may be too simple and too centered on Western forms of storytelling, and Propp's model may be too comprehensive and difficult to apply, at least for a beginner like me, both models provide a theoretical framework and help in the process of thinking about what a structural analysis is.

In the present thesis, the main focus in the structural comment will be, like in the summaries, on the turning points or "nodes" in the stories. What is the main event or main "point" of the story? Is there a crisis or a struggle, and what does it consist of? Also, sometimes the side characters play a decisive role. Are the character types of help to understand the structure of the story? And what can the structure of the story tell us about the agenda of the storyteller?

### 3.2.3 Discourse/performative analysis

If thematic analysis is about the "what" of a story and structural analysis is about the "how", a discourse/performative analysis is an analysis with emphasis on the "who" (who the story is directed to and who is telling it), "when" (what is the occasion) and "why" (for what purpose is the story told). This approach is context-centered, both in terms of the local context (the research situation) and the broader context (historical, political, societal). It acknowledges that stories do not appear out of nowhere, they are told in a setting and for an audience. Within this approach, stories are seen as social artefacts: they tell us about society and culture as well as about a person or group. For a researcher within this methodology, interest is in how social reality is constructed through interaction.

Mikhail Bakhtin is another Russian literature researcher who already in the 1920es formulated theories about interactionality which were rediscovered in



the 1960es. A central point for him was that every text is multivoiced or polyphonic. Form and meaning emerges between people. Each text includes many voices: hidden internal politics, historical discourses and ambiguities. A given word is saturated with ideology and meanings from previous usage, and an utterance carries the traces of other utterances, past and present.

Another important thinker within this tradition is Erving Goffman, who wrote that interaction is like theater – a performance. Interaction, he said, is not primarily about giving information, but about giving shows. Through interaction we perform ourselves (Riessman, 2008, pp. 105–107)

To make a performative analysis, I listened to and transcribed/translated the beginning and end of many of the early episodes (ep. 1-33), episodes in the middle of the material (ep. 60-70, 105-115), and a few of the late episodes (174-176 and 192). I did this to find out how the storyteller presented himself, the radio channel and the stories, what kind of relation he was trying to create between himself and the listeners, and why he told the stories. In the second step of the analysis, I sorted the presenter's utterances according to the questions listed above, drawing on the thematic analysis method. The result of this analysis can be found in chapter 4.

### **3.3 Positionality**

I am a student at the University of Oslo, a woman in her early 30-es, a Norwegian, an activist. As a Norwegian and European I see the situation in Syria from the outside, even though I have been there as a student in 2010, before the revolution and war. I am interested in politics and social movements, and I have a background from activism for peace and the environment. My positionality as a foreign woman has not affected the stories as they are told, since they were compiled and edited by someone else. However, the analysis is my own, and is limited by what I am able to see in the material.



## Chapter 4 The storyteller presents himself

“Once upon a time, not too long ago, there was a people and a regime. The people were oppressed, and the regime ruled with an iron fist. The people got fed up with the oppression, rose up and made a revolution. The regime had no understanding, and no give and take. Give and take means dialogue, not give and take the program on Radio Souriali, so I don’t make any problems with anyone, I mean. This regime got its army and security out and started to attack. It killed, destroyed, and made people flee. Day after day and month after month went by, and they are still continuing. The people are continuing with their revolution, and the regime is continuing with their bloodbath. But in the midst of all the bloodbath there are always small details that give us the strength to keep on going, so that we are able to live with all these hardships and difficulties.”

This little snippet from the introduction to episode 13(11) can serve to highlight three essential features of the show *Ḥakawātī Souriali* on Radio Souriali: Firstly that it is about documenting stories from real life, secondly, that it has a storyteller that tries to find occasion for humorous comments, and thirdly, that an important part of telling the stories is to convey small details that give strength.

### 4.1 What are the stories and where do they come from?

First, it aims to document the events in Syria from 2011 and onwards. It is a kind of “history from below”, stories told by those who experienced them. The storyteller starts in the first episode by stating the aim of storytelling:

“During this year and a half and a little more, many stories (*q̄iṣaṣ wi ʿahdāth wi mawāq̄if*) have happened in real life, stories that not many people have noticed. Neither Western media nor opposition media. Neither the free media nor the bound. Nobody has known, except those who experienced it. These are stories (*q̄iṣaṣ*) that may be small compared to the big things that are happening. But for those who experienced them, they are big and important. And these small stories together create the big picture, which is called Syria, and the future history of Syria. And since we in Radio Souriali care about the human first and last, we wanted to shed light on these stories and collect them for you.” (1)

He notes that many stories have happened in real life, but they have not gotten the attention they deserve. They have been forgotten and neglected by the media. In *Souriali*, the aim is to collect and share these stories, so that they may not be forgotten. The stories are human-centered rather than conflict-centered - the individual experiences are at the center of the stories, and the ebbs and flows of the revolution and conflict are a backdrop. The stories also aim to point forward to a better Syria.

“Stories that people might forget or not notice. I have collected a few, and I am waiting for you to send me some more. These stories are your stories, and your friends’ stories. It is stories that you have heard, seen or experienced, stories that have happened during this revolution. Send them to me, so that we can hear them together and not forget them, but keep them for the future. The future we

are dreaming about. The future, when we will build a Syria which is free (*hurra*), democratic (*dīmūqrāṭiyye*), civil (*madaniyye*), patriotic (*waṭaniyye*), diverse (*ta'addudiyye*), participatory (*tashārukiyye*), peaceful (*silmiyye*), all the descriptions you wish for." (1)

In the introduction to some episodes, the Ḥakawātī thanks the listeners for contributing their stories, and sometimes he says that this story is from one of the listeners.

#### 4.2 Who is the storyteller? How does he perform himself?

"May you have happy times. Good evening to all you who are listening to Radio Souriali. I am very happy that we can meet in this way. I talk, and you listen. What more could I wish for?" (Episode 1)

In her instructive book about narrative methods, C.K. Riessman argues that stories are not born in a vacuum. They are composed in contexts – interactional, historical, institutional, discursive and so on. They are shaped by their context and by the imagined audience. She quotes Erving Goffman who says that interaction is not primarily about giving information, but in giving shows. When we communicate, what we aim to achieve is not primarily to exchange information, but to present ourselves as the person we want to be. She also draws on the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who postulates that form and meaning emerge *between people* in social and historical particularity. An analysis of performance in narratives draws on and extends symbolic interaction theory and conversational analysis. The primary interest lies in how social reality is constructed through interaction. (Riessman, 2008, pp. 105–107)

Taking these ideas as a starting point, I would like to discuss how the storyteller in Ḥakawātī Souriali presents himself, and how he imagines and creates the relationship with the audience.

First and foremost, the storyteller presents himself as Abu Fakir, a Ḥakawātī, storyteller. In doing so he draws on a tradition with long roots in the Arab world as well as Turkey, Iran and India (Khalidi, 2006, pp. 30–34). The storyteller is usually a man<sup>7</sup> dressed in baggy trousers, a vest and a fez, and with some additional props like a sword or a staff. He performs in a coffee shop, or in older times on an elevated platform in a market or in a rich man's home (Skeiker, 2010, p. 226; Khalidi, 2006, pp. 35–36). The tradition is sometimes described as a one-man theatre performance, and is often mentioned when talking about Arab theatre traditions, for example in Khalidi's dissertation about Syrian drama (2006)<sup>8</sup>. The stories told are long, epic stories usually known to the audience, and they may be told over several days or even months or years. The audience

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<sup>7</sup> Although the coffee shop Ḥakawātīs are men for the most part, women also tell stories, of course, and they play a very important role in preserving and passing on folklore stories, especially to children, a point made clear by Dwight Reynolds, (Reynolds, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> There is also a Palestinian theater group called Ḥakawātī.

are there not because the story is new, but to enjoy the performance by the storyteller, his interpretation and his interaction with the audience. A skilled storyteller uses body gestures to capture the audience's attention and may impersonate different characters and give them different dialects. Often, the story is told in such a way that it functions as a comment to the contemporary situation, either politically or as a comment on a local quarrel. (Skeiker, 2010, p. 225) (Khalidi, 2006, p. 35)

In presenting himself as a Ḥakawātī, the host of the program conjures up some expectations as mentioned above. The audience might expect stories about heroes, and they might expect the story to have a kind of moral or message that may function as a comment on their own situation. In telling stories of ordinary Syrians in a program called Ḥakawātī, the host sends a strong message that ordinary people are heroes. And the main characters in the stories indeed do have characteristics of heroes, at least moral heroes. There are also strong moral messages in the stories.

