

Post-war Reconstruction, Authenticity and Development of Cultural Heritage in Syria

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Taking a historical perspective, I first shed light on the notion of cultural heritage in Syria from the mid-19th century until today and how it has been employed not only in the struggles against the Ottoman Empire and Western colonization but also in local propaganda legitimizing specific aspirations to gain power. The notion of cultural heritage was originally one of the 'modern thoughts' of the Arab Renaissance era (*an-nahdah*). It refers to the manifestation of human creativity in the form of tangible or intangible items of the past. On the other hand, it refers to distinct ideologies linked to different socio-political interests in Syrian society. This delicate linkage between cultural heritage and ideologies became a justification for the intentional destruction of historic structures in Syria during the current war.

In the second part of the paper, I discuss changing definitions and uses of the term 'authenticity' from the mid-19th century up until today. Despite the existence of the term in pre-Islamic Arabic literature, 'authenticity' was not used in relation to cultural heritage, architecture and urban planning until the late 1960s. In the current Syrian context, authenticity is associated with ideological understandings of heritage and therefore hard to attain in future post-war reconstruction. The reconstruction and development of cultural heritage is closely linked to how different Syrian groups perceive their pasts and their futures. Although specific items of the past might be recovered, Syrian society is politically deeply divided along religious, ethnic, and other lines. Each of these divided groups is characterized by both distinct political aspirations for the future and distinct understanding of the authentic past.

In conclusion, I argue that post-war development and reconstruction in Syria must be seen according not only to the history and hopes of Syrians, but also the tangible and intangible outcomes of their fighting during last years. It must coincide with the emergence of a cohesive civil society or a spiritual union - وحدة روحية متينة - which could rightly overcome the existing divisions in society that have been deepened by the current war.

Heritage and the Reforms debate: 19th-20th centuries

Consideration for the preservation of local heritage dates back to the late 19th century. Most enlightened struggles undertaken by the pioneers of *an-nahda* –Arab Renaissance – aimed to end the monopolization of Islam as the reference to the Syrian society¹. At the same time, through a selective demonstration of the glorious past of 'Arabs', these reformers endeavored to prove the ability of Arabs to constitute their own, unified and independent state. Hence, since its

beginning, heritage was both a technical and a political matter, rather, a *raison d'être* of the Syrian State². It was also a result of the Western cultural expansion that accelerated after the Ottoman Reforms' declarations: *ḥaṭṭi šerīf* in 1839 and *ḥaṭṭi hūmāyūn* in 1856. This expansion was particularly apparent in educational institutions, which often³ emphasized sectarian division and became an instrument of political penetration and a vehicle of culture⁴.

The radical upheavals that struck Syrian society in the course of the Ottoman Reforms, the colonial and postcolonial eras produced ongoing 'reformist' debates between cultural and sociopolitical networks that constituted peculiar 'bearers' of the emergent nationalist ideologies⁵. To this day, this debate continues to be the source of change within Syrian society and fuels many struggles focusing on three fundamental issues: the attitude towards Islamic law⁶; the interplay that might evolve with the dominant international powers; and the definition of the right Reform⁷ - called the Societal Modernization⁸, the Enlightened Society⁹, the Revolution, etc¹⁰.

The traditionalists tend to retain the status quo. They tend to completely reject the concept of historical rupture in the existence of Islam (which is understood as the religion of the eternal, unchangeable, bearer of prominent universal values¹¹.) Today, the traditionalists or Salafists are represented by several Islamic movements whose iconoclastic ideologies and extremist policies have contributed to disasters in many fields including heritage and urban infrastructure. Conscious of the influential local and international changes in the region, Syrian reformers adopted three main attitudes to tackle the aforementioned debate's questions.

First, the Islamic conservators who deemed reformed Islam to be the adequate bearer of modernity, pointing to the dynamic responses Islam have been created to different historic changes. Personalities like Muhammad Saīd Ramadān al-Bouṭi (1929-2013) and a number of Islamic sociopolitical movements represent the reformist Islamic debate¹². **Second, the secular reformers** who believed in the scientific foundations of society and the necessity of separating the spiritual from governance of the State. Several Marxist and leftwing movements, for example the Syrian Communist Party founded in 1924, had a major part in the cultural sphere from the French mandate onwards. **Third, the liberal reformers** tried to tailor the irreversible movement of modern civilization to the local contexts in order to secularize traditionally Muslim societies and update their historical process through new ways of thinking. They claimed, what the Ottoman intellectual Ahmad Midhat called a "cultural authenticity" arguing that it was possible to modernize while preserving certain aspects of Islamic culture¹³. Equally, two main perspectives characterized this tendency.

The first believed in the Syrian nation as a political entity and refusing the inherited classical patterns of its development. Antoun Saadeh [1904-1949], founder of the well-known National Syrian Party highlights this perspective: "From that time – the creation of the party- we stopped the history's rule and we undertook our right history"¹⁴. The second appealed to a secular society renewing its history through a revolutionary change, assuming the existence of an Arab nation based on the common language, history, heritage, ethics, geography and interests. The Arab Socialist Ba'th Party is the most relevant example¹⁵.

