

## PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN SYRIA: VOICES FROM ACADEMIA, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE ARTS

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Human  
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University of Essex

# **Perspectives on Transitional Justice in Syria: Voices from Academia, Civil Society, and the Arts**

## **A Workshop Report**

**By Dr Katya Alkhateeb, Senior Research Officer at the  
Essex Human Rights Centre, February 2025**

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## **A Note from the Author on Recent Developments**

Since this workshop was held in July 2024, Syria has experienced a dramatic political transformation with the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), armed factions entered Damascus on December 8, ending the 54-year rule of the Assad family. While this development has fundamentally altered the context of these discussions, it has made the workshop's insights not just relevant but urgent for Syria's immediate future.

The current transition period faces complex challenges beyond the mere change of power. The fundamental question facing Syria today is whether the new authority can establish legitimate governance that earns the trust of all Syrians. This requires bridging the gap between the 2011 revolution's aspirations for democracy and current governance realities.

The social and cultural dimensions of this transition cannot be overlooked. Syria faces deep social divisions, competing historical narratives, and religious tensions that have been exacerbated by years of conflict. HTS's historical baggage as a former ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliate and its current ideological standing can also complicate efforts at genuine reconciliation. Therefore, creating spaces for dialogue becomes particularly necessary.

The success of this transition will ultimately depend on whether current authorities can move beyond ideological governance to embrace genuine inclusive state-building. This requires not just statements of intent but concrete actions to establish professional institutions, ensure genuine political participation, protect minority rights, enable an independent judiciary, support civil society, and facilitate genuine reconciliation processes. As Syria navigates this challenging period, the insights and recommendations from this workshop become particularly valuable in charting a path toward genuine transitional justice and inclusive governance.

On 26 July 2024, the Essex [Human Rights Centre \(HRC\)](#) and Essex [Transitional Justice Network \(ETJN\)](#), in collaboration with the [AHRC-funded Syrian Academics and Researchers' Network \(SARN\) in the UK](#), hosted a workshop entitled: “Syrian Futures: Legal Justice, Artistic Practice, and Social Transformation.”<sup>2</sup> This report reflects on the conversations that took place on the day.

## I. Introduction

Over the past 14 years, the Syrian space in which to promote dialogue on political and social change has faced massive constraints. Despite the obvious challenges, movements for change have gained traction through interconnected physical and digital spaces where Syrian political and cultural identities have found new forms of expression and development. This workshop brought together Syrian artists, academics, architects, NGO professionals, and practitioners to explore how artistic expression, practitioners’ perspectives, and academic insight could inform each other to contribute to a more comprehensive and culturally resonant process of peacebuilding and reconciliation, in the context of the nascent movement towards transitional justice. The political landscape has shifted dramatically since this workshop was held, with the regime falling unexpectedly quickly, on 8 December 2024. Nevertheless, the discussions and insights from the workshop remain relevant, if not even more urgent, now that Syria’s path toward justice and reconciliation has become more than just a remote possibility. The perspectives and approaches explored here are key to address both the many historical grievances and the significant challenges to rebuild Syrian society.

Syria’s diverse ethnic and religious landscape has given rise to a wide array of identities, each with its own unique cultural heritage, traditions, and political aspirations.<sup>3</sup> The complex interplay between ethnicity and religion has shaped the formation of these identities, their relationships with the Syrian state and society, and the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Understanding these complexities is necessary for any meaningful discussion on transitional justice in general, particularly reconciliation. Workshop participants, including experts in law, transitional justice, psychology, gender studies, political science, literature, architecture, human rights, and art engaged in nuanced discussions about the multifaceted nature of Syrian identities and the complex landscape of prospective transitional justice.<sup>5</sup>

This report synthesises the workshop’s academic insights, artistic presentations, and collaborative discussions. It analyses how integrating artistic approaches with traditional

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to the University of Essex Quality Related (‘QR’) funding programme for funding this initiative, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> The main ethnic groups in Syria include Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Turkmens, and Circassians. Arabs are further divided along religious lines, with Sunni Muslims constituting the majority, followed by Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis. See Haian Dukhan, *State and Tribes in Syria: Informal Alliances and Conflict Patterns* (Routledge, 2019); Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the diverse ethnicities and identities in Syria, see Dukhan, *State and Tribes in Syria*; Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*.

<sup>5</sup> The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of colleagues who, while unable to attend the workshop, generously shared their expertise and insight for this report.

transitional justice mechanisms could address the unique challenges posed by the prolonged conflict and offers recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working towards sustainable peace and justice in Syria. By sharing these findings, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about innovative, holistic approaches to transitional justice and inspire further interdisciplinary collaborations in this field.

## **II. Assessing Syria’s “Transitional Justice” Landscape: Achievements and Limitations**

In terms of criminal accountability, our discussions examined the unique challenges that the Syrian conflict and its aftermath pose for traditional transitional justice mechanisms. While acknowledging the role of criminal accountability in addressing past atrocities, we explored how an overemphasis on retributive justice might overlook other vital aspects of reconciliation and societal healing.

Syrian civil society groups have maintained rigorous documentation throughout the conflict, building extensive evidence databases of violations. Groups like [Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), [the Violations Documentation Centre](#), [Syrian Archives](#), and the [Syria Justice and Accountability Centre](#) have worked alongside the UN’s [International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism \(IIIM\)](#) to collect, preserve and analyse evidence for future prosecution. We hope this documentation continues through Syria’s current transition, creating records for both accountability and reform processes. Beyond legal documentation, initiatives like The Creative Memory help to preserve the cultural dimensions of Syria's transformation through art and expression.<sup>6</sup>

Universal jurisdiction has been an avenue for accountability in the Syrian conflict.<sup>7</sup> Since 2016, courts in The Netherlands,<sup>8</sup> Germany,<sup>9</sup> Sweden,<sup>10</sup> and France<sup>11</sup> have prosecuted cases

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<sup>6</sup> Several organisations have documented the creative expressions of the Syrian revolution, such as [The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution](#) and [Bidayyat for Audiovisual Art](#).

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Universal Jurisdiction in Europe: The State of the Art," June 27, 2006, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/06/27/universal-jurisdiction-europe/state-art>.

<sup>8</sup> The Netherlands saw its first Syrian regime-related trial in January 2024. The Hague District Court convicted Mustafa A., a leading member of the Liwa al-Quds (Jerusalem Brigade), sentencing him to 12 years in prison for crimes against humanity. The Hague District Court, Case against Mustafa A., ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2024:493, Judgment of 22 January 2024. Access [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> In Germany, a significant breakthrough came in 2022 when the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz convicted Anwar Raslan, a former Syrian intelligence officer, of crimes against humanity. Raslan was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the torture of thousands of people in a Damascus prison. Higher Regional Court of Koblenz, Case against Anwar R., Case No. 1 StE 9/19, Judgment of 13 January 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Sweden was the first to prosecute Syrian nationals under universal jurisdiction. In 2016, Mouhannad Droubi, a former soldier in the Free Syrian Army, was sentenced to 8 years in prison. The following year, Haisam Omar Sakhan, also a former Free Syrian Army soldier, received a life sentence. Additionally in 2017, a former soldier in Bashar Al-Assad’s army was sentenced to eight months in prison for “outrages upon human dignity” as a war crime. Trial International, “Universal Jurisdiction Annual Review 2022,” Annual Report Series (2022). Access [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Most recently, in 2024, a French court took the unprecedented step of issuing an arrest warrant against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for his alleged role in chemical attacks in 2013. Reuters, “French Judges Issue Arrest Warrant for Syria’s Assad over Chemical Attacks,” November 15, 2023. Access [here](#).

concerning violations committed by various parties. The proceedings have addressed a range of crimes, from torture in government detention facilities to violations by armed opposition groups. Notable cases include the Koblenz trial in Germany, which convicted former intelligence officer Anwar Raslan for crimes against humanity, Swedish prosecutions of Free Syrian Army members, and the Dutch conviction of a Liwa al-Quds member. France has taken significant steps by issuing two arrest warrants for former President Assad - one in November 2023 regarding chemical weapons attacks, and another in January 2025 concerning the bombing of a Franco-Syrian civilian in Daraa.<sup>12</sup>

These cases have relied heavily on evidence compiled by Syrian documentation organisations and have created opportunities for victim testimony. While they represent important steps in establishing legal precedents and maintaining documentation for potential future prosecutions, they raised a few concerns with some Syrian actors who worried that these prosecutions might create a false impression of justice being served, potentially reducing pressure for more comprehensive accountability mechanisms that could address systematic violations by regime leadership.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, while the selective nature of prosecutions is inherent to jurisdictional and practical constraints, it raised questions about perceived politicisation of justice among affected communities.<sup>14</sup>

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria's alleged commission of human rights violations since March 2011 has demonstrated both the value and complexities of documenting human rights violations whilst hostilities continue. Since 2011, the Commission has produced extensive reports evidencing violations by all parties to the conflict. These include systematic torture and enforced disappearances in government detention facilities, arbitrary detention and restrictions on civil liberties in areas under Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) control, and serious violations by various armed opposition groups.<sup>15</sup> Despite access constraints, the Commission's findings have established clear patterns of violations across different territories and governing authorities.<sup>16</sup> Their documentation efforts, maintained throughout the conflict, have created an invaluable evidence base for accountability processes. This recording of violations has already supported universal jurisdiction cases in European courts and will be invaluable for transitional justice mechanisms as Syria is undergoing a political transition now.

The Syrian conflict's protracted nature has shaped how justice initiatives evolved on the ground. While Syrian civil society organisations made phenomenal contributions through documentation efforts and evidence preservation, the ongoing violence and instability left

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<sup>12</sup> France 24, 'French investigators issue new arrest warrant for Syria's Assad' (France 24, 21 January 2025) <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250121-france-issues-new-arrest-warrant-for-syria-s-assad-source> accessed 22 January 2025.

