

## Original Research Article

**Reflection of War and Suppression in Syrian Contemporary  
Surrealism Paintings  
(Case Study: Bassem Dahdouh's Works)\***Mehdi Mohammadzadeh<sup>1\*\*</sup>, Ya'qūb Talebi<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract**

**Problem statement:** Despite its old civilization, Syria as a newborn government and nation has recently faced numerous wars. In the last 10 years, domestic wars and the dominance of Dā'ish have caused suppression and violence, which has left a deep impression on the sociology and psychology of the people, culture, and art of this country. Art, as a vehicle to show endeavored human soul and man's concerns, has had bilateral interaction with political, social, and cultural situations in society: realities influence art and the biological realities of the human world are shaped by it.

**Research objective:** Investigating and deducing the impact of the war-torn society and people on the painting of the contemporary period of Syria with the style of surrealism, especially in the works of Bassem Dahdouh, is the aim of this research.

**Research method:** This research answers the research questions with a descriptive and analytical approach and by studying examples of Bassem Dehdouh's paintings, based on library studies, along with explaining the method of surrealism in Bassem Dehdouh's works and analyzing his works.

**Conclusion:** study of the works of Bassem Dahdouh show us that Modern art not only played an important role in reflecting the suffering soul of man in the east and west worlds, especially during wartime, but also sowed rebellion against the war situation. This study descriptive and analytical aims to represent and reflect war, violence, and suppression effects on the last 10 years of Syrian surrealism paintings.

**Keywords:** *Syrian painting, Modern art, Bassem Dahdouh's Works, Civil War, Surrealism.*

**Introduction**

In ancient times, Syria was the link between the culture, art, and religions of the Eastern

Mediterranean and North Africa, on the one hand, and Mesopotamia, and Iran, on the other. Although this special situation brought about

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political and military frictions between the two worlds, it did not prevent the continuation of the dynamism and growth of this land during the following centuries. However, the land of Syria in the contemporary era had a different destiny and history, and the war overshadowed all aspects of the lives of its people, including, of course, the field of culture, and was not far from these developments.

After the reign of Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000), the general situation in Syria was changed. Bashar al-Assad's rule was accompanied by a wave of public discontent, widespread civil war, and the rise of ISIS forces. Following the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, extremist forces known as "the Islamic State" entered Syria from Iraq and on April 8, 2013, renamed themselves the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS). They quickly occupied parts of northeastern Syria and chose the city of Raqqa as their capital. By mid-2015, the group had occupied about half of Syria. However, in the following years, ISIS gradually lost its possessions, and in 2017, the end of ISIS's presence in Syria was announced. The devastating civil wars and ISIS' domination on the part of Syria caused great human, social, and cultural damage to the country. Syrian artists were naturally affected by this situation, some left the country, some died, and others who lived in ISIS territory became a home state. However, Syrian painting took on a different form during this period by the artists living at home or fleeing the homeland, and a new era in Syrian art began.

However, what is the connection and interaction between art and the material and spiritual life of human beings? From the Renaissance onwards, the main theme of art philosophy has been the relationship between the second reality or world of the artwork and the reality of its outside world. Many thinkers and philosophers have argued that art is the re-creation of reality. Thus, the realist approach to art, in contrast to romantic aesthetics, shifted the emphasis from the artist to its social and