From this framework of sociopolitical divisiveness, the term 'heritage' was born, evolved and has been used up until today. During the late 19th century, the Ottomans instrumentalized the architectural heritage as a tool of political propaganda targeting to reinforce the ideology of Ottomanism¹⁶ confronting the Western modernity. Hence, the 'National Ottoman Style'¹⁷, of a clear Neoclassic spirit, (Fig.1) emerged in the late 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, with the intensification of the interior and exterior threats to the existence of the empire itself, the Ottomans diffused another national style that lucidly reflected Islamic and Western architectural references. The Sublime-Porte intended to symbolize the engagement in a particular form of modernization based not only on the imported Western modernity but also on the Islamic heritage of the Empire. Al-Hijaz Railway station in Damascus is a relevant example. After the departure of the Ottomans in 1918, the Syrian State was established under the rule of Faysal ibn al-Hussein. Syrians' dream for independence collapsed, however, when the French mandate was imposed in 1920. In the course of the colonial (1920-1946) and the post-colonial (1946-1963) eras, heritage has been particularly evident through its ideological narratives¹⁸. While the French focused on the Greco-Roman roots of Syrian heritage¹⁹, Syrian politicians focused on its local or Arab ones. The educational system, French scholars and Syrian scholars followed these general tendencies.



Fig.1. The New Seray (actual Ministry of Interior Affairs), Damascus, Late Ottoman period, 1900-04, [picture by the author, 2010]

The politicized dimensions of heritage's matters in Syria are also reflected by attitudes of international organizations dealing with the heritage matters in the country. Jean-Claude Davis raised the questions of why the 'Ancient City of Damascus' was listed by UNESCO as a 'World Heritage Site', in 1979, seven years before the 'Ancient City of Aleppo', despite the simultaneous presentation of the two dossiers of inscription²⁰. The differentiated attitude of the international community towards the destruction of Syrian heritage over the current crisis is also noteworthy²¹.

Undoubtedly, several internal and external forces, local, Arabs and Western immobilized the reformist debate and prohibited Syrians from taking advantage of their ethnic and cultural diversity in building of their modern society and State. While the Syrians' divisiveness escalated over

decades to become main factor of the current crisis, the vision of heritage became more controversial resulting in many cases in intentional destruction. In this agitated context, new values, notions and principles emerged. Others vanished. Authenticity is central in understanding the discourse referring to both the heritage and the political debate in Syria. Accordingly, the interrelation of reconstruction-authenticity-development could be the main banner page of the post-war reconstruction. The following paragraphs attempt to demonstrate the evolution of the term 'authenticity' in the academic and political Syrian literature.

Authenticity - الأصالة

Authenticity is related to the origin, memories, and languages. It is expressed through tangible and intangible facts. Among the authors who dealt with this term, Max Weber considered the common myths of origin, cultures or common memories would shape a component of authenticity for the new collective identity²². Charles Taylor in his thesis (1991) and George Steiner in his book on Real Presences (1991) approached the linkage between authenticity and language. From the late 19th century, Arab intellectuals underlined that the success²³ and the evolution of thinking requires a review of the language which is a bearer of development²⁴ and patriotism²⁵. Names, communications and linguistic expressions in relation to a building, place or thing create signs on its authenticity. Authenticity in Arabic [أصالة] is derived from the verb [أصل] - [فهو] - [يأصل، أصالة، فهو] - [أصل]: to get an origin; to persist in; to stand by; to stick to. For instance, the 'Authentic Arabic' means the literal Arabic, which was spoken by the ancient Arabs and still preserved today. The usage of the term dates back to pre-Islamic times. The Arab poets in the pagan era used it with ethical and physical²⁶ reference to tribal life.

In the Middle Ages, the dictionary *Lisan al-'arab*, written in the 14th century²⁷ linked authenticity to the original adjective: [أصيل]: having a recognized origin and lineage. It refers to a man, an opinion, or a noun showing the act of being original. In his *al-Muqadimah*, Ibn Khaldoun associated authenticity [الأصالة] with the social and political fanaticism of people [العصبية] who shaped an urban fabric [taking into account that Ibn Khaldoun opposed urban (الحضر) to the Bedouin (البدوة) ones]. According to him, having this fanaticism meant having authenticity [أصالة], a great origin, a pure genealogy, and lineage²⁸. Until the late 19th century, the definition of the term turned around that illustrated by Ibn Khaldoun. Qutr al-Muhit [قطر المحيط] dictionary, published in 1869, defined authenticity as the steadiness and the rightness of opinion and lineage²⁹. The writings of religious reformers³⁰ as well as the publications of the underground Arab nationalist organizations fighting Ottomans³¹ largely employed the term as the rightness of opinion.

Until the 1960s, the term was in common usage in the linguistic and political field. Dictionaries of the early 20th century, such as al-Bustan³², - البستان published in 1927, defined authenticity as the steadiness and the rightness of opinion and lineage. Al-Bustan did not state any relationship to the art or architecture. Although the Syrian literature tackled several subjects related to the urban environment, the term authenticity has not been employed before the late 1960s. In his book illustrating Damascus [الروضة الغناء في دمشق الفيحاء] - published in 1879, No'man al-Qasatili pointed to the reconstruction of the Bab Touma quarter after its destruction during the accidents of 1860.

He did not use the terms 'reconstruction,' 'authentic,' or 'authenticity'. Rather, he used [تجديد] / regeneration or renewal³³.

Accordingly, most Syrian sociopolitical movements endeavored to prove their 'authentic' character based on their truthfulness, ability to be the bearer of the glorious past, and ability to be in concordance with the accepted facts of the Syrian society of their time. The literature of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party, founded in 1946 and in power since 1963, is a relevant example. One of its main founders, Michel Aflaq [1910-1989], used the term authentic [أصيل] to qualify his party and to demonstrate how it harmonized with the Arabs' history, recurrent revival³⁴, and message for humanity³⁵. Likewise, the third 'Theoretical Principle of the Arab Socialist Party' affirmed that the Arabs' language explains their authenticity, specificities, and establishments³⁶. The same approach is present in other political writings published in Syrian journals of the first half of the 20th century such as *al-Moqtabas*, *Dimashq*, *al-Mashreq*, etc.