<sup>13</sup> Darwish, M. and Hamidi, I. (2022) "Universal Jurisdiction and the Syrian Crisis: Limitations and Possibilities," Syrian Center for Legal Studies and Research Working Paper Series, 3(2), pp. 45-67.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Craven, "The Selective Nature of Universal Jurisdiction: The Role of Politics in Prosecuting Atrocities," *International Criminal Law Review* 22, no. 2 (2022): 289-315.

<sup>15</sup> UNHRC, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic" (2022) UN Doc A/HRC/51/45.

<sup>16</sup> UNHRC, "No End in Sight: Torture and Ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023" (2023) UN Doc A/HRC/53/CRP.5.

limited space for developing broader transitional justice approaches. The focus on documenting violations was a necessary response to the immediate needs of the conflict, yet the scale of societal trauma - from mass displacement to the destruction of communities and cultural heritage - calls for justice processes that extend beyond documentation and prosecutions. Although criminal accountability remains important, addressing Syria's complex justice needs requires expanding current efforts to include peacebuilding, reconciliation, and institutional reform. As Syria moves through a political transition, there is an opportunity to build upon the foundation of documentation work while developing approaches that can help repair the social fabric and address deeper societal wounds.

### **III. Multiple Approaches to Transformation and Reconciliation in Syria**

Our discussions emphasised the importance of creating spaces for dialogue, truth-telling, and collective memory-building as essential components of a holistic transitional justice process. While holding perpetrators accountable is unnegotiable, we must also create avenues for Syrians to engage with their diverse yet interconnected histories and experiences – bearing in mind that Syrian communities do have a shared history, but most importantly also have unshared histories that were systematically concealed and prohibited by the regime. “Cultural practices, such as theatre, art and literature, play a vital role in acknowledging these marginalised experiences of many cultural groups/individuals and can therefore facilitate the healing process,” explained [Dr Feras Alkabani](#), Associate Professor of Comparative Literature (Sussex). The complexities of the Syrian conflict demand that we think beyond traditional legal frameworks.

[Obai Kurd Ali](#), a legal expert specialising in human rights, conflict, and justice, highlighted the importance of providing safe spaces for people to process their experiences, reflect on their memories, take pride in their culture, and engage in meaningful dialogues. He stated that the Syrian community has the right to be assured that atrocities will not recur, and that criminal justice alone may not be sufficient to give people the experience of justice. Indeed, holding perpetrators accountable for their actions is urgently required, but a creative and transformative approach should supplement this effort to confront and dismantle the root causes of the conflict and address the structural violence embedded within the state. He underscored the need for transitional justice processes to create spaces for acknowledging and addressing the multiplicity of experiences while recognising their interconnectedness. Central to this approach is understanding how different Syrian communities - whether ethnic, religious, or regional - conceptualise justice and what meaningful accountability looks like from their distinct perspectives. He stressed that these dialogues should “foster an appreciation of differences, shared traumas, and collective aspirations,” while recognising that the meaning of justice itself may vary across Syria's diverse communities. The journey toward justice is lengthy and arduous, requiring individuals to be well-equipped to embark on it and ultimately embrace its “full meaning”.

[Dr Katya Alkhateeb](#), an international law expert (University of Essex), challenged the prevailing notion that Syria was truly decolonised when the French mandate ended. She argued that the French-imposed governance structures, ill-suited to the region's diverse ethnic and religious landscape, have perpetuated a form of neo-colonial domination that lies at the root of the current Syrian conflict. It created enduring institutional and administrative frameworks that continue to influence contemporary Syrian political and social dynamics. The modern nation-state model, imposed by the French mandate, with its emphasis on territorial sovereignty, homogeneous national identity and centralised authority, has failed to accommodate the needs and aspirations of Syria's pluralistic society. She suggested examining how principles of *sovereignty* and *self-determination* might be understood and implemented in ways that better reflect local contexts and lived experiences. To achieve meaningful decolonisation, we need an approach that goes beyond the mere transfer of power from colonial authorities to local elites, which is what happened. This process involves a fundamental restructuring of governance frameworks to prioritise the inclusion, representation, and empowerment of diverse groups. By exploring alternative models of political organisation, such as federalism, consociationalism, or even more radical forms of plurinational statehood, Syria can begin to dismantle the colonial legacy and build a more equitable and sustainable political order.

These observations, said [Dr Roua Al Taweel](#), a specialist in transitional and transformative justice (Ulster University), “point to decoloniality as a complex and multifaceted process that necessitates relational and collective transnational efforts.” Such efforts seek to create meaningful connections between diaspora communities and those within Syria, facilitating critical examination of internalised and externalised experiences, as well as the conditions shaped by coloniality. This transnational dialogue should also, at different stages and through diverse forms, engage individuals from the colonial core. Such engagement helps reconfigure and reshape the boundaries between the ‘outside’ and the ‘inside’, generating a relational and dynamic space that embraces *difference* (as opposed to differential inclusion) and self-accountability as the foundation for collective and multidisciplinary decolonial praxis. Al-Taweel contends that this framework interrogates the conditions enabling both division and unity-in-difference. While identity politics and specific historical memories are acknowledged and celebrated, they are simultaneously questioned and critically examined in relation to one another. The synthesis of art, theory, and research offers a versatile and robust framework for examining and articulating these complex, multilayered dynamics. This understanding of decoloniality as a relational process informs how we might approach governance transformation. We need approaches that go beyond surface-level institutional changes to reimagine frameworks that can effectively respond to and represent the complexities of Syrian society while building sustainable political institutions that serve all citizens equitably.

The diaspora communities contribute vital perspectives to these processes of political transformation.<sup>17</sup> As Syrians have established new lives abroad, they have developed unique

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<sup>17</sup> The relationship between decoloniality and diaspora experiences is complex and deserves careful consideration. While diaspora communities often engage in transnational political and social practices that challenge traditional state structures, it would be reductive to automatically frame these practices within a decolonial framework. Their experiences and contributions should be understood on their own terms, while recognising potential overlaps with



insights into multiple forms of governance, citizenship, and social organisation. [Dr Zeina Al-Azmeh](#), a sociologist (University of Cambridge), shed light on the evolving nature of Syrian political consciousness. She observed that Syrians have become a “political diaspora” due to their participation in the country’s political life through online and digital spaces rather than traditional official channels, which have been severely repressed since the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Engaging these diasporic voices in the processes of dialogue, truth-telling, and memory-building is essential for constructing a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Syria’s past, present, and future. Additionally, the diaspora’s experiences of exile, cultural hybridity, and transnational solidarity can offer valuable insights to untangle the ways in which colonial legacies continue to shape Syrian identities and political aspirations.

While Al-Azmeh highlights how Syrians have maintained political engagement through digital spaces, other initiatives demonstrate how diaspora communities are actively shaping Syria’s future governance frameworks. An example is [the Syrian National Covenant Document](#), which emerged from extensive consultations with diverse Syrian stakeholders. This founding document, developed through collaborative efforts including feminist activists like [Ghenwa Al Shoumari](#), an academic and co-founder of [Release Me](#), who describes it as “our attempt to envision a state built on ‘unity in diversity’”. Al Shoumari explains that this document does not have any political affiliation associated with it, it is developed by Syrians inside and outside the country and open for signature. The Covenant Document represents an attempt to translate diaspora experiences of democratic governance into concrete principles for Syria’s future. The document’s commitment to women’s equality, including explicit provisions for women to hold any position “including the position of President of the Republic,” demonstrates how feminist perspectives have been integrated into broader visions of political transformation. Similarly, its focus on decentralisation and local governance suggests an understanding, informed by diaspora experiences, of how to better accommodate Syria’s diverse communities. This document moves beyond abstract principles to address specific structural challenges that sparked the conflict. Its provisions for the separation of powers, protection of public funds, and commitment to social justice respond directly to the grievances that fuelled the revolution. Moreover, its emphasis on international human rights standards while maintaining Syria’s sovereign character shows how diaspora communities are working to bridge international norms with local contexts - a key challenge in transitional justice processes.

This vision of inclusive state-building finds physical expression in the work of [Dr Ammar Azzouz](#), an architect, researcher, and author based in London, who brings a unique perspective to the discourse on Syrian identity and transitional justice. Azzouz emphasises the importance of architecture as a repository of memory and cultural heritage, arguing that the destruction of significant buildings and spaces during the conflict has profoundly impacted both physical

