



# Encounters with a Syrian

## How two worlds converge

Lisa Eidenhammer und Omar Khir Alanam

- Abstract** Two people, from two different cultural backgrounds, with two different pasts, meet each other. The following article deals with the process of these two people's becoming acquainted. Two years ago, Omar Khir Alanam was forced to leave his native Syria; he eventually arrived in Austria. In the spring of 2015, we met in Graz. We got together frequently, talked about everyday life and Syrian food. However, we never talked about our pasts. After a van attack in Graz on 20 June 2015, in which three people were killed and several badly injured, we became aware of how differently this affected us. Only then, after this horrible incident, did our individual pasts which colored our perceptions of the event become a major topic of interviews and discussions. During the process, the research took on a dialogic character. Only the mutual interest in the seemingly foreign enabled us to understand each other.
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therefore also over me. The *Multikultiball* – a ball with international guests and artists that takes place every year – that was to have taken place that evening, and where our choir was to have sung was cancelled. Omar, who is a member of the choir, was the only one who did not know that the town hall had cancelled all events in town. He had come from Gratkorn, a suburb of Graz, especially for the occasion. So I invited him to our place for tea. It was an absurd moment when we spoke face-to-face. I was shocked by the van attack, in contrast to Omar, who was slightly astonished by my reaction. In Syria, violence and crime had been part of everyday life. Nonetheless, he understood that such events were a grave exception and respected my reaction.

The encounter occupied me for a long time afterwards. I kept asking myself why the situation had seemed so absurd. What do I know about Syria or the individual fates of the Syrian people? By then, I had known Omar for several months. Why had I not asked him about his past?

Four months later, we were sitting again in our kitchen. Omar had received his decision on asylum a few days before. Omar smiles most of the time, but that day a very wide grin was on his face. He had arrived, finally. In one of his prose poems, Omar writes that he can live and love here. Through his girlfriend, he can visit Syria and see “sad Damascus smile through her eyes”. That is one of her special traits, Omar explains.

On that day, I got the feeling that the time for just talking about Syrian food and customs was over. I wanted to seize the opportunity and talk to him seriously about the strange meeting we had had on the day of the van attack. I wanted to find out why we had differing degrees of emotionality and sense of the importance of the event. In our first topical interview, on 4 November 2015, he told me that he had seen so many people being killed – friends, children, older people and women – that the events of Graz did not shock him that much (Khir Alanam 2015a). Omar adds that before the war, it was a disturbing event when a young person died. Although he always despised the cruel incidents, the many deaths which the war had brought had in some way made it easier to bear the pain. The Syrian author Fawwaz Haddad (2014, 34f) explains this daily confrontation with death in a similar fashion. He claims that death has become a steady companion of the people and can strike at any moment. However, even though Omar was used to the daily news of people dying in his home country, he is far from accepting this or calling it “normal”. He told me that people who went out on the street to sing for freedom had been killed by the state police and the militia. According to him, 30 people die every day. Of course that fact that was not “normal” to him (Khir Alanam 2015a).

Haddad states that the Syrian people are currently living under the reign of a militia and do not have a democratically voted government. He illustrates this irregular political and social situation in Syria and points out that this is not the real Syria (2014, 31). Omar also told me how he had been arrested by the militia. Alongside with his cousin and his two uncles, he had been tortured in the most degrading way. They had been blindfolded, beaten and humiliated severely. For hours, they had been forced to kneel with their arms crossed behind their backs. Again and again, Omar recounts memories of this mistreatment. Omar was released within a day. His cousin and one uncle were released a month later. However, one of his uncles is still imprisoned. No cruelty seems unimaginable for the militia. It was hard for me to grasp the immensity of the difference of our two pasts. Nonetheless, our different experiences constitute



a major part of our respective everyday lives. In our continuing encounters, we have found not only contrasts, but also similarities that connected us – for example, our shared love of literature or simply laughing together.

Omar already speaks fluent German. I interrupt only occasionally, to clarify a foreign expression or to ask for more information on a specific topic. Frequently, he uses examples from literature and philosophy to illustrate his interpretation of certain proverbs. In order for me to get a better understanding of the current power system in his country, he told me about a Syrian stage director who had studied in France: Mustafa Khalifa. He had called Hafiz al-Assad a “donkey”. For this he had been sentenced to 13 years in prison. In all those years, the hardest part had not been to endure the constant beating, but to have been forced to thank the dictator for his liberation.