When listening to a Ḥakawātī, the audience will expect some stylistic features like an introduction and a short recap of what happened earlier if it is a story told over several sessions. Traditionally, popular *siyar* may be told partly in rhymed prose, *sajʿ*, may contain passages of poetry, may have dialect in passages of direct speech, and may be told in simple narration, which may be in dialect or in a middle style between dialect and Classical Arabic. (Heath, 2006)

The Ḥakawātī in Souriali meets these expectations to a large extent. His stories have formulaic introductions and endings. The stories are told in Damascus dialect. Sometimes the storyteller makes use of other dialects – for example if the protagonist in the story is from Homs, he imitates some features of the Homs dialect (episode 70). Often, he uses very colloquial terms that even people from outside Damascus wouldn't understand, like proverbs<sup>99</sup>. Sometimes, he introduces the story using *sajʿ* (rhymed prose) (episode 21, 26, 176). In a very few cases, he uses Standard Arabic as part of the story (episode 70), or he tells the whole story in poetry (episode 24)

The radio medium is naturally different from meeting the audience face to face in a coffee shop. In a coffee shop, the Ḥakawātī can interact directly with the audience and read their faces to see how well he is able to communicate the story. It is also expected that the audience can break in and make their own comments about the story. In the radio, to simulate an interaction with the audience, the Ḥakawātī greets them at the beginning of each episode, and tells them that he has missed them and that he is always looking forward to the appointment on Monday evenings at half past eight. He wishes his listeners well, wishes them happy holidays, and asks God to protect them, and wishes that

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<sup>99</sup> Some proverbs and popular sayings include: *kaff ʿadas* – a handful of lentils – an expression to criticize that you don't know others' situation; *ʿa-l-waʿd yā kammūn* – on the promise, you cumin: you don't keep your promises; *ṭanjara wa laqit ghaṭāhā* – a pan found its lid – expression that means that two people who really fit together have found each other.

everyone will meet again in Syria. He encourages listeners to send him their stories, and not to hesitate to give any comment or criticism so that the program can become better and according to the listeners' taste.

In addition to the Ḥakawātī role, he also presents himself with some personal traits. Through his introductory and ending comments, he presents himself as talkative, friendly and empathetic, accepting criticism, wishing people well, and validating people's experiences and feelings.

### 4.3 Small details that give strength – the role of hope

The word hope, in its different inflections and with different synonyms, is mentioned so many times both in jingles and stories that it must be a central motivation for the whole project. It is mentioned in most introductions and endings of stories, and it only seems to become more important in the middle and later episodes. As mentioned earlier, the comment at the end of episodes serves to validate the experiences and emotions of the main persons. It is also a place where the storyteller expresses his hopes: that the main person will return to Syria, that Syria will heal from her wounds, that the listeners will have a week without explosions, that Syrians will be united and be like one hand, that the disappeared will return home, that everyone will meet again in Syria and rebuild what was destroyed, that everyone will celebrate together a free and safe Syria.

Hope is an important factor in all the stories, as the storyteller says in episode 67:

"In spite of the sorrow that many of us carry, there is a little piece of hope in each story. A moment of happiness (*farah*). A moment of strength (*quwwa*). I just try to shed light on these stories more than others. Because I want us all to concentrate on the full half of the glass. Maybe it is not a half, maybe it is much less. But still, let us be like Samāḥ. Let us have strength and hope." (67)

Samāḥ is one of the persons that inspire hope. In the story about her, the Ḥakawātī emphasizes that although this young girl was handicapped due to shelling and lived in poor conditions in a refugee camp in Jordan, she needed no pity, quite the contrary. She was the one that inspired hope in her mother and in everyone she met, with her enthusiasm for competing in sports with other children in wheelchairs, and with her dream of learning sign language and becoming a film director.

The Ḥakawātī also mentions explicitly that 'Abū Jawād (ep.23) is a person who inspires hope. The story teller says many things about 'Abū Jawād, an elderly man and apple farm owner from Zabadānī, but maybe the most important is his hospitality towards everyone including "guests" (internally displaced people), and his understanding that armed men surrounding the police station was not the reason why some arrested women were released.

I will argue that the stories rely on people's positive examples as inspirations for hope. Also, the way the stories are plotted, and the meanings that can be taken from the stories, are ways of communicating hope.

"With all that is happening in Syria and to Syrians both inside and outside Syria, the occasions for joy (*farah wi sa'ade*) may have become few and rare. Therefore we need to hold tightly on to them (*nitmassak fihā*) when we can find them. Take my advice and try (*jarrīb*). When you find an occasion to laugh, don't postpone it (*lā t'ajjilūhā*). When you find an occasion to have fun (*tinbustū*), don't let it go. Live life every day, because nobody know what the future brings." (17/15)

## Chapter 5 Choosing Syria: Stories

In this chapter I present a short summary of the stories about staying in Syria or coming back. For each story, I have included the most relevant excerpts of the text that say something about the characters' choice. For some of the stories, I have also added a short structural analysis. I have grouped the stories in three big groups according to motivation: Being true to one's moral identity, wanting to be of help, and a feeling of belonging.

### 5.1 Moral identity

I found preservation of moral identity to be one of the motivations to stay or to go back. This is particularly clear from three stories: The story of Ḥusām who decided to stay in a besieged refugee camp, the story of a young man in Homs who stayed because of his infatuation with a young woman who saved his life, and the story of Jamāl who was inspired by Don Quijote to go back to Idlib after the city was taken by rebels.

#### 55 Khubze bi-karāme (A piece of bread with dignity)

Summary: The story of Ḥusām, music teacher living in a refugee camp<sup>10</sup> in Syria, is driven forward by two elements: a constant discussion between Ḥusām and his wife and father-in-law about staying or leaving, and a constantly deteriorating situation in the camp, with disappearances, clashes, siege and starvation. Ḥusām is convinced by his wife and father-in-law to stay, and he is convinced by their story of dignity. The story ends with telling how people in the camp joined their efforts to distribute food as fairly as they could, and to get international attention to the situation in the besieged areas.

The arguments put forward by the wife and father-in-law to convince Ḥusām are the following:

Ḥusām's wife reproaches him for not asking about his missing brother, and when he quotes fear of losing his government job, she retorts:

"No, Ḥusām. We are not the kind that forget our rights because of the treasures of the world. First it was your brother, now my brother is disappeared too. How long should we stay silent? Cursed be the money that we allow to humiliate us. Our dignity comes first. Dry bread eaten with a raised head is better than a feast."

When Ḥusām just after a rain of bullets from a nearby skirmish is over suggests they leave the camp, the wife answers:

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<sup>10</sup> It is clear from the text that it is not a makeshift tent camp for internally displaced people, rather a well established Palestinian refugee camp where people live in houses and have electricity and water.

"This is our home. Where do you want us to go? People are dying everywhere. If I am going to die, I want to die at home."

And when a bomb hits their car just when they are about to leave, she comments:

" Thank God we were not inside. For you my dear. Everything disappears."

When bombing intensifies and the camp is besieged, Ḥusām asks his father-in-law for advice.

"When we were in Tall al-Za‘tar and they besieged us and starved us and negotiated about our lives, those who surrendered were slaughtered. Those who stayed, died from hunger. Only a few survived. In both cases we might die. You just have to choose how you die. Do you want to die after surrendering, or do you want to die while holding on to your word and your position? You have to choose. You choose. [...] Lift up your head and your girl’s head and don’t surrender. You will not see her grow up if your head is broken. They have taken everything from us, we don’t have anything save a bit of dignity that we are holding on to and defending. We can’t agree to lose it. Hunger is godless. But dignity is something you can hold on to your whole life."

As we can tell from the quotes, Ḥusām is convinced to stay because of his wife and father-in-law’s arguments about dignity, and their argument that fleeing means surrendering. His wife uses ‘we’ to talk about their values. This implies a collective identity. She says that life and dignity are more important than material possessions – we can call this approach spiritualism. Both the wife and the father-in-law refer to a raised head, and both frame dignity as an active and conscious choice.

Structurally, the story is about moral maturation, in two steps. Ḥusām first goes through a moral transformation, from thinking about what is materially best for his family, to learning from his wife and father-in-law about values of dignity, spiritualism and collectivism. In the second step, the new values are put to the test, and the test is passed. The test is the experience of siege and starvation, and passing the test consists in participating in collective efforts to distribute food and draw attention to their situation. The result is moral ennoblement – eating dry bread and scarce food, but together and with a raised head.

## 26 ‘A-l-ḥājiz iltaqā (We met by the roadblock)

Summary: A young, unnamed man who works to establish good conditions for refugees in his home city Ḥumṣ (Homs), including organizing a school, falls in love with a young woman he sees every day in another car at the roadblock. When he becomes homeless for the second time<sup>11</sup>, he decides to leave Homs, but first he wants to talk to the young woman. But that day there is a skirmish at the roadblock. Before he can talk to her he is wounded by a gunshot. He recognizes her eyes above a face mask before passing out. When he wakes up, he is in a field

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<sup>11</sup> The first time his house is shelled, the second time, the government decides to use the school that shelters internally displaced people to arrange end-of-year exams, making all the internally displaced people temporarily homeless.

hospital, and one day has passed. She is not there - one of the doctors says she was arrested the next morning because she helped him. He decides to stay in Homs. Even though it wasn't necessary anymore, as he himself had become internally displaced and was now living in the same shelter that he was responsible for, he decided to keep passing through the roadblock every morning, hoping to see her there one day.