historical context. Considered the perception of beauty in general and art in particular as a direct and definite result of the historical situation, and as a result, it gave a function to art that was unknown previously except in exceptional cases. According to Hegel, art expresses the spirit of the age, and the artist, without knowing it or even wanting to, creates works that convey the dominant intellectual and cultural spirit of his or her time. The artwork is placed thus in a historical context. For Marx, art is a special aspect of the expression of social consciousness, and in general, art is a historical and social phenomenon and is dependent on the evolution of the means of production and technology. According to Georg Lukacs, art comes from everyday life, so it must respond to the human needs of this life. Reality is known by man's relationship with nature and by the means of his work. Art is both the product of social evolution and how man constructs himself and his historical and social relations. Art distances itself from life to see it more closely, thus expressing new objectivity. Art is the constant experience of living reality. This continuity is only known in art. (Ahmadi, 2008, 163-164, 186-187, 203, 207-208). According to contemporary philosophers on the relationship between art and social reality, ideology and culture, there is no doubt that painting, as an important branch of the human arts, is a diagram of and reflects the bio-world of the human beings that shape its history, culture, and ideology. Syria in its contemporary period has undergone profound political changes and has gone through various reigns and governments with different ideologies. These developments have also led to changes in the field of Syrian culture and art. The art of Syrian painting in the context of these developments and during the last one hundred years influenced the social and cultural realities of the eras of secession from the Ottomans and French tutelage, unity with Egypt, independence and civil wars, and ISIS domination, and also reflected or sometimes opposed to the ideologies

that were promoted, in those eras. Meanwhile, the arrival of modern cultural and artistic ideas and methods from Europe and the formation of educational institutions and modern art institutes have been ineffective in accelerating and directing these developments.

Therefore, this study attempts to determine the impact of political, social, and ideological developments in Syria during the time of Bashar al-Assad - ISIS, which was accompanied by devastating civil wars, on the art of painting in this country. This study employs a descriptive and analytical approach to examine the works of Bassem Dahdouh, an outstanding and important artist of this period. Then it attempts to infer the formation and prevalence of surrealism style which is the product of political, cultural, and social developments of this period.

### Research method

The research method in this article was descriptive-analytical and has been done by using library resources. This article tried to answer the question what affect have contemporary Syria's civil wars and oppressive political environment had on the art of painting? How they have contributed to the popularity and prosperity of art style, and what are its features and characteristics?

### Research background

According to the authors' reviews of the article, no independent article or research, regarding the impact of political and social events, especially the civil war and oppression, on the formation of contemporary Syrian painting techniques has been published so far. Khatib (2017) in her master's thesis entitled "The Impact of War on the Works of Contemporary Syrian Painters: The Role of Women in the Syrian Holy Defense Resistance" has only examined a few paintings by Syrian artists, focusing on the subject of war in paintings, she has given an overview of the biographies of several artists and their works. Gholampouraki

(2000) in her master's thesis entitled "Introduction of Prominent Arab Artists" in a small section, has introduced only a few Syrian artists. Khatib and Heidari (2018) during the conference named "the Impact of War on Contemporary Syrian Women Artists (Case Study: Works by Sara Shama and Zayn al-Ahmad)" have studied the works of two contemporary Syrian women artists that have shown the issue of war in their work through their personal experience and reaction to the current situation in Syria. Cusenza (2019) in an article entitled "Artists from Syria in the International Art World, Mediators of a Universal Humanism" researched the works of artists who were forced to leave Syria and migrate to Europe due to the oppression and civil wars of 2011. She concluded that the politicization of the themes of these artists' works in the Western world is an approach to the essentialization and homogenization of the Syrian art arena abroad and stereotyped categorizing them as "Syrian" and "Middle Eastern" while the immigrant Syrian artists have had global and humanitarian concerns.

Due to the lack of research and resources that are directly related to the subject of this article, the present article focuses on the works of Bassem Dahdouh and the study of a specific period in the political and artistic history of contemporary Syria, trying to reduce the lack of documentation and data in this regard as much as possible and pave the way for future researchers in this field.

### Discussion

It seems that the most important issue in the study and analysis of the history of the formation and development of contemporary Syrian painting is the subject of war, which Syria has struggled with that since its inception and especially from one hundred years ago.

