



Innovative Arab Media and the New Outlines of Citizenship

A Collaborative Vision Builds Stronger Journalism across the Region

MAY 9, 2019 — LINA ATTALAH

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Trying to work in free and critical media in Egypt in the last few years has at times been a lonely endeavor. Even at its best moments, reporting and writing for *Mada Masr*, the Cairo-based independent media outlet I cofounded in 2013, can feel like fighting a flood with a bucket, or shouting into the wind. All around there is a rising tide of authoritarianism. The mood in the region—not to mention the world—often seems to be moving in the opposite direction from the ideals that guide us. But our loneliness is assuaged by knowing that we are not the only ones who believe that the craft of journalism can be used to become political agents. And not agents in pursuit of a particular political ideology, but in pursuit of new epistemologies of knowledge, and new possibilities of ideas. The realization is even more refreshing when its baseline transcends the geographical and psychological borders of the national home, to reach another, broader home: the Arab world.

In the winter of 2015, I traveled to Beirut for a workshop on identity politics hosted by the Carnegie Middle East Center, and met one of the founders of *Al-Jumhuriya*, the Syrian independent media outlet born in 2012.¹ I was struck by some of the affinities we share at *Mada Masr*. Suddenly, I felt that the professional and political loneliness we had experienced in Egypt since 2013 could be countered with a transnational

forum that could build a different kind of assemblage than the one we had been forging in our newsroom in Cairo.²

In the workshop, the *Al-Jumhuriya* cofounder did not try to negate the centrality of identity politics to the struggles of the Arab world—a position often held by those of us who always want to shift the debate to the struggle over resources and wealth. Instead, he argued about the inability of the modern Arab nation-state to adapt to post-2011 changes. Anti-colonial liberation movements and their offspring in the Arab world imitated the structures of modern Western states, but without meaningful societal participation.

Al-Jumhuriya's position crystallizes a certain criticality on the question of identity and citizenship, a criticality that is seldom found in prevalent Arab media discourses. The common discourse within the traditional Arab leftist opposition treats identity and citizenship as marginal distractions from greater priorities when the main goal is to challenge state power. Identity and citizenship are also often viewed as a threat to the postcolonial nation-state. *Al-Jumhuriya* breaks new ground; it chronicles how changing identities in the region, which are in dynamic processes of formation, can expose the failure of this nation-state.

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/innovative-arab-media-new-outlines-citizenship/>

In this report, I attempt to shed light on two media spaces, *Al-Jumhuriya* of Syria and *7iber* of Jordan (pronounced “hiber”), that have tried to activate a criticality vis-à-vis questions of identity, state-making, and citizenship in their media projects. I also offer my introspections about *Mada Masr*. *Al-Jumhuriya* is a publishing platform initiated by a group of writers, academics, and journalists residing inside and outside of Syria. *7iber* started off as a citizen journalism platform in 2007 and morphed into a professional media practice starting around 2011.³ I document some of our collective efforts to shape a new approach to Arab media in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings that began in 2010, and draw out the implications not only of our media work but also of our collaboration.

What this presentation of new media experiments in the region shows is that, despite the authoritarian backlash that has gripped the region and stifled almost all of the revolutionary movements, there is energy in new Arab media that has only increased over time.

Three main thoughts have unfolded in the process of reflecting about our media spaces, examining our content, and engaging in conversations with fellow founders, including interviews specifically conducted for this essay. One is that journalism is a highly political act of contention, especially at times of deep political crisis that in the last few decades have ranged from actual wartime to unprecedented repression. Two, journalism is an intellectual project, but it is also a project of witnessing and having the humility to tell through bearing witness. And three, the delivery of journalism is bound to be experimental at this moment, as, worldwide, the profession grapples with the immense opportunities and challenges of the information revolution.

This report begins with an overview of the media landscape in Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. It then engages with the politics of the founding teams of the media outlets I discuss. I then preview some of these outlets’ content. Next, I discuss different forms of delivery and ways in which these forms balance local media cultural references and global trends. Finally, I explore the meaning of the separate yet intersecting existence of these media outlets in the Arab world today.

Throughout the process of compiling this report, I traveled to Amman and Athens to meet members of *7iber* and *Al-Jumhuriya* for long, introspective interviews. Here, I attempt to synthesize my understanding of their thought. I do so through the lens of a core network member who is co-managing my own like-minded media project and working on shaping our grouping as a transnational professional force that is essentially political. For these reasons, I often use “us” in this report as a reflection of my position.

The Context: Environments of Exclusion

Many of the cultural and political landscapes of the Middle East are today heavily exclusionary environments, from wartime Syria, to repressive Egypt, to the more subtly yet staunchly restrictive Jordanian context. This developing context is not only key to the *raison d’être* of all three media outlets, but also to their relevance today as some of the few civil society actors that continue to operate. They pierce through the state of exception in which they have been functioning.

In both Jordan and Egypt, an economic liberalization agenda, advanced by the state in the last three decades, has opened up media to investments. The Jordan Media City, for example, was set up in 2001 as one of the first regional hubs for satellite television. In 1998, Egypt launched its first satellite, NileSat, with a quest to become a leading broadcast distributor in the region.⁴ In both countries, television is the most popular medium, with both local and pan-Arab media channels broadcasting. The written press, despite its limited distribution, acts as a political agenda setter for the other media forms. The Internet is increasingly accessible, in the wake of state liberalization of the communications and information technologies sector. In Jordan, 88 percent of the population has Internet access, while in much more heavily populated Egypt, just under 50 percent of the population has access.⁵

In Jordan and Egypt, both state-run and privately owned media outlets exist. In this context of relative economic openness, political control and surveillance are practiced

through formal and informal means, and are the result not only of direct actions from the authorities, but also of internalized practices, such as self-censorship.

