"The Conscience of the Syrian Revolution": Creative Resistance in the Banners From Kafranbel (2011–2018)

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Abstract

This paper examines the revolutionary storytelling and communication process of Kafranbel, a town in northern Syria celebrated as "the conscience of the Syrian revolution". Known for its impactful banners, the town's production spanned from 2011 to 2018 and featured images of people holding banners with written messages, drawings, and caricatures. These banners were regularly shared on social media, reflecting a nuanced and evolving creative process. This study employs a descriptive and qualitative research methodology to analyze a dataset of images ($n = 214$) compiled and organized chronologically. Additionally, insights from nine semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish, English, and Arabic are included in the analysis. These interviews involved residents, witnesses, and experts who have closely followed the uprising, providing a comprehensive understanding of Kafranbel's communicative efforts.

The findings highlight how Kafranbel's banners emerged and consolidated as a response to both the Syrian regime's crackdown and the threat increasingly posed by extremist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The town's storytelling employed human-centered and persuasive elements, such as the portrayal of children and references to global struggles and icons, to engage both local and international audiences. Patterns in the banners reveal a shift in tone and language choices as the conflict intensified and the town became more desperate for help. The absence of banners during periods of intense bombing underscores the harsh realities faced by the town's residents, which culminated in the town's silence following its recapture by the Syrian regime and the assassination of journalist Raed Fares by ISIS-affiliated gunmen. This study fills a significant gap in existing research, offering a detailed analysis of Kafranbel's unique communication strategy within the broader narrative of the Syrian uprising.

Keywords
Kafranbel, Syria, revolution, media, freedom of expression

"A Consciência da Revolução Síria": Resistência Criativa nas Faixas e Cartazes de Kafranbel (2011–2018)

Resumo

Este artigo examina a narrativa revolucionária e o processo de comunicação de Kafranbel, uma cidade no norte da Síria amplamente reconhecida como "a consciência da revolução síria". Célebre pelas suas emblemáticas faixas e cartazes, a produção da cidade decorreu entre 2011 e 2018, abrangendo imagens de pessoas a segurar faixas e cartazes com mensagens escritas, desenhos e caricaturas. Estas faixas e cartazes eram regularmente partilhados nas redes sociais, refletindo um processo criativo dinâmico e em constante evolução. Este estudo recorre a uma metodologia de investigação descritiva e qualitativa para analisar um conjunto de imagens ($n = $

214) compiladas e organizadas cronologicamente. Além disso, integra na análise as perceções de nove entrevistas semiestruturadas conduzidas em espanhol, inglês e árabe. Estas entrevistas, realizadas junto de residentes, testemunhas e especialistas que acompanharam de perto a revolta, proporcionam uma visão abrangente dos esforços de comunicação de Kafranbel.

As conclusões destacam a forma como as faixas e cartazes de Kafranbel surgiram e se consolidaram como resposta à repressão do regime sírio e à crescente ameaça representada por grupos extremistas, incluindo o Estado Islâmico do Iraque e da Síria (Daesh). A narrativa da cidade recorreu a elementos persuasivos e centrados no ser humano, como a representação de crianças e referências a lutas e ícones globais, para envolver tanto o público local como internacional. A análise das faixas e cartazes revela uma mudança no tom e nas escolhas linguísticas à medida que o conflito se intensificava e a cidade se via cada vez mais desesperada por auxílio. A ausência de faixas e cartazes durante períodos de bombardeamento intenso evidencia as duras realidades enfrentadas pelos residentes, culminando no silêncio da cidade após a sua recaptura pelo regime sírio e o assassinato do jornalista Raed Fares por homens armados afiliados ao Daesh. Este estudo preenche uma lacuna significativa na investigação existente, oferecendo uma análise detalhada da estratégia de comunicação singular de Kafranbel no contexto mais amplo da revolta síria.