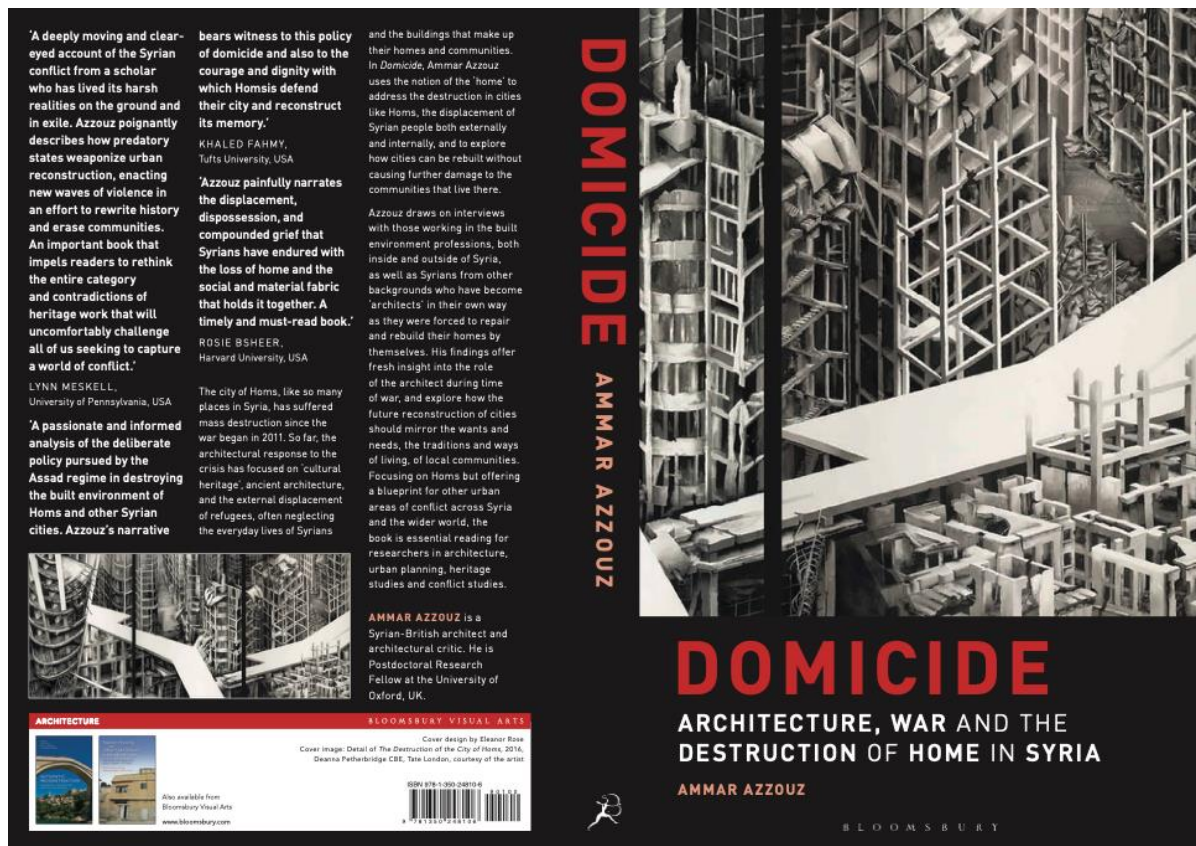
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broader discussions about political transformation and social change. For further discussion on decoloniality in the context of forced displacement, see María Lugones, “Decolonial Approaches to Migration and Displacement,” *Journal of Decolonial Studies* 24, no. 2 (2021): 145-168; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Decoloniality and the Politics of Displacement,” *International Journal of Critical Theory* 15, no. 3 (2019): 278-301.

<sup>18</sup> For historical references supporting the existence of pluralist political life until the 1960s, see: Sami Moubayed, *Syria’s Golden Years: The Story of My Life* (Saqi Books, 2006); Meir Zamir, *When Parliaments Ruled the Middle East: Iraq and Syria, 1946-1958* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2000).

structures and shared narratives. “The destruction of architecture,” he notes, “is not just about the loss of buildings, but also about the loss of history, memory, and identity.” This observation parallels earlier discussions of how physical structures shape social relations and power dynamics in Syrian society.

Drawing on his experience in exile, Azzouz advocates for architectural preservation and reconstruction as integral components of the transitional justice process. “Rebuilding is not just about bricks and mortar,” he explains, “it’s about rebuilding social ties, trust, and a sense of community.” His approach emphasises community engagement in rebuilding cities and towns, creating inclusive spaces that foster belonging and shared identity. “Architectural projects can serve as powerful tools for remembrance and reconciliation,” he argues, “by creating spaces that honour the past while also looking towards the future.” Through this lens, architecture becomes a means of facilitating dialogue and understanding across diverse communities. “Architecture has the power to bring people together,” he suggests, “by creating spaces that encourage interaction, exchange, and empathy.” Azzouz’s vision demonstrates how integrating urban planning with other cultural practices can create holistic, context-specific strategies for addressing the complex challenges of post-conflict reconstruction. “We need to think beyond the traditional boundaries of architecture,” he concludes, “and embrace a more inclusive and participatory approach to rebuilding our cities and our society.”



### III.1 Inclusive Consultations and Diverse Perspectives

Essential to any meaningful transitional justice process in Syria is the imperative to understand and incorporate diverse perspectives on justice. Our discussions highlighted the critical need for comprehensive research dedicated to measuring and reconciling potentially divergent attitudes towards justice held by Syrians across different contexts and experiences.

The experiences of Syrians in varied circumstances may have profoundly shaped their perceptions of justice, accountability, and reconciliation. It is important that we do not prioritise certain narratives of victimhood over others, inadvertently advancing a state of ‘exceptionality’, but rather seek to understand the full spectrum of Syrian experiences and aspirations. This approach requires sensitive, nuanced research methodologies that can capture the complexity of individual and collective understandings of justice. Only by gaining a deeper comprehension of these diverse perspectives can we work towards a transitional justice framework that is truly responsive to the needs and expectations of all Syrians. This inclusive approach is not only ethically important but also vital for the long-term sustainability and legitimacy of any transitional justice process in Syria. As we continue to explore innovative ways to address the challenges created by decades of oppression and prolonged armed conflict, the insights gained from this workshop serve as a valuable foundation for further research, policy development, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Our participating artists emphasised how artistic expression offers unique insights into how Syrians process trauma, preserve memory, and imagine future possibilities. The following artists’ works demonstrate the power of creative practice in addressing the complex challenges of transitional justice.

### III.2 Artistic Expressions of Identity and Reconciliation

A cornerstone of our workshop was the presentation of works by Syrian artists: [Alaa Shasheet](#), [Diaa Lagan](#), [Oula Hope](#), and [Leen Kayyali](#). Their diverse artistic approaches, spanning traditional and digital mediums, provided profound insights into the complexities of Syrian identity and the potential for art to contribute to transitional justice processes. Whether working through physical materials or digital platforms, each artist demonstrates how creative practice can foster dialogue and understanding across dispersed communities.

#### **Leen Kayyali<sup>19</sup> - Rediscovering Syrian Identity Through Art**

*Profound insight into meanings of Syrian identities, both within and beyond national borders, as they have evolved over time and in the present.*

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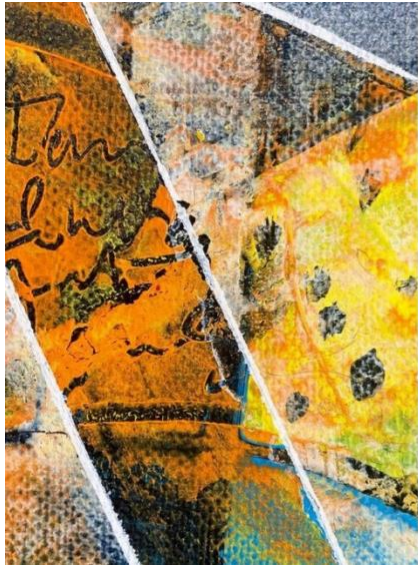
<sup>19</sup> Leen is a Syrian-British multidisciplinary artist and designer working across visual arts, spatial design, architecture, cultural production & site-specific projects. Her work is centred on the exploration of cultural identities within contemporary and historical contexts of the natural and built environment. She utilizes a mixed approach of art and storytelling as a means of shifting perceptions, empowering communities, and engaging the public on themes of diversity and multiculturalism.

*“Awakening to identity”* is how Leen describes her artistic evolution in exile. Prior to leaving Syria, she admits to never having deeply contemplated what it means to be “Syrian”. Being “Syrian” outside in a new reality which compelled a new understanding of one’s cultural, political, and ethnic identity vis à vis other Syrians as well as other people. One can see how her early works reflect this initial lack of introspection, showing a relatively straightforward or what she calls “vanilla” representation of “Syrianness”, see exhibit A. This work stands in stark contrast to her later works showcasing a new *reflection of identity in exile*; one that is multilayered and highly complex, see exhibit B. This painting is a rich tapestry of overlapping elements, symbolising the multifaceted reflections of identity. The use of textures and intricate patterns speaks to the depth and complexity of her evolving sense of self.



*Exhibit A: Untitled (2014)*

In exhibit B “Navigation Roots”, Leen overlays zoomed in sections of Syrian streets and virtual maps with personal inputs and written recollections, creating a visual metaphor for the reconstruction of identity through memory. The juxtaposition of somewhat architectural drawings with more fluid, personal elements highlight the tension between objectives.



*Exhibit B: "Navigation Roots" The image on the left shows a close-up detail from the main painting to the right*

In exhibit C, Leen's art invites us to question what she calls "the memory blueprint" as a diaspora in exile: how reliable are our memories in shaping our new negotiation of the self, especially when viewed from afar?



*Exhibit C: "2009 on My Mind" (2020) A sketch drawing of Old Aleppo's Souq, Khan Al-Shouneh, from memory, recalling the last time she visited the place in 2009 with friends. Drawing from memory rather than a visual reference, she attempts to investigate how real these reminiscences are.*

### *Third Culture Syrians: Navigating Multiple Worlds*

A significant focus of Leen's work is the experience of what she refers to as the "third culture" Syrian children – those who left young after the conflict and are now growing up in the

intersection of their parents’ Syrian culture and their new home country. She leads family workshops to allow children to express their identity “between worlds”, see exhibit D.<sup>20</sup> Leen invites us to step into the shoes of these children, who are experiencing both the challenges and richness of navigating the meanings of having Syrian roots without the opportunity to experience the real place. Their Syrian identity is constantly contested by multiple forces simultaneously. This work underscores the importance of intergenerational perspectives in understanding the full spectrum of Syrian experiences.



