CULTURAL STUDIES

The Middle-Eastern Conflict and the Image of the Other. The War Photography and Reframing of Perspectives

Irina Frasin

We are all familiar with the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East – the Syrian war being perhaps the most tragic event – the refugee crisis and the terrorist threat. But from the Western point of view, it seems that the turmoil is somehow connected to the area. And this sometimes leaves us too indifferent to the real suffering of people just because these people are from an alien and doomed land. It seems like the violence happening in this area cannot be understood in its full extent and this becomes clear when we parallel the reactions to the conflicts happening there and the terrorist attacks in the West. This paper argues that photography can alter our perspectives and make realities that seem far out of reach look closer to us. We are examining the work of five artists that try to cope with their own traumatic experiences and open for us new perspectives on a crisis that has already last for too long.

1. Introduction

We are all following the dramatic events which unfold in the Middle East. We see the ongoing war, the extraordinary violence, the civilians dying on a daily basis, the outrageous number of people drawn out of their homes, but, somehow all these tremendous events seem to fit the situation of the area. From a Western perspective, this is part of a never ending conflict on this side of the world. Peace was an exception in the area, never lasting enough time to allow for grow and prosperity. Stability seems now an objective out of reach. And, somehow, this violence and its many faces seems to pass beside us and leave us indifferent. This attitude becomes obvious if we compare it to the reaction after the terrorist attacks in Europe. Unlike the

death of our fellow citizens, the death and destruction happening in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan appears to concern alien people from remote lands with little or no direct connection with us.

There is always a difference between us and the Others. And it is just this difference that allows us to turn a blind eye to the conflicts happening in what seems to be the other side of the world. Although history repeatedly exposed us to the same scenario, with different actors, it looks like we still react with the same more or less indifferent stance. Understanding events happening far away from us is never free of challenges. It becomes almost impossible to choose what to believe from the tremendous amount of information available. The different sources we rely on to get the knowledge we need both inform and manipulate us, they reveal and hide in order to get the story told in their way. So, especially when we get our information from parties that have an interest in the area, either visible or well hidden, we are most likely to go astray. The tendency of labeling the victims helps this process of discrimination and prevents us from understanding how much the way we treat these people is unjust and obscures, for us as well as for them, the rights they are entitled to. We fail to understand the real story, we fail to see the faces of real people, and we ultimately fail to imagine the real suffering. There is always something lost on the way and we are inherently biased.

Photography can help change our point of view and make the realities that seem far out of reach become closer to us. To illustrate this we will be analyzing not merely those images we all see in the news but some series of photographs taken by artists that use the camera as a witness for people's suffering. These photographers show people like us and their stories, making use of camera to preserve the memory of something they hold dear. And it is this very closeness that impresses us, changes our view and touches us deeply. What appears in the news as statistics and numbers regains through the work of these people its human face and dignity.

2. The Arab Spring and its aftermath

The conflicts we are witnessing in the Middle-East (the war in Syria, the rising of the Islamic State, the turmoil in Afghanistan) can only be understood in the larger context of the ongoing political, economic and moral crisis happening in the Arab world. The flood of refugees and the resulting humanitarian agonies are direct consequences of this complex crisis.

The Arab Spring, the movement that was seen as an awakening and a desire of the people to shake off the chains of tyranny, oppression and poverty, proved to be a great disappointment. The events following made us see that the Arab world, in its quest for equality and democracy, needs a much deeper reform, a broader change, not only in the political department, but also at social, economic and, above all, cultural level. The revolutions that changed the existing regimes were followed by elections that proved that people (and when I say people I mean the masses, many of them very poor and even illiterate) were not quite ready for what democracy was offering them. The people, oppressed by the authoritarian regimes and barely surviving from a day to another, were only thinking about escaping from the restraints and oppression of the government. They were paying little or no attention to other aspects of the much needed reform concerning the state institutions, the education, the liberties of women and individuals.