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1. Introduction

For decades, the Syrian dictatorship established in 1971 kept the country largely opaque to the outside world. Situated in a strategically significant region, Syria has been marked by wars, authoritarianism, occupations, and systematic human rights violations (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2015, 2017; Ruiz de Elvira, 2011). Internal repression and strict control over foreign press rendered Syria effectively closed off, with minimal media coverage during Hafez al-Assad's regime (Badawi, 2023; Magnarella, 2017; Zarwan, 2005). The political landscape remained largely unchanged following Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power in 2000, perpetuating the authoritarian regime (El Khannoussi, 2012; Yassin-Kassab & Al-Shami, 2016).

In March 2011, as Syria joined the broader Middle East and North Africa uprisings, the country attracted unprecedented international attention. This period was characterized as "the most socially mediated conflict in history" (Lynch et al., 2014, p. 3), with citizens leveraging social media to exercise freedom of speech and engage in civic activities (Adi, 2014; Brown et al., 2012; Della Ratta, 2018). As initially peaceful demonstrations transformed into an armed uprising by late 2011 in response to the regime's crackdown (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2012), various rebel factions emerged and eventually coalesced into the Free Syrian Army. This conflict resulted in the establishment of areas outside regime control, termed "liberated areas" by revolutionary and rebel groups (Alshab, 2021; Khalaf, 2015; Saleh, 2017). The intensifying conflict drew in numerous foreign powers, each advancing their strategic interests. Russia and Iran supported the Syrian regime, while the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey backed various rebel factions to counterbalance

Iran and Hezbollah (Guedes, 2019). Over time, internal tensions within the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups became evident, leading to fragmentation and conflict among the factions. Additionally, extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra emerged, each pursuing their own agendas and further complicating the already complex conflict landscape (Karim & Islam, 2016).

Amid this geopolitical struggle, local developments continued. Beginning in 2012, committees in areas outside regime control started to provide essential services and manage basic needs — roles traditionally performed by the State (Abboud, 2018; Álvarez-Ossorio & Nachawati Rego, 2023). These local councils were described as "one of the main outcomes of the Syrian revolution, reflecting both a shift in the relationship with the capital and a means to manage the transition phase" (El Omari et al., 2016, p. 4) and as "collective laboratories for Syrians who had been deprived of civil society for over four decades" (Kache, 2013, p. 104). Within this context, a revolutionary narrative emerged to document protests and challenge the official narrative (Bachleitner, 2022; Bachleitner & Matthiesen, 2021; Wall, 2015).

This paper focuses on one such "laboratory": the town of Kafranbel, which was noted for its significant media impact and prolific production of banners between 2011 and 2018. Known as "the conscience of the Syrian revolution" (Dibo, 2013; Graham-Harrison, 2018), Kafranbel's banners exemplify creative communication and storytelling during the Syrian uprising (Hubbard, 2018). Central to this phenomenon was the Kafranbel Media Center, led by journalist Raed Fares, which played a crucial role in organizing and disseminating these impactful messages. Supported by a combination of local funding and international contributions from entities such as the United States Agency for International Development, the European Union, and the National Endowment for Democracy, the Center amplified local voices and sustained resistance efforts (Al Natour, 2022). The town's relevance is further underscored by the fact that it became a target of both the regime and ISIS, particularly during the peak of its creative output (Griswold, 2014; Hurtado, 2014; *Raed Fares: Syria Radio Host Shot Dead in Idlib*, 2018). This pressure culminated in the assassination of Raed Fares and Hammud al-Jneid, key figures in Kafranbel's creative process, who were shot by gunmen affiliated with ISIS on November 23, 2018 (Hubbard, 2018). Additionally, a significant number of original posters from Kafranbel were covertly transported out of the country, primarily for exhibitions in museums and galleries across the United States, with the aim of preserving these pieces as artifacts of Syrian collective memory (Hanano, 2013).