However, although the notion of heritage [التراث- بنايات تاريخية- العاديات الآثار-] was present since the mid-19th century in Syrian political and academic literature, the usage of the terms 'authenticity' and 'authentic' did not occur before the late 1960s. Notorious politicians and technicians have focused on the conservation of historic buildings without utilizing the term authenticity³⁷. The speeches of the Syrian president Shukri al-Quwwatly (1891-1967)³⁸ and the well-known political figure Abdul Rahman al-Shahbandar (1879-1940)³⁹, are examples. Both appealed to preserve the Arabs' heritage and art on one side; to revive its originality [سيرته الاولى] on the other.

Anyway, three main reasons might explain why the term 'authenticity' found place in the urban and architectural literature from the 1960s onwards. **The first** is the reaction to radical mutations that struck the urban and architectural environment during the late Ottoman Reforms and the colonial and post-colonial periods. In this context, authenticity became the stamp that distinguished the architecture of the pre-Ottoman Reforms –or its 20th century imitation- from the contemporary architecture, *al-fan al'asri* or *al-tamaddon al-jadīd*⁴⁰, which is based on imported materials, techniques, logics, and styles⁴¹. This architecture, imported from the West, was truly described by the Jesuit priest Boulos Jarroun following his visit to Aleppo in 1898: 'however, we regretted the loss of their Oriental spirit [of Cairo and Damascus] and how the European urbanization erased their splendor. On the other side, we found Aleppo original as it was and its beauty has not been obliterated by the new urbanization'⁴². According to conservators and liberal reformers, the new monuments in Neoclassic, Art-déco, and International Style, which characterized the extensions of Syrian cities over the first half of the 20th century, represented the opposite of authentic – original – architecture. Abdul-Azīz al-'Azmah (1856-1943) of pro-Ottoman and pro-Islamic caliphate tendency, showed his disappointment in the use of Western styles in construction⁴³ and criticized the prevailing westernized tastes⁴⁴. However, al-'Azmah did not utilize the term 'authenticity' in his book. As for M. Kurd Ali (1876-1953), a minister, author, Arab nationalist, and pro-European reformer, he described the 'Modern Damascus'⁴⁵ as 'Western quarters deprived of the eastern spirit - احياء غربية مجردة من الطابع الشرقي'⁴⁶.

The second reason is the new debate that appeared in the Syrian scholarly milieu from the 1920s onwards, dealing with writings of Orientalists and Western scholars who related most Islamic monuments to non-local Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Persian origins. Hence, several Syrian scholars and intellectuals endeavored to prove the authenticity of Islamic art [اصالة الفن الاسلامي]. They focused on the unavoidable interactions between the Islamic and other civilizations, including the Western ones, especially during the seventh and eight centuries⁴⁷, the first decades of the emergence of the Islamic State. The writings of directors of the Arabic Scientific Academy in Damascus, such as M. Kurd Ali⁴⁸ and those of the administrators of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, such as Salim Abdul Haq, Khaled Moaz, Afif Bahnasi⁴⁹, and Abdul Qāder ar-Rīḥāwi⁵⁰, are relevant examples.

The third reason belongs to the political context that characterized Syrian society during the French mandate and the post-colonial periods. This crucial era was distinguished by the struggle for independence and then for the building of the 'modern State. The presence of the previously mentioned Islamic, secular and liberal currents enriched the political scene and created an evolving societal cohabitation. Until the 1970s, the main Syrian literary trends could be identified as Marxist and national left, both inspired by the spirit of revolutionary change⁵¹. After the Second World War, a rapprochement came about between nationalists and Marxists. In 1951, the Association of Syrian Writers was founded thanks to a group of left-wing writers like Hanna Mina, Muhammad al-Maghout and Ghada as-Samman. The emergence and evolution of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party reflected the aforementioned political atmosphere. This sociopolitical movement has been shaped by the fusion of a nationalist party, al-Ba'th, [Ba'th means the revival], and a Marxist one, al-'Arabi al-ishtiraki, [Arab Socialist Party]. Their theoretical principles attempted to demonstrate their original linkage not only to the Arabs' history, traditions and ethics but also to their ambitions for change. Thus, the Party was founded in 1946; arrived to power in 1963 and is still governing Syria up until today. Its first ideologists and founders, Michel Aflaq, Zaki al-Arsuzi, Salah ad-Din al-Bitar had received university training in France and had been well grounded in the humanist culture of the Age of Enlightenment. Very often, Michel Aflaq utilized the term authentic [أصيل] to qualify the thought of his party and its concordance with the Arabs' history, recurrent revival⁵² and message for Humanity⁵³. He underscored "our linkage to the heritage and nation's spirit consolidates our determination; ensures our progress; and guarantees our (right) orientation, [...]. Our strength is built upon the Arab history since we progress in the same direction of the Arab spirit"⁵⁴. Likewise, the third 'Theoretical Principle of the 'Arab Socialist Party' affirmed that the 'Arabs' language explains their 'authenticity, specificities and establishments'⁵⁵.

