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| CITY OF EXILES |

THE NEW ARAB INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL

The exile hubs used to be Paris, London and Istanbul, but a decade after the Arab Spring, Berlin has become the city of choice for a new generation of cultural elites. *By Alex Pichaloff*

Leila Chammaa was never well accustomed to being in Berlin's most active and popular scene. As a student in Islamic and Arabic studies at the HU in the late 1980s, she decided to offer her services to teach an Arabic class at the Volkshochschule. "I called up and they said, 'The Volkshochschule in Wilmsdorf is the only one that has an Arabic course... but that's enough, we don't need anymore!'" Not to be perturbed, after finishing uni in the early 1990s, the now 55-year-old – who was born in Beirut but moved to Berlin at the age of 10 – started translating literary works from Arabic into German. Yet, her skills still weren't in high demand. "At that time, interest in Arabic literature was marginal. There were really very few people interested in it, and income-wise, I thought I had studied the wrong thing," she laughs.

This situation continued until 2001, when the 9/11 attacks sparked some interest. How-

ever, Chammaa says this was more based on people wanting to read Arabic books to understand what had happened in New York rather than taking a genuine interest in Arab literary movements. Another decade passed before she noticed a definite change. Following the backlash to the series of uprisings against authoritarian governments in the Middle East and North Africa that took place in late 2010 and 2011, which became known as the Arab Spring, many critics were forced to leave their respective countries. As a result, many Arabic speakers made their way to Berlin, bringing their love of literature with them. "All of a sudden a real scene emerged that had never before existed," Chammaa says. "There were times when I couldn't attend an event or reading because I was at some other event somewhere else in town. Before that, if there were one or two Arabic literature events a year then it was really great."

Chammaa wasn't the only one to observe the shift. While visiting Berlin in the autumn of 2011, Egyptian-Australian sociologist Amro Ali got a taste of the city's then still developing Arab cultural scene. When he returned in 2015 to take up a fellowship with the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, he'd noticed a visible change. "It was a combination of little things: you'd go to a theatre play, then to an art exhibition, then to a film screening," he says. "I was asked to moderate events. I saw a lot of things crystallise and show what they could be."

Arab Spring on the Spree

A lot had happened since Ali's first visit to Berlin four years earlier. The protests in the Arab world, which promised so much in 2011, had in many countries been crushed, in some cases brutally, and many of the people who were pushing for greater rights and freedoms ultimately found themselves pushed out of their own countries. Artists, writers, activists and other intellectuals were among those targeted by their regimes – and many ended up in Berlin. Then, as various conflicts spiralled out of control across the region, German Chancellor Angela Merkel offered temporary residency to asylum seekers. More than one million people, chiefly from Syria, entered the country in 2015 alone.

While there was horror and tragedy in their homelands, and trauma for many who had made the journey to Europe, the growth in Berlin's Arab population led to an unprecedented outburst of cultural activity. In addition to more plays, films and art shows, there were a number of firsts – from *Abwab*, the first European-based Arabic language online newspaper, established in May 2016, to

Baynatna, the city's first ever Arabic library, which opened that same year. Although the city had long boasted significant Arab populations, notably from Palestine and Lebanon, it was now emerging as a cultural powerhouse in the Arab exile world.

Ali was observing developments with his sociologist's eye. One day, while sitting in a Kreuzberg café, he spotted a book on the table. It was *City of Exiles*, a historical work by Berlin-based Australian author Stuart Braun. "I saw the title and just linked it to everything," Ali says, "because that's what Berlin is – a city of exiles. So I just connected this idea to all of these events that were going on around me." This set him in motion, and he penned the essay *On the Need to Shape the Arab Exile Body in Berlin*, which was published in January 2019 by the online magazine *dis:orient*. Ali's essay made the case that, just as New York had been a sanctuary for Jewish exiles seeking refuge from Nazi Germany in the 1930s and Paris had provided a safe haven to Latin American intellectuals fleeing their dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s, Berlin had become the city of choice for Arab intellectual exiles driven from their countries. While many would have expected cities with large Arab populations like London, Paris, New York and Istanbul to become the post-2011 exile hubs, Ali argues that Berlin, with its thriving cultural scene and unique history of political protest, had usurped them all. "The thing about Berlin is that there is a young, mobile population. This is different to the old cities of Paris, New York and London, which are more rigid, too expensive and too institutionalised – they're very old school.



tor behind the city's transformation into a major Arab exile hub, it wasn't the only cause. For example, around 80,000 Syrians had come to Germany between the start of the conflict in 2011 and the end of 2014. The government also actively granted asylum to specific individuals suffering from persecution – these included people such as Syrian human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni and Turkish journalist Can Dündar. Another recipient of special help from the authorities was the poet and journalist Ramy al-Asheq. The son of a Palestinian refugee

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There just isn't this rigorous movement that you can get in Berlin." Ali is far from the only one sharing that sentiment. "Traditionally, the Mecca for Syrians was Paris due to the affiliations of being a former French colony," says 43-year-old Syrian filmmaker, playwright and poet Liwaa Yazji. "A lot of the intellectuals used to have good connections and a foothold there. But broadly speaking, I feel like the older generation went to France and the younger generation is coming to Berlin."