Why did he stay? The story says this about what he felt when he saw the young woman at the roadblock:

"In all of this tiredness, exhaustion and pain they feel every day working with the internally displaced, and with the sad news about bombing in other areas of his city, this daily routine became his free place, his holiday from life and work, where he experienced his personal dream. He got to breathe, gather strength, and could continue with his activities. The few moments when he saw her eyes at the roadblock in the car mirror changed into moments of smiles that gave their days color."

The story also says something about what he felt when he learned that she was gone:

"He felt deep guilt."

We don't learn anything more about what he is thinking - the storyteller leaves the interpretation to the audience. My interpretation is that in addition to guilt, he also felt gratefulness, and possibly a moral obligation. Maybe he was hoping to one day be able to pay her back for what she had given him, or maybe he stayed to be worthy of her sacrifice. It seems that nobody forced him to stay, and no one would blame him for leaving. He chose to stay because of an inner moral obligation, something related to what kind of person he wanted to be, not what others would think.

Structurally, the story is one of moral transformation, a test, and passing the test. The test is the temptation to leave Homs. The woman's positive role in his life, as well as her sacrifice, made him change his mind. Her role is that of a helper or catalyst. The result of the transformation and test is moral ennoblement.

### 113 *Ṭawāḥīn il-hawā* (Tilting at windmills)

Summary: As a child, Jamāl loved the TV-series about Don Quijote. Even though his friends saw Don Quijote as a fool, Jamāl saw him as a true knight and a noble man. But as Jamāl grew older, he forgot about his former ideals due to studying accounting and developing a calculating outlook on life. When the revolution in Syria started, Jamāl considered the protesters fools. But his wife reminded him: "Yes, we Syrians are all Don Quijote." After hearing these words, Jamāl went out and participated in a protest for the first time, and was arrested, beaten up and tortured for the first time. When he came back home, he slept for two days. Then he dedicated himself to working for the revolution.



“When he woke up, everything was clear to him. He saw that what he had done to his life earlier was tilting at windmills. Now it was time to fight the beast for real. Now it was time to realize his old idea, and show clearly that Don Quijote was a knight, and that Syrians, when they decided to make a revolution and demonstrate against injustice, really started to fight the windmills of their minds. They killed the fear that had ruled over them and stopped them from living.”

He dedicated himself to helping children and establishing a school for them. Then he had to flee from Idlib to a refugee camp on the Turkish border. When he heard that Idlib had been liberated by opposition forces, he made a decision:

“Jamāl felt that this was the start of the real struggle of Don Quijote that was inside of him. It wasn’t the struggle that had been. Now the time was there. He had to go to Idlib to be part of the new era (*sharīk bil-marḥale l-qādime*). The era of new establishment (*marḥalet l-ta’sīs l-jdīde*) and new building (*l-binā’ l-jdīd*). It was better than being outside and protesting against the rule that was established and against those who took control of the city. He had to be there. In his country.”

We can see that to Jamāl, ridiculing the protesters and seeing them as fools was part of his previous outlook, a calculating outlook where he weighed risks and benefits. This is presented as a straying from his true ideals. His wife’s comment worked as a catalyst to remember his true values, symbolized by Don Quijote. As I see it, these values of knighthood include courage, honor, chivalry, saving damsels in distress, and fighting “evil” in disregard of slim chances of winning. These ideals are tightly connected to masculinity. Referring to Don Quijote also implies an understanding and acceptance that others may ridicule him, but he can still be true to his idea and understanding of what the world should be.

### Summary – moral identity

These three stories, in different ways, tell about people who chose to stay in Syria, not primarily because of belonging or wanting to help, but something deeper.

I have chosen to call it moral identity, inspired by Wendy Pearlman’s convincing theory about motivations to participate in demonstrations (see next chapter).

All these three stories have a similar structure: the main person is a good person who has forgotten his values and is tempted (to stop demanding his right, to leave his homeplace, to stop helping others or to ridicule the demonstrators), but receives help from someone who reminds him of what is important in life, and passes the test, achieving moral ennoblement.

### 5.2 Responsibility to help

I identified a feeling of duty or responsibility to help to be the main motivation in two of the stories of people who stayed behind in Syria. One is the story of Ḥanān, a young doctor from Homs, who worked both in field hospitals and in a military hospital, and even though she saw that the fighting became more and

more meaningless, found meaning in her vocation – to help others as a doctor. The other story is about Ghēth, who had to drop out of school to help his family economically, and who got a new chance in life after a heavy building brick injured him.

As already observed in the section about moral identity, the responsibility to help is a strong red thread in most of the stories in the material, and not only in my choice stories of people who came back or stayed behind. In the rest of the material, there are also stories of people who decided they could be most helpful by working from abroad. And there are several episodes with a plea to listeners not to blame those who left the country<sup>12</sup>.

### 171-172 Bint il-‘addiyye (The girl from Homs)

Summary: Ḥanān from Ḥumṣ works in field hospitals to help demonstrators, in secret, in addition to her day job at a charitable hospital. One day four men in military uniforms knock on her door and take her to a military hospital. The commander there asks her to work with them. She accepts, and saves the life of a badly injured soldier, Fādi. Fādi is injured again and again, and Ḥanān discovers to her surprise that there is a similar resentment on both sides of the conflict. They develop a relationship, and Fādi tries to convince Ḥanān that they should both leave the country. However, she feels a responsibility to help. Before he is able to convince her, she is disappeared, along with the army doctor.

This is what Ḥanān told Fādi about why she was hesitant to leave:

”Because... They are like you. Maybe not everyone is like you, maybe there are some people who deserve to die. But it is not up to me to decide or judge. My task is to save this person’s life. Their destiny will judge them. If someone like you is forced to stay here, it wouldn’t be right to leave him, would it? Someone has to help him. I must stay here. I can’t just go.”

As we can see, Ḥanān’s motivation to stay is a feeling of responsibility to help. It is meaningful for her to think that someone has to stay behind and help, and why shouldn’t that include herself? If all doctors left, who would be there to treat the wounded?

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<sup>12</sup> Examples: Episode 60 *Thuwwār balā hudūd* (Revolutionaries without borders), is about a young woman who was convinced she would be more useful alive and working from abroad, than dead or imprisoned in Syria. Episode 90 *Dākhil vs. Khārij* (Inside vs. outside) is about a young couple who stayed in Syria for a long time, but finally had to leave. They experienced a lack of understanding for why they had to leave. 115 *Kaff ‘adas* (A handful of lentils – expression meaning not to judge others) is a story of a Syrian who left the Gulf for Europe, but others thought he came to Europe only for fun. He actually didn’t have any other choice. Episodes 15/17 and 17/19 are about people who fled to Lebanon, with the implicit message from the storyteller: Wouldn’t you have done the same in their situation?

Also, we see that the feeling of responsibility to help is not restricted to one side of the conflict. Although she started out working in a field hospital, she was convinced to work in the military hospital as well. Although there may have been an element of coercion in that decision, in the story it is presented as persuasion by the army doctor:

“We are both doctors. It is true that I have a military rank, but first and foremost I am a doctor. Just like you I have sworn an oath to save lives. I don’t care about their religion or political affiliation. I don’t care if they are from the army or from the free army, or from armed groups, revolutionaries or *shabbiḥa*<sup>13</sup>. What matters, is that this is a human being. As long as this human’s life is in my hands, I have to do my best to save it. The rest is not my task.”

These values, here articulated by the army doctor, are also embodied by Ḥanān in her work and in her decision to stay.

The structure of this story is one of moral transformation, test, and passing the test. Ḥanān achieves a moral maturation after talking to the army doctor, who helps her broaden her view of responsibility to include the “other”, as a human being. After meeting Fādi, she finds out that the army doctor is right, there are good people on the other side as well. Then there is the test, put forward by Fādi – it is the idea to leave the country. She passes the test, and her morality and humanity is confirmed. The result is ennoblement – the audience now sees Ḥanān as a “heroine” of humanity.

#### 165 **قصة** ḥajr (A stone’s hardness)

Summary: At 16, Ghēth had to quit school and work in construction to help his family economically. One hot August day nine years later, his shoulder was hit by a brick that fell from the 15th floor of a building, and had to go to hospital. He could never work in construction again. When he got home, he started writing. He was good at writing, and his talent was discovered by a friend of his father, who recommended him to an editor of a magazine. He started writing for them, and after a training period he got a contract. When the revolution started, most of the contributors left the country after having been arrested first. But Ghēth stayed behind and became their correspondent from inside Syria.

In this story, the decision to stay is only a side theme. The main theme is how an accident turned out to be a blessing for Ghēth. There is not a lot to say about his motivation from the story itself, just this: “Ghēth stayed in the country because he couldn’t leave his family.”

We can only guess whether it was a choice to stay, or if he just didn’t get the chance to leave because of the family’s financial situation. In any case, he now had a new meaning to his life, namely to write “to let his voice and message reach the whole world. His pen and his words were his weapon.”