While previous studies have documented Kafranbel's media presence (Al Natour, 2022; Sylvester, 2015; Wessels, 2015), this study fills a critical gap by providing a thorough analysis of the town's banners as a form of digital storytelling, in line with Couldry's (2008) definition of personal stories shared through digital media. Grounded in descriptive and qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2014) and interpretive paradigm (Geertz, 1973), this study prioritizes an in-depth understanding of Kafranbel's unique context and experiences. It does not dismiss the importance of other perspectives or narratives explored in broader analyses of Syrian conflict propaganda (Badawi, 2023;

Karadjis, 2019; Scartozzi, 2015); rather, it focuses specifically on Kafranbel's creative resistance to provide a nuanced portrayal of the activists' experiences. Informed by the constructivist perspective (Crotty, 1998), this approach emphasizes how knowledge and meaning are constructed through social processes and interactions, enabling a rich and contextually embedded exploration of Kafranbel's creative resistance.

2. Literature Review

The year 2011 was pivotal in the recent history of the Middle East and North Africa (Ben Moussa, 2013; Brym et al., 2014; Howard et al., 2011). Movements questioning power structures, particularly the long-standing dictatorships that had suppressed human rights and freedoms for decades, emerged first in Tunisia and Egypt, subsequently spreading across a significant portion of the Mediterranean's southern countries. The regimes in these countries heavily relied on controlling freedom of expression and association to suppress opposition and maintain power (Ben Moussa, 2013; Howard et al., 2011). Consequently, the mobilizations and revolutionary processes that unfolded in the region were driven by a strong aspiration for free expression and association from the outset, challenging established norms (Ahmad et al., 2015; Ghannam, 2011). From Tunisia to Syria, Egypt, and Bahrain (Bonnefoy & Louer, 2021), citizens broke a communication monopoly that had been solidified over decades, using both physical and digital spaces (Khamis et al., 2012) to challenge official structures and narratives.

Several authors have examined the artistic and creative components of citizen expression that challenge official narratives (Awad & Wagoner, 2017; Ghannam, 2011). Among these contributions, the book *Street Art of Resistance* (Awad & Wagoner, 2017) stands out, exploring how street art has become a tool of resistance, offering a platform for opposition to political systems and addressing social issues worldwide. Aesthetic elements such as murals, graffiti, posters, street performances, and caricatures are analyzed in terms of their role in occupying urban spaces and presenting alternative visions of social reality.

Various studies affirm the importance of the internet and social media in amplifying the voices of those previously silenced during the uprisings of the Middle East and North Africa. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) and Haque Khondker (2011) argue that social media played a critical role, particularly in the absence of open traditional media. Others, such as Howard et al. (2011), emphasize the role of social media platforms in shaping political debates, organizing and mobilizing protests, and disseminating democratic ideas despite a strong surveillance apparatus.

In this context, Jurgenson (2012) contends that citizen journalism emerged as an institution of civil society challenging traditional structures. Espiritusanto and Rodríguez (2011) argue that, as international journalists struggled to access these areas and local media were subjected to censorship and repression, citizens turned to cameras and mobile phones to document their situations and to the internet and social media to disseminate their stories.

Engagement through social media aligns with the concept of the "economy of attention" in the digital era (Simon, 1971), which views attention as a valuable and increasingly scarce resource (Gitlin, 1980). More recently, with the advent of social media, attention has become a critical concern, particularly in relation to its commodification by digital platforms (Pedersen et al., 2021) and its significance within the context of mass media oligopoly (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Barthes (1964/1977) and Durand (1970/1982) introduce the concept of the "rhetoric of the image", which refers to the use of images to delight, move or persuade. Barthes (1964/1977) suggests that images convey interconnected messages: a primarily linguistic message composed of words, a denoted or literal message perceived at the initial level of viewing, and a connoted or symbolic message formed by elements that allude to shared cultural knowledge between the sender and the receiver.

Exploration of new forms of communication where citizenship plays a central role and the resulting organizational and communicative changes align with the idea of "revolutions from below" proposed by Christine Sylvester (2015). Sylvester argues for a comprehensive understanding of "war as an experience" that considers the documents, voices, testimonies, and narratives of those who suffer its consequences rather than solely those who orchestrate them. She emphasizes the need for academic focus on the experiences of individuals living through war rather than the narratives of elites who initiate wars. Sylvester uses the town of Kafranbel as a key example of the "war from below". Similarly, Wessels (2015) explores the Syrian case using Sylvester's approach, highlighting Kafranbel as an example of the "war from below" narrative in a context where "views from above" are prevalent.

