

Pop Culture and Political Critique in Syria

HOW *KHAN AL-HARIR* DENOUNCED
STATE CRONYISM AND
AUTHORITARIANISM UNDER THE
ASSAD REGIME

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nder the rule of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, Syria has for decades been a highly autocratic security state. The ruling regime has attracted much-deserved criticism from human rights organizations and the international community.¹ Before the Arab Spring, however, domestic criticism of the Assad government within Syria was largely stifled by harsh information controls.² A so-called “barrier of fear” kept most dissent quiet. Some forms of media, however, did manage to make it past the censors, voicing subtle criticisms of the regime many years before the brave protestors on the streets of Dar’a and Homs made them heard throughout the world.³ Before 2011, television dramas played an outsized and essential role in critiquing the many flaws of Syria’s political system. One drama in particular, *Khan al-Harir*, offered a particularly holistic summary of the complaints brought to the streets in the first days of what would become Syria’s

terrible and tragic civil war. The series found a way to critique the Assad regime's oppression, autocracy, and cronyism years before such a level and scope of criticism was thought to be acceptable in a heavily censored state. Moreover, *Khan al-Harir* enjoyed a massive domestic audience, broadcasting its message to millions of Syrians. Fifteen years before the Arab Spring and years before Bashar al-Assad would even ascend to the presidency, it presented an early version of the critique that would one day threaten to topple the Syrian regime.

Ramadan Miniseries in Syria: "Important National Pastime"⁴

To understand the place of *Khan al-Harir*, it is important first to look at the role of the television industry in the Arab world and more specifically in Syria. The prime season for television in much of the Arab world is Ramadan. It has been compared to a month-long Super Bowl for the Arab TV market.⁵ The Syrian television audience is as much a part of this Ramadan TV "bonanza" as any Arab population.⁶ A 1998 report on Syrian media estimated that 99% of urban homes had television sets.⁷ Christa Salamandra claims that "[w]atching these series has become as much a part of Ramadan for the Damascenes as breaking fast with tamarind juice."⁸ Although it is hard to measure exactly how much extra time Syrians spend watching TV during Ramadan, observers agree that Ramadan is Syria's peak viewership season.⁹ In fact, many of the most acclaimed shows (*musalsalat*) are purposefully produced for and broadcast during Ramadan.¹⁰ The content of these programs is thus highly influential, garnering avid attention from wide swaths of Syrian society.

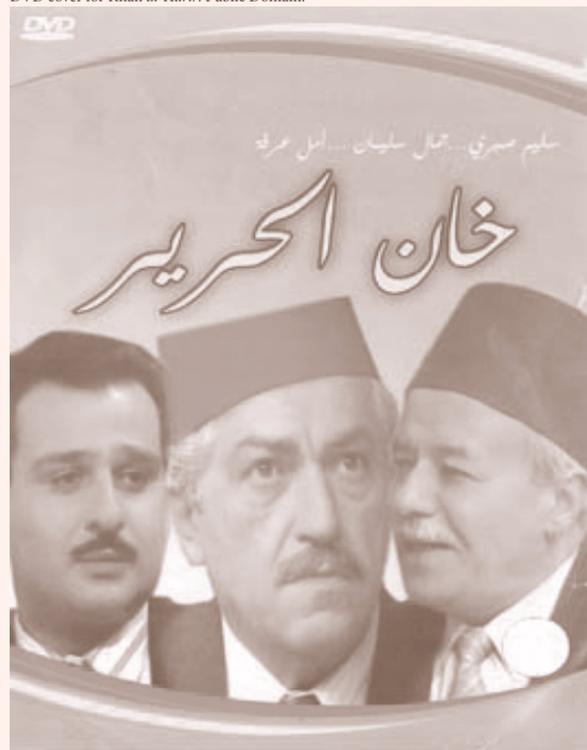
Television's Political Potential in a Highly Censored State

According to Miriam Cooke's *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, the roots of Syria's strong censorship can be traced all the way back to the coup that brought the Ba'ath party to power in 1963. With the Ba'ath came martial law and in 1970—after Hafez al-Assad ascended to the presidency in another

coup—the laws were strengthened yet again. Since then, the Assad regime has had what Cooke calls "absolute control over the production of culture and the distribution of information."¹¹ Nearly every form of media was state-owned, and those that were not were highly censored. Cooke summarizes that "taboo subjects included 'politics, ideology, religion, society, and economics.'"¹² The regime relied heavily on propaganda. After decades of Ba'ath rule, this environment became so stifling that Syrians were thirsty for any information or media of differing content.