A UNESCO analysis of the Jordanian media landscape captures the situation well. “The Jordanian media environment is relatively diverse and pluralist,” the analysis reads. “But often reporters lack adequate capacity, ignore professional standards, indulge in self-censorship because of biases, employers’ affiliations, fear of legal consequences if not sometimes fear of physical threats in a context of impunity and lack of accountability. . . . Media professionals are also aware of ‘red-lines-not-to-cross’ . . . mostly related to the monarchy as well as to religious and ethnic issues.”⁶

The situation is similar in Egypt, where detention and prosecution of journalists and police raids on some media outlets have marked the country’s restrictive media environment, in addition to self-censorship. This has especially been the case since, starting in mid-2013, most media outlets—including privately owned ones—pledged allegiance to the authorities.⁷

Formally, legislation is an important tool to practice state executive control over media in both Jordan and Egypt. A 2012 amendment to the Jordanian Press and Publications Law requires news websites to have government licenses, thus tightening press outlets’ ability to operate, and imposing high financial barriers to entry. A 2010 cybercrime law (the Information Systems Crime Law) prohibits online outlets from sharing information on national security or foreign affairs not already made public.⁸ Recently proposed amendments to the same bill can be used to prosecute people for posts published on social media platforms. Other contentious legislation affecting freedom of expression includes the 2014 amendments to the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which can be used to prosecute journalists on charges of promoting terrorist ideas.⁹

In Egypt too, restrictive tools have expanded to include legislation, such as the 2018 media law, which legalizes widespread government control over media outlets, and the 2018 cybercrime law, which legalizes Internet censorship.¹⁰

Legislation in both countries has allowed the blocking of websites, especially in cases of unlicensed sites. In Egypt, the situation has been especially bad, with the government in 2017 carrying out—outside the scope of any law—a mass blocking of websites belonging to nongovernmental media and human rights organizations, and censorship circumvention tools.

In this restrictive environment enforced by legal and extralegal tools, and a broader political atmosphere governed by regimes that have grown skeptical of the Arab uprisings, spaces like *Ziber* and *Mada Masr*, merely through their practice of independent professional journalism, have directly entered into the ranks of dissidents. Both websites, operating from their respective capital cities but covering their entire countries, reach hundreds of thousands of readers every day through their mostly small-scale operations, which range from fifteen to twenty-five journalists.

Syria’s story is different, and has been since before the uprising-turned-war. A total control of the media has been in effect since the 1960s, which has virtually eliminated journalism as an independent practice in the country and rendered the possibility of reporting or any kind of empirical work not just politically dangerous but also practically impossible. Until recently, the Syrian state remained in direct control of media outlets through ownership of newspapers, radio, and television, or through a group of business elites close to the regime who owned some private media.¹¹ A short window of openness between 2000 and 2001 led to some private media criticizing the government, but they were quickly censored.¹² The period was followed by the 2001 Press Law, which, as Syrian writer Joseph Daher describes it, “provided the government with sweeping controls over virtually everything printed in Syria: newspapers, magazines, other periodicals, books, pamphlets, posters, etc.”¹³ The 2011 uprising was marked by several forms of civilian organizing, including around documenting and reporting the protests springing up nationwide. Such organizing was conducive to the formation of a number of independent media outlets and citizen journalism platforms that oppose the regime and that became, as Daher has written, “a basic act of resistance.”¹⁴ But with the improvised content presented by citizen

journalism networks, concerns arose not only about the credibility of information, but also about the exploitation of such information by different armed groups.¹⁵ *Al-Jumhuriya* emerged as a way to use journalism as a form of resistance, as a reaction to the need for better content that engaged with the Syrian revolution and its evolution. It also rose with an emphasis on storytelling and reportage in the context of the evolution of Syrian dissident culture, where a certain traditional elite valued speculative reasoning more than empirical research. Reaching out to thousands of readers every day out of the Syrian diaspora in Beirut, Istanbul, and Berlin, *Al-Jumhuriya* joined the several media groups that chose to organize themselves and build institutions in order to deliver content from and about Syria that was well thought-out and well produced.

The Driving Politics

Within the paradigm of critical knowledge production as a form of resistance, there are some specific underlying politics to our websites.

One is an attempt to speak for a political position that holds itself at equal distance from supposedly secular authoritarianism and political Islam in its different forms. This political position is not very popular in the region.

A second related motive for our work emanates from this distance from power, and its prevalent configurations in the region, and feeds on a desire for mediation—for giving a voice, and for saying something distinctive. People assuming this position, like us, often come from a middle-class educated elite background, and we are very much aware of the privileged place from which we are speaking. Accordingly, at the core of this desire for mediation is a need for distance from the presumptuous role of championing the cause of the Enlightenment in the Arab world. This role's troubled legacy goes back to top-down attempts in the nineteenth century to break the Arab mind free from its supposed darkness or obscurity, led by scholars strongly allied to oppressive authorities.

A third marker of our outlets' approach is an ability to make certain political compromises, because we believe in the worthiness of resilient survival.