Omar is saddened by the ongoing war in his country. His dream of a revolution is over. War was never been the intention of anyone who had protested peacefully; the people who had sung and danced for freedom, bare-chested and with flowers in their hands. One of them had presented the soldiers with white flowers and had subsequently been arrested and killed. Omar told me that by cutting people’s throats, the soldiers demonstrate that they want to silence their voices. He explained that it is forbidden to raise your voice. Omar claimed that the government had educated them to be merciless. Recently Omar started to write poetry in German and composed the following poem:

Die Diktatur hat immer Angst vor der Liebe...  
Die Diktatur will nicht, dass wir die Liebe lernen,  
deshalb habe ich immer über die Liebe gesprochen und von ihr erzählt.  
(Khir Alanam 2016a).

Dictators are always afraid of love...  
Dictators don’t want us to learn about love,  
That is why I always have spoken about love and told about it.

The risk of being conscripted was the main reason for Omar to flee. Many young men act in the same way because they do not want to be a part of this system. Omar interprets this as a good sign. According to him, they do not want to fight and kill, but to live a peaceful and good life (Khir Alanam 2015ab). Even though Omar’s dream of a peaceful revolution has been disappointed, his call for freedom has not been silenced.

For Omar, the revolution was an explosion of creativity. Suddenly, he had a host of ideas that he wanted to put to paper. The things that occurred to him were frequently quite contradictory, as in his life: Love, Death, Blood, Revolution, Social Wrongs and Freedom. Once, he wrote a text about the revolution and a friend put a melody to the lyrics. They went into the streets to sing their song together in company of other people. Omar wanted to be part of the revolution. It was very dangerous, but he wanted to show that all people are the same (Khir Alanam 2015b). He had written poems before the revolution, but the cry for freedom had sparked his sense of self-awareness in a much more intense way.



Audio file 1: 'Wir wollen sein', (Deutsch):  
<https://soundcloud.com/user-655623594/wir-wollens-sein-deutsch>



Audio file 2: 'Wir wollen sein', (Arabisch)  
<https://soundcloud.com/user-655623594/wir-wollen-sein-arabisch>  
Icon: CC BY Plainicon, Online unter [www.flaticon.com](http://www.flaticon.com)

A poem by Omar Khir Alanam in which he describes dream sequences. He tries to convey the message that the suffering of the Syrian people must come to an end and that freedom should be regained.

### Developing dialogical research

After we finished our second interview, Omar remarked that next time I should talk about me. It was obvious to me that this field study was gradually developing in the direction of dialogical research. When I reflect on the research process, I realize that from the beginning there existed a dynamic of mutual interest. However, I had not been aware of this dialogical character from the start.<sup>2</sup> For me, Omar had ceased to be a mere interviewee. He was now a research partner.<sup>3</sup> It was in our mutual interest to understand each other and to fully embrace the complexity of the issue.<sup>4</sup>

Our conversations often triggered strong emotions, ranging from anger, incomprehension of the unjust situation, and deep dismay concerning Omar's memories and the van attack in Graz, to optimism and cheerfulness. Repeatedly, our different approaches to literature, art, music or films sparked new discussions. In the field of arts, I want to mention the works of

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2 There had been no preconceived connecting threads leading through the questions for the interviews. Only outlines, for the themes which should be covered, existed. Thus, there was a lot of space for free associations and improvisation (Sauer mann 1982, 147). Eventually, I realized that there was no sense in excluding myself from the study in order to take a, seemingly, objective point of view. According to Rolf Lindner, Cultural Analysis requires to think in relations (2003, 179). I was, and still am, part of this research, for it took both of our sides to produce the contradiction of that moment.

3 According to Sauer mann (1982, 151), in such a case it is crucial to disclose the dialogical character of the process as transparent as possible, in order to maintain the scientific assessment.

4 As Lindner (2003, 186) proposes, I wanted to involve myself with all my senses into the topic and fully set my mind on it. Or, as Bourdieu (1997, 782) put it, to achieve a relationship between active and methodical listening. Bourdieu claims that it combines complete frankness with the subordination of oneself to the uniqueness of the story.



the painters Wissam Al Jazairy and Tammam Azzam, as well as music by the singer Samih Choukeir and short films at the Syrian audiovisual arts NGO Bidayyat.