Television was well-positioned relative to other forms of media. Having the massive Ramadan audience—and with written forms of media losing readership—these *musalsalat* were positioned to be the vehicle for social and political debate and commentary in the 1990s thanks to evolving laws and technology.¹³ One potential cause of the declining role of written media in Syria could be the heavy censorship of the highly autocratic regime. Every book in Syria must

DVD cover for *Khan al-Harir*. Public Domain.



“The prime season for television is Ramadan. It has been compared to a month-long Super Bowl for the Arab TV market.”

have an official stamp of approval from the Ministry of Information.¹⁴ Khaled Khalifa, an acclaimed screenwriter and novelist known for his criticism of the regime, explains that “[w]e don’t have theater, we don’t have newspapers... the only way for political expression is through television programs.”¹⁵ Although television had long been censored and controlled just like any media, it began to gain more autonomy in the 1990s.

This decade was a period of development and change for the TV industry. In 1988, private TV production was allowed. By the early nineties, the television industry had begun to grow—the regime passed another law in 1991 encouraging private, entrepreneurial participation in the industry—and would eventually become what Joubin calls the “primary arena” for social and political discussions.¹⁶ Even though private production of film was permitted, however, it was still subject to heavy screening and censorship at every stage.¹⁷

The rise of the satellite TV industry brought more freedom, variety, and competition to the airwaves in the 90s. Although satellite dishes were officially illegal throughout the 1990s, Syrians still adopted them quite quickly. Emphasizing their expansive presence, Scott Peterson wrote in 1999 that “[s]atellite dishes clog the rooftops of every building in the capital.” He concluded that the reason satellite television is so popular in Syria is that it provides new and different programming. Marlin Dick summarizes that the advent of satellite television turned the Arab world from many small, state-controlled markets into one expansive, competitive market.¹⁸ Before satellite, Syrian viewers had been restricted to watching just the state-run channels. With satellite, they could watch everything from pornography to Israeli news.¹⁹ Shows produced in Syria, however, like *Khan al-Harir*, were still subject to the usual production-level censorship. Although

some outside shows have gained popularity in Syria over the years, and parts of Syria’s TV industry have moved to Lebanon during today’s war, Syrian shows in the 1990s were more popular than their international competitors. *Khan al-Harir* was one of the hits that helped Syrian dramas steal the spotlight.²⁰ It is reasonable to assume that in the face of competition from regional satellite content, the regime permitted private production and allowed some more controversial shows to be produced in Syria, where it could still exercise control over production. The alternative would likely have been audiences watching even less favorable content produced abroad and broadcast via the uncontrollable satellite airwaves. Joubin’s research finds that some observers even believed that “the appearance of satellite television broke the regime’s control of knowledge and information.”²¹ Perhaps allowing satellite dishes at all—Joubin mentions that the regime considered banning them completely—is one example of the regime presenting a modern, pluralistic façade to the world.²² Despite heavy state controls, the television industry’s newfound freedom and dynamism in the 90s had the potential to create the environment for change in media content too.

***Making it Past the Censors:
Historical Allegory, Tanfis, and
Whispering***

Cooke explains convincingly, through analysis of art and interviews with artists, that this burdensome state control stimulated alternate forms of conveying dissident messages.²³ A story directly disparaging life under the regime would probably not make it to publication, but one cloaked in allegory and ambiguity might. As private television production started to take off in the nineties, it was a relatively dynamic form of media that reached massive audiences and could convey a dissenting message. Television’s strength in getting political commentary past the censors relied



The Assad family, 1993. Wikimedia Commons.

on three main features: the already-discussed new satellite technology, allegorical disguises for critical content, and, perhaps surprisingly, the censors' purposeful permission of political criticism in the media.²⁴