A few times during this period, Syria was not involved in the war, from international and civil wars to the time of its other countries. The nature of war is the most widespread and, of course, most

condemned human problem which encompasses all the aspects and structural formations of a country, and in the meantime, art is the most oppressed social element in facing war. Art is directly and indirectly affected by the war, sometimes is deleted and goes into regression, sometimes is at the disposal of the warlords and takes a custom form, sometimes becomes the language of protest, and sometimes becomes a language to express war's various dimensions.

• **History of contemporary Syrian painting: Political oppression and civil wars in the mirror of art**

This period covered the contemporary history of Syrian painting, which dated from 1970 to the present, painters have worked with various subjects in different parts of Syria. Apart from the general subjects of painting such as portraits, landscapes, etc., other full frequent subjects are also seen in the paintings of this period. Many artists in this period such as Bassam Nasser, Tamam Mohammad, Gibran Hedaya, and Fatemeh Asbar, have dealt with the subject of women, beauty, women's problems, women's rights, and so on. Some others, such as Nemat Badavi, have also paid attention to the issue of women in their mother role. Some have also criticized human relations and social issues and theories of creation, myths, etc. For example, Amer Ali addressed the issue of human descent, the myth of the cow and the tree of life, and Lina Deeb referred to the issue of love and hate in human relationships.

However, in this period, following the monopoly of the Syrian party and then the political repression and internal conflicts, and the emergence of ISIS, a subject that first time appeared and became common in the paintings of Syrian artists was war and its manifestations such as the destruction of buildings, destruction of living structures as well as the depression. Human beings, suffering, migration and displacement, and other consequences. During this period, works have been performed different techniques, but the style of painting

is Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, and Surrealism.

Painters have shown different reactions to the problem of war. For example, it can be seen that post-World War I painters were realistic narrators or expressed bitter and sad scenes that they were directly confronted with. A kind of realistic expression full of hidden pain and suffering that shows the frustration and humiliation of human beings. Most of these works evoke a sense of insecurity, confusion, and helplessness in humans. In the Iran-Iraq war, the representation of the war has been accompanied by idealism, and the works have created a lyrical and idealistic look. These works are most motivating and based on ideal ideas (Shad Qazvini, 2017, 28-29).

In Syrian paintings, too, the tendencies of painters in representing war in this turbulent period, that their homeland is collapsing and destroying, towards the side which is a bitter and sad expression that depicts human suffering in this region.

In some works of other painters of this period, such as Ali Maghous, there is a tendency for symbolism in one of them. Syria, with the concept of homeland in the form of a wish, gathers people under itself in the form of a big tree; and in another one, there are signs such as bloody anemones, doves, and hawks, a symbol of resistance, martyrdom, and power of the Syrian people against the warlords.

Another prominent painter of this period is Bassem Dahdouh, whose technical and thematic variations can be seen in their works. In the works of his first period, the subject of paintings is mostly inanimate nature in the style of abstract expressionism. At this time, no trace of the war can see in his works.

In his works of the second and third periods, the style of works are still abstract expressionist and abstract figures make up the bulk of his works.

In the fourth period, due to the effects of war and migration and the destruction caused by war, the coffin appeared in his works and eventually leads to a box that encloses the subject. This image is a more general and universal symbol than the coffin

symbol, which is a concept influenced by war. Thus, it can be seen that in this period, the subject of works has tended toward surrealist expression.

• **Bassem Dahduh: War and oppression in the mirror of Surrealism**

Bassem Dahdouh was born in 1964 in Damascus. He studied at the Adham Ismail Center. He then graduated from the Damascus Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Photography, in 1986 and he received his doctorate from Halvan University in 1999. He is currently a professor at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the International Arab University in Syria. He has won two major art awards and has held solo exhibitions in Damascus, Beirut, Alexandria, Tunisia, and Kuwait, as well as group exhibitions in Damascus, Aleppo, Istanbul, Tehran, Canada, Bulgaria, Geneva, Cairo, and Tabriz. At first, Dahduh tended to be realistic, but then he changed the way in favor of expression and aesthetic structure, which is more of a diagram of surrealism, the method that seems to be dominant and significant in this period. Surrealism, as it is known, began with André Breton's statement in 1924, and arose from a union between the collage and the constructive aspects of Cubism and Dada's absurdism. This style contains the dictation of thought away from reason and argument and any moral or aesthetic desire. The aim is to make free the artist from the connection with ordinary visual ideas and all accepted means of expression, in such a way that he can create works that are inspired by his subconscious mind. Surrealism developed in two directions: Pure imagination and detailed reconstruction of a dream world (Murray & Murray, 1993, 2/888).