The founders of *Al-Jumhuriya* were especially motivated by the realization that the Syrian revolution, unlike other revolutions in the region, was a subaltern revolution not too different, in that sense, from those in Yemen and Libya.¹⁶ It wasn't a middle-class revolution, as Egypt and Tunisia's uprisings are often described (albeit with some generalization), and hence didn't have a liberal outlook that made it easy for the world to relate to it. There was a sense of responsibility among *Al-Jumhuriya*'s founders to convey the universality of Syria's struggle for democracy, freedom, and dignity. There was a need for, as *Al-Jumhuriya* cofounder and director Karam Nachar put it, "the urban, multilingual progressive elite to take advantage of their privilege and access to translate this political struggle to a more universal language that the whole world can understand, relate to, and hopefully support."¹⁷

Those who directly participated in the Syrian uprising, especially in its early days, shared many of these ideas and impulses. This perception of a mediatory role was shared among different groups of seculars, leftists, and liberals in Syria, such as the local coordination committees, who didn't necessarily have a critical mass on the ground, but were quick to organize themselves around the different areas where protests emerged. They started Facebook groups, shot videos, connected with the media, and showcased demonstrations and other actions, especially in places where it was difficult for locals to gain access to traditional media, or broadcast themselves.

As motivated as they were by the rural element of the revolution, these groups, including *Al-Jumhuriya*, were also galvanized against a grouping of secular elites—artists and intellectuals who took the side of Bashar al-Assad's regime from day one. These elites saw him as the protector of the modern secular state—possibly a flawed protector, but still the only one available—and viewed the protesters as a backward lot coming out of mosques.

The pro-revolution seculars, in contrast, thought they could achieve some *modus vivendi* with political Islam. Upon revisiting the idea, they discovered that many of those embracing political Islam “weren’t ideologues,” Nachar said. Rather, they were “people who wanted power, in the sense that our disagreement with them was not just ideological—liberal versus conservative. It was also about their political opportunism and hunger for power.”¹⁸

Nachar explained that the founders “understood how the revolution got armed. We were against the discourse that adopted the idea that the revolution’s armament [occurred] through a conspiracy from abroad. The revolution got armed because it needed to defend itself.”¹⁹

The Imperative to Bear Witness

Early in its lifetime, *Al-Jumhuriya* published profiles of armed militants in the Syrian revolution who included Christians, Alawites, and members of other sects, one of the few such documentations of the diversity in the fighters’ ranks in the first year of the uprising, and an evidence of those days’ popular, broad-based, and spontaneous participation.²⁰ The series was mostly penned by Syrian writer and political dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh, also a founding member of *Al-Jumhuriya* and a mentor to many on the team.

In a similar vein, the catalyst for *Mada Masr*’s birth was a moment when its founders decided to assert that they did not believe that military authoritarianism was the right alternative to political Islam.²¹ This moment was the day in 2013 when the Egyptian masses took to the streets to demand an end to the rule of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. *Mada Masr*’s founding team, who spent their previous years in journalism critiquing the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, covered the protests leading up to the military takeover a few days later. The site intended to actively document not only the popular protests, but also what followed them in terms of the military’s tight grip on power, and the ensuing repression of any form of opposition, whether from the Muslim Brotherhood or others.

With *7iber*, the trajectory of the mediation and translation of people’s voices was different. The website emerged in 2007 purely as a platform for Jordanian voices with the aim of editing and making citizen journalists’ content fit for publishing. But a politically critical moment came with the protests of 2011. The site transformed into a magazine with a fully engaged core team that began working on the project full time. From the onset, and under the slogan of “what’s your story?,” *7iber* encouraged submissions that would create room for diverse ideas about Jordanian politics and society. And while the invitation was open to all, it especially attracted oppositional voices, which prompted *7iber*’s evolution into a critical magazine. In effect, *7iber*’s staking out of a space of openness was far from a claim to neutrality. This was reflected in the type of submissions that were sent to them.²² For example, contributions from bloggers since 2007 have contained criticism of the Jordanian government for suffocating Iraqi and Palestinian refugees instead of helping them assimilate, as well as criticism of the Jordanian judicial system for not properly standing up to corruption.²³

As the fervor of the Arab uprisings subsided after 2011, *7iber* editors’ inboxes, which had once been inundated with readers’ contributions, dried up. Readers, contributors, and the general public began withdrawing into a certain cynicism about the possibility of real change in the region. This is when *7iber*’s founders decided they needed to be proactive. They moved toward a concerted editorial policy designed to forge an identity of sharp journalism. “‘Conversation’ is a keyword that captures what we are trying to do,” said Lina Ejeilat, the executive editor of *7iber* and one of its founders. “We decided to intervene more actively in trying to push conversations around certain issues. We started off by being the children of the Internet, adopting blogs early on, and being excited about the possibilities opened up by this space. But the element of depth and quality was missing. It was nice to receive and publish all these different contributions after editing them, but we want this content that has depth, and that is well thought-out and well researched. There is so much noise out there.... We feel today that credibility lies in a certain intellectual depth.”²⁴

7iber’s aim has been to challenge the status quo by adding something different to the mainstream conversation. An

opinion column Ejeilat wrote for the New York Times pointed to a position that sums up *7iber*'s attempt to challenge the dominant Jordanian state-manufactured discourse about itself—namely, that it is a modern state with reformist politics and a general allure that appeals to the West.²⁵ In the op-ed, Ejeilat compared the response to two different killings by religious extremists. In January 2015, King Abdullah II and Queen Rania of Jordan marched in Paris with other world leaders to mourn the murder of Charlie Hebdo's cartoonists. But this contrasted with the king and queen's posture at home, which Ejeilat examined by analyzing the 2016 murder of Nahed Hattar. Hattar was a Jordanian journalist who, shortly after being released from police custody on charges of insulting religious beliefs for a cartoon he posted, was murdered by fundamentalists. In drawing a comparison, Ejeilat pointed to the contradiction between the official Jordanian claim that the country was fighting radicalization, and its constant attempt to appease Islamist fundamentalists by banning books and censoring films. And while the country's 97-percent Sunni majority makes for a population that is largely homogenous from a religious perspective, this appeasement still has consequences for society. It creates friction with those who don't share the dominant view, or who are diverse in other ways—Jordan has long been a destination for refugees, including Palestinians, Iraqis, and Syrians.