Although Syrian television production was heavily censored, political messages still reached audiences thanks to creative screenwriting and some ambiguity. One of the most effective tools was historical allegory. Cooke discusses Syrian political allegories in great detail, citing Sumita Chakravarty of the School of Media Studies at New York's New School. Chakravarty assesses that the effectiveness of the allegory truly comes from "the past being the displaced site of the tensions, failures and anxieties of the present."²⁵ Syrian screenwriters, therefore, could set their stories innocently in the past, in real or imagined history, but in such a way that they illuminated the concerns, the hopes, and the pains of their contemporary audience. Naomi Saqr concurs, writing that "any political comment that passes the censor only does so because it is heavily disguised. Thus, screenplays or works for the theatre are routinely set in other decades, or even other centuries."²⁶

Claiming that camouflage is the only way for a political message to reach audiences, however, could be a stretch, given the extreme level of control apparently

held by Syria's Ministry of Information. A prominent theory explained by Wedeen discusses the potential for purposeful regime toleration of unflattering political content. Wedeen writes that "in Arabic, the word *tanfis* means 'letting out air' and is used by many Syrians to describe the perception that politically critical television serials and films operate as 'safety valves,' allowing people to vent frustrations and displace or relieve tensions that otherwise might find expression in political

action." So, although it would be convenient to assume simply that a critical show like *Khan al-Harir* slipped by the censors thanks to clever writing, the potential for intentional complicity by the censors in airing this criticism is notable.²⁷ Cooke and Joubin also discuss the *tanfis* theory, with Cooke arguing that the government uses "commissioned criticism" to create a "democratic façade."²⁸ With such an opaque government, attempting to analyze regime intent can only go so far, but acknowledging the reality of permitted dissidence alongside artistic attempts at disguise is essential.

Khan al-Harir's Historical Allegory: Nostalgia for Democracy

Khan al-Harir aired over two seasons. The first season, in 1996, ran for twenty-three episodes and the second, in 1998, ran for twenty-five. Episodes generally lasted forty-five minutes.²⁹ *Khan al-Harir* depicts a heavy-handed security state employing cronyism, clientelism, and raw force to assert control over civil society. Valiant attempts at democratic expression and love-based romantic relationships are undermined and fought by selfish cronies of the regime and the state bureaucrats backing them. The screenplay was written by Nihad Sirees, who has criticized the regime in his novels and now lives in exile in Germany. Haitham Haqqi—"the Godfather of Syrian television

drama”—directed, and is also critical of the regime.³⁰ The show is primarily a historical drama, set during the political turbulence of the 1958-1961 United Arab Republic.

Although *Khan al-Harir* has not received due attention as a holistic critique of the Assad regime, one axiomatic aspect of its message, while still under-discussed, is its embrace of democracy. Sirees, in an interview, explained that, “I wanted to tell people how there was democracy [in Syrian history]. “I wanted people to cry, or to push them for change when they compared everything with the present.”³¹ A vibrant, full throated, pluralistic democratic process is indeed what he portrays in the beginning of *Khan al-Harir*.³² Khaled Khalifa, a noted author and screenwriter who, like Sirees, is critical of the regime, recalled his main takeaway from *Khan al-Harir* as the reminder that Syria had a real “golden age” of democracy in the fifties.³³

Essential to the portrayal of this vibrant democracy are the nuanced political discussions undertaken by the characters. Positions range from Nasserist support of union with Egypt, to union with Baghdad, to an independent Syria, to federalism, to the well-trodden socialism-capitalism debate. Citizens discuss politics at home and at work, hear news on the radio, and rally for their faction in the streets. Joubin adeptly summarizes the show’s discourse as “a depiction of the vivid debates on socialism, capitalism, and a multi-party system,” all of course within the context of the potential—and ultimately realized—union with Egypt. Men meet to debate politics and listen to the news together. Some are so inspired by the political news they hear over the radio that they rush off to join the army and fight against the “triple threat” of Britain, France, and Israel that has attacked their Arab brothers in Egypt.³⁴ Still others, like Kamal, make calculated and unprincipled political pivots in order to protect their interests and stay in the good graces of the government.