In works attributed to the surrealist style, the painter is not bound to describe objective nature, nor to create a subject and concept that occupies the intellectual moments of the human mind. He is looking for the moment where he reaches an absolute kind. He is forced to resort to objects and create unfamiliar and heterogeneous combinations of them, in hidden and unnatural language, creating

vague and unknown scenes like a sleepy human being. He is looking for forms and the relationships between them to search for the lost meaning of objects and his forgotten memories of them in any way possible in his mind. He, therefore, relies on his subconscious mind and leaves the power of his pen to the subconscious to become protected from the domination of the conscious will, which knows nothing but the appearance and function of things. He is bound to choose objects or to create a special combination of them to have a predetermined meaning for him. According to the surrealists, the origin of the painter's work is his subconscious mind, which automatically forces him to create a work of art (Hosseini Raad, 1991, 46-48). In a surrealist work, the classical triple units are disrupted. The painter is not faithful to a specific time, place, or subject because his reliance on the development of the artworks is neither the power of reason nor what happens in nature. The presence of unfamiliar and heterogeneous places, times, and objects is a common thing that evokes an unusual and imaginary subject for the viewer. Hence, all the charm of surrealism lies in its imaginativeness. According to the surrealist artist, self-exploration of the mind is important before respecting the power of reason. In his view, it is considered a work of art that can be created without the domination of the power of reason. His world is carnal dreams and dreams. René Magritte outlines his methods for creating surreal landscapes as follows: "Putting objects in unusual places, creating new objects, deforming familiar shapes, changing the material of objects, using word and image together". For this reason, the scenes that emerge awaken in the dormant mind of the spectator the forgotten illusions.

There are two types of surrealist painting: the first, which Dolly calls "hand-painted dream objects", traditional methods such as reality shows are used to represent a chaotic, illusory, and dreamy world. Imaginary perspectives in which heterogeneous objects are placed side by side described pieces

of creatures that have been reassembled into strange phenomena, Industrial devices and structures, monstrous creatures, organic-abstract forms, and such disturbing images can be seen in these paintings (such as Dolly and Tangi works). In the second type, which is based on technical innovation, color lines and shapes are combined under the influence of inner motivations to evoke mental images (such as in the works of Arp, Mirro, and Mason). This group of surrealist painters occasionally perform the process of automation with the help of collage, reversing, rubbing, stamping, etc. The result is often close to abstract painting (Pakbaz, 2004, 316).

As the works of painters of the last ten years in Syria (during the time of Bashar al-Assad - ISIS) show, surrealism has been the predominant style in the painting of this period. The reasons for resorting to this style should seek in the political, social, and cultural spheres, which ruled over Syrian society due to political repression and the devastation and violence caused by the civil war. According to Baqer Parham, culture is not just a product of freedom; Coercion, tyranny, and oppression can also create culture.

The government alienated from civil society instead of helping civil society flourish and strengthen its organizations, makes every effort to prevent the expression and dissemination of the intentions of civil society and its spontaneous organization so that the governing relations are always reproduced and civil society always remains within the exclusive sphere of influence of those relations. This closure of the path of spiritual growth to civil society while preserving its material existence is a kind of cultural confrontation of the state as a center of power with civil society. Civil society's response to this confrontation is also cultural: Civil society incapable of physical confrontation with a state alien to civil society eliminates the existence of the state within and in its mind; that is, creates a culture in which, while coexisting with the state, there is no place for the organic and internalized

acceptance of the state. Such a culture is called a culture of oppression; for though in itself it has arisen in a sense in opposition to force and for its internal elimination. It is inherently the product of continuous force and, consequently, of a repressed or oppressive culture (Parham, 1997, 26-32).