*Exhibit D: Works created by family workshop participants run by Leen at the Barbican Centre, London (2022)*

### *Art as a Tool for Self-Expression and Collective Healing*

In dealing with themes of exile and resilience, Leen’s practice took on a new dimension as she began to explore the universal desire for belonging. She extends her artistic practice into a form of collective healing and dialogue on migration and identity. For example, she facilitated “story telling” art workshops entitled “KAN YA MAKAN MILTON KEYNS” translated to “once upon a time in Milton Keynes”,<sup>21</sup> which led to a public show featuring the participants’ crafts, personal anecdotes, memories, recollections and impressions, weaving the final interactive piece through a multisensory experience.

<sup>20</sup> Leen facilitated the workshop for families attending a film screening for ‘Dounia and the Princess of Aleppo’ at the Barbican, London. These collage works by participants interject playful understandings of identities with collective memories, or experiences, that shape - and potentially distort - our understanding of identity.

<sup>21</sup> Leen was commissioned by AHA-MK (Art and Heritage Alliance Milton Keynes) in 2021 to work with the Southwest Asia Cultural Group. The work included a series of workshops and a final immersive exhibition.



The multimedia installation in the final exhibition combines sound recordings with tactile elements, creating an immersive experience that explores how Syrians, along with others from across the Southwest Asia region, in the diaspora maintain connections to their heritage while building resilience in new environments, see exhibit E.



*Exhibits E: All three images here are from Kan Ya Makan*

### **Reconstructing Memory & Processing Trauma in Exile with [Alaa Shasheet](#)**

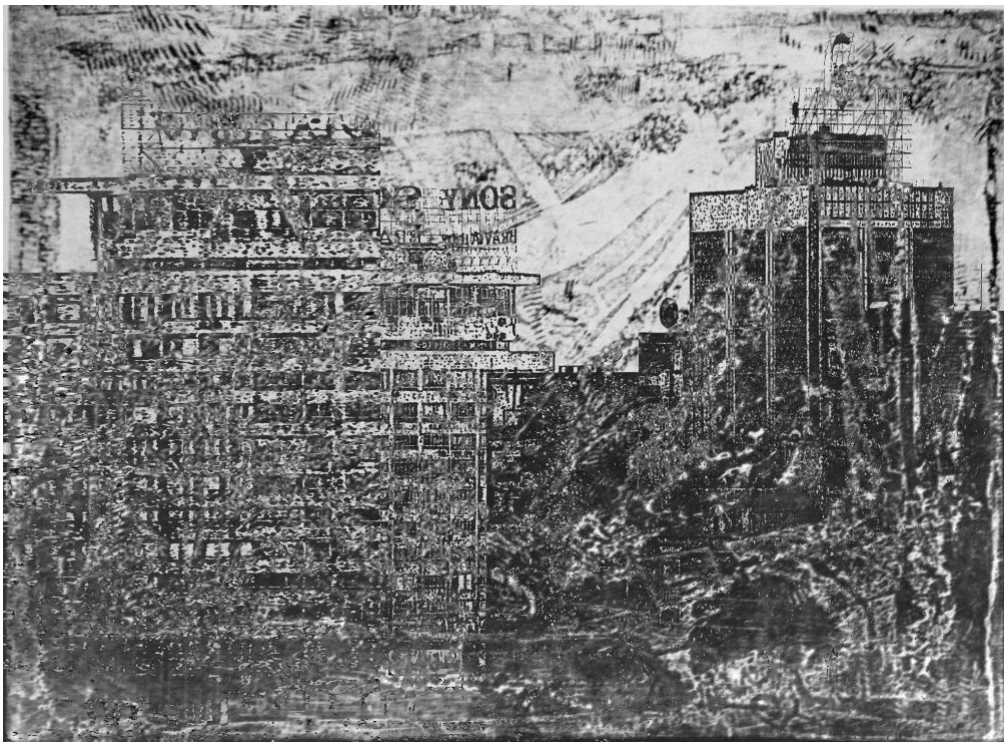
Alaa Shasheet's contemporary artwork exemplifies how art can serve as a powerful medium for processing collective trauma and preserving cultural identity in the face of conflict, even as he himself hesitates to claim trauma as his own narrative. During the workshop, Shasheet explicitly refrained from articulating his work within the frame of trauma response because he is not physically in Syria. This hesitation becomes, paradoxically, a manifestation of trauma itself - a form of survivor's guilt that speaks to the complex psychological landscape of artists in exile. His artistic journey, deeply intertwined with his experience of displacement after leaving Syria, became a catalyst for exploring Syrian identity through art, allowing his work to express truths that he feels personally hesitant to otherwise claim or articulate.

Shasheet's diverse body of work employs a strong visual vocabulary that includes painting, printmaking, and mixed media - tools that allow him to express what he verbally denies himself. This synthetic composition creates layered representations of Syrian identity that speak to both loss and resilience, while simultaneously revealing the tension between artistic expression and personal denial. His work demonstrates how artists can transform life challenges into a broader dialogue about national trauma and cultural preservation, even as they grapple with questions of legitimacy and the right to claim traumatic experience. In this way, Shasheet's self-denial becomes as much a part of his artistic narrative as his powerful visual expressions, illustrating how trauma manifests not only in what artists create but also in how they position themselves in relation to their homeland's continuing suffering. In exhibit F we see the tally marks and burning edges on carton, and it leaves the viewer wondering who is in prison, the people in Syria, or the artist in exile?

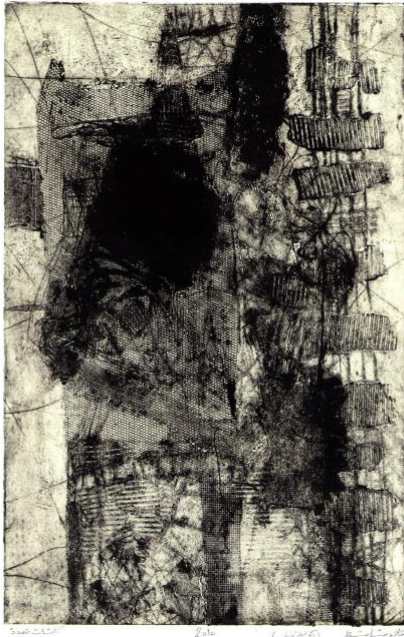


*Exhibit F: Prisoner, War / 2023 / Mixed media on cardboard*

Shasheet's use of materials such as concrete, cardboard, and sand in his pieces evokes the tactile reality of urban destruction while also suggesting the possibility of reconstruction. His inspiration from the shapes, feelings, and materials of the old city, layered and abstracted, creates new visuals and scenes. These visual palimpsests aren't just artistic – they're acts of memory preservation, creating a space where past and present coexist, inviting viewers to contemplate the nature of Syrian identity in the face of conflict, exhibits G.







*Exhibit G: Compositions of Syria / 2010 / Printmaking on paper - digital art*

In dealing with trauma, Shasheet's art took on a new dimension as he began engaging with the works of Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani (exhibit H), reinterpreting cultural touchstones to address contemporary trauma.<sup>22</sup> This shift marks a point in his artistic journey – a move from personal catharsis to a broader dialogue about collective memory and identity.



*Exhibit H: The Rooster / 2014 / Illustration*

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<sup>22</sup> The rooster in the painting is a reference to Nizar Qabbani's poem "The Rooster" in which he alludes to the dictator.



Exhibit I, 1:  
They Have Names / 2013 / Digital art

Shasheet advocates for the value of education as a tool to rebuild society and the state, including the educational potential of art and its ability to foster understanding and empathy across cultural divides. His work illustrates how contemporary Syrian art can preserve and reflect Syrian cultural memory in the face of physical destruction, provide a platform for exploring complex emotions related to displacement and national identity, and create spaces for cross-community dialogue and understanding. In his words, “mainly what I feel I am doing is reflecting my thoughts, feelings, and memories in my art.”

Shasheet’s artistic practice is a vital contribution to the collective processing of Syrian trauma, demonstrating the profound role that contemporary art can play in navigating the aftermath of conflict. While his approach represents one way of engaging with these issues, it highlights the importance of diverse artistic voices in the ongoing dialogue about Syrian identity, memory, and reconciliation.

Shasheet’s artworks of the old Hama massacre and the Darayya massacre are not mere documentation; they are visual testimonies that demand acknowledgment and justice for a past that led to the present struggle. In Exhibits I, 2, we see the name of the massacred town of Darayya repeatedly written on bloody and charred pieces of paper, a form of punishment that weighs down on the arti. In the context of transitional justice, these works serve as powerful reminders of the past, ensuring that as Syria looks to the future, it does not forget the wounds that need healing.

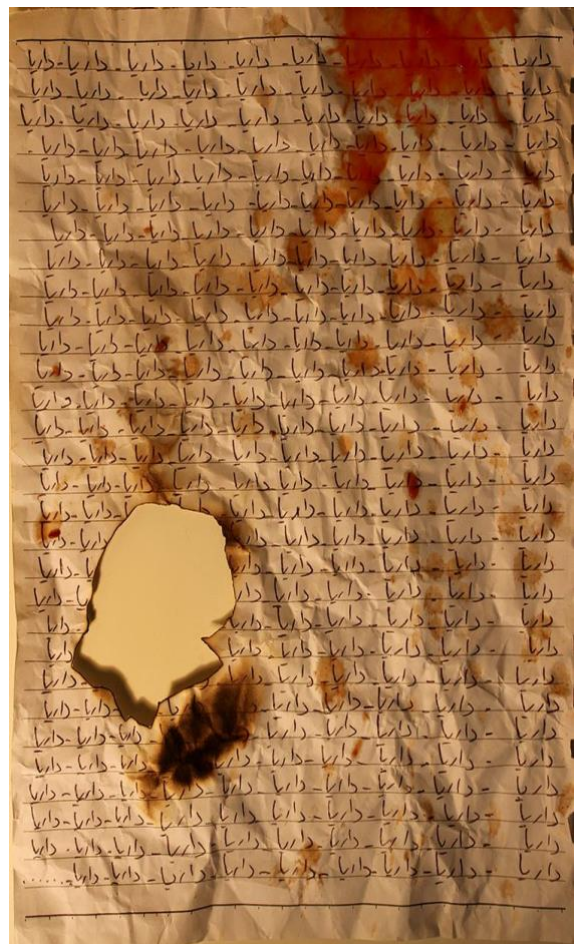


Exhibit I, 2: Darayya / 2012 / Mixed media on paper

### Diaa Lagan: The Art of Subversion

Lagan emerges as a provocative voice in contemporary art, wielding his multifaceted skills in sculpting, calligraphy, painting, and digital art to challenge our understanding of conflict,

identity, and cultural narrative. His artistic journey traces the evolution of Syrian resistance and documentation, from early political commentary to his latest shared exhibition “Shahid” - a powerful work that evokes the dual meaning in Arabic of both ‘witness’ (شاهد) and ‘martyr’ (شهيد).