It is true that previous regimes were authoritarian and violent, but the people who rose to fight for change should not have allowed the country to fall into chaos. This does by no means imply that we should question the reasons for rising-up; the fight against oppression is easy to understand. However, it is also easy to understand that some countries in this part of the world were not ready for this sort of overnight change. Unfortunately, the movements and the unrest they brought helped the fundamentalism rise to the surface. One of the purposes of the previous aggressive regimes was to clean the countries of fundamentalists. They justified their violence in the same way the western powers now justify some limitations of the civilian liberties by the fight against terrorism: they need the use of force to prison and disarm these people. After the fall of these regimes, the fundamentalism surfaced more violent and better organized. Thus, the hope of living in a better,

more open and democratic society – the very hope ignited by the revolution – ended in disappointment and disaster.

After 2011, religion was brought to the scene[1] and interpreted in political and ideological way. This evolution made the Arab Spring unleash a living hell. This is showing us once more that the Arab society was not ready for the change. Poverty, lack of education (in many cases, even illiteracy), and the religious obscurantism are making democracy almost impossible to implement. A society where religion still plays the main role in nearly every level of public and private life is not able to understand the basic principles of liberty of thought, conscience, and equality for people of different faiths. A society centered on a monotheistic religion that it obviously seen as the only right religion is offering a monochromatic image of reality. The idea of plurality, which makes the heart and soul of democracy, is excluded from this image and world vision.

3. The Syrian war and the Islamic state

In this climate of fear and unrest,[2] we should easily understand the war in Syria. There the fight is literally tearing the country apart. Once flourishing, cities are now in ruins. We see civilians dying every day or living in conditions hard to imagine. From the chaos that the civil war created, it emerged one of the most radical and cruel interpretation of the Islamic religion: the Islamic state.

Among other countries, Syria was fertile land for the rising and growth of this radical Islamic ideology that transformed violence itself. Violence is no longer perceived for what is it, but it is regarded as the advent of the Islamic triumph that fulfills the will of God. An individual living in this society is denied the right of choice. Plurality is suppressed. There is one law only, one power in heaven and one representative on earth. The Other has to be eliminated; there must not exist any Other. This is the source that feeds

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1   The Muslim Brothers become a party that won the elections in Egypt in 2011 and 2012.

2   It is not the purpose of this paper to present or analyze the political subtleties implied in the changes ongoing in the Middle-East.

the jihad. If the Other is killed to bring the triumph of the unique law on earth, then the author of the killing is promised the paradise, a place of relief and pleasure. (Adonis 2016, 61) People who consider themselves stronger than death, because their life is supposed to continuing in paradise, find themselves justified to act in violent and barbaric ways without any guilt or remorse.

The Islam as political ideology, as it is used by the Islamic State, is based on the *sharia* as fundamental law and claims the necessity and duty of imposing it to the whole world. There is no other possible and acceptable law or regime. To clean the world of sin and ignorance is the holy mission of this ideology. However, as many have already observed, "any society that considers itself the place of residence for the absolute truth produces in fact ignorance." (Adonis 2016, 100)

What we need to understand is that people using Islam in this way are a threat not only to us – the outsiders, the westerners, the unfaithful – but also to their fellow citizens, to other Muslims, to whom they pose a more immediate and direct threat. "Islam is a religious culture which resists the separation of secular from spiritual jurisdiction – Bernard Lewis says – 'the very notion of secular authority is seen as impiety' " (Townshend, 2002, 102). So, for the ordinary people living in an Islamic society, the possibility of living in a democratic and free world is but a distant dream.