In the course of the 1960s, ideologues like Elias Morcos and Yaseen al-Hafez sought to create a synthesis between Marxism and Nationalism. At this rate, the ascension of representative of this Ba'thist wing to the power in 1966 encouraged the progressive intellectuals and writers to express themselves freely and to diffuse the notions of social progress, Arab unity, Arabs' authenticity, equality, revolution, change and so on. Many of them could rely on support from a number of foreign institutions such as the Union of Afro-Asiatic Writers, the Peace Movement and others. In addition to these reasons, during the 1940s-50s-60s, Syria witnessed the return of a large number of scholars who were trained in Europe and the United States. After the departure of the French

in 1947, these scholars assumed key public functions including those in relation to urban planning and the conservation of heritage.

In this context, the term 'authenticity' was introduced in the matters of heritage, art and architecture. Thus, modern dictionaries expanded the concept to refer to a state of reliability [موثوقية] and steadiness [ثبات]. In thinking, it means its astuteness and profoundness; in style: its creativity; and in lineage: its truthfulness⁵⁶. This explanation reflects the widespread definition of authenticity according to European and American scholars. As the term has been linked to a legal antecedent in accordance with facts; referring to the original as opposed to a copy; the real as opposed to the fake⁵⁷; being itself, without imitations or intrusions.

Authentic heritage in Syrian context

Since the 1950s, even without the employment of the term 'authenticity' itself, Syrian architecture has become hostage to a continuous discourse focusing on the linkage between the authenticity on one side, the renewal [التجديد] and contemporaneity [العصرية] on the other. Furthermore, the greatest understanding and appreciation of heritage matters in the Arab world relied on the term authenticity⁵⁸. This understanding varies from rigid conservation in a few Arab countries like in Syria, to a total liberty to demolish and reconstruct historic buildings or sites like in Gulf countries. Having either attitude depends on several interrelated factors including the educational system, the sociopolitical weight of heritage, the strategies of its presentation and development. Focusing on the Syrian literature and considering the universal definitions of the term, the starting points in exploring the authenticity of a historic building might be its reliability and steadiness (in relation to the concept of truth) and creativity in style (in relation to the concept of the commitment with local and universal values).

Creativity in style, or "Authenticity by creation" according to Jukka Jokilehto⁵⁹, is subjective and relies on the context, culture, convictions, and psychological state of the user and observer of a historic building. Several Syrian scholars explained 'authenticity' as a state of creativity and innovation which must be based on commitment to the society identity and values, including the political ones. Afif Bahnasi underlines that authenticity is a principle and conviction based on nationalist thinking targeting the demonstration of the Arabic identity. It is a condition which legitimizes the work of an artist engaged in the nation's interests⁶⁰. Badr ad-Dine Abou Ghazi linked the definition of authenticity to creativity and singularity which necessitate synthesis and acknowledgement of the national specificities of the Arab personality. According to him, authenticity does not constitute an opponent to contemporaneity. On the contrary, it would not be realized without an understanding of history and its impact on culture⁶¹. Aziz al-Habbabi illustrated the interrelation between authenticity and creation underlining that the relevance of the authenticity manifests when it is alive, active, questionable and unlocked towards the unidirectional progress of history⁶². In this framework, Syrian literature considered 'authentic' any opinion, intellectual production, scientific innovation or human creation whose value is relevant to the society without considering of its old or new age. Undoubtedly, this includes the heritage elements like buildings, sites, artefacts, etc.

As for reliability, it might be analyzed by investigating the state of 'being of itself' over a supposed period and through the following issues. **First**, 'being of itself' necessitates a reliable knowledge of the whole history of the tangible aspects and the ideologies that have been part of the building. What criteria determine the credibility of the documentation that illustrates the evolution of the tangible part of a historic building? As does the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, Syrian scholars referred to the ethics of authenticity focusing on its sociopolitical issues. Afif Bahnasi defines 'authenticity' as the realization of an artifact according to a heritage identity which is distinctive in its aesthetic principles. This realization is carried out through three steps: the rejection of the stranger art; the exploration of the principles of one's own heritage identity; and the appropriation of this identity in the new artifact⁶³. Bahnasi explains that the main problem of the Arab world is the feeble knowledge of the Arab heritage identity⁶⁴. On the other hand, scholars like Aziz al-Azmah, did not adopt the aforementioned attitude. Rather, they doubted the feasibility and meaningfulness of such insertion of heritage, part of the past, in the present. Al-Azmah compared the adoption of authenticity with semi-Salafism⁶⁵ or with orientalism - highlighting that both shape transmission of knowledge through absolute antiphrasis⁶⁶.

Second, 'being of itself' considers the cumulative quality of heritage as well as the evolving nature of the cultural expressions illustrated by several scholars like G. Semper⁶⁷ and O. Grabar⁶⁸. Historic buildings continue to live on and alter their forms, functions and narratives in response to human and natural interventions. In the field of conservation, the ongoing development of a monument results from the inevitable technological progress and normal maintenance activities over a long period of time. The use of imported industrialized materials and techniques of construction in Syria was propagated from the late 19th century⁶⁹. Should such continued intrusions be considered to reduce the authenticity of the historic structures? Or, as Henry Cleere asks⁷⁰: should they be seen as having a historical significance of their own? In the same line, Jukka Jokilehto wonders about the 'difference between the gradual renovation of an ancient monument and the reconstruction of a building or part of a building at a particular moment in time⁷¹? Undoubtedly, the recognition of the natural organic development of historic buildings portrays an explicit dilemma in the scholarly milieu. The appearance and design of significant parts of the listed and non-listed historic structures in Syria might be described as having developed an organic homogeneity of their own. Extension, maintenance, remodeling, destruction, reconstruction after conflicts, wars or earthquakes have impacted the majority of the structures⁷². The evolution of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is a well-known example bearing in mind its evolving from an Aramaean to a Roman temple; from a Christian church to an Islamic mosque; its reconstructions [after the fires of 1068 and 1893] and its restorations [for example in the 1980s]⁷³. We also know how the Ottoman governor of Damascus, Midhat Pasha [1879-1881] undertook urban restructuring in Old Damascus after intentionally burning many houses and stores in 1880 to retrieve the original alignment of the actual Souk Midhat Pasha / the Roman *Decumanus*⁷⁴. How could we determine the authenticity of such fabrics? What is the relationship between authenticity' and ethics (regarding the example of Souk Midhat Pasha)? Furthermore, could many other historic structures have functioned without recent technical installations like electric lighting or the addition of sound diffusion [in the churches and Friday mosques], which are clear insertions in these structures?