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<sup>13</sup> Regime loyal thugs

## 12/14 Niqūlā

Summary: The protagonist is sitting and checking Facebook pages when suddenly he recognizes his friend Niqūlā in a picture. He is surprised, because the picture is from inside Syria, but his friend is in Germany. Can it be him? Even though the face is hidden, the protagonist is sure it must be him because of his sweater. When the green dot appears next to his name, the protagonist asks about the picture and hears that Niqūlā really is back in Syria! He is still doing humanitarian work, but also documenting archaeological sites and people's daily lives. Niqūlā tells about a time when he was with some activist friends transporting some medicines into an area close to Idlib, when they were almost hit by fire from a helicopter, but managed to find refuge inside an old stone church. After hearing this story, the connection is lost, and Niqūlā's mother calls the protagonist. She is worried because of a Facebook post he wrote, and doesn't know he is back in Syria.

Niqūlā's decision to come back is explained as a personality or identity:

" Niqūlā is a generous<sup>14</sup> young man, one of the most loyal<sup>15</sup> persons I know. Loyal to the church and its activities, to his friends, his family, his work and his country, and his clothes which he doesn't change until they are completely worn out, and to a girl he wanted to marry."

"The sweater is his! It has a small burn on the sleeve. It comes from when he fainted from exhaustion while helping refugees from Homs at the start of the revolution. While he was unconscious, he burnt his hand on a heater, and he didn't notice himself until people notified him it was burning. The jacket could not be saved, but he kept the sweater. He says it is his most precious sweater because of this memory. It was burnt on a heater among refugees, and it is one of Niqūlā's best memories. Don't be surprised. This is Niqūlā, this is how he thinks."

These two excerpts build Niqūlā's identity as someone who can be trusted and counted upon, and who is always there to help.

While seeking shelter in the stone church, Niqūlā went through a transformation:

"He started thinking about the forefathers who built it. About all the years that had passed, and it was still standing there strongly and firmly. He thought about how many regimes and civilizations that had come and gone, but these buildings had survived them all. They were standing there through all the regimes, and have remained to tell us, so that we can learn from them, that the past, present and future are connected, and that if we don't receive from our parents, we cannot pass on to our children. But what is it that we should receive and pass on? We need to pass on the thoughts and love and civilization which exist in this country, so that we can preserve it and pass it on to our children."

Niqūlā felt a strong bodily connection to the church and the other old buildings:

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<sup>14</sup> *kafu* – someone who always says yes when you ask, someone you can rely on

<sup>15</sup> *ikhlaṣan* – sincere, loyal, faithful, devoted (Wehr, 1961)

“While he was thinking about this [...] a bomb hit one of these ruins around them and made a big hole in its wall. In this moment, Niqūlā felt that the hole was made in his heart. He felt that he and the old buildings had become one, and that someone had come and shattered and cut up his body.”

It was this experience that motivated him to start documenting the archaeological heritage.

“He felt that this is his responsibility towards the generations which are coming after us. [...] In this way, our children can see them and know that they have inherited a civilization that has lasted for thousands of years, and that we didn’t come to the earth from a void. We are children of this brown earth, and the stone which is planted with power and love in its bosom.”

In the story about Niqūlā, the presentation of the motivation to come back is particularly rich and full of metaphors. First, it is explained in terms of his character – he is already kind, loyal, and trustworthy. His parents put him to a test when they make him go to Germany, and he passes the test by coming back to Syria and involving himself in humanitarian work again. A second test is the incident with the bombing and hiding in the stone church. This is where the most important moral transformation happens. While sitting in the church, Niqūlā feels a strong bodily connection to it, as if the building was his own body, and the hole was in his heart. He thinks of himself as part of something much bigger, part of a civilization and history that has lasted for thousands of years. We see that the responsibility to help is interwoven with a sense of belonging and identity.

#### **40 Bāb il-hawā (The Gate of Love, or: The border crossing)**

Summary: Ḥanān studied child psychology and went to France to do a PhD. When the revolution started, her parents were happy that she was abroad, but all she could think of was the children who were sleeping to the sound of bullets and explosions. She decided to come back to Damascus and work with children. Her parents were happy at first, but when she said she was back to stay, they got upset. When roadblocks hindered her from travelling freely, she left her parents and moved north to Idlib. And when the situation deteriorated, she decided to cross the border to Turkey. After the rebels gained control of North Syria, she decided to go back there for a while to continue her work with a group of children. But the border control officers stamped her passport with the Free Syrian Army stamp. It meant that she could never go back to Damascus, not until the regime would fall.

Here is what she was thinking when she made the decision to come back to Syria:

“When she talked to her parents on the phone [from France], she only heard “Thank God that you are abroad. Then we are safe that you are not in danger.” Every time she heard this, she felt that she was falling short towards her country and people. She couldn’t sleep from crying.”

“Her head and heart was in her home country and what was happening there”, the narrator explains, and this is what she told her parents back in Syria when they said she was wasting her future:

"My future is my home country's future. All these children who are exposed to all this violence, they are the country's future. I can't be abroad when I am able to contribute to better mental health for these children, and ease the mental burden they have to carry. Mother, each bullet which is fired now, damages the mind and heart of children who hear it. Every drop of blood that runs before them, can change their future completely. What good can come of the revolution if we lose the children and get a sick generation? Believe me, our revolution will be a failure."

It seems clear that just continuing to study in France, and not doing anything to help, was a very unsatisfying option to Ḥanān. This is in contrast to what she felt after coming back to Syria and starting her work:

"Every evening when she came home she was filled with even more motivation than the day before. She could feel an improvement in the children she was working with. She told her mother that what she was experiencing now was more important than hundreds of universities. She got experience from real life, not just books!"

To Ḥanān, it was important to make a difference, to help children, and to take part in the revolution in the way that she could best. This gave her life meaning.

It is noteworthy that in this story, coming home is not the end result of transformation or test like in so many of the other stories. In this story, coming back is one of many things the heroine does to be true to herself and to what she believes is right. However, this is not the end of the story. The end is what happens at the border crossing. Ḥanān is cast as a heroine who does good things and who has a lot of determination, but who is thrown around by the circumstances and finds herself in a position where she has lost the opportunity to go home to her parents.

We could say that after passing several tests of her determination to help children and help her country, the final test and last sacrifice is the stamp in her passport. Without intending to, she sacrificed the chance to go home to her parents, in order to keep helping children in northern Syria. The narrator emphasizes this point by giving the story the name of the border crossing, playing on its literal meaning: The gate of love (or desire; passion).

#### **114 Il-maḥaṭṭa il-tāliye (The next station)**

Summary: Humām grew up in a small village in the desert somewhere around Raqqa and Dēr il-Zūr (Deir ez-Zur). When a road was built that connected the village to the two cities, a new teacher came, and Humām learned how to read and write. With the new teacher, he was able to take high school exams in Raqqa, and was enchanted by the city's beauty. Later he studied law in Aleppo, and each new place he visited, enchanted him with its special magic. He wanted to travel, and with determination, hard work and help from friends, he found a job as an international human rights lawyer, and could travel all around the world from his base in Sweden. When the revolution started in Syria, he established a special office to document human rights abuses. After he heard that insurgents had

declared Raqqa the center of an Islamic State, he had a personal crisis and lay in bed with fever for several days. This was not what he had hoped for or dreamed of! His wife reminded him of his important work and his values. After this, he decided to leave Sweden and go to his home country.

So, what did his wife say to motivate him?

"I am not defending, and I am not excusing. What is important is that the goal is clear before your eyes. If you withdraw now, you are more wrong than them. You, and others who have the freedom of movement and can get in touch with people, and can provide pictures and documentation of people's rights, and draw the contours of a new law which can create order for the country after all that has happened. If you let yourselves be defeated, you have done the biggest mistake in my eyes. Think well before you decide anything."

The next day, he got up, packed his bags, kissed his wife and said:

"Thank you. I am going. [...] I need to be close. I need to be as close as I can. I will go to Turkey, and from there I will try to get to Aleppo. I need to meet people and be among them. After travelling on all roads in the world, it is time to travel in the other direction. Towards my country."

We can see that Humām came to where he was because of good helpers – his teacher first, then his friends who helped him with career tips, and finally his wife. His decision to go back could be seen as a way to pay back.

The decision is also motivated by a responsibility to help, and part of the responsibility is about being able to help. Not everyone has the same expertise and possibilities. Humām's contribution would be unique, and maybe that is what makes it meaningful. Also, he relied on others' example. He worked closely with revolutionaries in other parts of the world, and they served as an example when the same happened in Syria.

Third, it is based on his love for the cities in Syria. The story says he was enchanted with the beauty of Raqqa and Aleppo and other cities he saw. To him, Raqqa was not just another city, it was the first city he visited, and the first city to enchant him with its magic.

The structure of the story is first one of a long journey with many helpers. His journey started in his home village as an illiterate boy, and ended in Sweden as an international human rights lawyer inspired by revolutions around the world and having special knowledge about them. Then he is put to the test. First it is a small test – the revolution starts in Syria, and he answers by opening an office and using his knowledge to help document human rights abuses. The second test is tougher – it is a temporary loss of moral orientation when what he thought he had been working for, a rebel takeover, turned out to be such a terrible thing. His wife is his helper in the second test and transformation, where he chooses an outcome that demands a much higher sacrifice – separation from his wife, loss of safety, and possibly loss of life.