We are all too familiar with the threats the Islamic state poses to the West. The fear of terrorist actions is on the rise, and we can all measure this very well in our reactions.[3] Everybody is talking about keeping calm and continuing the normal life, but we have to understand that this is or should be no longer possible. What I mean is that we should realize that part of the guilt for this unprecedented fear of terrorist attacks lies with the Western politics that in a way or another failed to sanction reasonably – and some would say even sustained – the obscurantism and fundamentalism inherent

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3   See the attack on July 22th, 2016 in Munich, where not only that the first thought was that there was a terrorist attack, but also the story in the breaking news was keeping us thinking that the attack was of much larger proportion than it really was. There was speculation about the existence of three or more shooters in different areas of the city, when in fact it was only one.

in the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Because Western countries are interested mainly in trade with Arab countries, it seems that they are treating their culture, progress and development with less commitment. This politics is no longer serving the best interests of citizens. It is neither possible, nor acceptable for the Westerners to not fully acknowledge the suffering of the people leaving in countries devastated by war like Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic state is not a collection of mentally disturbed people, even if this appears to be the general image depicted by the media. We should be all aware that they have a clear purpose in view and a strategy to follow it. In the Islamic tradition, the place for the final battle, a place that the Bible calls Armageddon, is Dabiq, a small village in Syria of no apparent strategic value (Beck 2016, 28). This is the place where the "armies of Rome" will be forever defeated. According to the view shared by the Islamic state, the USA are the leaders of the "armies of Rome" and they will be sending troops to fight the Islamic state. According to the prophecy, the final result of this catastrophic confrontation will be the defeat of Rome (i.e., the coalition forces) and the rebirth of the caliphate (Napoleoni, 2015, 27). This victory will bring the *sharia* to all the surviving people.

The Islamic state followers imagine that they are the ones called to fulfill this prophecy. It is not hard to see why this kind of propaganda is so appealing to individuals who think of themselves that they cannot even master their own lives. They see themselves lost and abandoned, with failed expectations and no future, and they find shelter from all these feeling in the Islamic state's propaganda. This way they feel empowered and responsible not only for their own fate but for that of the whole humankind. The disaster the war is bringing to the people – the constant violence and fear, the fact of living under threat, not knowing if tomorrow will find you alive – is making them find shelter wherever is possible; thus, the fundamentalist propaganda becomes appealing. "We don't have anything to obtain in this world, except martyrdom, we will be buried in the mountains and the snow will be our shroud." (Weiss & Hassan 2016, 226)

The lack of perspective is frightening for anybody. In the absence of a goal and facing imminent death on a daily basis, it is hard to imagine how people living in conflict and war zones carry on with their lives. In the West,

the refugees, people who risk their lives to leave their country, home, and family to find a new life, are becoming more and more visible. We see the perils they face, the horrible death of their family members or friends and we try to find solutions to shelter them. They are visible because, by coming here, they become closer neighbors, and, at the same time, our very problem, in the sense that we cannot ignore anymore the source of their misery and despair. But "they are the most lucky victims, the rich ones, from everything the cowardice and the cynical calculations of the West produced in Syria" (Pichon 2015, 130). Becoming a refugee is far more complicated to understand and more traumatic than it seems on a first glance. And transforming the state of refugee, which is temporary in theory, into a permanent way of life, because one does not have any more a country to go back to, should make us think about how it feels like to be walking in their shoes. It offer us a view into how the war looks like from their perspective and from a first-hand experience.

However, we often forget or choose not to think about the people still living in the conflict zones. Most of the poor people have no means to leave, so they do not have a choice in this respect. They have to find ways to cope with the disaster. This is incredibly hard and it becomes even harder given the fact that they seem almost invisible to the world – or, to be sure, easy to ignore in the face of other more important subjects to the news. Still, there are people who never give up showing the word what the people in the conflict zones are going through. Beside professional photographers, who make their mission out of showing this tragedy to the world, there are simple people who use photography to make their voices heard. It is perhaps not too far off the truth to say that they have chosen to stay in Syria in order to bear witness to the disaster. They take photos every day, after the fighting and the bombings stop. Overcoming countless difficulties (the electricity is falling out on a daily basis and the internet connection is generally of poor quality), they upload photos and videos on internet and share them with the rest of the world. The web is full of such witnesses and yet the word's reaction is delayed and do not match the harsh realities revealed.