The critique begins to gain steam as Nasser’s increasingly autocratic regime dominates Syria and clamps down on democratic politics. Although the democratic debate is vibrant in the first season, by the end

of the second season, *Khan al-Harir*’s Aleppines have come to live under an oppressive police state with uncanny similarities to Assad’s. Individuals with nuanced political stances, such as Murad, are detained even when they pose no threat to the state and support the party’s main goal, Arab unity. Just as in Assad’s Syria, expression of political dissent becomes a crime. One conversation Murad has with Tareq serves to highlight this criminalization of nuanced, individual politics:

Murad: I hate you, but I don’t hate unity. Unity is important in the hearts of the people. I wanted unity. But my unity is not the same as your unity. I’m a Syrian citizen. You’re also Syrian. But the difference is that I respect the opinions of others. You want unity with Egypt in order to usurp the opinion of others. You want unity with Egypt to cancel the others... This unity won’t continue.

Tareq: Parties won’t continue.

Murad: Parties are important. And unity is popular among the people. Everyone wanted unity. But you didn’t deliver what you promised. You made more enemies than you gained friendships. You put everyone who was with unity in jail. You haven’t left any friends for yourselves.³⁵

Tareq and Murad’s conversation serves to highlight the transformation of the government from a popularly backed movement to an oppressive dictatorship.

The narrative arc of *Khan al-Harir*’s two seasons deserves focus for its critical strength. The story starts by reminding viewers of Syria’s once-robust democracy yet over the course of the show’s three-year historical period, the audience witnesses a political transformation—a condensed but convincing version of the transformation Syria has truly undergone in the decades since its democratic “golden age.” The creators use the audience’s nostalgia for the democratic, pluralistic past to amplify its frustrations over Syria’s disheartening present. The late 1950s were a turning point for Syrian politics, a dictatorship watershed with long-lasting, still-uncertain consequences. By setting

its story in the era of UAR politics, with its ricocheting shifts between democracy and dictatorship, *Khan al-Harir* aptly critiques modern Ba'ath politics, recognizing that Nasser's authoritarianism yielded directly to that of Assad. Thus, the historical allegory of Syria's transformation from democracy to dictatorship is an important aspect of *Khan al-Harir*'s critique.

Going Further: Khan al-Harir's Portrayal of Cronyism, Clientelism, and Hopelessness in Syrian Society

Khan al-Harir's pro-democracy allegory is not the only element of its political critique. The roles and storylines of three key characters—a businessman and two bureaucrats—exemplify the show's denunciation of Ba'athist cronyism and the state security apparatus.

First, Kamal is a wealthy silk trader who relies on government connections to maintain his influence, his business, and his romantic life.³⁶ He is happy to become politically pliable—and thus willing to appear unmanly and hypocritical—on the most pertinent issue of Egyptian unity in order to stay in favor with the state.³⁷ Consider this following quotation from the miniseries, where a colleague articulates Kamal's foundationless politics:

Nufa: Unity with Egypt is becoming a reality. It's better for us to get on board in order not to isolate ourselves. If we say no to Abdel Nasser, we're saying no to unity. And we won't be part of the government; we'll be out of the picture. We have to say yes to maintain our presence, our share, and our interests.³⁸

Kamal's character represents the pliant and subservient wing of the merchant class that is happy to side with the oppressive regime in exchange for personal and financial benefit. In a detailed biography of Hafez al-Assad, Patrick Seale details the socioeconomic arrangement established by the Ba'athists: "So unfettered were their activities and so extensive the networks of patronage and clientelism they built up that some spoke of the emergence of a 'merchant-military complex.'"³⁹ Kamal represents the class of super

wealthy merchants grateful to be a part of the ruling polity simply to be kept protected from the subjective eyes of the security apparatus and to further its own business dealings.

Kamal's state patrons are represented by two bureaucrats in the intelligence service, Tareq and Sayedna. Both exercise wide-ranging power, covering everything from arrests to bank lending, completely arbitrarily.⁴⁰ Sayedna's very name is another critical tool. This character, imbued with more political power than any other in the script, is defined by his position and by his power so entirely that everyone around him calls him only "our master." These men, along with their police henchmen, are the show's villains. They destroy the life's work of the show's only entrepreneur, Rabi', tear apart happy families, and have ears only for the wealthy and well connected. This portrayal of the show's villains fits neatly into Sirees' broader critique of the Assad regime, reminding viewers of the corrupt, self-serving, and arbitrary uses of power by the ruling elites.