Artistic creation is inherently a reaction to existing reality, in the face of the established order, in the face of an atmosphere whose dominance has been established and a rigid system that has overcome social life and collective spirits and existence. Thus, artistic creation is a reaction from the depths of the artist's existence against the inevitability of existing reality: This means that, in the words of Nietzsche, "No artist can tolerate reality." Experience has shown that authoritarianism isolates the writer, the poet becomes introverted, the architect's creativity is weakened, and the musician dies. Tyranny leads artists to semi-dark solitary crypts, censors themselves, and makes them fragile, and cautious. Authoritarianism, especially if combined with ideology, deprives the artist of individuality, independent recognition, and freedom of action (Shams Langroudi, 2003, 81 & 88).

From a psychological point of view, war and oppression have a great impact on the human psyche. Fear and anxiety are one of the psychological effects of war that have many negative effects on the tranquility and physiological actions of human beings. During severe turmoil, a person experiences severe fear due to uncertainty about the situation around him. This fear weakens the person's defense system and the power of reason and thinking and cannot do the right thing in the face of the problems (Amiri Khorasani & Mirshekar, 2017, 28).

During the reign of war and oppression, people are not safe from their lives, property, dignity, jobs, and other life Belongings. People do not feel completely secure in such situations for a moment, rather, they are constantly in a defensive position. Feelings of insecurity in the face of

authoritarian and belligerent tyrants make people distrustful of their words and behavior. Distrust is not usually limited to the relationship between people and rulers and extends to relations between all strata, classes, clans, and individuals of society. For someone living in an insecure society, it is a precautionary measure not to trust anyone or anything in the first place. As much as possible, he avoids approaching and contacting others and if he has to interact with others, he must speak and act in such a way that the truth of his inner state is not immediately revealed to the parties of the relationship. For this purpose, he must speak and act with ambiguity and amphibology to have an escape route from accepting responsibility for any task, which is to his detriment. People are forced to flee or surrender defensively in the face of threats from the powerful. The two opposite reactions of strife and surrender in the character of oppressed human beings and victims of violence have the same origin and defense function. Here the victims find a dual personality or two faces. On one face, they are violent, aggressive, and bullying, and on the other face humiliated, flattered, and oppressed. Such people, in addition to material and social harm, their psychological personality is damaged and offended by feelings of humiliation. A feeling evoked in the face of threats, rape, injustice, and humiliation in the person, if not compensated and restored creatively and constructively way, goes back to himself and hurts himself instead of hurting the aggressor and the bully. Psychological traumas of tyranny and internalized fear of rape and violence, cause most people to feel insecure and distrustful in their personal and social relationships and constantly feel been exposed to rape (Peyman, 2011, 290-294).

In difficult, stressful, and extremely insecure situations, in a situation where the material and spiritual life of the people is in severe straits and society is suffering from social, cultural, and moral crises, these injuries occur more severely and disrupt health and peace in society. Under

such circumstances, individuals' defensive reactions take the form of archetypes belonging to human childhood and, naturally, unconsciously, irrationally, and often destructively, so that the creative tendency to peace and reconciliation gives way to the passive tendency to surrender and non-commitment. Actions focused on escape and isolation or conflict and aggression replace active resistance and tolerance (Peyman, 2011, 247-248). Dahduh's works often and openly reflect the war-torn and oppressive Syrian atmosphere of his time. The subject of these paintings is a man whom dictatorship, war, and violence have humiliated and isolated him and has transformed into an animal creature that lacks rationality, consciousness, and emotions. By the surrealist approach of the painter, the subject is located in a nightmarish, eerie, terrifying, and immersive space in dark colors and the collage technique has been used extensively. Holding an exhibition of Syrian artists at Tabriz University of Islamic Art in February 2019 facilitated access to the works of some contemporary Syrian artists among them, the works of Bassem Dahdouh, more than other artists, have an atmosphere in line with the approach of this article.