Al-Jumhuriya, *7iber*, and *Mada Masr* have vociferously objected to the idea that the role of the media is to support the discourse of enlightenment that is rooted in the nineteenth-century legacy of top-down thought reformers in the region. In a panel where representatives of all three media outlets spoke (including myself), Ejeilat responded to a question about the media's role as guardians and promoters of a project for modernity in the region. "We always remind ourselves that while we have liberal values, we don't have an evangelical role," she said. "Our main principle is to try to understand and deconstruct, especially given the intense polarization that is making people speak less to each other."²⁶

The antidote to the impulse to enlighten can be summarized in one phrase: "bearing witness." In our conversations,

Al-Jumhuriya repeatedly used the term "witnessing" to describe their journalism. It is also a word I often used when explaining how *Mada Masr* started in the turbulent year of 2013, especially with the turn of violence against the Muslim Brotherhood. It was a moment that needed less pontification and more sheer witnessing. In our case, news gathering was an essential form of witnessing from day one, given the fact that *Mada Masr* was born around an event that the founding team knew would barely be witnessed (at least in an accurate way) and would mostly be distorted. This event was the violent dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-in in August 2013, in which many hundreds of civilians were killed, and which followed the military's removal from power of Morsi, himself a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. The event, and other ensuing clampdowns on opposition voices in a highly concentrated media environment, meant that witnessing the news and writing about it should come first, and then analysis could follow.

In this context, all three groups have avoided the culturalism prevalent in many knowledge-related projects in the region: they rejected the overuse of local culture as an explanation for events and phenomena, in a way that limits our frame of reference and locks our people within their culture.

Facing Backlash

Attempts to add something different to the mainstream conversation have had their cost. In Jordan, the government blocked *7iber* soon after it became active in publishing its own professional team's content in 2013.²⁷ The blocking was justified with the 2012 amendment to Jordan's Press and Publications Law, which requires licensing for media outlets. *7iber* chose to make the compromise of accepting and applying for an official license through this law. "Either we license or die slowly," said Doa Ali, a *7iber* editor.²⁸

"The feeling was that we didn't do enough yet, we weren't contentious enough. We didn't produce what we wanted to produce," Ejeilat said.²⁹ Besides the desire to do more, there was a sense of responsibility toward the media landscape in general and to *7iber*'s audience.

That compromise was related to navigating the specific nature of restrictive policies in Jordan, which, as described by *Ziber*'s team, have been gradually and subtly evolving, so that there isn't the dramatic authoritarianism of Egypt or war of Syria. It was also made with the *Ziber* team's full awareness that they might be used as an instrument in Jordan's argument that, unlike other places in the Arab world, theirs is a regime that essentially allows opposing voices.

Mada Masr has been blocked in Egypt since 2017 and is having to go through a similar licensing process through a restrictive 2018 media bill. Our outlet has not questioned the need to apply for a license. As Ejeilat put it, the choice is not for survival for the sake of survival, but about survival because there is still work to be done.³⁰ In *Mada Masr*'s own terms, the licensing process was not simply a way of complying with how the authorities want to organize us. In a letter to readers about the process of registering, our editorial team wrote:

We realize it may be sheer wishful thinking to presume that the state is willing to grant us legal status in the first place—they may very well reject us outright. We also realize the perils of being granted legal status only to be subject to endless penalties and fines as a way to permanently cripple us. We made this choice while thinking about what it means to be radical inside out—not just on the level of producing content in a context that wants to see us silenced, but also in how we produce this content and how we organize ourselves within an environment that would rather we didn't exist. If the council approves our application, then here's to a new beginning of a fully acknowledged presence and ongoing battles to keep doing what we're doing, with a focus on continuously improving and developing our work. That said, we don't necessarily believe that this scenario will be a happy ending to a difficult struggle. We're aware that producing real journalism within the framework of the law and in the current political climate is a high-stakes gamble. But it's a risk that we're willing to take. We won't be going home in the event that our application is rejected, however. If this is the reality

we have to contend with, then we promise to try and reincarnate ourselves into something that can work and that is just as exciting, if not more so, than our current *modus operandi*.³¹

Fear has sometimes cast a shadow on *Ziber*'s team. The government's block on the website caused anxiety. Even more alarming were two office break-ins and equipment thefts in 2014. As in Egypt—and despite the different local circumstances—the *Ziber* team has often been uncertain about what can get them into trouble. Fear has also permeated the work of *Al-Jumhuriya*. Even though its team has taken refuge in the diaspora, it is being made unsafe by the shrinking political space in Turkey and the role that country has been playing in Syria.

A Quiet Revolution in Content

Both *Al-Jumhuriya* and *Ziber*, like *Mada Masr*, have an interest in in-depth journalism focused on data-powered investigations, ethnographic reportage, and fact-based analysis—with clear propositions that veer away from pontification and toward accumulation of coverage of certain topics. The approach has been to create slow, in-depth content—but doing so while staying relevant, and not falling into a sort of lazy elitism that this form of production can risk. Additionally, while producing in-depth introspective content, all three media outlets have been increasingly aware of the importance of not considering their own countries exceptions, but rather thinking of them in the context of the wider world.