### **Early Works: Direct Confrontation with Power**

Lagan’s early works demonstrate his sharp political critique through visual metaphor. In one striking composition (Exhibit J), he depicts a regime intelligence agent riding a poor donkey, only to reveal the rider himself as another kind of beast - a clever subversion that exposes the true nature of authority. This piece establishes Lagan’s characteristic use of visual metaphor to communicate political truth.



Exhibit J

His first oil painting (Exhibit K) marked a powerful response to the death of Hamza Al-Khateeb, a 13-year-old martyr from April 2011.<sup>23</sup> This work represents a significant moment when documentation of atrocity transformed into artistic testimony, bridging the gap between witness and martyrdom that would later become central to his work.

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<sup>23</sup> Lucy Williamson, “I hope Assad pays the price, says mother whose son's death inflamed 2011 Syrian revolution,” *The Guardian*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg9z3r2xp9o>.



*Exhibit K*



*Exhibit L "Chemical Playground"*

His digital image "Chemical Playground" (Exhibit L) responds to the Ghouta chemical attack, transforming a scene of childhood innocence into a haunting testament to civilian suffering.



A 2014 fired clay sculpture (Exhibit M) presents perhaps his direct critique of political hypocrisy - a national politician stands at a microphone speaking of freedom while a civilian victim hangs tortured and upside down, a stark juxtaposition of rhetoric and reality.

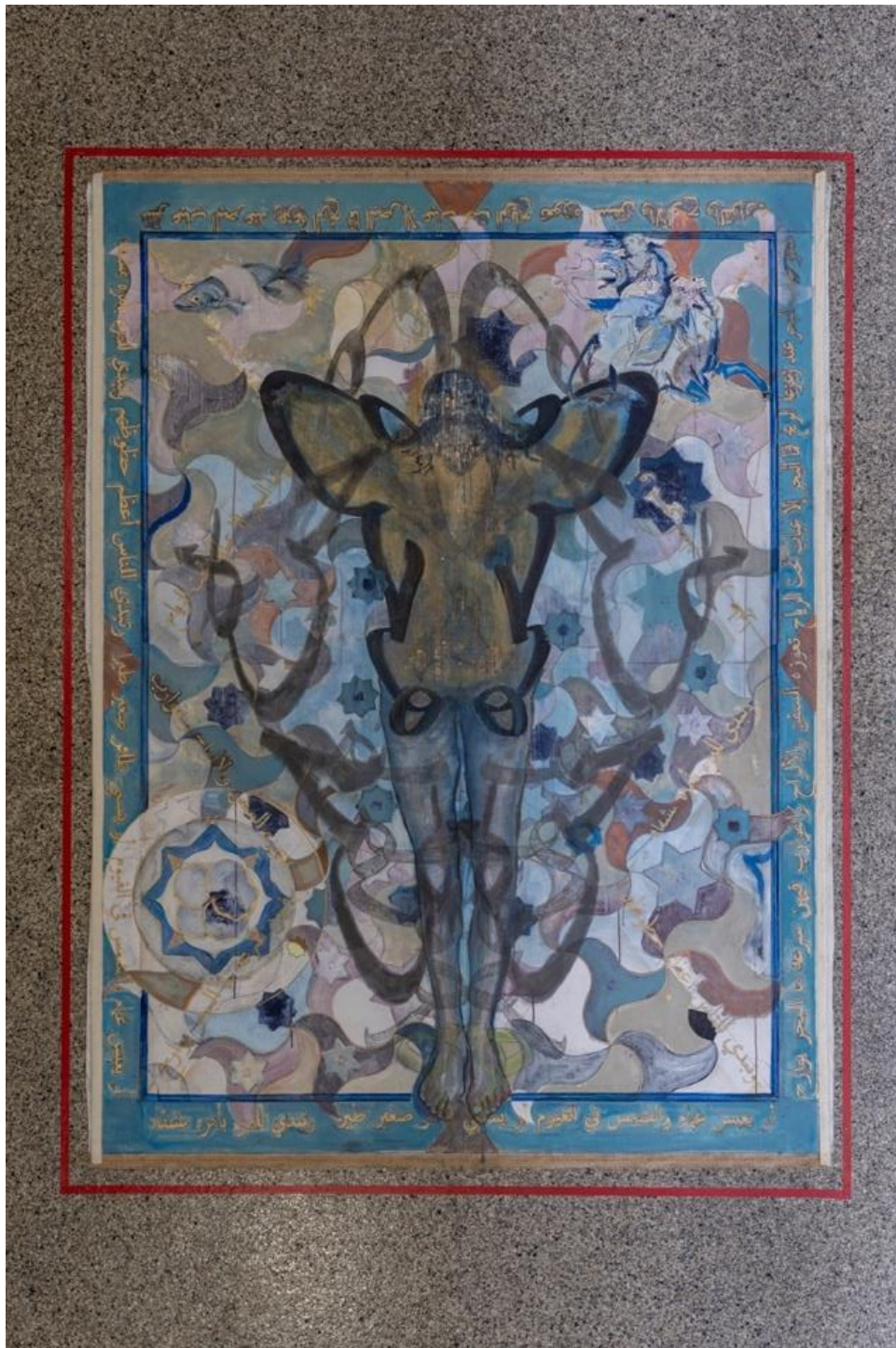
*Exhibit M*

### **Evolution to “Shahid”: The Witness as Both Observer and Victim<sup>24</sup>**

In his exhibition “Shahid,” Lagan begins with the Arabic word’s primary meaning of ‘witness’ - one who observes and encounters experiences, including through the unconscious, (Exhibit N). While the exhibition title originally centred on this concept of bearing witness, the word’s resonance with martyrdom (شهيد) adds an unintended layer of meaning when considering how Syrians have experienced their nation’s trauma. Lagan’s work reflects on a timescale that “goes beyond modern crises to express the region’s legacy of horror and generational depression.” He says “I am a Levantine citizen” and he certainly brings it to his art. “All our lives, even before the conflict, we were mere shahid,” Lagan explained, portraying the people of the region as involuntary witnesses stripped of agency. He observes how news shapes our present and

<sup>24</sup> Shahid (شاهد) means 'witness' in Arabic – someone who observes, but also someone who hears and encounters experiences in their unconscious. The exhibition explores this concept through an intertwined stream of consciousness, examining lived and inherited memories. “Shahid شاهد,” exhibition by Daa Lagan and Basil Al-Rawi, The LAB Gallery, Dublin, September 15 - December 4, 2023, <https://www.dublincityartsoffice.ie/programmes-projects/lab-gallery/shahid-شاهد>.

future, while they passively witness their lives unfold like a stream of consciousness, (Exhibit N).



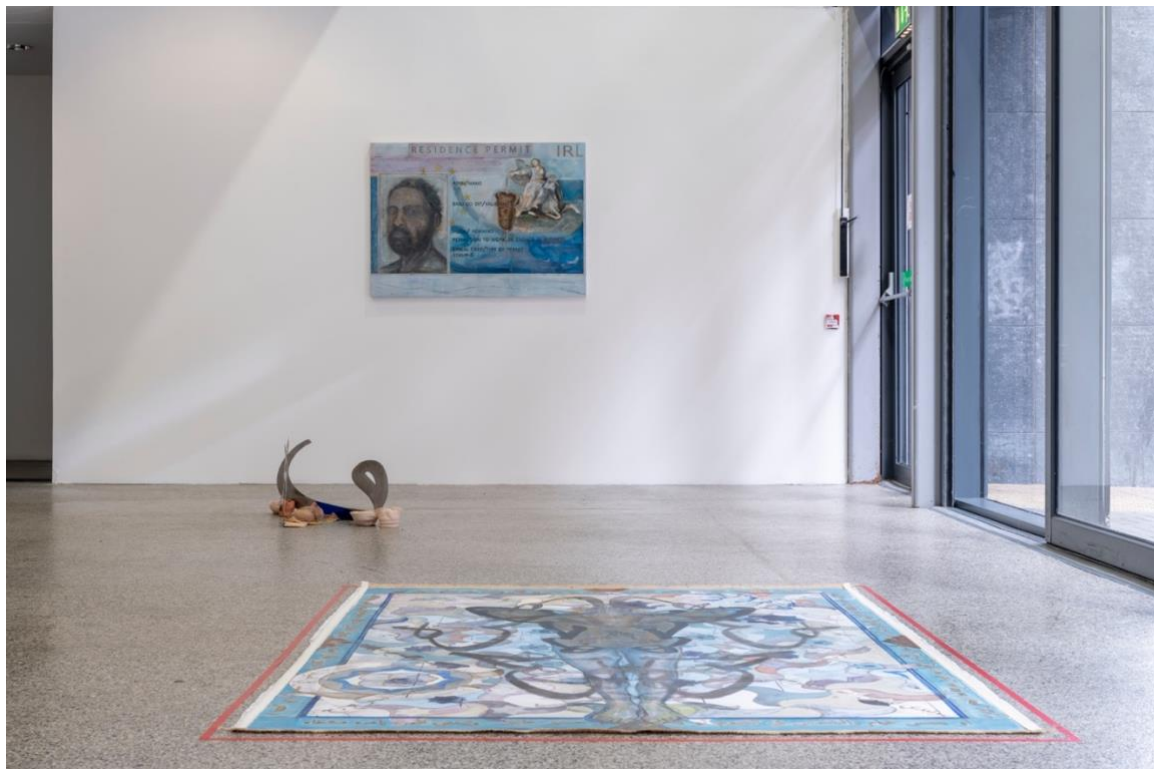
*Exhibit N from “Shahid” Exhibition, Oil on canvas, 210x160 cm (2023)<sup>25</sup>*