Here are three examples of Bassem Dahdouh's paintings that have been painted on canvas with the technique of oil painting and mixed media and were created in 2012, 2015, and 2016, but they convey a common theme within the framework of the surrealist style, are selected, reviewed and analyzed and will be compared with six other examples of Dahduh works that have thematic unity.

The statistical population of this study is oil paintings created by Bassem Dahdouh in 2012 and after the beginning of the conflicts and civil wars in Syria, which the author has observed many of them up close in the exhibition of Tabriz University of Islamic Arts and he talked about some of them with the painter himself. All three examples of studies of the works displayed in Tabriz University of Islamic

Art are notable examples of surrealism, not only because of the use of a more eerie and terrifying atmosphere but also in terms of the visual cues embedded in these works, they have the greatest capacity for analysis in the context of the history of modern Syrian art.

The Painting in Fig. 1:

The subject of the painting is a figure with a cow's head and a human body. This particular figure is the dominant subject of Dahduh paintings, especially from 2012 onwards and it is clear that this figure is a grounded theme in this artist's intellectual world. Here, the statue of cow head man is a symbol of a human being who has been transformed into a creature devoid of outward and inward human traits through war, violence, and oppression, and in a word, becomes a monstrous creature. This body has two horns: One up and the other down. This asymmetry implies two opposite traits inherent to this creature. The upward horn refers to anger and aggression against others, and the downward horn refers to fear and surrender to authoritarian power; The dual characteristic we have seen is that man, who has fallen into the circle of violence and political oppression, suffers from it. The figure and the space around it are depicted in neutral and dull colors (brown and gray). Which indicates the atmosphere of despair, depression, and misery that dominates the subject's biosphere. The figure sits in a hole between blocks of paper collages. Printed and handwritten inscriptions can be seen on the collages, like the word al-habaa,



Fig.1. Dahdouh (2015). Mixed media on canvas. Source: ww.aiu.edu.sy.

which means both dust and stupid people which is unlikely not to mean. The sitting position of the body (squatting, hugging the knee, and placing the chin on the knee), and its isolation, and loneliness emphasize the subject's helplessness, despair, and misery. The figure is marked with a red borderline, which can indicate that the subject's biosphere is surrounded by bloody events.

The content of this painting is similar to Figs. 4-6, all of which were painted in 2012. The subject of these paintings are cow-like creatures that have sunk behind the table or on a chair and put their hand on the other hand or head on the table and stare at the viewer or distant point with small eyes, helplessness, and despair. The subject of these paintings, like the first painting, is the same metamorphic man whose war-torn and tyrannical society has isolated and helpless him, devoid of emotions and the power of reason and reaction.

The Painting in Fig. 2:

The subject of the painting is a cow painting with a humanoid mask on its face; this theme is also frequent in the works of Dahduh. Here the subject is no longer a metamorphic man with a cow-head, but it is a complete animal in which there is no trace of humanity left and his only way to be a human being is to use a human mask. The mask has a smile on its face and indicates that the beastly subject is an animal with sharp, upward-pointing horns and he rushes to the audience on all fours, in other words, he is aggressive and hostile. At the same time, he intends to pretend to be good and deceive. He is a symbol of powerful dictators who hide their anger, violence, and savagery under a human mask and they are slowly victimizing people with their dictatorships and bellicosity.