Third, 'being of itself' is related to the longevity of the past and to the concept of the old according to the local society. 'How old is the old' is a question we should consider in evaluating the relationship of an architectural creation to its setting and own past? This familiar worldwide question was unwisely handled through the official definition of heritage in several Arab countries. The former Syrian law of Antiquities [n° 222, 1963] considers that a monument or site is qualified to be historic if it is at least two hundred years old. In other Arab countries, for instance, Oman, the law [n° 6, 1980] decides that antiquities are at least sixty years old. Anyway, heritage exists in the life of Syrians as a tangible and intangible continuity of their past and a living vessel for their civilization. If authenticity is a concept in accordance with the natural development of the Syrians' civilization, it should not oppose the fundamental principles of renewal, creativity or universality. Moreover, reducing the Syrians' relationship to their heritage by imposing limits on its authenticity could create a considerable misunderstanding of the current world⁷⁵. How would we work with the fact that there is no distinct present, but only past and future? Beyond what has been stated, the critical approach of the present helps to set comparative agendas with the past more clearly⁷⁶.

For that reason, the designation of authenticity in reconstruction as engagement with the past, for instance, with Islamic standards, carries controversial messages: how a reconstruction, a future fact, could be coherent with returning back to a past, either proved or imagined? Furthermore, this engagement fails since the historic monument is relevant when it is understood in accordance with its time and context⁷⁷. Ibn Khaldoun underlined lucidly the unfeasibility of getting back the value of a building because "destruction means coming back to the origin which is the nonentity and subsequently, a differently reconstruction to the origin"⁷⁸. In this framework, R. Thomson proposed the term 'revised authenticities' that might influence the interpretation of post-conflict sites, often with far-reaching implications for significance and commemoration within their communities⁷⁹.

Finally, 'being of itself' –or not- is a societally-imagined perception. Undoubtedly, the imagined 'signs'⁸⁰ are present in the Syrians' perception of their heritage. Afif Bahnasi does not consider authenticity as an individual concern but instead as a sensitivity of a group of people. Consequently, it should be harmonized with the artistic tastes of people, incorporating their context and individual specificities⁸¹. Tayyeb Tizini underlines that in some way, the dilemma of authenticity-heritage in the Arab world has been evacuated of its factual conceptualization. He argues while the societal and ideological issues of this dilemma have been rightly approached, its scientific and technical ones have been superficially done⁸². Anyway, very often, many people have an instinctive acceptance of the 'authentic' and an instinctive resistance to the new artistic, architectural or urban tendencies. According to A. al-Azmah, this might be explained by the fact, people accumulate their acceptance of the historic monuments during centuries considering them, as a result, as 'containers of authenticity'⁸³. Therefore, the reconstruction of Syrian heritage would be more enduring and appropriated by Syrians if it embodies an internal, national and innovative revival. For that reason, both the renewal and post-war reconstruction of Syrian heritage should be 'authentic' (mainly originated by the society itself) even if the strategies of conservation of this society are not as creative as the advanced international ones. In other words, Syrians should avoid what Hassan Fathy⁸⁴ qualified as *autocolonization* of many Arab and Islamic countries in their policies of conservation. Fathy, like many other Arab scholars and architects, attributed this

autocolonization to the type of urban and architectural change introduced during the 19th-20th centuries, which is, according to him, diametrically contrary to the traditions of these countries.

In this context, post-war reconstruction offers to Syrians the opportunity to embrace a new understanding of the contemporaneity of art bearing in mind that for decades, this term meant the imitation or emulation of foreign tendencies and implied the loss of the 'authentic' local artistic identity. As A. Bahnasi underlines, the linkage between authenticity and contemporaneity does not mean their harmonization, but rather, how the authenticity of spirit might provide continuous creativity in the contemporary framework for construction projects and artistic realizations⁸⁵. However, the juxtaposition of the definitions of Authenticity-Contemporaneity poses a crucial, maybe the principal, dilemma in the actual Arab thought. Muhammad Abed al-Jabiri suggests that this question can be summed up as follows⁸⁶: does the duality of Authenticity-Contemporaneity mean choosing between a heritage model [in the wide meaning of the word] and a Western model? According to him, the problem is not only in the choice of one over the other, but also, in the incapacity of Arabs to have had the choice itself from the beginning of their confrontation with the model of Western civilization, that dates back according to At-tayyeb Tizini⁸⁷ to the French expedition on Egypt 1798 to 1801.

Shifting authenticity

In addition to the difficulty in proving how a historic structure might be authentic regarding its reliability and being of itself, there are factors that influenced –and will influence - the understanding of Syrian society of the term 'authenticity' in its urban and architectural contexts. The continuous heritage-making process; the prior experiences of post-conflict reconstruction and the new technologies affecting the construction, documentation and presentation of heritage are main factors that continuously change the reading of authenticity.