Moreover, several academic works focusing on the town of Kafranbel highlight its diverse and significant contributions (Al Natour, 2022; Camps-Febrer, 2013; Downey, 2015; Ramírez Díaz, 2016; Wedeen, 2013). Al Natour (2022) identifies Kafranbel as a key element in the "enduring legacy of the Syrian revolution and its causes", while Downey (2015) examines it as a remarkable example of contemporary visual culture and contested narratives in the Middle East. Ramírez Díaz (2016) explores the use of banners and slogans as communication and documentation tools in shaping a Syrian revolutionary identity. Both Wedeen (2013) and Camps-Febrer (2013) underscore its exceptional use of humor as a form of resistance against oppression. However, none of these studies provide a comprehensive compilation of Kafranbel's banners from the entire 2011–2018 period or an in-depth analysis of the narrative's characteristics and evolution over the years.

For analyzing the communicative phenomenon of Kafranbel, this study adopts a perspective that views the medium not merely as a technologically implemented channel but as a communicative instance with its own rationale. This approach departs from the traditional distinction between medium and message. McLuhan's proposition that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) is particularly relevant to understanding Kafranbel, which, as Sylvester (2015) suggests, not only conveys its message but also embodies and experiences it presenting it to its audience in a way that seamlessly integrates sender, medium, and message.

3. Objectives

The research questions formulated at the outset of the study were grouped as follows: when and how does the communicative phenomenon of Kafranbel emerge? What are the key features of the creative process that was developed? What is the general message conveyed by the banners? What were the main or recurring themes, as well as the protagonists portrayed or caricatured? What are the key elements of the critical thinking expressed by the people of Kafranbel? What impact did this surge of creativity, showcased to the world through social networks, have on the population?

The overarching goals of our research are:

1. To describe the communication process of Kafranbel by compiling and analyzing banners that encapsulate its storytelling from 2011 to 2018. This analysis will be contextualized within the broader framework of communication during the Syrian uprising and the Arab Spring.

2. To identify key features of the storytelling crafted by the Kafranbel Media Center, with a focus on the resources and strategies employed to engage local, regional, and global audiences.

4. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and qualitative case study methodology to offer a focused and coherent analysis of the communicative phenomenon in Kafranbel. The methodology consists of two primary components: the collection and analysis of images ($n = 214$) depicting banners created and disseminated by Kafranbel activists and semi-structured interviews ($n = 9$) with individuals who are either directly involved in or have closely observed the town's creative process (Table 1).

Interviewee	Profession/affiliation	City/country
Hasan al-Ahmad	Media activist	Kafranbel (Syria)
Laila Muharram	Journalist	Spain/Syria
Joey Ayoub	Researcher (PhD) specializing in human rights, conflict and the Middle East	Lebanon
Haizam Amirah	Researcher (PhD) specializing in (geo)politics in the Middle East for Real Instituto Elcano	Spain
Mariano López de Miguel	Researcher (PhD) specializing in conflict in the Middle East at University of Murcia	Spain
Nur al-Swehat	Researcher (PhD) specializing in conflict in the Middle East	Spain/Syria
Robin Yassin-Kassab	Activist, writer	United Kingdom/Syria
Lina Sergie (also known as Amal Hanano)	Writer, Karam Foundation	Syria/United States
Kenan Rahmani	Human rights lawyer	Syria/United States

Table 1. *Interviewees*

Grounded in the interpretive paradigm (Geertz, 1973) and case study methodology (Yin, 2014), this approach prioritizes an in-depth understanding of a specific context

and experience. The interpretive paradigm allows for a thick description that captures the symbolic dimensions of the activists' messages, while the case study methodology provides a systematic framework for examining Kafranbel's unique circumstances.