Parts of the figure, the mask, and the background of the painting, all of which are depicted in neutral and colorless colors which refer to the same atmosphere of depression and misery, collages provided by paper, apparently from excerpts from Arabic and German-language newspapers. Do newspaper collages, especially on the mask

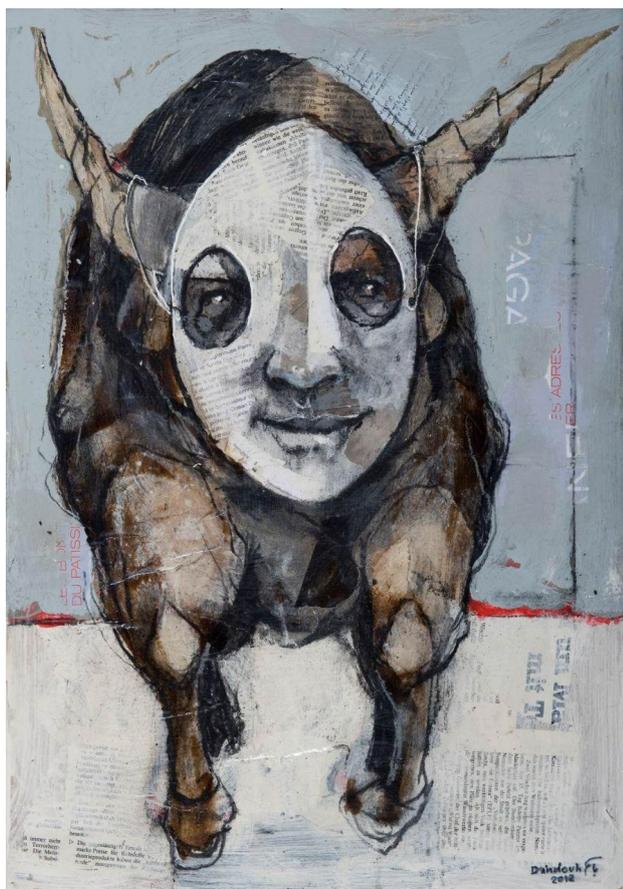


Fig. 2. Dahdouh (2016). Mixed media on canvas, 60\*80 cm. Source: [www.aiu.edu.sy](http://www.aiu.edu.sy).

and background of the subject, indicate that the authoritarian regimes behind the mask of the media are deceiving the people and giving themselves credibility and legitimacy through the media propaganda apparatus?

The content of Fig. 2 is similar to Figs. 7 and 8. In these two paintings that were painted in 2012, the same subject and the same composition are used, but the difference is that the cow-like subject has not yet fully or completely disguised himself. If the painter wanted to show, the subject behind the human mask is the same depicted human being who is similar to his victims in being free from emotions and humanity. In fact, the agent of authoritarianism and the victim of authoritarianism are both the ruined products of the phenomenon of tyranny.

The Painting in Fig. 3:

The painting is divided into three parts by white

lines, and in each section, a cow's headman sits inside a frame. Of these three figures, two have one upward horn and one downward horn, which indicates the simultaneous existence of anger and fear in the nature of these subjects. The figures look at the viewer with a sad, frustrated, and pleading look as if they are asking for help and seeking a savior. According to the symbolism of the number three (Cooper, 2000, 24), these three figures represent the "whole" of society, not only they are separated by lines that symbolize political boundaries, but they are also separated by narrow frameworks, creating the ultimate in isolation and separation for them. This enclosing framework is a symbol of political authority. The rectangular space has long been a symbol of the political realm since ancient times. All figures are worn dishdasha (Arab special clothes), which is a more explicit reference to the Arab and Syrian nature of the subjects in the painting. The tightness of the frames causes all three bodies to bend at the waist and hug their knees. They have even paired their legs as a sign of submission and obedience. Frames and figures are maddened from paper collages. The colors of the painting are all colorless (black and gray) and again emphasize the atmosphere of despair and depression.