The main factor that altered the perception of the term 'authenticity' in Syrian society relies on the continuous heritage-making process embodied particularly by the Syrian Modern Style⁸⁸. Monuments of high architectural value (located for instance on al-Nasr Street in Damascus and al-'Azīzyeh quarter in Aleppo), which were erected from the first decade of the 20th century to the 1960s, reveal its main characteristics. However, the Syrian Modern Style was not recognized under this appellation during its emergence or the prevailing period. Very often, the local literature utilized 'Arab modern style'⁸⁹ or buildings of 'Oriental form'⁹⁰ or buildings in 'pure Arabic Art'⁹¹. The Syrian Modern Style has evolved through the aspirations of not only the conservative but also the liberal and secular reformers. It reflected the interests of different rulers of Syria: Ottoman, French, and Syrian, presenting an authentic - hybrid architecture facing the Neoclassic and *Konak* styles that prevailed in the late Ottoman era; the Art-déco and International Style widely adopted in the course of the colonial and postcolonial periods.



Renewed Islamic Architecture in Damascus / Syrian Modern Style, Ayn al-Fijeh Waters Headquarters, al-Naṣr St, Abd ar-Razzaq Malas, 1932-36. [picture by the author, 2010]

Hence, the ‘authenticity’ of the buildings of this style relies according to several Syrian reformers on the ‘creativity’ of its architects in reviving, rationalizing and reformulating local references according to contemporary logics, spirits and techniques. So far, the signs of the Syrian Modern Style reflected the belief of the owners of buildings and their architects [European in the first three decades] in both the glorious past and in Western Modernity. Jacob Petersen indicated that one of the dominant ideas of the first half of the 20th century in the Middle Eastern cities was that “*the public buildings and spaces ought to express the identity of the nation [...]. This aspiration for a national style could spring from a nationalist ideology*”⁹². Muhammad Kurd Ali claimed that the ‘honest’ nationalists have to recognize and conserve their artifacts as a way for the memorialization of the ancestors⁹³ in parallel to the admiration of Western civilization⁹⁴. Subsequently, Kurd Ali appealed for adoption of the Syrian Modern Style as an adequate expression of the local and Western values⁹⁵. Taqi el-dīn al-Ḥeṣnī who criticized the blind imitation of Europeans⁹⁶, admitted the importance of a hybridity between the ancestors’ local civilization and the Western progress⁹⁷. Currently, several buildings of the Syrian Modern Style, for example, ‘Ayn al-Fijeh Headquarters and the Old Justice Palace in Damascus, are inscribed on the national heritage list and protected through special legal provisions. Consequently, the Syrian Modern Style proved that not only the historic buildings might be authentic and relating to a glorious past, but also a modern architecture might be included through its creativity and linkage to an accepted past and aspiring future.

The second factor that affected the understanding of the term ‘authenticity’ concerns the constant changes of the techniques of construction since the late 19th century. In many instances, what Syrians deemed ‘modern’, ‘imported’ or ‘Western’ a few decades ago, becomes ‘authentic’ today. At the mid-20th century, historians like Abdul Azīz al-‘Azmah displayed their disappointment of the employment of manufactured cement tiles instead of paving with traditional materials like the coloured marble and limestone⁹⁸. At the present, owners, architects and professionals of construction consider the presence of these tiles in buildings dating back to the 1890-1960s, as

an expression of their authenticity⁹⁹. Another issue is related to the new technologies of reproduction, documentation and presentation of heritage, for instance, the Drones and [3D] technologies of printing or visualization affording a revolution in the field of heritage conservation. When would a Syrian consider a [3D] printed model of its heritage as a part of its heritage? Would a Syrian appropriate the Palmyra heritage if it was printed in Dubai or Peking or elsewhere? Is the acceptance or rejection valuable in this widely-globalized world? The answer to these questions is primarily related to the irreversible factor of time and cultural change. Either way, thanks to the aforementioned revolution, after being destroyed, buildings and artifacts take on another life, maybe through new technologies of representation. In other words, disappearance is no longer synonymous to being forgotten or lost, but rather, it provides new ways of memorialization and interpretation of the Syrian heritage.

The third factor that marked the significance of the term 'authenticity' in Syrian society concerns the former local experiences of post-conflict reconstruction. These examples portray the evolving understanding within Syrian society of the term 'authenticity'¹⁰⁰. The first example refers to the reconstruction of the Bāb Tūma quarter in *intramuros* Damascus after the violent incidents against Christians in 1860. The inhabitants assumed the reconstruction of their severely damaged quarter from 1863 to the 1880s by reinstating its pre-accidents urban pattern, traditional materials, spatial organization and architectural styles. In spite of the linkage of Bāb Tūma to a desolate memory, it forms today an outstanding and inseparable part of the Old Damascus, inscribed on the WHL in 1979. The second example refers to the reconstruction of the Sidi 'Āmoud quarter in *intramuros* Damascus after the destruction caused by the French bombardment on October 18th-20th, 1925. The Syrian and French mandate authorities managed the quarter's reconstruction by imposing new urban planning, construction materials and architectural styles [Art-déco and International Style]. From that time until today, Syrians do not see the rebuilt Sidi 'Āmoud, called *al-harīqah* (the 'fire'), as part of the historic Damascus but as part of its westernized quarters, even though it's included as part of the inscribed Old Damascus.