### 39 'Alā mōj il-baḥr (On the waves of the ocean)

Summary: Most people in Salām's family and friend group saw the demonstrators as infiltrators who wanted to destroy the country, but Salām started to doubt this story after she saw a silent protest outside the university of Damascus. There, protesters in white clothes carrying flowers were beaten up by the police. She told her fiancé about it. He was abroad, but he explained to her that he wanted to come back to Syria to participate in the demonstrations. He explained to her many things that she hadn't thought of. When he came, they distributed leaflets together, but thanks to a nosy neighbour, he got arrested and she was sent to her grandmother on the countryside after the parents demanded the engagement nullified. Her grandmother told her she could write letters to him and throw them in the ocean, just like she had done decades ago when her fiancé was arrested during the revolution against the French. The end of the story is that Salām and her fiancé marry against the wish of Salām's parents, go to Idlib, and that the fiancé loves to hear about Salām's letters to the ocean.

In this story, it is not the main character, but a side character who decides to come back to Syria. His motivation is explicitly stated:

"He wanted to come because he was working with a group of young people in Ṭartūs and some other villages on the coast to do activities to wake up the people there, and warn them against the trap they could fall into. That this was a revolution of the people, not a civil war or war of religion. What is happening is repression and terrorism. Regime against people. He had to come to participate in the Syrian revolution."

He wanted to come back to be part of the revolution, but first and foremost it was to warn people and help them see things "the right way". The first person he managed to "wake up" was his own fiancé, Salām. As she is the main person in the story, she can serve as a moral example for the listeners – if she can change her mind, maybe some skeptical listeners, will, too?

The story is again one of moral transformation. Salām's ideas about the protests changed after 1) watching the demonstration and 2) talking to her fiancé. After this, she also wanted to be part of it. However, in this story the moral transformation is only the first part of the story. There is also a second part, about how to deal with isolation – separation from her fiancé and from other activists. Here, the grandmother is a helper. Salām takes her grandmother's advice, and it works well. The story ends happily – Salām and her fiancé are reunited and they are again working to help people in Syria.

### 89 Shatwiyet balad (A country's winter)

The story says that in the old city of Ḥamā there is a man, 'Abū Sālim, who repairs heaters. He considers his work to be life-saving and important. During the eighties, he had been in Saudi-Arabia, but he didn't like his life and job there, and came back, just after the Ḥamā massacre. He married and had children, and his children tried to convince him to modernise his trade, but he refused. He was happy about the revolution and tried to help the demonstrators, but they all got



arrested. His children fled to Jordan and tried to convince their parents to join them. They did for a while, but then 'Abū Sālim decided to go back.

Here is what he said about going back:

"What destiny has decided, will happen. My children, in the eighties they scared me from going home, so that nothing would happen to me. But I am sure that what will happen, will happen, no matter where I am. And now I will tell you the same. I am going home to my house and my street and my shop. If I, in these difficult times, am not with my people and help them repair their heaters, when would I do it? What if a neighbor's heater is broken and he gets sick, and I am sitting here? I swear, I cannot feel any warmth outside of my country and outside of my house."

The story has a similar structure to that of Rāma (117): Being home and doing his vocation, put to the test twice (Saudi-Arabia, then Jordan), ennoblement through sacrifice, reward: feeling of home and feeling of doing something of value.

The difference is that for 'Abū Sālim, it is not the city in itself that he can't live without. It is his calling in life: To help people repair their heaters. He feels a similar moral calling as Ḥanān (170-171): If not me, who will stay and help people? While Ḥanān is a doctor, 'Abū Sālim repairs heaters, and he considers his work to be as important and life-saving as a doctor's.

### 93 Hūm swīt hūm (Home sweet home)

Summary: The story is about Sidra, who visited many places in Syria and discovered how marginalized and neglected some areas were. She saw that there were places that lacked health services, garbage collecting, some places didn't even have schools. She was arrested because she wrote about things others wanted to keep a secret. When she got out, she continued travelling and writing, but alone and in secret, without publishing it. She was not surprised when the revolution started, and least of all she was surprised that neglected areas had the strongest participation. She was imprisoned early on and was in prison for four months. When she came out of prison her family took her to Egypt. She didn't want to go, but she was not in a state to quarrel after what she had just been through. Her family managed to convince her that she could help Syrians in Egypt. But the situation deteriorated, and her family started to think about crossing the sea to Europe. Sidra felt that the thought alone would be enough to strangle her. The family couldn't force her this time since they didn't have anything solid between their hands. She went back to Homs with her mother, got involved in groups providing humanitarian help, and continued her project of documenting the situation on the countryside.

The narrator says he asked her if she couldn't have helped if she went to Europe. Her answer was:

"No. Not me. I can't be far away from Homs and from Syria. Maybe others than me can. I don't judge anyone. Quite the opposite. It is important for us that we

are spread out in many countries, where Syrians have fled. [...] But not me. There [in exile] I will be even more lost than them [other refugees], and I will not be able to help them. My place is here. In Homs. Among my family and my people. I am from here, and from here I want to continue my life."

We can see that Sidra's motivation for going home is a mix of a feeling of belonging, a wish to help others, and feeling lost abroad. Her story and motivation might be compared to that of 'Abū Sālīm with the heaters (89). Although unlike him she was also able to help others in Egypt, she imagined that if she went to Europe she would feel lost, out of place and unable to be of help.

### 5.3 Belonging

#### 129-130-131 Min il-Jūlān (From the Golan Heights)

Ismā'īl came from the Golan Heights to Damascus in the 90-es thanks to a UN-sponsored program. He experienced hospitality and curiosity from most people, but also excessive curiosity from the student union leader – it felt like an interrogation, not a conversation. Samīr and Maraḥ, two friends at university took extra good care of him after they understood that he had been invited "for a cup of coffee"<sup>16</sup>. At this time, Ismā'īl said he just wanted to go home. But Samīr told him:

"This is not how we solve things, Ismā'īl. This is your country. You are Syrian first and last. Nobody should be allowed to force you away from your country, your home country. Believe me. Those who rule over us, those are the ones that have to go."

His friends taught him about the situation in Syria and discussed political developments with him. Maraḥ told him her father was in prison because of his political activities in the 70-es.

When the revolution started, Ismā'īl felt that it was a natural development, but he was scared of the regime. He thought about leaving, but then Samīr and Maraḥ, who had married and moved abroad, came back to be a part of the revolution.

"Are we really not going to be part of such a real change? Are we just going to sit silently and just watch the news? This is a chance that won't come again easily. We need to use it well to serve the country."

But as the situation worsened and the violence increased, they felt marginalized. And then Samīr was kidnapped. Ismā'īl suggested to Maraḥ that they should leave. Maraḥ could go, but Ismā'īl did not have a passport. His only way out was back to Golan. He went there, but decided in the last moment to stay. He taught

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<sup>16</sup> Euphemism for being taken for questioning by the security forces. Other common expressions include *sīn wi jīm* (short for *su'āl wi jawāb*, question and answer) and visiting *bēt khāltu* (his aunt's place).

children who had lost their school, and was killed in a bombing raid. The narrator ends the story in these words:

”He died, together with twenty children who were having a geography lesson about the borders of Syria, and about Golan, which is a part of Syria.”

We can see that Ismā‘īl’s decision to stay was a result of previous events in his life. First of all, it was motivated by a strong sense of belonging, coming from the warm welcome he received when he came to Syria, but also from before he left Golan, from the community celebrations of the ”day of Syrian identity”, commemorating the refusal of Israeli citizenship. When he died, he was in South Syria, close to his childhood home in Golan and close to his beloved Damascus.

Second, his decision to stay was motivated by what he learnt from his friends. Samīr and Maraḥ taught him that no one could force him to leave Syria, it was those in power who had to leave. They taught him to hold on to what is right, and not to bow under pressure. The last sentence of the story is an indication that he learned his lesson well, that he died defending what he believed was right.

This story is, like so many of the stories, one of moral transformation – of the two themes mentioned above: belonging and holding on to what is right. Ismā‘īl knew that Syrian was part of his identity, but the warm welcome reinforced this conviction. The not so warm welcome from the security apparatus made him doubt, but his friends were helpers who told him he belonged. His friends also helped him in the process of learning to hold on to what is right. In this story, there are three tests, and they are tests of belonging: The first one is the temptation to leave after his visit to the security service, the second is his temptation to leave when the revolution begins, and the third is the temptation to leave after Samīr is disappeared and Maraḥ has left. In the first two tests, his friends are there to help. In the third test, he has to manage without their help – now he just has the memories of what they taught him.

### 95 Bēḍāt baladiyye (Home-farmed eggs)

Summary: ‘Abū Jamāl only likes to eat food that is *baladi* (home-grown or grown in the country). When military forces turn his farmland into military posts, he comments that the land which had been a source of life, now has become a source of death. Therefore, he accepts his wife’s suggestion to visit their daughter in Aleppo. But he is unhappy there. He just stares at the sky, smokes cigarettes and eats anything they give him. When his daughter and son-in-law decide to go to Turkey, he decides to go back to his farm. His wife comes along with him.