4. Photography as witness and catharsis

Photographers are putting their lives at risk in this context of war and violence to be able to show us the yet unseen face of the Syrian conflict. For some artists, cameras have become real preservers of memories; for others, they are mere tools for recording facts, documenting the destruction, the violence, the loss, and the death. (We know that after attacks relatives use photographs to identify their loved ones that have perished.)

It is a fact that our perception of the photographs of the conflict is different to that of the Syrians. For us the photos show a reality too distant, they show fragments or ruins of buildings and cities most of us have never visited, and some have never even heard of in their entire existence. But I am wondering if this is enough to explain why our reaction and our collective response to Paris, Nice or Brussels attacks was so different, compared to what we felt about the Aleppo, Beirut or Baghdad bombings that happened almost at the same time.

The artist Tammam Azzam emphasizes precisely this distance. With the aim of bridging the gap, he uses images of well-known Western works of art, which he imposes onto photos of ruined Syrian cities. We see a huge image of Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss" on the façade of a ruined building and an image of Matisse's "La Dance" onto a pile of rubble that used to be a block of apartments.

Tammam Azzam first distinguished himself by a "hybrid form" of painting – using different kind of media (sometimes even unconventional materials, such as rope or other objects) that helped him accentuate the tactile interactions between surface and form. Azzam turned eventually to digital media and graphic art in order to create more visual compositions of the Syrian conflict that could impress a larger international audience. He is exploring the immense potential of digital photography and street art as forms of protest and immediate tools that are very difficult to suppress. He is using his compositions of destroyed cityscapes to both document the present state of his homeland for the international viewers and make a cathartic exercise of reconstruction.

Catherine Ward is also using photography as a kind of catharsis. For many of us the perpetual conflict in the Middle East is a given fact that we don't think too much about. It seems the norm for the region, a norm which is incarnated in the Syrian conflict and the Islamic State. But for people of Syria, like Ward, the reality of the conflict is traumatic and even beyond comprehension. They see places they know completely destroyed or erased from the ground, they see people they love brutally killed and the reality becomes fuzzy and hard, if not impossible to understand. For some artists, photography could be seen as a means of preserving one's mental sanity. For Ward, photography offers an alternative to the news reports. The news, as we all shall be aware of this, show casualties of the conflict as numbers, statistics, and, by doing this, they fail to present the human tragedy. As a consequence, the humanitarian message is lost. Catherine Ward is telling us to make an effort to put a face to the numbers. She is challenging us to imagine that the people killed are someone's mother or father or sister or child. They are not just statistics, but souls. The artist's portraits of people, most often close-up photos of children, are an illustration of her statement and deep belief that people matter the most, they are "the most important thing".

The art of Issa Touma reflects the very same idea: bringing at the forefront humanity over the statistics. He is an artist based in Aleppo, thus finding himself isolated from the international art community in his country. In April 2015, during the attack unleashed upon his city by the Islamic state, 15 women took refuge together in his art gallery. The stories of these women are presented in his series of photos called "Women We Have Not Lost Yet". This series consists of portraits of women who, according to the author, refuse to "become just o victim or number in the media". The eyes of the girls and women are covered in the photos with a band containing their city, age, origin, and religion. Each photograph is also accompanied by the story of the model. Their stories are a cry for freedom on behalf of the Syrian women who are not lost yet to death, oppression or exile. The artist has chosen to present portraits of women as a way to make known those who do not have a voice in the conflict. In general, in all his work he tries to emphasize humanity over politics. He is altogether very skeptic of Western politics and its double standard.