Why does Syrian civil society recognize the authenticity of the reconstructed Bāb Tūma yet refuse to consider *al-harīqah* as part of its heritage? In fact, the answer might stem from the degree of memorialization of the reconstruction processes and their tangible outcomes. This has four main dimensions: technical or urban-architectural reason concerning the correlation between the urban and architectural fabric of the reconstructed zone and its surroundings; political, involving the identities and motives of the destructor and the re-constructor; cultural referring to the influence of the media and its dissemination in forging popular knowledge and awareness of the actions taken, and finally, societal, relating to the change of the popular and official appellation of the quarters after reconstruction that could recall or omit the memory of horror.

Relating the aforementioned aspects to the current Syrian crisis might provide examples of how the cultural and socio-political aspects of the post-trauma reconstruction and the understanding of the changes to the term authenticity play out. Indeed, the previously mentioned comparison shows that in the case with reconstruction according to identical pre-war situations [the case of Bab Touma, in which people reproduced more or less the same pre-conflict situation (1860 and backwards)]¹⁰¹, the 'authenticity of form' of the reconstructed areas might be retrieved immediately

after reconstruction in contrary to the 'authenticity of setting' related among others to the loss of human lives. However, the factor of time has always created new 'authenticity of setting' that prevailed over the precedent ones.

In other words, the tragic collective memory issued from the conflict and the destruction vanishes overtime giving place to new societal memories and settings. Rodney Harrison highlighted 'the process of forgetting is in fact integral to remembering – that one cannot properly form new memories and attach value to them without also selecting some things to forget'¹⁰². Adrian Forty and Suzan Kuchler underscored that the materiality of monuments can produce a particular collective mode of remembering which shapes the consumption of the past as a shared cultural form of memory¹⁰³. C. Nagel shows disappointment of how the rebuilt downtown of Beirut does not present a substantial public memorial to the civil war or to its victims¹⁰⁴.

Which linkage might be established between the authenticity of a reconstructed building and remembering / forgetting of the tragic memory of the Syrian war? If historic monuments are means of retrieving collective memory(ies) of more imagination than truth, which form of memorialization Syrians would chose in dealing with the heavily damaged or completely annihilated monuments? According to which criteria would they decide: the materiality of a monument, the metaphysical symbols, virtual techniques, emptiness, memorialization of building fragments, a tabula rasa or other concepts? What is the ethical role of architecture¹⁰⁵ in times of crises or wars? It seems that any post-war reconstruction raises a noticeable contradiction: deciding if the physical fabrics of the past can be brought back while at the same time, acknowledging that the setting that gave these fabrics their significance cannot be brought back. This perception affects the question as to whether Syrians might be able to keep the whole legacy, narratives, authenticity and values of their cultural heritage or not? The response to such questions will depend on the post-war approach of Syrians to the duality Authenticity-Contemporaneity in rebuilding their society and State and expressing themselves in the future. Anyway, bearing in mind the specificities of the modern history of Syria and taking into account that the socio-political divisiveness of Syrians has been deepened during the war, there cannot be a post-war reconstruction that satisfies all of them.

In this intricate context, authenticity may be present in the debate about the post-war reconstruction as well as in the political propaganda surrounding the different socio-political currents and decision-makers. While authenticity may never be attained as a state of reliability for contextual reasons especially the huge human loss during the war, its manifestation as a state of 'creativity in style' might be recognized and materialized. In other words, post-war reconstruction might provide an opportunity for Syrian historians, archaeologists, sociologists, architects, planners and politicians to demonstrate original creativity in the forthcoming projects of construction, conservation and artistic performance.

Conclusions

Syrian literature and scholarly milieu linked the term 'authenticity' to several notions: memories, origin, language and creativity. While the language and creativity constituted converging factors, approaching the origins and memories ignited heated discussions, even conflicts among Syrians.

As the present paper demonstrated, Syrians are divided in their socio-political convictions and their definition of the 'right' society they are looking for and the heritage they are dealing with. Heritage in Syria is not only a technical but also a socio-political matter, forged through a continuous process that has been interrupted by natural disasters and wars (including the current one). The vitality of this process might be seen as early as the mid-19th century through the development of tangible and intangible attributes. One such attribute is the evolving literature that included the term 'authenticity', deriving from a Marxist-Nationalist discourse, built upon conflicting titles such as the change, the revolution, the glorious past, etc. Until the late 1960s, the term signified the steadiness and the rightness of opinion and lineage.

Since then, the term has been employed in urban and architectural literature by a group of scholars whose university training took place in Europe and the United States. Three main reasons serve as the basis for the new utilization of this term. The first is the necessity to explain and to react to fundamental mutations that struck the urban and architectural environment during the late Ottoman Reforms and the colonial and post-colonial periods, noticeably what we call the Westernization of the urban fabrics and architectural styles. The second reason is the reaction of the Syrian scholarly milieu, especially during the French Mandate (1920-1946), to claims and debates focusing on the non-local origins of most masterpieces of the urban and architectural heritage in Syria. The third reason is a specific political context that characterized the building of the modern State after the departure of the Ottoman in 1918 to the ascension of the Ba'ath Party's to power in 1963.