Why did he make this choice? Before they made the decision to go back home, his wife asked him what was the matter with him. He said:

”I was wrong, woman. I can’t say that I will look for land other than my own land. I cannot leave my house and my land. It was entrusted to me. I got it from my

father, and will pass it on to my children. What am I doing here? I shouldn't have come. I need to go home."

As he explains his decision to his daughter, he says:

"I can't take it any more. I have already endured a lot. I can't take anything more. Take 'Um Jamāl with you and take good care of her. I am going back. Whatever happens to people, let it happen to me."

His wife refuses to accept this solution and echoes his sentiment:

"Whatever happens to you, let it happen to me."

After going back home and working on his land again, he says to his wife:

"I know that we might not be able to stay for long, and that we might have to go somewhere else in a bit. Or we might die from a barrel bomb that falls from the sky. But believe me, I don't regret it. This breakfast, and these eggs from our own hens, are the value of the world to me. It is not about healthy life and a life I am used to, house and garden. After a while, this earth has become like blood, flowing through the veins of those who work on it. I cannot live far away from it. Then I will die. I don't want to die far away from my land and my country. *Baladi* is something special, 'Um Jamāl, it is something special."

We can see that his reason to stay has to do with belonging and responsibility. 'Abū Jamāl feels so connected to the land that he imagines it to be the blood in his veins. He imagines a bodily connection. He evokes a long perspective of generations. He says the land was entrusted to him, and he has a responsibility to take good care of it and pass it on. Humility is also a reason to go back – he does not see himself as any different from other people in the community, and whatever happens to them, he accepts that it should happen to him, too. This means that he feels connected to the community and feels belonging not just to the land, but also to the other people in the village.

In this story, the structure is one of a test passed. The test is going away from the farm, and passing the test is going back, despite the dangers. The reward is an even stronger feeling of belonging.

### 117 'A jabīn il-lēl (The best part of the night)

Summary: Rāma loves the night, and writes and dreams at night. She also loves her city Damascus, but feels that it is losing its soul due to random building projects. With the revolution, she feels the soul returning. But her friends get arrested and die, one after one, and the remaining ones try to convince her to leave the country. She gets a job in Beirut and travels back and forth for a while, but when the border crossing becomes more difficult, she stops going there. Then her fiancé Sāmī decides to go to Turkey. It is becoming clear that he is under surveillance. And her house is bombed. Her siblings pack their stuff and prepare to travel, and she is convinced to join them. But on the last night, their childhood friend 'Imād is sitting with them, and he is very quiet. He does not

have enough money to travel. Rāma gives her money to him, and declares that she will go back to Damascus.

Why did she make this decision? One hint could be how she felt about the streets of Damascus:

"She liked to walk in the streets in Damascus in general, but the old Damascus had a special meaning to her. She liked the sound of her own footsteps on the stones in the old streets. She felt that with every step she took, she got in touch with the steps of those who had walked there before, hundreds and thousands of years ago. Just as if the stones were telling their stories and the stories of these people, and she was listening."

Another hint could be how she felt when the border between Syria and Lebanon became difficult to cross:

"She felt that it was enough. She couldn't leave Damascus anymore. "The people are different, the country is different. I can't. I am like a fish. I die outside of the streets of Damascus. I tried walking a lot in Beirut. I got confused. My legs don't know the streets and don't know how to walk there. Here, I don't need to think. My legs know the way by themselves. I know my shadow. I know where the sun comes from. Every breath of wind I feel gives me the soul back. No, this is it. It is not for me."

The narrator agrees:

"I could understand her very well, because I feel the same. Believe me, my siblings: When we tread on the streets in our own city, we hear the sound and feel the strength. Abroad, the steps are empty and weak."

On the last night, after giving the money to 'Imād, surprising her siblings and fiancé, she said:

"I can't travel. I can't see myself there. You have made up your minds, I haven't. 'Imād is like a brother to me. If one of my siblings needs money, it is impossible for me to be stingy."

What can we tell about her motivation to stay from these excerpts? She refers to the city's soul disappearing with ugly buildings, and returning with the revolution. This points to a kind of spirituality. To Rāma, Damascus is more than just a city. She feels connected to it in a physical way – like she "is" the city, and being away from it means losing herself in a fundamental way. She needs to be there in order to have a soul. Her identity is tied to the city in an organic way.

She also feels a moral duty to help 'Imād, based on a family-like, close relationship. 'Imād serves as a catalyst by giving her a chance to do something good for him, while she is disappointing her fiancé by giving him the ring back.

The story's structure rests on this sense of belonging, which is put to the test twice (first time Beirut, second time Turkey). The protagonist resists the

temptation, and is rewarded by a moral ennoblement through sacrifice and by a home feeling.

### 161 Bēn madīntēn (Between two cities)

Summary: The story is about how Zuhēr feels about coming back to Damascus, after being in Beirut for some years and earning enough money to pay his way out of military service. It is about the arguments for and the arguments against coming back. It is a discussion about whether he is lucky or unlucky to be able to live in Damascus in the middle of the war, inflation, fear, depression, and difficult living conditions. He is lucky because he doesn't need to fear conscription and because his home and family are still around, and because he has a girlfriend. He is unlucky because he can't get used to the insecurity and bombs, because people are depressed and afraid, because it is hard to get a job, and because his girlfriend's parents don't agree to their marriage because he doesn't have a job other than at a snack bar.

Why did he make the choice to come back to Damascus?

"The payment was the price for his love towards his country, where he grew up and felt safe. It was a place where he would like to spend more time with his father, mother and siblings."

And how did he feel after being in Damascus for a while?

"It was hard for him to accept the situation, which was so humiliating<sup>17</sup>. At the same time there were others who saw his situation as their dream situation. He had gone, paid what he had to, come back, to a house and family which were okay. A young man in his thirties who had neither a job, a life, friends nor money. The only thing he had achieved was that he could live in Syria because he had paid his way out of the military. It was not wrong to go back home, like many others had told him. It is always right to go home."

This story stands out in the material, because Zuhēr apparently is not motivated by a responsibility to help or by an inner morality. His decision to come back is simply based on love for his family and his home. The text says that coming home is always right, but it doesn't provide any further justification. It just states that some might see him as lucky, others as unlucky.

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<sup>17</sup> Reference to the difficulties of fulfilling basic daily needs like taking a shower and doing laundry, because of electricity and water cuts

## Chapter 6 Choosing Syria: Findings

### 6.1 Themes and motivations

As we could see from the previous chapter, in the stories (re)told by the Souriali storyteller, motivations for Syrians to stay in Syria or come back to Syria from abroad have to do with being true to one's moral identity, to feel a responsibility to help, and with belonging. In most cases, the motivation is a mix of two or three of these broad categories.

Keeping the head high and holding on to what is right are presented as the central motivations for Ḥusām (55) and Ismā'īl (129-130-131). For Jamāl (113) and Humām (114) it is of central concern to disregard high risk and be courageous. Others' examples help them see their own moral obligation. For Humām (114) and the young man from Homs (26), coming back or staying is a way to pay back and show gratitude to someone who changed their life for the better. It is not something that is expected of them, it is more a reflection of being true to who they perceive themselves to be and want to remain.

A feeling of responsibility and having to follow a moral imperative to help is a central motivation in many of the stories. Doctor Ḥanān (170-171) and 'Abū Sālim with the heaters (89) both ask themselves: If I am not here to help, who will? If I am not here not now that I am most needed, when would I be? The other Ḥanān (40) uses her feelings as a moral guide: When she is in France, she cries and feels useless. When she is in Syria helping children, she feels enthusiastic, she doesn't get tired, and she feels a sense of flow – she forgets about time. Others also feel helpless when they are too far away: Sidra (93), 'Abū Sālim (89), 'Abū Jamāl (95) and Rāma (117) all fear that if they are too far away from Syria they will feel useless, unable to help, idle and weak.

Some feel a responsibility to help because they have a special skill or knowledge that not everyone can provide, and they find it meaningful to use their skills in the service of their country and their people. Ḥanān (170-171) is a doctor, this is surely needed. Helping children cope with trauma (Ḥanān, 40) is surely also needed. 'Abū Sālim (89) repairs heaters, and believes people need him and his services, especially in times of winter. Documenting human rights abuses (Humām, 114), the cultural heritage (Niḡūlā, 12/14) and the situation on the Syrian countryside (Sidra, 93) are also valuable contributions. Providing some form of schooling to displaced children is also of great need (Jamāl, 113; Ismā'īl, 129-130-131; the young man from Homs, 26).

Many feel that the revolution is a once-in-a-lifetime chance that will not come again easily. This is Samīr and Marah's reason for coming back (129-130-131), as well that of as Salām's fiancé (39). Ḥanān (40), Humām (114) and Jamāl (113) also feel this way.