From their exile, *Al-Jumhuriya*'s founders began their work thinking about the possibility of creating a form of Syrian journalism that didn't exist at home. For forty years, Syrian writers had been going to Lebanese newspapers to pen their thoughts, mostly in the form of op-eds, as opposed to fact-based reports. There were no Syrian institutions to accommodate professional journalism. Those who were called "journalists" tended to be intellectuals who favored theorizing over writing empirically. As a result, a certain accumulation of knowledge about a people that is made possible through journalism was absent.

The founders of *Al-Jumhuriya* sought to rediscover the whole of Syrian society through their journalism. This desire emanated from what they saw in the revolution. “Something happened in the last twenty years in the towns and the villages,” Nachar said. “A new urbanized middle class emerged in the countryside.”³² In looking for the subnational in their Syria coverage, *Al-Jumhuriya* shunned pontification and embraced “the humility to go and see what Syrians are like,” as Nachar put it.³³ In that vein, a defining element in *Al-Jumhuriya*’s work has been the resistance to the idea that the revolution was a starting point with no past and no history. The site has attempted to use journalism to trace the events and dynamics that culminated in that breaking point.

Al-Jumhuriya has described some of its content as a form of ethnographic journalism: something that lies between media and anthropology. This is partly due to the academic training in history of some of the founders, and their broader interest in ethnography as a method of investigation. As such, not every piece published is necessarily prompted by an event. The news hooks that typically drive journalism are sometimes disregarded in *Al-Jumhuriya*. Some content has simply been centered on the description of a nonevent—such as focusing on a place of certain significance. In 2014, the group published a profile of Antioch, in southern Turkey, through the lens of the experiences of Syrian refugees, focusing on how Syrians navigated life there through the layers of class and gender.³⁴

With time and more reporting, *Al-Jumhuriya* settled into its own blend of journalism, despite constant pushback from media groups telling the team that they were more academics than journalists, and academics telling them they were mere journalists and shouldn’t pose as academic or think-tank researchers. And it took time for this blend of journalism to unfold. The editorial team made painstaking efforts to work with young people in Syria, and ensure that their contributions were empirical and focused on witnessing, rather than being emotionally indulgent.

While responding to the absence of a journalism tradition in Syria, *Al-Jumhuriya*’s editors have been questioning, in their content, what is politically relevant today in the work they

do. In 2016, the site published a series, “The Political Agent,” which reflected on the crisis of the secular democratic camp that emerged as irrelevant after opposing both the regime and political Islam.³⁵ It also reflected on how egocentrism and an excess of intellectualism obstructed this camp’s ability to organize or reform itself, despite still being considered a political force.³⁶ For example, a letter by members of this camp asking the Syrian opposition not to participate in negotiations in Geneva because of unfavorable negotiation conditions resonated widely and got cited in international mainstream media. “We have pushed ourselves into the world of contemplation,” said Nachar. “But we have also become irrelevant as a political form, and that’s why the idea of the [political agent] dossier came about.”³⁷

Staying Grounded amid Turmoil

With their questions on political relevance central to the content, *Al-Jumhuriya* developed an aspiration to build a community. A key event that catalyzed this aspiration was the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack. “Any discussion about politics at that point became ‘mubtazala,’” Nachar said, using an Arabic term for banal or tacky. “The Syrian regime needed to be made to understand it had to go.”³⁸ Some staff at *Al-Jumhuriya* believed, at the time, in the importance of foreign military intervention. Others strongly opposed it. “It became unclear what’s useful, what’s consistent,” Nachar said.³⁹ For everyone, however, the aftermath of the attack revealed an unsettling fact: the regime wouldn’t be punished. Concerns about higher-level politics became paralyzing. *Al-Jumhuriya* turned away from abstract-seeming policy debates and veered more and more toward events on the ground, with their immediacy and clear importance.

Al-Jumhuriya made good on its decision to go to the ground with a 2015 series on women’s testimonials in the diaspora.⁴⁰ The series, written by women, was a practical embodiment of the site’s determination to focus on gender dynamics. The series challenged the assumptions that women’s work is in civil society and cultural organizations while men do the political writing, and that high-brow intellectual pieces are written by men, while testimonial-based, confessional pieces are written by women. The site’s founders were

at first uncertain about how their turn toward gender and sexuality would be received. But they became committed to their new tack, prompted by the realization that progressive Syrian groups could be conservative when it came to gender and sexuality. In 2017, *Al-Jumhuriya* invited *Mada Masr*, and colleagues from *Ziber*, to join a working group in Beirut that would focus on how to integrate gender as a subject in and a lens for our coverage. The group exchanged testimonials about gender politics, and discussed third-wave feminism and intersectionality. We returned home invigorated and inspired to introduce editorial plans that focused on gender in new ways.

In some degree of contrast to *Al-Jumhuriya*, and in light of the fact that Jordan has not had Syria's experience of a dramatic rupture of politics with war, *Ziber* has developed an interest in covering the news, considering it an index of relevance. The question has always been how to add value when reporting news, Ejeilat said.⁴¹ Most recently, *Ziber* published popular reporting on the June 2018 protests in Jordan against economic austerity measures, which led to a change of government and other concessions. *Ziber* reported the events with a mix of live coverage, in video and text, and analysis.⁴² Here, a straight process of newsgathering unfolded through live videos and daily wrap-ups, among other methods. *Ziber* focused on the kind of news that can easily be distorted by mainstream media aligned with the ruling authorities, and especially the king.

Driven also by an interest in covering news that has captured local mainstream media attention differently, *Ziber* did a series of profiles about policemen killed in several bombings in August 2018. The site's reporters traveled to the victims' native villages and towns and asked about the choices that led them to join the army and the security forces.⁴³ The gesture humanized the deceased, in contrast to mainstream reportage, which essentially portrayed their deaths as political events—martyrs of terrorism who sacrificed their lives for the nation.