The series of portraits were meant to show people, their lives, their simplicity and humanity and not to document the violence they are submitted to. Trapped in the gallery for a week – as long as the fighting lasted – the young women found there a safe place to share their hopes and dreams in order to face together the frightening and desperate situation. For the photo session they used their usual clothes and talked about their usual life. They made of this episode a kind of testament, a final message – in case disaster struck and they will disappear. They were students, teachers, artists, pharmacists, UN volunteers, archaeologists,[4] graphic designers and other profession; they were Sunni Muslims, Kurdish, Christians, Arabs, American Orthodox, and so on. No matter how different their lives have been before, they felt united under the same threat.

Unlike Touma, in the photos of Mahmoud al-Basha is difficult to separate the different sides of the conflict: war, politics, and humanity. He was there when the revolution broke out, like most of the students of his time. He was arrested, and then released. He began working to help foreign journalists, but he ended up being kidnapped by the rebels. He escaped, and in the process many of his photos were lost. However, some of them remained (and are available on Twitter). Some of his photographs are shocking, exposing gruesome images, while others show images of everyday life. They are photos made by someone who lost his home and most of his friends in the conflict; therefore, his images are far from those of an uninvolved or unbiased photojournalist.

The Italian photographer David Brunetti used his camera to capture images of refugees across the Middle East for his series "Scattered Pieces of a Homeland." The images are accompanied with text telling their story. The artist is rarely showing the faces of the people because he wishes to make the viewers see themselves in their place. He wishes he could make the viewers walk in their shoes for a while and meditate on that.

As we can imagine, life is extremely difficult for all refugees, but especially hard for women and children. That is why most of the photos and por-

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4   This was a very dangerous occupation under the Islamic state since ISIS issued a fatwa declaring that everyone with this profession should be decapitated.

traits of refugees represent women and children. Harassment, discrimination and injustice are hurting more people who are more vulnerable. The gendered experience of war and displacement and the need to find shelter from violence are making the already difficult life almost unbearable. Women, who by this experience are separated from their family and community, become more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Their status as refugees associated with economic vulnerability leave them almost without any protection. Many already faced physical and emotional trauma in the war, and they must now deal in their new homes with a new set of challenges arising from their status as refugees. In the constant struggle to find food and shelter for their children they are facing isolation, discrimination, and abuse.

David Brunetti wanted to show the everyday life of Syrian women refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. Thus, he focuses on their daily existence and struggle to find the means to make the life possible for them and their families. The photos are accompanied by their stories which are often heartbreaking. We read stories of families separated by war, of women forced to leave their children alone to be able to work and provide for them, or worse, women who have no other choice but to let their children work (the children find work easier because they are often poorly paid). The stories are hard to tell, but these women – no matter how difficult it may have been for them – have chosen to tell them in hope that their voices will be heard and the Syrian crisis will not be forgotten. By sharing their stories, they have somehow regained partial control over their lives and the hope to overcome the crisis, even if the trauma of war and the memories of their former lives are still haunting them.

Since the refugee flood, the question of what really means to be a refugee gained critical significance. Photographers are, naturally, among those who are constantly asking this question. The state of being a refugee should be temporary, at least in theory. But for many people in the Middle East, being a refugee is a state that lasted for far too long. The refugees, forced to leave their homes and live in other countries, are not only limited by accommodation restrictions – they are confined to places where only their basic need can be attended to –, they are also trapped between a past that is becoming an ever more distant memory and a future that seems out of reach.

We are all aware of the debates and problems that the huge number of displaced people has caused so far, but I don't know how many of us have tried to picture themselves in their place. The photographers and their works shortly presented above concentrate on stories that make us more sensitive to how this experience translates into reality.

The Time photographer James Nachtwey travelled to Greece to document the situation of those displaced by war and other disasters. The sheer size of the phenomenon first struck him as he has never seen this happening on such a large scale. His photos tell stories: the woman in tears on the arrival on European soil, the refugees shouting at the border to be allowed to pass, the man standing between migrants and a row of policemen, and so on. Nachtwey aims at capturing his subjects' individuality and the complexity of their emotions. He is trying to preserve something for people who seem to have lost everything. And the only thing a photograph can save and give them back is, perhaps, their stories. He wants to bear witness to their experiences and uses his photos as testimony to the ongoing events. In the end, he hopes that the things recorded will not be forgotten and will not happen again.