Fig. 3 is the same in form and content as Fig. 1. This painting was also painted in 2016. In this work, three frames are depicted horizontally and on top of each other, in each of which a cow's headman is enclosed. The subjects have gathered their hands and feet in this limited and narrow space and apart from each other, have worn dishdasha (Arab special clothes) and their horns are often downwards. The



Fig. 3. Dahdouh (2016). Mixed media on canvas, 100\*100 cm \*3. Source: [www.aiu.edu.sy](http://www.aiu.edu.sy).

statues all look out of the scene with tiny eyes, a symbol of narrow-mindedness. The most important difference between this painting and No. 9, (Fig. 9) except for the horizontal arrangement of the frames and their greater resemblance to the coffin, which refers to the mortality of the oppressive space of society, is that the fourth cow's head statue has lolled on the highest frame. His body physique and clothing are similar to those of other figures, with the difference that it is not surrounded, its horns are upwards, its lines are paler, and it is as if it has a grin on its face. It seems that in this work, the fourth figure is a symbol of the nature of authoritarian power, which itself is a creature devoid of human traits and relies on the coffin-like world of its victims and at the top of the pyramid of power.

In general, in this eerie and unusual atmosphere that the surrealist style has provided, it depicts the artist's emotional effects and his revelation against the warlord's dictators and their victims; we are witnessing creatures who, under the political, social, cultural, and ideological pressure of the tyrannical and belligerent political power, have lost their human qualities and turned into animals that are both a symbol of ignorance and anger.

In the confines and impasse of such a space and arena, they have been transformed into isolated, abandoned, depressed, hopeless, and miserable creatures and are just waiting for a savior to arrive.

### Conclusion

War, violence, and political oppression are phenomena that affect and overshadow all aspects of human life. It is obvious that the field of culture and art will not be far from these phenomena and their effects. Syria has been embroiled in devastating civil wars, rampant violence, and a repressive political climate for the past ten years. Hence, Syrian painters at this time have created works that have been completely influenced by this political and social atmosphere and reflect their lived experiences and emotions, and spiritual turmoil during this period. Searching the works of Syrian painters of this period shows that surrealism was a common and dominant art form among these artists; because this style, due to its nature, depicts the imaginary, turbulent and nightmarish mental world of modern man that the world wars and world-burning dictatorships were the concerns of its people, it had a more effective, efficient and appropriate language to express the social and



Fig. 4. Dahdouh (2012) Artist's personal collection. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 5. Dahdouh (2012) Artist's personal collection. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 6. Dahdouh (2012) Artist's personal collection. Source: Author's archive.



Fig. 7. Dahdouh, (2012). Mixed media on canvas, 35\*50 cm. Source: www.khawamgallery.com.



Fig. 8. Dahdouh (2012). Mixed media on canvas. Source: www.artrepreneur.com.



Fig. 9. Dahdouh (2016). Mixed media on canvas, 100\*100 cm \*3. Source: www.aiu.edu.sy.

spiritual conditions of the Syrian people. This study examines the works of Bassem Dahdouh as one of the prominent and important painters of contemporary Syria, showing that the painter artist by using the features and possibilities of surrealism style, depicts a human being who, after years of war, violence, and oppression, has become a creature devoid of human traits and has shown a view of the Syrian citizen's (contemporary man) lived experience in such situations and in the face of the authoritarian, and warmongering ruling power. Dahdouh's works show the atmosphere of despair, depression, and misery that dominates the subject's bio-world. In these works, the isolation, abandonment, and helplessness of the subject are always emphasized. In Dahduh's selected paintings, the masked cow is a symbol of powerful dictators who hide their anger and violence under a human mask and the unmasked cow is a subject of whom violence, oppression, and tyranny have deprived its soul of humanity. The method of surrealism has been the best media and tool in this period of Syrian history and in that inflamed atmosphere which an artist such as Dahduh has used to express and represent his spiritual influences as well as expose war-mongering dictators.

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