The Existing Discussion: Khan al-Harir's Contribution

Broad industry analysis from experts like Cooke, Joubin, and Wedeen points out that several other shows have done much to stimulate Syrian political debate.⁴¹ However, their analysis demonstrates that, until the time of *Khan al-Harir*, these political shows were limited to parody and comedy, not serious drama. In discussing examples of *tanfis* in the 90s, Wedeen highlights mostly comedies and cartoons. She mentions films, but downplays their relevance due to their small and largely intellectual audience. Films did not have a mass audience like television. Her hypothesis, however—that Syrian television was made up of giggly soap operas in the second half of the 20th century and did not find a serious voice until the 21st—was formed before the 90s had run their course and before the acclaimed and regime-critical second season of *Khan al-Harir* aired in 1998.⁴² Sirees, *Khan al-Harir*'s screenwriter and a highly-regarded author, claims that his show "helped to shift TV from 'silliness' into a forum for quality fiction," a claim

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supported by Wedeen’s research.⁴³ Looking at Syria’s earliest acclaimed television dramas, such as those by Nihad Qal’i and Durayd Lahham which dominated Syrian television for decades, their legacy is largely one of commentary through comedy.⁴⁴ Marlin Dick, too, credits *Khan al-Harir* with raising the regional profile of Syrian dramas.⁴⁵ Given the timeline of *Khan al-Harir*’s airing, if Sirees is correct that his show was at the forefront of serious, critical television content, then *Khan al-Harir*’s contribution to Syrian anti-Ba’ath dissidence cannot be ignored.

The critique Sirees and Haqqi articulate in *Khan al-Harir* lent an early voice to the desire for democratic reforms and an end to the abuses of the security apparatus—the exact desires that would finally be made explicit in 2011. Moreover, *Khan al-Harir* explores other fundamental issues in Syria’s government and society—state cronyism, lack of social mobility, and

authoritarian overreach into civil society—that were as important in creating the conditions for the Arab Spring, even if they were not the subject of its main slogans.

Khan al-Harir offers an avant-garde explication of the grievances that would eventually erupt into political disaster in Syria. These grievances were fiercely branded and broadcast during the Arab Spring protests. Some of these concerns—especially calls for democratic reform and a less oppressive security apparatus—had briefly entered public discourse early in Bashar al-Assad’s presidency. *Khan al-Harir*, however, came first. It criticized cronyism, dictatorship, and institutions such as the security services years before Hafez al-Assad died.

In this way, *Khan al-Harir* can be considered “avant-garde” because its message came before its time. For example, torture was not elsewhere portrayed on television until after 2000; *Khan al-Harir* depicted torture in 1998.⁴⁶ Taken as a whole, the series disrupts and adds nuance to an oversimplified timeline that assumes today’s level of political dissidence to be a phenomenon of Bashar al-Assad’s Syria alone. Moreover, *Khan al-Harir* demonstrates that developments in technology, law, censorship policy, and

A still from Season 1, Episode 18 of *Khan al-Harir*. Khan al-Harir.



storytelling helped catalyze a political discourse that has been implicitly branded as a product of the transition from Hafez to Bashar—a macro-level change where coincidence is not necessarily causality.

It is no secret today that *Khan al-Harir* is a critique of Assad's Syria. Haqqi, who directed the show, describes a lengthy censorship process that resulted in many cuts to the second season. He adds that “the fairly direct political critique outraged the authorities” but that “they could not ban the mini-series because of its popularity.” Haqqi also holds that the censorship committee underestimated the impact of *Khan al-Harir*, realizing its role in encouraging dissidence only too late.⁴⁷ Sirees says in an interview that he “wanted to tell people how there was democracy [in Syrian history],” that he “wanted people to cry, or to push them for change when they compared everything with the present.”⁴⁸ Indeed, any audience cognizant of the 1990s reality in which *Khan al-Harir* was produced would look at the repressive government depicted in the late UAR period and recognize the Assad regime. Joubin describes the regime depicted in *Khan al-Harir* as “increasingly autocratic” and having “a direct correlation to Hafiz al-Assad's

all-powerful Ba'ath party dictatorship.”⁴⁹ Through this explicit political statement, the series helped to illuminate issues that had persisted throughout the Assad years and began to stimulate debate that would eventually climax in the now-familiar protests.