Schiffauer states that the experience of the Self and the Other are inseparably interrelated (1988, 255). As a result of the dynamic approach, we were constantly confronted with the issue of questioning ourselves as well as the other, in order to unravel the stories that had been spun around us. Hamid Reza Yousefi (2008, 41) argues that that encyclical hermeneutics, especially in the area of interculturality, provide a tool with which to respond to the mutuality of meeting others. It is about both sides: how do I perceive myself and how does the other perceive me? Interculturality should be committed to communication which promotes multi-dimensional thinking and rejects monocausal thinking. Yousefi states that you have to try to understand if you want to be understood (2008, 27). More important than completely understanding the other was the mutual respect with which we dealt with each other's stories. Moreover, it is a shared desire of both of us to add our voices to the ongoing debate about refugees. In other words, our throats should not be cut but release our voices to communicate with the people of our society and to challenge them to interact and communicate in their turn.

### **Syria, a complex reality**

According to Bourdieu, revealing the mechanisms that make life painful does not mean solving them: "It takes more than that" (1997, 825). It is foreseeable that the people who try to escape from these mechanisms of violence in Syria will encounter extremes here in Europe when seeking asylum. In every place where human beings gather, there will be contrasts and similarities. It is a crucial task of cultural studies to draw attention to smaller shades and bigger contrasts and to highlight their complexity. Of course, conflicts or mechanisms are not solved by this. However, it leads to a more differentiated and, probably, more sensitive view of things; one becomes critically aware of the complexity of contrasts without over-generalizations and prejudice.

The essential difference between the van attack in Graz and the current situation in Syria is that while the van attack was an absolute exception, the war in Syria remains a daily reality in which several systems of power and violence are involved. The Syrian conflict has long ceased to be merely regional. Syrian civil rights activist and journalist Ali Atassi and producer Christin Lüttich (2014, 175) point out that the story of Syria also tells about the petrified international humanitarianism. A solution of the unfathomable conflict and the restoration of democracy drifts out of sight with every passing day in which the world does not act. Larissa Bender (2014, 10) also notes that the Syrian war has transformed into a proxy war, however, a war fought at numerous frontiers at the same time: Sunnites against Shiites, Saudi-Arabia against Iran, Turkey against the Kurds, USA against Russia, just to name a few. According to Bender, "The ones who suffer are the Syrian people who took to the streets against a brutal regime and who see how their power to decide on their future has been taken out of their hands entirely."

Omar Khir Alanam sung for freedom on the streets of Damascus. Today, on the anniversary of the revolution, he sings on the streets of Graz for freedom. He will not let his voice be taken away from him and he will not stop fighting for freedom. Like Sadik Al-Azm (2014, 19), a retired university professor of philosophy, Omar keeps insisting on the fact that the Arab Spring in Damascus started as a peaceful protest movement, and only after the extremism of



the regime turned into a violent confrontation with the police and the army. Omar could not see a future for himself in Syria, which is why he attempted the long and weary journey which finally led him to Austria. Here, he writes and has found a new home. Frequently, he puts his fears and sorrows into lyrics to get them from troubling his mind. Therefore, he feels most at home in his poems (Khir Alanam 2016b).

## Conclusion

The process of the converging of two people from two seemingly different worlds is at the core of this article. On the day of the van attack in Graz, we became aware of our different perceptions of this act of violence. Gradually, we noticed that we were moving towards each other, despite our completely different experiences from our respective pasts, which tinted our perceptions of the event. We were both of the opinion that violence against innocent people, whether it be exceptional case or a systematic mechanism of violence, must always be condemned. Nonetheless, our emotions and perceptions were rather different. To Omar, who had himself experienced torture in Syria, violence had become a part of every day reality; to me, it remained extraordinary.

During the research process, a dynamic of mutual interest developed. Repeatedly, we revolved around a determination of the Self and the Other, and the feeling of wanting to understand the other as well as the desire to be understood in return. Several times we used art, music, literature, films etc. to find new impetus for our discussions, in which we gradually moved together, one step at a time.

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