A poet's flight to freedom

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After reporting on anti-government demonstrations in 2011, al-Asheq was arrested by the authorities and spent a short time in prison. Following his release, he fled to Jordan in 2012. He lived there under four fake identities for two years in order to avoid the authorities, before receiving an artist residency with the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Cologne in 2014. As someone who was born stateless, however, his travel to Germany wasn't straightforward, and despite being protected by Germany and having secured permission to leave Jordan, al-Asheq was nervy as his plane took off from Amman. "I was scared until the moment I landed at Düsseldorf Airport. I was worried that the plane could turn back at any time and they would send me back to Jordan," he says. "And it was my first time in a plane. I had a really strong headache from the air pressure. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to complain, I didn't want to shout, even though I had a massive headache. I didn't want to draw anyone's attention. I just kept silent and thought, 'Fuck it!'" he adds, laughing. After two and half years in Cologne, he moved to Berlin at the end of 2017. With wide-framed glasses and curly black hair, al-Asheq cuts a striking figure, but it is his work that has captured the most attention. Since 2014 he has published five poetry books in Arabic, some of which have been translated into German and English, while his work has appeared in numerous anthologies. Al-Asheq has also supported intercultural projects: he co-founded the German-Arabic culture magazine *Fann*, has worked as a curator at the Literaturhaus Berlin and helped set up the Arabisch-deutsche Literaturtage (Arab-German literature days) festival.

"Where everything was happening"

While many, like al-Asheq, saw Germany as a refuge, others had the liberty to choose Berlin. One of these was Liwaa Yazji. Born in Moscow to Syrian parents, and later raised in Aleppo and Damascus, Yazji actually turned down an opportunity to stay in New York

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while undertaking a three-month residency at the famous literary institution, the Poets House, in 2015. “It was very welcoming if I wanted to stay longer,” she says. “But I felt it was too far away from where everything was happening for me.” That place where everything was happening was Berlin. That year was the high watermark of Germany's refugee intake, and Yazji – although not a refugee herself – had plans to create a television drama series based on the experiences of the refugees being housed in the airport terminal at Tempelhof. As a regular visitor to Europe for film and theatre events, she was eligible for a frequent traveller visa in the Schengen zone. After receiving a three-year visa, Yazji moved to Berlin.

Unlike many of those initially housed at Tempelhof, Yazji isn't completely exiled from her country. While she is a critic of Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government, her mother Salwa Abdullah is currently Syria's minister for labour and social affairs, giving her story a particularly complicated twist. “I still have the possibility of going back, but each time it's a risk,” she says. “Despite my family's political orientation, I still have to be very careful when I'm there, basically stay put, or, if I do anything, watch every one of my steps,” she explains. “Last time I was there shooting a film, I started getting messages from the security services saying that I had to stop what I was doing. It was getting dangerous, so I left the country.” While she might not be able to work freely in Syria, the country still remains the overwhelming inspiration for her work. Her play *Goats*, inspired by the goats given to the families of dead Syrian soldiers as compensation, debuted at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2017, while *Heim*, her TV series based on the refugees at Tempelhof, received a grant from the Doha Film Institute and is currently being produced in Germany. “Perhaps I'm addressing people here, but I don't want



Liwaa Yazji.

Florian Reimann

to stop addressing people in Syria. So I feel like that's a very important orientation for me, and the place where I get all the images for my work,” she says.

Crafting a community

While Berlin has been feted as the new cultural centre for Arab exiles, and in the process been compared to famous intellectual émigré communities of the past, there are some key factors that differentiate it from its historical predecessors. “For these groups in the past, I felt like there was an ideology that really united them as a bloc, but I don't see that here,” says Yazji. “I don't see literary salons, I don't see meetings,

this huge number of authors or artists isn't always a positive thing. Many of the authors, artists, cultural workers – they don't really work together, they fight each other. They think that the success of the other is their own defeat.” Much of this, according to al-Asheq, has to do with the traumatic situations that many came from. “We are coming from a defeated society, we shouldn't forget that. People from defeated societies have a difficult and very special way of defending themselves: a mechanism where they fight for their own existence,” he says. “And that's that's understandable, that's very normal, I would say. We're coming from a catastrophe, we still have trauma and we want to achieve something.” But this isn't the only challenge, with al-Asheq noting that after a spike in interest in 2015, support for many Arabic cultural initiatives has dropped in recent years, leaving many without funding.

Despite the challenges, Ali thinks that collaboration is essential if this exile community is to live up to its potential. He believes that the city's Arab intellectuals need to get out of “auto-pilot” and develop a shape, form or mandate in order to pool their creative energy and direct it towards a common goal. “There is a lot of talent in Berlin, and it can be harnessed for something,” he argues. “It doesn't have to be ‘Step A leads to Step B’; it's more about creating conditions for something better to come about. It could be a school of thought, it could be an ideational movement or philosophy.” And although it has been 10 years since protestors first took to the streets across the Arab world to demand reforms and greater freedoms, Ali thinks the spirit of the movement is alive and well, and that the exiles in Berlin could play their part in someday realising its goals. “What happened in 2011 is still with us.

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I don't see us forming clubs and working together and so on. I see more individual experiences. Of course, some people are working together or trying to create something mutual, but in general we don't present ourselves to the city as one thing, as happened with those old intellectual diasporas.” Al-Asheq agrees, noting that Germany's 200-plus Arab writers would be numerous enough to create an influential association or writers' union in exile. “But having

There was a movement from below, which is democratic, pluralistic, opens the spaces for different groups and tries to make the world better,” he says. “Political ideas that are born into the world never die, they take a detour. Maybe the ideas, visions and practices we are discussing now might go forgotten for 20 years, but then circumstances could change and they may be brought back to life. It's got to be there, it's got to be present, even if it's just collecting dust.” ■