<sup>25</sup> Description by Lagan from his [Instagram](#): “Gnosis refers to knowledge based on personal experience or perceptions. Gnostic beliefs, the transformative power of the word is revered—originating as God, manifesting into the divine Word, and ultimately becoming a deity. This concept parallels the intricate relationship between text, art, and figurative shapes in Arabic calligraphy, where the written word transcends mere letters, embodying artistic expression and spiritual significance through its visual form. The Arabic text is a poem by ‘Umar ibn Abi Rabi’ah al-Makhzumi (Arabic: 8 ربيعة) the century).”

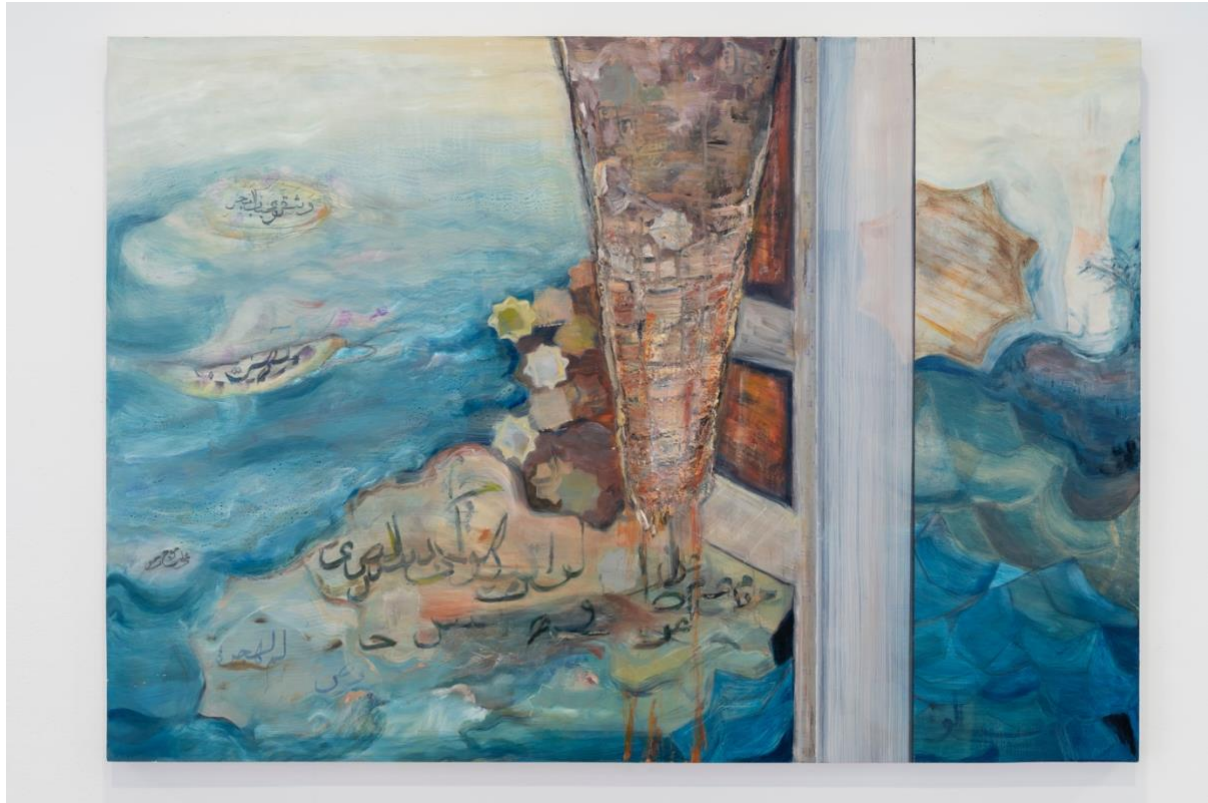
### **Transforming Passive Witnessing into Active Resistance**

Lagan subverts the concept of involuntary witnessing through his art. By curating significant moments, he transforms witnessing from passive to active, exposing power mechanisms and reality.

*Exhibit O “Shahid” Exhibition from two angles - Dublin City Art Gallery, featuring the artist*



“Trade Routes”, (Exhibit P), offers a meditation on the cyclical nature of history, human movement, and the economic realities of contemporary people at home and abroad. Referencing W.B. Yeats, Lagan ingeniously weaves together the apocalyptic vision from “The Second Coming” with the mundane yet politically charged image of a kebab grill.



*Exhibit P, Trade Routes (2023) Oil painting on primed wood pane 100x70 cm<sup>26</sup>*

The canvas presents an ethereal seascape where Arabic calligraphy forms the vessels traversing the waves, evoking the grand maritime traditions of Turner, Van Gogh, and Rembrandt. The phrase in the painting (top left) “وشقو عباب البحر” (“traversing the sea waves”) echoes Yeats’ “widening gyre,” suggesting both movement and the unravelling of order. Lagan’s focus on the etymology of shawarma, döner, and gyros – all meaning “to turn” – brilliantly parallels Yeats’ imagery of a world spinning out of control.

This linguistic play takes on a bitter irony when juxtaposed with Lagan’s economic observation: “A top-tier Syrian employee’s salary equates to just three kilograms of shawarma.”<sup>27</sup> Through this sardonic conflation of high art, history, and mundane economics, Lagan questions why the celebrated history of cultural exchange through trade has devolved into the current hostile climate surrounding migration.

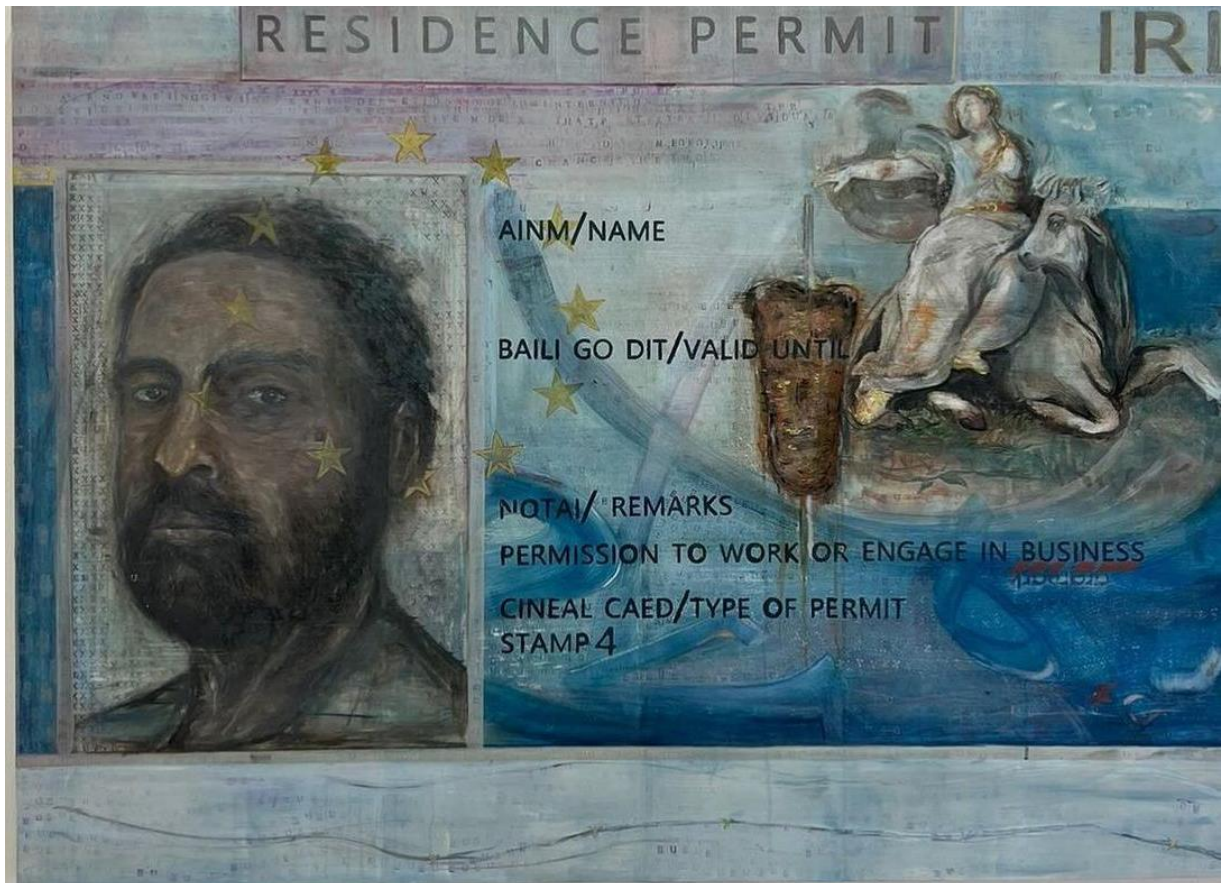
### **Mythological Contrasts and Modern Realities**

<sup>26</sup> “Trade Routes” 2023, read more [here](#).