Ziber has also been doing some analysis, but only when the analysis can reveal new propositions and new arguments, something that is rare in local Jordanian papers. Though

Ziber's outlook has generally been perceived as politically left-leaning and socially liberal, Ejeilat explained that there is a diversity of positions in the editorial team, especially when it comes to the more divisive questions of the economy. She has been happy with this diversity, as it has made it hard to categorize *Ziber*, and has certainly saved it from being dogmatic about the truth. And while she recognizes that *Ziber* has a leftist “nafas” (“breath”), she has also been conscious that it should be open to critically engaging other positions.⁴⁴

Political and Social Impacts

There have been political and social impacts to *Ziber's* approach. A long 2015 feature analyzed and critiqued Jordanian laws that allow a man who rapes a woman to marry her to avoid punishment.⁴⁵ The feature was one of the most widely read on the website, but it also turned into a public debate on social media networks, where the headline “Rape and Marry” (“Ightassib wa Tazawaj”) became a trending hashtag. The penal code was eventually amended in order to reverse the regressive stipulation. Another example is an investigation into whether Jordan will reclaim al-Baqoura and al-Ghamr, lands that were occupied by Israel. The investigation drew on information, including maps, that were not publicly available. The piece resonated widely, with other regional and international media outlets citing it and writing about the issue. The king ultimately announced that Jordan would not renew the parts of the peace treaty with Israel related to these lands. He also signaled that Jordan would start negotiation to reclaim them.⁴⁶ “It was something that everyone thought was impossible,” Ejeilat said.⁴⁷

Ziber's team described some of their in-depth work as accumulating knowledge on certain topics that other outlets won't cover in sustained ways. One prominent example has been their work on Internet governance, an issue barely covered in Arab media in Arabic, let alone local Jordanian media. Through this coverage, the tech-savvy *Ziber* team has interrogated the free space of the Internet that we all take for granted, identifying ways in which it has been becoming less free and more controlled by states and corporations. Obsessions over particular topics and the accumulation

of content on them have translated into the existence of a number of micro-archives that serve interest groups from different walks of life.

A concern that *Ziber* and *Mada Masr* have shared is avoiding getting too comfortable in the elitist space of being an alternative, intellectually superior website. When it started, *Ziber* was associated with the elitism of Jordanians who only read in English. When the site tilted the balance toward its Arabic content, the association with elitism continued, though it was now more of an intellectual elitism and not merely a class-based one. In the words of Ejeilat, *Ziber* has been conscious of this elitism and of an interesting intersection between being “both hip and trendy but also contentious and oppositional.”⁴⁸ In other words, the idea of being critical of authority, while also being socially liberal and progressive, has had repercussions on the level of the media’s popularity, across the board. “We don’t want anyone to take the impression that we are a grim space,” Ali said.⁴⁹ The expression of this idea has taken the form of diversity in content, which has included coverage of culture, sports, and lifestyle, among other topics.

On an overall editorial level, one of the realizations that years of publishing and large amounts of content have given to the *Al-Jumhuriya* team is that the Syrian crisis has generated a sense of exceptionalism, among those who speak about it and write about it. This is perhaps what created an interest in joining a network of Arab media, where other outlets, including *Mada Masr*, would voice a certain concern: indulging too much in the crisis that Egypt has become since 2013 has been unavoidably coupled with a sense of exceptionalism. This is how a 2016 editorial series by *Al-Jumhuriya*, “The Left and the Question of Freedom,” was conceived. Here, a number of activists wrote about their experience joining leftist parties across the region, and reflected about why they quit them. Writers hailed from Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The series even included a translation of George Orwell’s introduction to the Ukrainian translation of *Animal Farm*.⁵⁰ This has also been the impulse behind *Ziber* and *Mada Masr* engaging in big regional news, while depending on each other’s resources, a key aspect of the collaboration between them.⁵¹ *Al-Jumhuriya* has

developed a rubric called “Hyperlink,” whereby they post links to interesting reads from fellow, like-minded Arab websites, with a note introducing the topic and the website hosting it.⁵²

In fighting exceptionalism, our media outlets have been trying to incorporate intersectionality into our journalism—understanding how different cultural, political, and social facts and categories intersect to create the circumstances that define our stories. We especially take this approach when reporting on gender. Following the workshop on gender organized by *Al-Jumhuriya*, the site launched a series titled “Gender, Sexuality, Power,” with stories from across the region. In its introduction, Nachar wrote about a Syrian woman who was murdered by her brother for an unsanctioned relationship with a Turkish officer. He also wrote about a gay Iraqi boy murdered by the police. “What, in other words, if we juxtapose the bodies of Rasha and Hammudi side by side, and compare the wounds?” he wrote. “The many intersections would suggest we were dealing with two versions of the same original text: the grotesque scene; the adolescence and clear weakness of the victims; the pride of the murderers and their certainty of the ‘goodness’ or ‘justice’ of what they were doing; and of course before all else the motives that cannot be understood in either case without going back to that word that still, half a century after its emergence, irks so many: ‘gender.’”⁵³

The act of looking beyond and not being incarcerated inside the exceptionalism of our countries’ condition also meant the ability to use this condition as a lens, and in that there is power. In the words of Nachar,

We believe that the revolution and the war in Syria have generated an excellent lens to understand the world. [We want] to employ what happened in Syria as a lens for some of the basic questions of the world. There is something progressive when the Third World person feels bold enough to engage in cosmopolitan questions. It’s empowering. In area studies, theory is produced by the white people and the brown people come with the case study. Marx and Weber gave the global universal theory, and we

are here to apply it. Our archive is a laboratory and as much a valid space to theorize as the European archive is, or any other region in the world.⁵⁴

In the same vein, Palestinian American academic Lama Abu-Odeh wrote a two-part critique of Western liberalism through the lens of the Syrian crisis.⁵⁵ Similarly, Danish academic Sune Haugbolle wrote a commentary about how Syria can teach lessons on militant humanism.⁵⁶

The Politics of Delivery: Language and Writing

All three media outlets have been engaging in different forms of production and delivery of their content, but two commonalities have brought them together, and also reflect their practical ethos. Language and the way Arabic is used is one; a core reliance on writing over other forms of telling (like visual storytelling) is another, while experimenting with different media.