Numerous studies have examined propaganda from various factions involved in the Syrian conflict, including the regime and opposition groups (Badawi, 2023; Karadjis, 2019; Scartozzi, 2015). However, this study does not seek to explore these broader propaganda perspectives. Instead, it focuses specifically on Kafranbel's creative resistance to provide a nuanced and authentic portrayal of the activists' experiences and messages. This approach is informed by the constructivist perspective, as articulated by Crotty (1998), which emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals construct meaning within their specific contexts. Constructivism argues that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social processes and interactions; therefore, focusing on Kafranbel's activists enables a rich, contextually embedded exploration of their creative resistance. By concentrating on this, this study aims to capture the complex and context-specific ways in which they interpret and respond to their environment rather than offering a comparative analysis of external propaganda narratives.

4.1. Data Collection and Analysis

- Image collection: the images span from 2011 to 2018, covering the phases of the Syrian uprising, the transition into war, and the regime's declaration of the "end of the war" (*Assad: The End of War on Syria Is Imminent*, 2018). This timeframe is crucial for understanding the evolution of Kafranbel's communicative strategies. The images were sourced from various online platforms, including X[1], Flickr[2], Facebook[3], and Pinterest[4], some of which are no longer accessible. They were systematically collected and organized between late 2019 and early 2020. Emphasis was placed on images with legible text, high resolution, and verified association with Kafranbel. The analysis of these images employed Roland Barthes's concept of the "rhetoric of the image" to interpret their communicative significance.

- Interview process: semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001) were conducted with nine participants, including both individuals who actively participated in the creative initiatives and academic experts who have studied the uprising. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, Arabic, and English via phone and email. The first interview was conducted with Kafranbel activist Hasan al-Ahmad, a young man who had been involved in the creation and dissemination of the banners since the early days of the revolutionary process. For the second interview, we reached out to Spanish-Syrian journalist Laila Muharram, who closely followed Kafranbel's contributions. The next four interviews were conducted with academics specializing in the Middle East, all of whom were deeply familiar with the revolutionary processes in the region and their implications for the media landscape (see Table 1). The last three interviews were with experts who visited Kafranbel in 2013, a period marked by intense artistic and creative production within the context of the revolutionary process and resistance to dictatorship, to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon: Robin Yassin-Kassab, co-author of the book *Syria: Burning Country*; Lina Sergie, also known as Amal Hanano, a Syrian-American writer and founder of the Karam Foundation; and Syrian human rights lawyer Kenan Rahmani.

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[1] Kafranbel hashtag on X: https://twitter.com/search?q=%23Kafranbel&src=typed_query&f=live.

[2] Kafranbel hashtag on Flickr: https://flickr.com/search/?text=Kafranbel.

[3] Kafranbel hashtag on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/kafrnbl and https://www.facebook.com/kefranbell.coom.

[4] Kafranbel hashtag on Pinterest: https://es.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=kafranbel.

- Linguistic considerations: the linguistic diversity of the banners, which includes English, Arabic, and occasionally other languages such as Russian or Turkish, adds a layer of complexity to the analysis. The author's proficiency in Arabic and English facilitated the interpretation and translation of the majority of materials, ensuring an accurate understanding and contextualization.

5. Results

This study resulted in a visual archive comprising 214 images shared by the town of Kafranbel between 2011 and 2018. These images primarily depict banners with messages and drawings displayed during various demonstrations by Kafranbel residents. Additionally, the collection includes images that capture the process of creating the banners and contextual elements, such as the town's destruction.

The banners featured in most of these images are typically made from A1-sized cardboard (84 x 59 cm) or 4 x 1 m fabric or paper. Most banners display manually crafted designs, including drawings or cartoons, along with messages in Arabic or English and occasionally in Turkish or Russian. Each banner is signed and dated at the bottom, often with a collective signature such as "The Occupied/Liberated People of Kafranbel", with the date provided in the day–month–year format.

The images in this archive are either free of licensing restrictions or released under a Creative Commons license, which facilitates their use and redistribution. This licensing arrangement supports the potential for widespread sharing and viral dissemination.

A database[5] has been created to organize and provide access to the images from two key periods in the history of Kafranbel's banners. This database allows for systematic analysis and retrieval of the pictures, supporting further research into the town's creative resistance and its impact.