<sup>27</sup> Zeina Yaaqoub, "From Essentials to Luxuries: Soaring Prices and Administrative Chaos in Syria Today," Aljumbhuriya, January 12, 2024, <https://aljumbhuriya.net/en/2024/01/12/from-essentials-to-luxuries/>.



Perhaps most provocatively, Lagan’s piece “Permission” juxtaposes the mythological tale of Zeus abducting Europa with his own bureaucratic identity documents, (Exhibit Q). The classical myth, where Zeus transforms into a bull to carry the Phoenician princess Europa across the Mediterranean to Crete, has long been celebrated in Western art as a romantic foundation story of Europe. Lagan’s reinterpretation, however, exposes the power dynamics and ironies embedded in this narrative.



*Exhibit Q, Permission (2023) oil on primed plywood 100x140cm<sup>28</sup>*

By placing his residency permit alongside this mythological scene, Lagan creates a stark commentary on the transformation of Mediterranean crossings from celebrated legend to criminalised act. The same waters that carried Europa – herself a South West Asian migrant – to become the namesake of a continent are now the site of countless tragedies for those fleeing conflict. Zeus’s divine transformation into a bull to facilitate the crossing stands in sharp contrast to the dehumanising transformation of modern refugees into mere numbers on immigration documents.

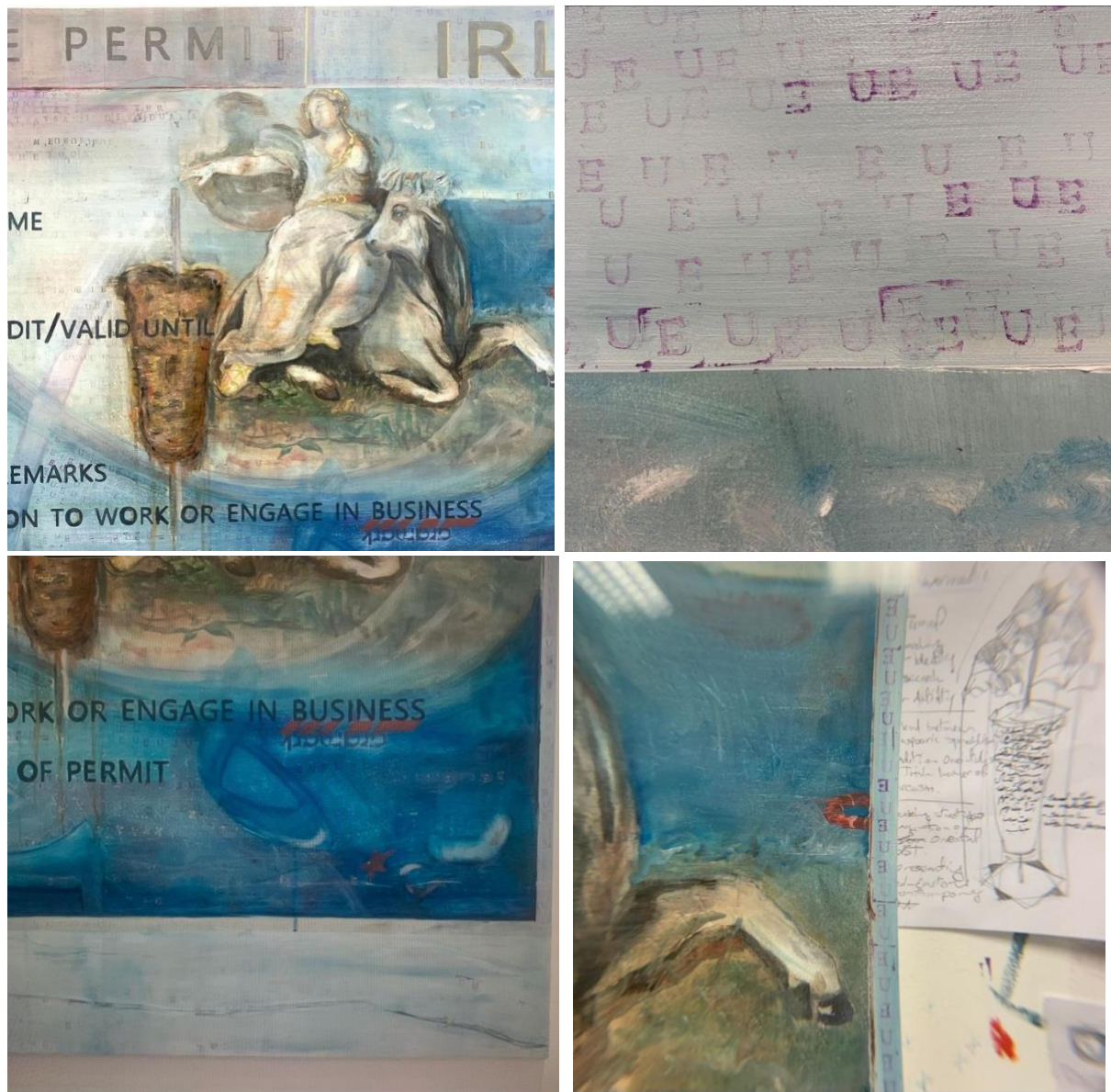
The irony deepens when considering Europa’s Phoenician origins from the same Levantine coast that many Syrian refugees now flee. While her crossing has been immortalised in art and literature, today’s Mediterranean crossings are met with hostility and bureaucratic barriers.

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<sup>28</sup> Read more [here](#).

Through this complex interplay of classical mythology and contemporary reality, Lagan exposes the arbitrary nature of borders and the stark disparities in how different Mediterranean crossings are perceived. His work suggests that the true modern metamorphosis is not the physical transformation of Zeus, but rather the transformation of human beings into numbers and permit applications – a bureaucratic metamorphosis that strips away dignity and individual identity.

These four detailed images highlight specific elements of the above installation that may not be immediately apparent in the full view. Each closeup photograph captures intricate features and craftsmanship that deserve closer examination



Lagan’s work offers critical insights for transitional justice in Syria, particularly through his “Shahid” exhibition’s exploration of witnessing and martyrdom. By playing on the Arabic word’s dual meaning, his art challenges traditional documentation practices that often reduce victims to passive subjects. Through his artistic practice, Lagan demonstrates how creative

expression can serve multiple vital functions: as documentation of historical truth, as resistance against enforced silence, and as a means of processing collective trauma. His transformation of passive witnessing into active artistic expression suggests that effective transitional justice must go beyond legal frameworks to address the psychological and cultural dimensions of conflict. The work argues that true healing and reconciliation cannot occur while people remain mere spectators to their own destiny - instead, they must become active participants in shaping narratives of justice and recovery.

## **Oula Hope: Feminist Art and Women’s Narratives in Transitional Justice**

*I have harnessed my art to advocate for gender equality, justice, and human rights, especially for women, girls, and other underrepresented gender identities. I strongly believe that art can amplify our voices. We have a long way to go, walking together can make it less daunting and isolating.*<sup>29</sup>

### *Female Storytellers Project*

Oula shared her “Storytellers” project (female storytelling) which stands as a significant contribution to transitional justice discourse through its **documentation** of Female Syrian activists’ struggles for equality and freedom. Its significance stems from the fact that it presents narratives from diverse genders and backgrounds—rural, urban, religious and secular—offering insight into experiences under patriarchal authority, oppressive regime and wartime conditions.

*Protection Through Artistic Translation and Healing:* “my work is to capture the essence of each story, focusing on its most poignant moment” Oula explains. Her unique approach lies in the intimate process of listening to survivors and translating their experiences into visual metaphors, preserving both their anonymity and the psychological truth of their trauma. In “The Rescue Girls”, (Exhibit R), she captures the essence of Reem’s story,<sup>30</sup> where a persistent feeling of cold after prison showers becomes a psychological rather than physical sensation. Hope depicts this through a woman trying to warm herself against a crumbling wall—the wall symbolising lost dreams in Syria. This artistic interpretation allows her to document psychological aspects of trauma often missed in traditional documentation while creating a protective space for survivors’ experiences to be acknowledged and validated.

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<sup>29</sup> [Oula Hope](#), a graduate of Damascus University’s Faculty of Fine Arts, positions her artistic practice at the intersection of feminist activism and human rights advocacy. Her work spans multiple mediums and has supported numerous NGO campaigns across Syria, Lebanon, Europe and the UK.

<sup>30</sup> Reem, a graduate student in Aleppo, risked her life as part of ‘The Rescue Girls’ - a group who protected male protesters by claiming to be their relatives. Her secret activism came at a heavy cost. In December 2013, authorities detained her for 58 days, subjecting her to harsh interrogations and solitary confinement. Though her hypoglycemia condition ironically protected her from further torture, the experience left deep scars. Ultimately, she sought refuge in France, leaving behind both the trauma and her homeland to rebuild her life.



Exhibit R, "The Rescue Girls" story بنات الفزعة

The project weaves together varied narratives of resistance and transformation against patriarchy and political oppression. "Heart to Heart" and "A Little Bird Told Me" قالتلي العصفورة are stories that chronicle experiences of activism and detention. "The Freedom Generation" نور بعد الظلام documents emerging voices of change, whilst "Light After Darkness" نور بعد الظلام follows journeys of escape and renewal. "The Truth Is What We Find" الحقيقة ما نجده خلال بحثنا explores personal revelation and transformation. "A Soul Unknown to Humankind" روح لا تدري بها البشر expresses the trauma of sexual abuse and loss of trust, (Exhibit S).