We have used language, especially Arabic, as a vehicle of ideas, and accordingly took the liberty to experiment with its different tones in order to best deliver the content at hand. As such, our use of language has been political and not dogmatic, because it is not restricted to the tight rules and traditional uses of the standard written language. These choices have situated us in the new, post-uprising Arab world, where the Arab is being actively redefined, including through language—its new and evolving syntaxes and accents—and bringing the spoken to the written.

For example, there is something like a generational divide in the opinions of *Al-Jumhuriya*'s editorial team about the way the name "Syria" is written in Arabic. Older, established volunteer editors like writing "Syria" in Arabic with the letter "ta' marboutah" at the end, while the younger ones like to write it with the letter "alef" at the end. The ta' marboutah is shrouded in Arab nationalism and its associated rigidity around the Arabic language. The alef, a long, straight line that conveys a strong "ah" sound, "is more chilled," to use the words of Nachar, and is in use by people "who are comfortable with themselves."⁵⁷ In *Mada Masr*, we hosted a

discussion about the teaching of the Arabic language in our countries, and the notion of the sacredness of the language often came up. One Syrian participating in the discussion said that in Syria, Arabic is so glorified that people are expected to perfect it to the point that there is a phobia about committing language mistakes. In contrast, one of *Mada Masr*'s editors, Nael el-Toukhy, said that we have to constantly be in a tit for tat with language: we should at times perturb it or tickle it, all while befriending it.

In *Al-Jumhuriya* and *Ziber*, as in *Mada Masr*, there has been a concerted effort to resist the purist approach to language. For example, *Al-Jumhuriya* has been comfortable using common English words in Arabic, rather than figuring out Arabic translations that can sound foreign and off-putting. All three outlets have found comfort with a certain use of dialectical and colloquial Arabic—something that is especially challenging for many Syrian intellectuals to embrace, with the country being the birthplace of Arab nationalism. Toukhy, who is also a novelist, has often preached about how the colloquial is the language of society. As media outlets concerned with our societies, he felt we needed to be able to grapple with colloquial Arabic while writing. In Toukhy's op-ed section, *Mada Masr* published a series by Khaled Fahmy, a well-known historian of the modern Middle East, titled "Thoughts in Colloquial Arabic."⁵⁸ Here, Fahmy used the language he speaks in his everyday conversations to talk about history and politics. This language bounced somewhere between the colloquial and the classical, demonstrating the large spectrum that exists between the two and the essential dynamism of the language we use.

In a review published in *Mada Masr* of a book written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, Khalid Mansour defended the use of the colloquial dialect as a way to bridge the gap between books and everyday life, and as a resistance to the idea that formal literary creativity can only happen in classical Arabic.⁵⁹ "Remember the poetry of Biram al-Touns, Fouad Haddad and Salah Jaheen? The diaries of Louis Awad? The novel of Mostafa Masrhafa about the 1919 revolution?" he wrote, citing examples of colloquialism in influential Egyptian literature. It is noteworthy here to say that the openness to experiment with the different shades of Arabic that lie

underneath the language's staunch classical face doesn't translate into an ideological position against classical Arabic and in favor of the spoken word. Rather, the openness is a form of resistance to the authority of language, a resistance exercised through constant experimentation, including within its classical forms.

All of our three media outlets have been translating some content into English, and, to a lesser extent, we have been generating original content in English, all with the interest of being part of the global conversation. Throughout, we have been exposed to the woes of translation, and have grappled with how often part of the original essence is lost.

All three media outlets have also been defending long-form writing. "Who would have thought that so many people would like to read a long piece about Gramsci and the Arab world?" said Nachar, referring to work *Al-Jumhuriya* has done on the reconfiguration of power by Arab ruling elites in order to maintain it within their ranks, a strategy that exemplifies Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony.⁶⁰ Well-known Lebanese writer Khaled Saghie wrote a six-thousand-word autobiographical piece about how he grew up in leftist circles and ended up leaving the left.⁶¹ The piece was a big hit, from a clicks perspective. In 2014, Hossam Bahgat, a human rights defender turned investigative journalist, wrote a four-thousand-word piece about how the Mubaraks, Egypt's former rulers, economically abused power inside their presidential mansions.⁶² The report continued to top *Mada Masr's* most viewed pieces for years. Readers not only read the text, but also downloaded embedded data sets we provided that showed exactly how the corruption occurred. Such pieces challenge the common view that online content is ephemeral.

"The Internet surprises us," Nachar said. *Al-Jumhuriya* has been refusing to fall into the received wisdom about the Internet, which holds that gimmicks drive views and that people don't like long reads.⁶³ Instead, Nachar cherishes the Internet—not because of these gimmicks but because it has given him and his team access to analytics and data about readers that weren't available with newspapers.