The feeling of belonging is in some stories evoked in strong metaphorical terms. Niqūlā (12/14) sees himself as bodily connected to an old stone church. When a bomb hits the church, he feels as if it makes a hole in his heart and shatters his body. He also feels like a child of the brown earth, and like the stone church, he is planted there with love and power in the earth's bosom. He feels as if he is not a separate human being, but a part of a bigger picture involving generations and civilizations. Rāma (117) also feels a strong connection to history, especially when she treads the streets of old Damascus. She feels that her footsteps puts her in touch with people who walked there before, and it is as if she can hear their stories as she goes walking. Her footsteps feel firm and strong. But if she is away from Damascus, she feels like a fish without water. She can not connect to people and streets of other cities. 'Abū Jamāl (95) refers to his farm as the land that gives life, and when he comes back home to it, he says that the earth is like blood in the veins of those who work with it. Like Niqūlā, he has a long perspective of generations, and sees the land as something he has a responsibility to pass on. 'Abū Sālim (89), who provides heat to others, says he cannot feel any warmth outside of his country.

Then there are the two stories of those who stay simply to be with their families. Zuh̄r (161) chose to come back to Syria because of his love for the family and home. The story does not provide any more justification than "it is always right to go home". Gh̄th (165) stayed in Syria because of his family, but he also might have felt a responsibility to help based on a special skill, namely his skill for writing and reporting from inside Syria.

The stories are so eloquent that the above findings seem to speak for themselves and not need further explanation. Yet, theory may help us understand them more deeply. However, not all theories that may seem relevant or applicable are in fact adequate.

One theory that I became acquainted with, but found not useful at all is the rational choice theory. According to this theory, any decision is based on a calculation of cost and benefit. Just like a dog will do the strangest things in order to get food, humans do things in order to get benefits such as approval, recognition, love or money. This theory is associated with Adam Smith and the idea of the "invisible hand" in a free market (1776). Shortcomings of this theory include the inability to explain collective action or social norms, especially altruism, reciprocity and trust (Scott, 2000).

It seems clear from my findings that weighing cost and benefit is not a motivation to return to Syria, or to stay. To be sure, it could be a motivation for some people, but not for the characters in this material (or, at least, not in the presentation of their decisions by the *ḥakawātī*). On the contrary, there are stories with a direct criticism of such ideas. Jamāl (113) after his moral transformation rejects any notions of utility, and instead embraces notions of courage and honor. Ḥusām (55) after his moral transformation rejects material reasons to flee, and accepts values of spiritualism, collectivity and dignity.



In contrast, a theoretical approach that seems to fit much better is the one proposed by Wendy Pearlman (2018). Although her focus is on joining protests and not on coming back to Syria, I find Pearlman's model of moral identity-based mechanisms to be particularly useful. In her article, Pearlman's interest is what motivates people to participate in protests in between the first movers and before mass participation, while the benefit of participation is still smaller than the cost. She finds that an important part of the answer has to do with moral identity. Moral identity is about whom one perceives oneself to be, in terms of what is crucially important and what one's commitments and identifications are. This can change according to circumstances.

She finds that three moral identity-based mechanisms were at work when Syrians decided to join demonstrations: Self-respect, agency and obligation.

1) Self-respect: The courage, integrity and dignity demonstrated by first movers, challenged others who regarded those values as central to their own moral selves. Seeing others act on their moral values could compel spectators to consider what not participating meant for their own moral worth. Pearlman gives several examples from her fieldwork. Some of the quotes invoke ideals about masculinity and honour, others emphasize that the moral challenge was the strongest when the first movers were women, less privileged or less able-bodied. Spectators responded to the meaningfulness of protests, not to the size. They voiced dissent not because of reputational worries, but as an expression of their moral selves.

2) Agency: Early movers demonstrated joy in publicly expressing their own beliefs, and this inspired others to follow their example. The inspiration was not so much due to new information about the regime, but by the reward of auto-emancipation. In a Syria where people were so used to denying their political voice, finally expressing it was more than just revealing a preference. It was a fulfillment of a self that had been subjugated. Pearlman gives examples of her informants who expressed that they experienced pride and pleasure from participating in protest. She recounts that their faces lit up while talking about it, and sometimes they would tear up. Protesting, and thereby experiencing freedom from fear, felt so good that one informant described it as "better than his wedding day". Another informant said protesting was like a drug, you could get so addicted to it once you just start.

3) Obligation: Bystanders experienced a moral obligation to act when they learned about or saw first movers being arrested, killed or maimed for taking part in protests. Whereas the motivation of self-respect was about acting out one's moral self, the motivation of obligation stemmed from an internal question of how one could enjoy safety and comfort while others were dying for a cause that one also believed in. Pearlman's informants expressed surprise at how strongly they were affected by seeing other people sacrificing themselves. One informant explicitly expressed that it did not have to do with social ties: seeing a stranger die because of the same humiliation that he was also facing, made him want to do the same. Pearlman concludes that theories about indignation and moral shocks as motivators for protests are valid, and that other people's

sacrifices can motivate bystanders to take risks that they were not initially willing to accept.

We can see all these three processes at work in the Ḥakawātī stories, too. I have already mentioned that one of the preliminary categories is named "Moral identity", inspired by Pearlman's article. In this category, I placed stories where going back or staying apparently provided no benefit at all, except maybe a moral benefit of staying true to one's ideals.

Self-respect, agency and obligation are keywords for the following stories:

The moral integrity of first movers had a great impact on Salām (39) who watched a silent protest, and it was an important inspiration for Humām (114), who learned about people in other countries who stood up for dignity before the same thing happened in Syria. Ideas about masculinity, courage and honor are evoked by Jamāl (113), who compared himself to Don Quijote.

A feeling of satisfaction resulting from "doing the right thing" was clearly at work for Ḥanān (40). For Niḡūlā (12/14), a sweater with a burnt sleeve from a time he was helping displaced people was a dear possession – this could also be because helping others led to a deep form of satisfaction.

Other people's sacrifices might have been a reason why Ismā'īl (129-130-131) chose to stay in Syria and school children when he had a chance to go back to Golan. He knew that his friend Marah's father was in prison, and that his other friend Samīr had just been disappeared. He could also learn from their example of coming back to Syria when the revolution started. For the young man from Homs (26), the sacrifice of the woman who saved his life caused a shift in his willingness to accept risk in order to keep helping others.

## 6.2 Structure and performance

There are strong similarities in structure across a large part of the stories chosen for this analysis. A majority of the stories share a similar structure: A protagonist (who may already have good moral values) goes through a moral transformation, in many cases with the help of a side character (a 'helper' in Proppian terms), who reminds the main character of his original values (113; 114; 129-130-131), helps expand the moral commitment (170-171) or helps to see things differently (55; 26). The protagonist is then put to one or several tests. The tests often consist in a temptation to leave the country or to stay abroad. The reason could be friends or family who tell them to leave Syria (12/14; 117), come visit in a safer place (89; 95), to stay abroad (161; 40) or to flee the country together (170-171; 93), a bomb raid (12/14), a worsening security situation (55; 170-171), becoming homeless (26, 117), or being arrested (117, 129-130-131, 93). When the protagonist passes the test and decides to come back to Syria, or to stay in Syria and not flee, the reward (or 'wedding' in Proppian terms) is moral ennoblement, an enhanced feeling of belonging, and/or a feeling of satisfaction resulting from holding on to inner values and moral identity.

An interesting variation of this structure is the story of Salām (39), where it is a side character who comes back to Syria, but the main character who experiences a moral transformation. This is also the case with Ismā‘īl’s story (129-130-131).

The story that stands out most in terms of structure, is the story of Ghēth (165). In this story, the question of remaining in Syria is not at the forefront. Instead, the main structure is that of an accident that turned into a blessing.

Another story that stands out in terms of structure is the story of Zuhēr (161). Although it is similar to other stories in that the plot rests on belonging put to the test, it modifies the messages from other stories in proposing that coming home is not necessarily so glorious. Zuhēr is rewarded with a home feeling, but although many may wish to be in his situation, he is struggling to adapt to a new form of daily life in Damascus, the "city sunk into darkness".

The storyteller’s choice of emplotment says something important about his agenda. Most of the stories are emplotted as stories of moral growth, and the protagonists and helpers are ordinary Syrians. The morale of the stories may not be explicitly stated, but I think I would not be too far off if I said that the morale is that holding on to what is right, holding on to a feeling of belonging, and holding on to a conviction that it is right to help fellow Syrians, are rewards in themselves. The choice of form is the *ḥakawātī* style, which is normally reserved for heroic epics.

This sends a strong message to the listener that ordinary Syrians can be heroes, and it sends a message about what this heroism consists of. The protagonists, as well as the helpers in the stories, can serve as models for moral transformation: towards an inclusive humanism, towards a willingness to sacrifice, towards dignity, spiritualism, collectivism, and warmth.