In this framework, the paper showed the magnitude of the understanding of Syrian scholars, politicians and professionals of the heritage of the term 'authenticity'. Accordingly, any opinion, style, artefact, construction, intellectual production or scientific innovation is authentic when it is relevant to Syrians, even if it is not traditional. The Syrian Modern Style is the pertinent example. The aforementioned understanding relies on two main notions or at least to one of them: the 'reliability' - [موثوقية] in relation to the concept of truth and the creativity in style [إبداع] in relation to the concept of the commitment with defined values. These values are universal and local, including at the forefront of political convictions and aspirations that changed over time. Accordingly, since its association with the political discourse and the concept of heritage, the term 'authenticity' has introduced a divisive factor in Syrian society. The current crisis affirms the contradictory attitudes of Syrians towards their cultural heritage, which suffered pressures through not only cultural processes of internationalization but also transnational projects of islamization. Anyway, three factors have influenced –and will continue to influence - the understanding of Syrian society of the term 'authenticity' in its urban and architectural environment. They expanded the scope of authenticity from a rigid and definite value to a field of creativity and development.

These factors include, at first, the continuous heritage-making process embodied by the Syrian Modern Style. This concept proved that not only the historic buildings might be authentic and

linked to the nation's past, but also that modern creative architecture might do when it is linked to accepted narratives and an aspiring future. Then, new technics and materials of construction altered Syrians' vision of the meaning of 'modern', 'imported', 'Western', 'local' and consequently, 'authentic'. As for the new technologies of documentation and presentation of heritage, they added new possibilities for appropriating a historic structure, even in the case of complete physical destruction. In other words, disappearance is no longer synonymous to being forgotten or lost, but rather, it provides new ways of memorialization and interpretation of the Syrian heritage. Finally, the prior experiences of post-conflict reconstruction in Syria represent a main factor that continuously changes the reading of authenticity. Relating these experiences to the current Syrian crisis might provide examples of how the sociocultural aspects of the post-trauma reconstruction and the understanding of the changes to the term authenticity play out.

The paper revealed that while the identic reconstruction can retrieve the 'authenticity of form' immediately after reconstruction, the 'authenticity of setting' necessitates a much longer timeframe to be reestablished. The underlying argument for this observation is that time is necessary to reshape a new 'authenticity of setting' following the huge loss of human lives and the exodus of millions of Syrians towards other countries. In this framework, questions about the interrelation between authenticity and remembering / forgetting the tragic collective memory issued from the conflict and the destruction have been raised. This issue leads to a major question that has not been handled in the paper: are Syrians able to keep the whole legacy, narratives, authenticity and values of their cultural heritage? or a new audacious understanding of the term 'authenticity' and 'contemporaneity' might be proposed?

Because of the ongoing socio-political divisiveness that has been deepened during the war, there cannot be a post-war reconstruction that satisfies all Syrians. This situation would have been different if Syrians would have undertaken a converging project that involved, among others, a harmonious perception of their heritage. Until that stage, rulers and politicians will be the principal decision-makers directing the strategies of conservation of the heritage as well as its post-war reconstruction.

Endnotes

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⁴ Antonius, G., *The Arab awakening: the story of Arab National Movement*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1938, p.93.

⁵ Weber, Max, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions', In: *From Max Weber, Essays in Sociology* ed. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948, esp. pp. 269-70 and 279-84.

⁶ Arkoun, Muhammad., *Essaie sur la pensée islamique*, Maisonneuve & Larose, Paris, 1983, p. 251-281

- ⁷ Reform was explained in Arabic through several ways especially, *al-‘iṣlāh*, see for example: Hourani, A., *Arabic thought in the liberal Age, 1798-1939*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1983, p. 34-67; or *al-‘inqilab*, see for example: Michel Aflaq., *fi sabiil al-Ba’th, al-kitabat as-siyassiyah al-kamilah*, vol.1-vol.2, Bagdad, 1986, p.141-142-
- ⁸ According to Shukri al-Quwwatly, [1898-1967] an important former Syrian president: H. al-Quwwatly., *Shukri al-Quwwatly yukhateb ummatuhu*, al-Fujairah, 2001, p.244
- ⁹ According to Anoutn Saadeh, *New enlightened society / mujtamaa jadiid nayer*: Saadeh, A., *al-mahadarat al-‘ashr , the tenth lectures*, 1st Lecture on January 7th 1948, p.21;
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- ¹¹ Equally, members of the Christian clerical organ affirmed that people were more attached to the religion than to the nation: Al-Mashreq, 1st year, 1898, n° 1, “response of the Père Louis Shaiḥo”, p. 23.
- ¹² See on this subject: ‘Abad, Abuld-Ghani., *Islamic movements in the Arab World - الحركات الإسلامية في الوطن العربي*, Center of Arab Union Studies, Beirut, 2012; *Islamic political movements and authority in the Arab world : the rise and fall* / edited by Jamal Sanad Al-Suwaidi, Ahmed Rashad El Safty, UAE, 2014.
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- ¹⁵ Aflaq, Michel., *fi sabiil al-Ba’th, al-kitabat as-siyassiyah al-kamilah*, vol.1, Bagdad, 1986, p. 62-64.
- ¹⁶ Ottomanism is a sociopolitical ideology coming back to the beginning of the 19th century, targeting to create an Ottoman cultural and political personality prevailing the Ottoman empire and enhancing the unity of its provinces.
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- ²³ Ni’mah Yafeth., in: *Al-Muqtataf*, Part. 1, 1887, p. 12. Asaad Dagher, in: *Al-Muqtataf*, Part. 2, 1887, p. 77.
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- ¹⁰⁰ See on this subject: A. Soufan., *Historiographical Overview on the Post Conflict Reconstruction in Syria: From the mid-19th Century to the 2011 Crisis*, WHC, 2016. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/events/1286/>
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- ¹⁰² Harisson, Rodney., "Forgetting to remember, remembering to forget: late modern heritage practices, sustainability and the 'crisis' of accumulation of the past", In: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol.19-6 2013.
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