Liam Maloney has spent time as a photographer with a group of Syrian refugees that were sleeping in a former slaughterhouse. They were using tents to get some privacy. Maloney started to shoot photos of the people at night, their faces lit only by the light of their cellphones. Although in the beginning the people were skeptical, they ended by sharing their messages with him. Text messages, a quite ordinary way of communication for most of us, made for the refugees that took shelter in the slaughterhouse the difference between life and death. They were sending and getting signs of life. They were getting news of family and friends as most of us usually do, but the difference to us sending messages in our normal life lays in the huge emotional charge of those people's messages.

When the work is exhibited, the texts of the Syrian refugees shown in the photos are sent to the viewer's phone as a way to gap the distance between them. The technique gives a glance into what the refugees must have lived in those critical circumstances while walking in the common and neutral space of an exhibition room.

5. A few closing lines

It is very difficult to see if photos alone can bring concrete change. Even the artists who risk their lives to take photos are very skeptical about the possibility to bring visible change. They think that we are so saturated of being confronted with this kind of images that we choose to turn our heads and continue with our lives. Even if we are touch and feel sorry for the victims, it seems to be the most we can do.

The most famous photo of all, the picture showing the three year old Syrian boy lying dead on the Turkish beach, inspired some debate across Europe about the fate of the migrants, but it resulted in little consistent change. This is clearly showing that being impressed by an image or emotionally moved by a situation, it is still far away from taking an attitude or engage in real action.

We should be all aware that the photos we see in the news are the result of a tough selection. We should also keep in mind that the possibility of taking photos in a war zone is limited. The scale of what photojournalists can achieve when they take pictures depends on the degree to which conflict zones and refugee camps enjoy some level of protection. And, despite all these facts, some of the photos we get to see are just horrifying, almost too shocking – if I may say so. These photographs, as I tried to show, remind us of the lived reality, the disaster of war, the pain, the blood, the collective and individual suffering. They point to something that has little to do with political theory, statistics, and numbers of casualties presented in mainstream news. The camera serves as an eye witness that cannot be shut: we cannot claim anymore that we didn't know what is happening, or that we can't grasp the extent of the damages. But even if we can fully see and better understand the human tragedy triggered by the Syrian civil war, and even if some of us seem quite empathetic to the victims of this war and their suffering, what can this understanding achieve in concrete terms? We are touched by the terror, grief and pain exposed in this war through the camera's lenses and the anger we feel demands action. Some of us may even go to the extent of donating to charitable organizations that help the war victims. Often this is as far as our imagination stretches and having this done we go back to our usual life.

To better understand this reaction we may compare it to the compassion fatigue felt by people working constantly in stressful conditions with people in need (in hospitals, shelters, nursing homes, police forces, social services, etc.). After seeing others suffering on a daily basis, in order to protect themselves, people generally become immune to that kind of suffering. They get accustomed to think about people in pain as new cases they find in their work. A similar effect has the multiple exposures to images of war and violence, of people in need and suffering through TV, internet, and newspapers. We become accustomed to it.

As we gradually identify with the people in the photos, they are more and more perceived as an evidence of the general human condition. It becomes a statement of the miseries of life; somehow, we end up in a state where we see the war in the same way we see a hurricane or a tsunami. Unexpectedly, we come to the conclusion that, in a certain way, photos taken in conflict areas accuse nobody and everybody. The situation is effectively depoliticized. We are shocked, but at the same time taken away from the real core of the problem. The reality of such photos should lead us to question our own lack of political freedom. We should try to find out what led to this situation and how could it be changed efficiently. Thus, given the possibility of coming into contact with first-hand accounts, we should choose not to look away, but to think, rethink, and question the situation to the point we understand it and to the extent where it becomes clear what our real possibilities of response are.

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Irina Frasin

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