But being online also made other forms possible. Even as we have been committed to longer reads, we have also always been open to using video. Our openness was not a response to the dominant idea in the media industry that people prefer video to texts. Instead, we strongly believe that people still like long texts if they are informative and compelling. But images can undeniably tell stories too. In 2016, *Al-Jumhuriya* started a monthly fifty-minute video talk show, in which they managed to use their limited resources to create a cozy minimalist aesthetic: dim lighting, two cameras, and basic microphones. In this series, hosts discussed new Arab journalistic writing, the new Syrian revolutionary opposition, and political Islam in Syria, among other topics. The series got wide public attention and received a lot of engagement. Nachar said that *Al-Jumhuriya* liked this format because it embodied the experimental nature of his organization and the thought it produces. He described the talk show as "democratic" and "immediate."⁶⁴

Mada Masr has experimented with video as well, with the biggest hit being a comical web series titled "Big Brother" ("Akh Kebir"), in which our lead cartoonist developed a character who satirically comments on the country's state of affairs. Through this series and others, we learned that the audience wasn't looking to us for straight documentation in video form—this is the work of television. Instead, they wanted an explanation, a conversation, a joke, or a departure from reality altogether.

Ziber has been the savviest of all in integrating video into its journalism. Beyond its strong presence during the 2018 summer protests against austerity measures, *Ziber* developed a large package in September 2018 that focused on the new income tax bill, one of the elements that fueled the protests. *Ziber's* package included a series of informational videos explaining Jordanian income tax law over three decades, with visualizations and a long text. It was one of several examples of how *Ziber* has thoroughly developed some of its topics with different forms of storytelling.⁶⁵

Moving Forward: Strengthening Collaboration

In the Carnegie Middle East Center meeting where an *Al-Jumhuriya* founder spoke about the modern Arab nation-states' failure to create a politics of inclusive citizenship, there was an articulation of the need to insist on finding and forming new assemblages of individuals and groups across the region, and defending the values of freedom and dignity with a shared common political denominator. *Al-Jumhuriya's* intellectual contributions and the concluding note confirmed an idea I had: I wanted to mobilize a collective of progressive, independent, young Arab media outlets, actively operating within today's crises in the Arab world.

The connections between *Ziber* and *Mada Masr's* staff preceded the uprisings, dating to the early years of the new century, when Arab youth were first using the Internet to connect across borders for activism and political engagement. Platforms like the annual Arab Bloggers Meetings and Arab Techies were places for such early meetings, friendships, collaborations, and mutual solidarities. Founders of both *Ziber* and *Mada Masr* also had in common past experience in traditional journalism practice. With these shared backgrounds, both outlets have been on a quest to carve out a new space for Arab journalism, resisting corporate control and technological determinism, but taking advantage of the opportunities the Internet offers.

In February 2016, we organized the first meeting in Cairo of young Arab media, with participation from Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. This was the first in what has become an annual meeting, dubbed the February meet-up. It is a traveling annual meeting across different Arab cities, hosting different new media initiatives each time and attempting to identify what a new Arab media profile can look like.

In 2018, *Mada Masr*, *Al-Jumhuriya*, and *Ziber*, alongside other sites from the region that specialize in certain types of content and certain forms of production, decided to experiment with developing a journalism school that speaks

to their values. These values include viewing journalism as a political act, and understanding that sociopolitical contexts and histories are essential in reading and translating the Arab world. The values also hold that strong research and good writing are part and parcel of being a good journalist—besides all the other skills associated with digital media today—and that mimicking global digital journalism trends without a well-formed intention is a recipe for failure. The three websites are seeking to develop this program not out of altruism, but in the interest of improving their respective newsrooms. The year-long program, which has both in-person and virtual elements, is to start in the fall of 2019, but its curriculum is already being developed, centered on three main tracks: the journalist as a historian, the journalist as an anthropologist, and the journalist as a specialist.

Meanwhile, and while waiting for the next generation of journalists to join us after the school experiment, we have worked together with our own teams on producing some editorial collaborations. In these collaborations, we decide on a common theme and pitch stories about it from our different contexts. Once we agree on the right mix of the pitches, we produce the content and publish it together, both online and in print. In 2017, we published a collaboration exploring fifty years since the 1967 Arab defeat in a war fought from the different fronts of our respective countries.⁶⁶ In 2018, we published a collaboration on bread as a prism through which to talk about food, power, and bodies.⁶⁷

In this report, I have provided a glimpse of the ways in which these innovative media outlets act as political agents in their current contexts, through their expressed positions, their content, and the forms in which they publish. Further work is needed to more fully describe the editorial sensibilities of these projects, as well as audience reception.

Joseph Daher, a fellow member of the “Citizenship and Its Discontents” working group, saw systemic value in the media efforts described in this report. “This is the kind of thing that can be done ahead of the next revolution,” Daher said in a workshop gathering the members of the working group. “This is the kind of thing that should have happened ahead of the revolution.”⁶⁸ Beyond simple praise, Daher

validates the idea that journalism can go beyond the act of challenging power. When journalism becomes an act of building progressive institutions that reflect the values of the content they present, and contribute to the growth of constituencies around these institutions, we can perhaps start thinking of a politics that is not only obsessed with critiquing power, but also with imagining other possibilities. French philosopher Jacques Rancière has described politics as a field that transcends the investigation of power and its legitimacy, to cover the relationship of the subject of such power to oneself and then to authority.⁶⁹ It is in this relationship that politics resides. Whether what we do provides a draft or a rehearsal for other revolutions remains a speculation that I prefer to leave to political scientists and other academics.

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Author

Lina Attalah is an Egyptian media figure and journalist

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