In fact, political critique in *musalsalat* would become bolder and more common just a few years after *Khan al-Harir*. In an article on Syrian press freedom, Rhonda Roumani writes that, in 2000, with the transition from Hafez to Bashar al-Assad, “came a thaw that Syrian journalists and intellectuals hopefully referred to as Damascus Spring.” The first year of Bashar al-Assad's rule brought tempered reforms and modernization.⁵⁰ With this limited opening, television drama creators saw more room for political criticism in their art.⁵¹ One *musalsal*, *Buq'at Daw'*, helps illuminate this timeline. Known for its constant envelope-pushing—*Al-Monitor* rightly calls it “a bastion of courage for consistently defying the limits of censorship”—*Buq'at Daw'* premiered in the first year of Bashar al-Assad's presidency and ran for over a decade.⁵² However, Joubin writes that the Syrian television drama would soon, in those early years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency, reach its viewership and popularity peak. Not

Khan al-Harir's success was made possible by the proliferation of satellite dishes, like those seen here across the city of Damascus in 2005. Uryemoz, Wikimedia Commons.



coincidentally, Bashar al-Assad's Damascus Spring peaked even sooner, late in 2001. Although there had been relatively vibrant discourse among intellectuals and demands for freedom and pluralism, Assad soon changed tack and arrested many dissidents. By the end of 2001 the chance of political reform that came with Bashar's inauguration dimmed in favor of the regime's old ways and old guard.⁵³ Still, although the Damascus Spring was short-lived, critical shows like *Buq'at Daw'* demonstrate that some elements of the thaw were lasting.

Adding Nuance to the Timeline

Khan al-Harir's example serves to bring nuance to an otherwise oversimplified timeline of dissident media—one that portrays the ironclad rule of Hafez al-Assad through the last decades of the 20th century, a brief blip of dissidence and glasnost in the 2001 Damascus Spring after Bashar took over, and then relative silence again until the Arab Spring in 2011. *Khan al-Harir* disrupts this narrative. Close examination of the show reveals that it gave voice to many of the criticisms heard during the Damascus Spring, but years before. Although experts like Salamandra and Lesch characterize more open political dissent to be a Bashar-era development, *Khan al-Harir* shows that significant dissent is not a phenomenon unique to the 21st century and that stronger dissent began to break through as early as 1996.⁵⁴

The show deserves acclaim both for its unappreciated depth and breadth and for the boldness of its avant-garde message. Although Sirees, Haqqi, Khalifa, and Joubin all highlight *Khan al-Harir's* treatment of the demise of Syrian democracy, and Joubin ventures into discussion of arbitrary detention and parodies of authoritarianism, no analysis captures the full importance of *Khan al-Harir*. These well-versed experts argue that the show portrays the “from” in Syria's journey from democracy to dictatorship, but barely ventures into the “to.”

This is inaccurate. Much of *Khan al-Harir's* critical strength comes from portraying the “to”; by delving into the outcome and the unpleasant consequences of Syria's undemocratic turn in the mid-20th century, it shows its audience the result of the journey Syria has undergone. In doing so, it offers striking parallels to the Assad regime and gets away with more criticism than any other form of media at the time.

Khan al-Harir stands out most of all for the earliness of its critique. Although it was broadcast in the mid-to-late 90s, while Hafez al-Assad was still at the helm, the show resembles the dissident television content of the early 2000s, when television dramas were, in Joubin's words, the “primary arena” for political and social debate. It was an early indicator of the role of satellite technology in breaking the censors' control of the media while simultaneously demonstrating the censorship committee's unwillingness to fully block every piece of critical entertainment.

In summary, *Khan al-Harir* critiqued some of the most fundamental injustices of the Assad regime—notably the oppressive security apparatus and autocracy-backed cronyism—long before the Damascus Spring made these complaints more common and more public. It mocked the centralizing, autocratic cronyism employed by the Ba'ath Party and mocked non-governmental forms of dictatorship, like authoritarian fathers. It showed the permeating reach of Syria's regime into crevices of the private sector and civil society. It displayed the abuses of an oppressive, paranoid security state and the hopelessness felt by citizens unable to pursue their dreams in their homeland.

Khan al-Harir is a reminder of the resourcefulness and tenacity of the Syrian people—a reminder that at the height of Ba'athist authoritarianism, a group of committed citizens found a way to reach millions with their anti-government critique. Regardless of the outcome of the current war, the story of *Khan al-Harir* is grounds for hope that Syrians will never stop speaking up on behalf of freedom. ♦

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