5.1. Centrality of the Human Experience

A notable characteristic of the banners is their depiction of Kafranbel residents holding them. The analysis reveals that the final image is not just of the banner but of the people presenting it. This visual presentation aligns with Sylvester's (2015) concept of storytelling "from below", emphasizing the experiences of those directly involved in the conflict.

The inclusion of individuals — often men, but also children and some women — alongside their banners introduces personal elements such as expressions, attire, and the surrounding environment, which frequently includes the town's destruction or seasonal hardships. These aspects enrich the narrative and create a compelling, authentic portrayal of Kafranbel's resistance. While banners are sometimes shared independently, their impact is amplified when combined with images of the people holding them, making the message more relatable and poignant.

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[5] Database: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/1fg91bwni5glqeq/h?rlkey=uwm3zcq2cnz4boaokunytdh1k&e=1&dl=0, from April 2011 to April 2014, in chronological order, and https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/8b6f202tng94lngmxgwvt/AOlHqdMCYQv6upcY_tvVcr4?rlkey=ogsl3kfl9c966g41l7q3zrtoi&e=1&dl=0, from April 2014 to December 2018, in chronological order.

The role of the Kafranbel Media Center is also pivotal. The process of designing and creating the banners was both spontaneous and professional. Led by journalist Raed Fares and artist Ahmad Jalal, the Media Center became central to the town's protest communication. As described by Kassab (personal communication, November 3, 2020):

> the work was, actually, very organic and quite spontaneous. Being in that room, that welcoming space open to everyone that served as the Media Center, meant seeing people constantly coming and going — neighbors entering and leaving, people from different backgrounds and occupations discussing ideas, joining ongoing conversations, overlapping talks that formed a very spontaneous process while simultaneously accompanied by the professionalization of the Media Center's own work.

The interplay between online and offline aspects significantly contributed to the banners' impact. The banners' offline display during protests, combined with their online dissemination, created a powerful narrative presence. Raed Fares and others interacted with activists globally, and the Media Center's work was widely shared through online channels. As Kenan Rahmani (personal communication, December 17, 2020) noted:

> [Raed] spoke with activists from different countries; we interacted through online conversations and exchanged ideas. From there, he would meet with Ahmad Jalal [one of those in charge of the drawing aspect of the banners], they would create the banner at the Media Center, and then take it to the Friday protest, where the image was captured and later disseminated worldwide through online channels.

Occasionally, images included not only the final banners during demonstrations but also the process of their creation. For instance, pictures dated December 8, 2012, and January 16, 2012, depict Fares and Jalal smiling and engaged in creating posters, surrounded by their working materials.

5.2. The Presence of Children

Central to the humanization in Kafranbel's storytelling is the presence of children (*n* = 101). These children appear both thematically and visually in the images, shaping the narrative and impacting those who engage with it.

Since 2011, nearly 12,000 children have been verified as killed or injured in Syria — roughly one child every eight hours over the past decade — many due to bombings targeting schools and educational institutions, according to the United Nations (2021). Unlike other conflicts where children may be collateral damage, in the Syrian context, the child population was targeted explicitly from the early stages of the uprising (Allaf, 2012).

Several interviewees emphasize the central role of children in the Syrian revolutionary process and the crackdown against revolutionary towns. This is reflected in numerous posters that pay tribute to children killed in the regime and Russian airstrikes (e.g.,

November 24, 2015), sieges like Ghouta (e.g., June 20, 2014), and attacks by extremist groups (e.g., December 5, 2015). As Lina Sergie (personal communication, November 12, 2020) notes:

> in Kafranbel's posters, children are always presented with their dignity; holding a poster does not take away their dignity nor puts them at risk. What puts their lives at risk are the constant bombings [by the Syrian regime and its allies]. It is crucial to understand the context, to understand that the entire childhood of these children is marked by violence and repression, that they grow up under bombs, and hiding them, if possible, would make no sense.