Let us now turn to issues of performance. The stories are told by a Syrian storyteller on a non-government controlled radio channel. He performs himself as humorous, empathetic, enthusiastic to meet the listeners, and with a weakness of talking too much. The target audience is Syrians inside and outside of Syria<sup>18</sup>, and the audience is imagined as siblings, part of the Souriali family, who give feedback on stories and share their own stories. The occasion is the aftermath of the "revolution", and the purpose is to spread hope, encourage people to take part in imagining Syria the way they want it to be, and to become a part of the change. It is also to help people cope with the situation as it has become, both inside Syria, and to deal with issues of exile and integration outside Syria.

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<sup>18</sup> Melki’s Syrian audience research finds that it is hard for the non-government controlled radio stations to reach most parts of government-controlled Syria (2016). Therefore, the actual audience of Souriali is probably Syrians in rebel-controlled areas as well as Syrians abroad, in addition to other audiences abroad that can understand Syrian Arabic.

If we see stories as social artefacts that tell us about society and culture, and if we see social reality as constructed through interaction – what do the stories then tell us about society and culture in Syria, and what is the social reality that is constructed?

The "reality" constructed by the radio stories is one where the regime is humiliating and subduing its own people, and where people are right to rebel. The "world of Syria" as presented in the program is a world which contains the security services, which are both stupid and frightening. It contains prison experiences, which for the most part, the listeners do not hear much about, just that it is a difficult experience. It contains armed groups opposed to the regime such as *Dā'ish* (derogatory for Islamic State), which in many cases are not any better than the regime and do not deserve any support. It contains the dangers of checkpoints, sieges and bombs falling from the sky.

But most importantly, the "Souriali world" also contains ordinary Syrians, who are cast as protagonists and heroes in the stories, as well as side characters. They are for the most part characterized by an outstanding hospitality, by good humours, by bravery, by being willing and able to help others, by abiding to norms of reciprocity and trust, by being skilled at their jobs and finding pride in it, by having positive visions for their country, by finding creative solutions and by being willing to change and learn<sup>19</sup>.

This kind of storytelling and identity-building gives Syrians a place in their country's history. The story of Syria after 2011 is not just about the whims of armed groups and of militias who are negotiating about people's lives. It is about these people's lives as well. By casting them as main characters in stories about Syria, the *Ḥakawātī* is saying that they have a place in their own history, and that they can change the history, too. They already have. They belong in their country, as well as in all the countries where they are now scattered. Their visions, choices and actions matter.

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<sup>19</sup> Characters in *Ḥakawātī* Souriali stories may also be cast in negative terms: as uninclusive to others, for example to Palestinians (6), as helping the security service and telling on protesters (30; 39; 106; 177) as discriminating against women or making their lives difficult (69; 196; 36; 163), having unrealistic expectations to marriage and/or divorce (110; 160; 184; 190), as being bothersome and noisy (85), not to be understanding of others' situation (90; 115), too concerned with money (169; 177), or even sympathizing with *Dā'ish* and using violence towards their own family members (195; 202). It is a clear pattern that Syrians are portrayed in more positive terms in early stories, and the social criticism is more prominent in later stories.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

The overall aim of this thesis has been to explore the motivations for returning to Syria or staying in Syria, in stories told on the storytelling program Ḥakawātī on the non-government radio station Souriali. In order to do so, I have used methods from narrative analysis, and conducted a thematic and structural analysis of 15 stories about going back or staying in Syria, and a performative analysis of the introduction and concluding remarks to around 60 stories.

Chapter 4 is both a presentation of the Ḥakawātī program and an analysis of its performative function. After presenting what the storyteller says about the stories and where they came from, I make a short analysis of the Ḥakawātī's performance as compared with genre expectations the Ḥakawātī tradition. I also refer to the storyteller's mention of hope in his comments on the stories.

In chapter 5, I presented the 15 stories with summaries, quotes about the character's decision making and comments about structure. The stories were put in three categories: being true to moral identity, a responsibility to help, and a feeling of belonging.

In chapter 6, I summarised the findings from the previous two chapters and compared the result to theories about decision-making. I found that rational choice theory was an inadequate explanation for the decision-making in the stories, whereas Pearlman's model of expressing moral identity as motivation to join protests had significant overlap with my own findings. I also found that the emplotment chosen by the storyteller, the style and the morale, could contribute to give hope by setting people in the center position in the story of their country and by emphasizing the positive role they have played, and continue to play.

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## Appendix: Souriali programming

Note: This list is not exhaustive.

Program name	Topic/Content
<b>Discussion programs</b>	
<i>Shū qōlak</i> (What would you say)	Questions like "Where are you now" and "How are you treated by your host community"
<i>Balā tazkaret safar</i> (Without a ticket to travel)	Both voice messages and longer, anonymous interviews with people who fled.
<i>'Akhd wi 'atā</i> (Take and give)	Longer interviews, opinions about different issues
<i>Taghṭiya khāṣṣa</i> (Special coverage)	Longer interviews, about a special event or initiative
<b>Programs to encourage reconstruction of civil society</b>	
<i>Sūriyyīn la-ba'ḍ</i> (Syrians for each other)	Presentation of initiatives where Syrians are helping Syrians
<i>Banāt il-shams</i> (Girls of the sun)	Short biographical pieces about Syrian women, for example Razān Zaytūna, a human rights activist and lawyer who was disappeared in 2013.
<i>Takhayyal law</i> (Imagine what if)	In this program, listeners are invited to imagine another Syria and another world, with more justice and accountability.
<b>Programs to preserve and reconstruct cultural identity and memories</b>	
<i>Qaṣāqīṣ 'ayyām il-lūlū</i> (snippets from the days of pearls)	Two presenters talk informally about the "good old days" and different cultural traditions in Syria, for example food traditions, the meaning of typical Syrian names, fashion, what changed in the TV series from those days to now, or what they used to do around exam time at university.
<i>il-Manqūshe</i> (thin, fresh bread with za'tar – thyme and sesame seeds, traditional breakfast food)	This is a shorter and more informative program, with similar content: food traditions, culture and traditions, popular sayings, and songs
<i>Khallīni khabbrak</i> (Let me tell you)	Two presenters explain the meaning and stories behind some popular sayings.
<i>Irtijāl/ Mūsīqā-lī</i> (Improvisation/Music for me)	Contains informal talk about music for different occasions, for example related to football, to comics, or to Ramadan.
<i>Kānvās</i> (Canvas)	A long program about different forms of art
<i>Bētī hōn</i> (My house is here)	Guests are invited to talk about their house in Syria. Where was it exactly, and what do they remember about the neighbours and the neighbourhood?
<b>Storytelling programs</b>	
<i>Ḥakawātī</i> (Storyteller)	Stories from real life Syria collected and told by a



	professional storyteller. See (Monaco, 2018) for a discussion of surrealism in <i>Ḥakawātī</i> and <i>ʿAlf sarde wi-sarde</i> .
<i>Jadāyil</i> (Braids)	Stories and testimonies of women
<i>Muzakkarāt kānit mamnūʿa</i> (Memories that were forbidden)	Stories told by the people who experienced them
<b>Serials (often broadcast during Ramadan)</b>	
<i>Al-Zīr Sālim</i> (The Epic of the Hero Al-Zīr Sālim)	The long story of Al-Zīr Sālim told by Ḥakawātī ʿAbū Fākir in 24 episodes. Interactive episodes, told in a coffee shop, with a few friends commenting and getting excited about the story. Showcase of the Ḥakawātī tradition.
<i>Musalsal bi tawqīt Sūriyā</i> (Serial in Syrian time) part 1 and 2	Soap opera with characters inside and outside Syria, story including prison in Sweden and a husband who suddenly turns violent
<i>Killnā lājiʿīn</i> (We are all refugees)	Soap opera with a Syrian family in a Jordanian refugee camp, story including child marriage, domestic violence, and other problems woman refugees might face. See (Ziter, 2020) for more about this serial and for more on the role of nostalgia in Souriali programming.
<i>Kalīla wi Dimna</i> (The Fables of Kalila and Dimna)	Animal fables of Indian origin reinterpreted by the Ḥakawātī ʿAbū Fākir and told during Ramadan 2015. Funny style, where the storyteller blames the other crew members for putting the wrong song and wrong actor, and asks them for advice.
<b>Satirical programs</b>	
<i>ʿAlf sarde wi-sarde</i> (Thousand and one renditions)	Small allegorical stories and anecdotes, told by Kurdish communist actor and writer Luqḥmān Dīrkī.
<i>Jōz kalām</i> (Couple talk)	Light, humorous talk between a couple in days of war.
<i>Sūʿ taqḍīr</i> (Misconception)	Correcting some misconceptions, some serious, some funny
<i>Mōjaz ʿanbāʿ sūryāliyye</i> (Souriali/Surreal news summary)	News summary, but in a Souriali way. Surreal news told in a neutral voice.
<b>Educational programs</b>	
<i>Tuffāḥit qalbi</i> (The apple of my heart)	Program about different issues related to raising children
<i>Līra wara līra</i> (Lira after lira)	Short episodes about different economic issues
<i>Sharawi gharawi</i>	Educational program about different issues related to new technology, for example Facebook privacy
<i>Mā lam yaṭlubhu l-jumhūr</i> (What the public doesn't want)	About media in Syria during Baʿth rule