Exhibit S, "A Soul Unknown to Humankind" <sup>31</sup> روح لا تدري بها البشر

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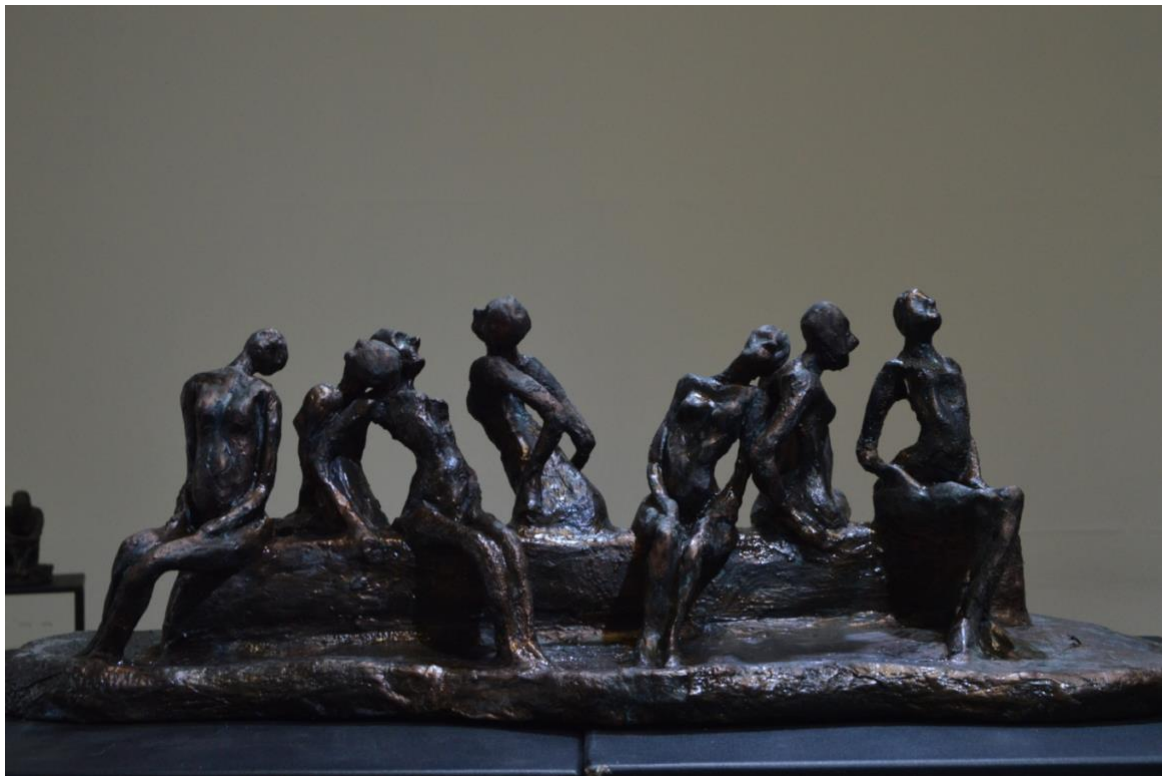
<sup>31</sup> Leila, after 25 years, shared her story of being sexually abused by a cousin in childhood. The trauma caused a lifelong fear of men that strained even her relationship with her father and led to failed romances, reinforcing her distrust. But Leila finally met a man who respected her boundaries. They married and moved to France, where she now supports Syrian women against patriarchal oppression.

## **The Power of Storytelling in Healing and Transitional Justice**

Oula Hope's artistic practice harnesses the power of storytelling to transform individual trauma into collective memory. By creating a space for survivors to share their experiences through visual metaphors, Hope's work breaks the isolation often felt by those affected by conflict. This process of reclaiming one's narrative can be profoundly therapeutic, validating experiences within a broader context of resistance and survival.

Hope's methodology has significant implications for transitional justice. Her work demonstrates how art can serve as a vital complement to legal frameworks by preserving testimonies while protecting vulnerable witnesses; creating visual records of the psychological impacts of conflict; documenting patterns of gender-based oppression and resistance; building solidarity among survivors through shared narratives; and offering alternative forms of truth-telling that capture the emotional and psychological dimensions of conflict.

The artwork "We Gathered" particularly exemplifies this approach, (Exhibit S). It represents feminist solidarity and collective resistance – essential elements for sustainable transitional justice processes that address gender-based violations and systemic inequalities.



*Exhibit S, "We gathered" represents the idea of sisterhood and feminist solidarity among all the heroines of the storytelling project narratives*

Hope's work suggests that transitional justice mechanisms must go beyond legal frameworks to address the complex psychological and social dimensions of conflict, particularly regarding women's experiences and gender-based violence. By creating safe spaces for difficult conversations about justice, accountability, and social transformation, artistic expression can play an important role in healing and rebuilding after conflict.

## **Challenges and Ethical Considerations in Transitional Justice Work**

The integration of diverse approaches into formal transitional justice processes presents several interconnected challenges that require careful consideration. At an institutional level, while artistic and cultural initiatives can be powerful as community scales, expanding their impact nationally requires substantial resources and coordination. This connects to broader questions of representation - ensuring that initiatives encompass diverse Syrian experiences without marginalising any groups, particularly those historically excluded from formal processes.

The trauma-sensitive nature of transitional justice work demands careful attention. Whether through legal documentation, artistic expression, or academic research, practitioners must develop robust guidelines for engaging with traumatic material to avoid re-traumatising individuals and communities. This challenge extends to questions of ethics in representation - how to balance the need for truth-telling with protection of vulnerable individuals, and how to navigate the tension between creative expression and ethical documentation of conflict experiences.

Institutional integration presents another significant challenge. Traditional justice mechanisms may resist incorporating alternative approaches, whether these are artistic initiatives, feminist perspectives, or decolonial frameworks. This resistance often stems from limited resources, with funding landscapes typically favouring short-term, project-based work over the sustained engagement needed for meaningful transformation. Moreover, developing methods to evaluate the impact of diverse interventions on transitional justice outcomes remains critical but complex.

The physical dimension adds another layer of consideration, particularly regarding architectural preservation and urban reconstruction. These efforts must balance preservation of memory with community needs, ensuring that spatial interventions contribute to reconciliation rather than reinforcing existing power dynamics. Success in addressing these challenges requires sustained commitment, careful planning, and close collaboration between artists, institutions, academics, and communities.

## **IV. Recommendations for Transitional Justice Institutions**

Based on the insights and approaches shared during the "Unmasking Syria's Hidden Identities" workshop, we recommend the following actions for transitional justice institutions working in the Syrian context:

1. **Integrate Arts into Justice Process:** Create formal mechanisms to incorporate artistic documentation and expression in Syria's transitional justice. Form working groups

combining legal experts, artists, and academics to develop a culturally grounded model for truth-telling and collective healing through arts.

2. **Inclusive Justice Process:** Conduct research to capture diverse Syrian perspectives on justice while ensuring meaningful participation of marginalised groups - including women, minorities, and youth - in designing and implementing transitional mechanisms.
3. **Diaspora Input:** Leverage Syrian diaspora's unique perspectives through digital platforms and transnational collaborations in justice processes.
4. **Embrace a Decolonial Praxis:** Critically examine the colonial legacies and power structures that have shaped experiences of violence and oppression in Syria, as highlighted by presentations on the enduring impacts of the French Mandate and the need for a reimagining of Syrian governance.
5. **Centre gender justice and women's experiences** in transitional justice efforts.

## **V. Conclusion and Way Forward**

The workshop has demonstrated the vital role of artistic expression, practitioner perspectives, and academic insight in informing a more comprehensive and culturally resonant approach to transitional justice in Syria. By bringing together artists, academics, architects, and practitioners, the workshop has identified innovative ways to address the complex challenges of reconciliation and justice in post-conflict Syria.

The workshop has revealed several insights:

First, effective transitional justice efforts must create spaces for dialogue, truth-telling, and collective memory-building that acknowledge both shared and unshared histories.

Second, the integration of artistic practices, such as those demonstrated by Leen Kayyali, Alaa Shasheet, Oula Hope, and Diaa Lagan, can facilitate the documentation of diverse experiences, the processing of individual and collective trauma, and the envisioning of alternative futures.

Third, the engagement of diaspora communities and exiled voices, as illustrated by the Syrian National Covenant Document, is impactful for constructing a more comprehensive understanding of Syrian aspirations for justice and social transformation.

Moving forward, transitional justice institutions must prioritise inclusive consultations, the integration of artistic practices, the engagement of diaspora communities, the adoption of decolonial and feminist approaches, and the establishment of cross-sectoral working groups. The workshop has underscored the need to critically examine and transform the colonial legacies and power structures that have shaped experiences of violence and oppression in Syria,

Furthermore, the formation of specialised teams combining legal experts, artists, academics, and practitioners can facilitate the development of holistic approaches to transitional justice that integrate diverse perspectives and methodologies.

As Syria navigates a critical period of transition now, the insights and approaches shared in this workshop hope to offer guidance for developing transitional justice processes that are more responsive to the complex realities and aspirations of diverse Syrian communities. The realisation of a more just, inclusive, and peaceful future for Syria will require sustained commitment, collaboration, and creativity from transitional justice institutions, cultural organisations, and Syrian civil society. The workshop hopes to have offered some reflections on the challenges and opportunities ahead.





From left to rights: Leen Kayyali, Dima Alhaj Hussein, Sima Nassar, Dr Roua Al-Taweel, Dr Katya Alkhateeb, Dr Feras Alkabani, Dr Azzam Al Kassir, Ghenwa Al Shoumari, Diao Lagan, Alaa Shasheet, Reem Nouredin, Maya Dayoub, Dr Jeeda Alhakim, Dr Nerouz Satik