5.3. Women in the Communication Process

The representation of women in Kafranbel's banners is notably sparse. Most of the images feature young or middle-aged men and children holding signs. We identified only three images where women are depicted holding banners or signs, dated March 12, 2013, April 12, 2013, and June 21, 2013.

According to Yassin-Kassab, who has firsthand experience of Kafranbel's internal dynamics, the town's conservative rural environment means that women are less visible in public spaces compared to men. He also points out that "the brutality of the regime, followed by that of others, contributed to women's diminished presence in public spaces, as they sought to protect themselves and their children" (Robin Yassin-Kassab, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

It is important to recognize, however, that while women may not be prominently featured in the images holding banners, they were actively involved in the creative and media processes within the town. According to Rahmani (personal communication, December 17, 2020), who also visited Kafranbel:

> in Kafranbel, there were women on the radio of the Center of Media as reporters, presenters, administrative workers, and announcers. Projects were created to train and empower women journalists. (…) The radio became the most listened to in the country, and Raed used to tell me: "you'll see, Kenan, it is so evident how important and beneficial this work is that soon the parents of young women will come themselves to ask me to enroll their daughters in these courses or include them in the radio work".

5.4. Persuasive Nature of the Storytelling

A key characteristic of Kafranbel's banners is their persuasive nature, which is closely tied to the human protagonism previously discussed. This persuasive quality is evident in numerous banners that include direct calls to action. For example, messages

such as "it's a revolution what's happening in Syria. Please understand us" (image from January 11, 2013) and "it's not a war, it's a genocide. Let us die but do not lie" (image from December 2, 2012) seek to garner international solidarity with the Syrian uprising. These banners challenge framings of the conflict as mere sectarian strife or civil war, which are explicitly rejected in other posters.

Additionally, banners that satirize political decisions (e.g., images from June 7, 2013, and May 10, 2013) or criticize the inaction of the international community are also designed to persuade viewers of the need for change regarding Syria's situation.

The messages on these banners are clear, direct, and straightforward. They typically consist of short phrases, often just one or two sentences, which present a reflection on the current situation in Syria and a call to action. The predominant use of indicative verb forms in the present or simple past tense describes daily realities, while imperatives are employed to appeal to various actors and audiences.

Language choice plays a crucial role in this persuasive strategy. Banners are written in Arabic or English, with occasional use of other languages such as Russian (e.g., October 3, 2015), Turkish, Kurdish (e.g., April 28, 2012), or French. This multilingual approach is intentional, targeting diverse audiences to maximize the impact of the messages.

Robin Yassin-Kassab (personal communication, November 3, 2020), who was involved in the creation of some of the banners, explains the strategic use of language:

> what was happening during the revolution and in the war determined the messages and the audience they were addressing. If the people saw that Arab governments were involved [in the conflict], they crafted their messages to be picked up by Al Jazeera or other media outlets. If there was an international event, they responded in English, taking that event into account.

Data analysis reveals a clear correlation between language use and the context of Kafranbel's banners. In the early stages of the conflict (late 2011 to early 2012), most banners were in Arabic, reflecting the local context and audience. From mid-2012 onwards, there was a noticeable shift towards English to persuade the international community to support the Syrian people's demands and condemn rights violations. As the town became more desperate for help, calls for Western intervention to counter Russian military attacks increased. In the final period, the prevalence of Arabic banners rose again, reflecting waning trust in international responses and a renewed focus on consolidating the revolutionary process locally. Despite significant support from entities such as the United States Agency for International Development, the European Union, and the National Endowment for Democracy, Kafranbel's banners maintained editorial independence, frequently critiquing Western policies and United States actions specifically.

The evolution of the banners also reflects the broader circumstances of their creation. Notably, the poignant absence of banners during the period of the town's silence in October 2018 — following its reconquest by the Syrian regime and the tragic assassination of journalist Raed Fares — highlights the impact of these significant events on Kafranbel's communication efforts.

5.5. Main Themes Drawn From the Banners

We identify the following recurrent themes: the human impact of the attacks on the town, satire directed at the regime, the involvement of geostrategic powers in Syria's fate, the international community's passivity, and its responsibility for the suffering of the Syrian people. Additionally, the mistakes of the political opposition and their effects on the revolutionary process, as well as the rejection of extremism, sectarianism, groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, and the suffering of the most vulnerable, are central to the town's storytelling.

A distinctive feature of Kafranbel's storytelling is its integration of local and global issues. The town skillfully connects its struggles to international events and celebrations. For example, Kafranbel's banners have referenced significant events such as the Boston bombings, global observances like Mother's Day, International Women's Day, and Children's Day (e.g., April 25, 2012), as well as prestigious ceremonies like the Nobel Peace Prize.

The banners also draw connections with other global struggles, expressing solidarity with movements such as those in Burma (July 10, 2012) and Ukraine (February 21, 2014). During the Boston bombings, a banner read: "the Boston bombings are a terrible scene, representing what happens daily in Syria. Accept our condolences" (April 19, 2013). Additionally, historical struggles are acknowledged, as seen in a tribute to Nelson Mandela's resistance against apartheid, which links his legacy to the Syrian people's demands and the perceived abandonment by the international community. Universal concepts like "democracy" are often depicted in striking ways, such as a caricature of democracy as a terminally ill patient connected to a blood transfusion machine.

5.6. Increasing Creativity and Sophistication

The evolution of Kafranbel's banners shows a marked increase in creativity and sophistication. Initially, the banners featured only text with simpler designs, as seen in early examples from August 26, 2011, November 25, 2011, and December 23, 2011. These early banners had thicker, less defined strokes and appeared hastily constructed.

As the revolutionary process and the regime's crackdown progressed, the banners became more elaborate and refined. They began incorporating drawings and sophisticated design elements. For example, by October 10, 2015, banners featured elaborate typography and imagery, such as a parody of the film *GoodFellas* (1990), with the subtitle "war criminals", depicting Putin, Assad, and ISIS leader al-Baghdadi. Hollywood cinema frequently served as inspiration for the banners. Iconic film references, such as *Titanic* (1997) in the banner from July 22, 2012, and *Alien* (1979) in the banner from January 3, 2014, were used to draw parallels between current events and well-known cinematic narratives.

6. Conclusions

This study provides a thorough exploration of Kafranbel's communicative phenomenon from 2011 to 2018, revealing how the town's banners became a powerful tool for storytelling and resistance during the Syrian uprising. Through a descriptive and

qualitative case study methodology, this research delves into the intricate dynamics behind Kafranbel's creative process and the broader implications of its messages.

Kafranbel's banners emerged as a reaction to the Syrian regime's crackdown and the country's oppressive media environment, leveraging the momentum of the Arab Spring to contest the regime's narrative. Initially characterized by simple text, the banners progressively integrated sophisticated visual elements and design techniques, mirroring the town's increasing expertise and strategic communication objectives.

Beyond countering regime propaganda, Kafranbel's banners addressed the threats posed by extremist groups, including ISIS, who sought to exploit the conflict's power vacuum. The banners became a crucial medium for resisting both the regime and extremist ideologies, underscoring the town's vision of a democratic and pluralistic Syria. Kafranbel's creative output represents a dual defiance against oppressive forces and a dedication to a more humane future amid a complex, multilayered conflict.

The analysis of 214 banners, complemented by interviews with nine key informants, reveals a deliberate and inventive storytelling approach. The use of humor, satire, and global references illustrates a strategic effort to resonate with diverse audiences and emphasize universal themes. Kafranbel's storytelling, marked by its thematic diversity and strategic use of language and imagery, provides valuable insights into local resistance and global communication dynamics. The banners not only document the town's struggle but also aim to inspire international solidarity and action.

Future research could further explore the interplay between local creative resistance and global communication dynamics. Comparative studies might shed light on how similar forms of creative resistance manifest in other conflict zones and their influence on international perceptions and responses. Additionally, analyzing the broader implications of such media practices could enhance understanding of their impact on global awareness and policy responses, offering a richer perspective on the role of creative media in shaping both local and international narratives.

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