Eye of the storm

The upstart newspaper Taraf has thrust itself into the centre of Turkish politics with a series of courageous challenges to the military and the government. Circulation is up – but the advertisers are gone. **Suzy Hansen** reports from Istanbul on the perils of publishing in the age of Ergenekon

The Turkish holding company Alarko, a major conglomerate of energy, construction and tourism firms, resides in a pink former psychiatric hospital up in the hills off Istanbul's stunning shore road, on the European side of the city, across from a seaside dance club called Reina. In December, I went to Alarko to meet with its chairman, a Turkish-Jewish businessman named Ishak Alaton. Alaton founded Alarko in 1954 with another Turkish Jew, Uzeyir Garih, and the two ran the firm together until Garih was stabbed to death in 2001 by a young soldier while visiting a cemetery in Istanbul. At the time the murder was seen as the random act of a violent psychopath, absent religious or political motivation. But the week that I went to see Alaton, prosecutors reopened the case, suggesting that the murder was linked to a mysterious ultranationalist gang called Ergenekon, whose intrigues have captivated and horrified Turks for the last year.

The cab driver who took me to Alarko was a Kurdish man born in the southeastern city of Mardin. In the privacy of the car, he delivered a long rant about the injustices the Kurds had suffered at the hands of the state, which in Turkey essentially means the military. The massive Ergenekon indictment contained allegations that the group had been connected to a secret intelligence unit of the military police called JITEM, which some say has carried out extrajudicial killings in Kurdish areas. He talked about *Taraf*, a one-year-old, left-liberal newspaper, which had distinguished itself by relentlessly covering the Ergenekon gang. The goofy but handsome driver, a John Turturro kind of guy, threw his hands around, laughing a lot. He had an excellent sense of comedic timing, and punctuated his sentences with dramatic pauses and heavy syllables, as if he admired the oeuvre of Chris Rock. "*Taraf* is good, but I mean, Ergenekon isn't news to *me*," he said. "All Kurds know about Ergenekon." (Pause.) "We've all known about Ergenekon since we were children." (Pause.) "Kurdish *babies* know about Ergenekon. Everyone's JITEM. Everyone."

Taraf, continued on **4** ➔

review the saloon

Where freedom isn't free

Small, patriotic pieces of cardboard are common coin for US military airmen

The price of freedom is a matter open to some debate. Thomas Jefferson claimed it was eternal vigilance. But it turns out the price of freedom – or at least its exchange value – is 25 cents.

That's the case, at least, on the base used by the US Air Force in Abu Dhabi, an oasis of Americanism whose precise location is not meant to be a matter of public knowledge. Behind the well-guarded entrance, dollars are exchanged as freely as they are from Alabama to Wyoming. The problem arises when an airman needs change for the drink he just bought at The Thirsty Camel, the on-base bar, or for the greasy slice of pepperoni wolfed down afterwards at the Pizza Hut. US coins are generally not in circulation on the base, so the solution is simple – the Air Force makes its own.

Just as UAE supermarkets sometimes give shoppers chewing gum when they have no change, customers on the base are given small "pogs" – discs of thin cardboard that stand in for the different denominations of American coins, which can be redeemed only at certain base retail outlets.

It's not unusual for the images on currency to veer towards national self-promotion. American coins display the heads of dead presidents, monuments and the national bird. British banknotes feature images of the Queen and of civilisation-advancing Englishmen like Charles Darwin. And Emirati legal tender features falcons, dhows and – on the 20 dirham note – an image of the Dubai Creek Golf Club.

But the US military-base pogs may be – and perhaps this is not so surprising – among the most bombastic, patriotic coins ever produced.

The face of one 25 cent pog features not a historic American figure, but the proud words "Operation Iraqi Freedom", boldly printed over the image of two seemingly shell-shocked soldiers standing in the rubble of a bombed building, with flames still licking the burnt-out wreckage. The soldiers, wearing full combat gear, hold machine guns at their side.

Freedom, judging by this coin, looks like a mess, and is worth considerably less than the $416 billion (Dh1.5 trillion) the Pentagon confirmed the Iraq War had cost up to January 2008.

Another 25 cent pog – whose value amounts to a bit less than one dirham, for those minding the freedom exchange rate – commemorates Operation Enduring Freedom, the US military operation in Afghanistan. It shows two soldiers, one male and one female, staring into the distance of the desert, as if attending roll-call in a blockbuster war film.

A third 25 cent coin, which can be exchanged at the Pizza Hut, shows three young boy scouts, probably from the 1950s, standing in front of a memorial to fallen soldiers. Other pogs substitute for 5 cent and 10 cent coins, although those are more rare.

Such is the fascination with the pogs in the outside world they can sell online for more than eight times their value on a base, even though they are not legal tender in the civilian economy. One pack of 12 Middle Eastern-themed pogs, which includes one five-cent pog featuring a dolphin equipped with a spy-camera to scout under ships, is on sale for $17 on an aficionado website. Pogs for the British Army feature camels and famous footballers such as Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard. But they generally sell for much less than their US equivalents online.

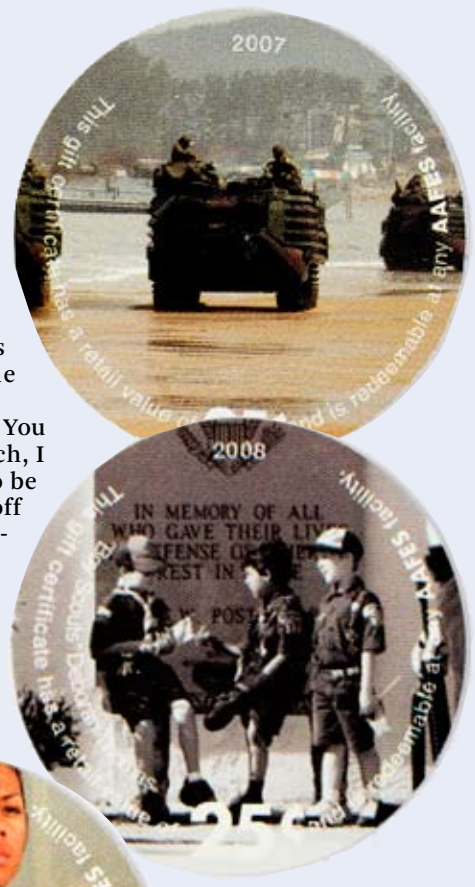
The discs were first used on military bases during the Vietnam War. But the word "pog" originated in Hawaii, from a children's game that used bottle tops from Passionfruit, Orange and Guava (POG) drinks.

Why not use actual coins? Apparently, cardboard pogs are cheaper to ship around the world than considerably heavier metal dimes, quarters and nickels. That, and they seem to serve a motivational purpose.

"They are strange little nuggets of propaganda," said one southern American man working on the base. "In everything you do, there is always some little reminder of the agenda.

"I find it amusing to a degree. You know, I am buying a sandwich, I don't need to be reminded to be a patriot all the time, so lay off for two minutes," he said. "Nobody is going to forget the mission."

✶ Roland Hughes



Rich-Joseph Facun / The National

Not on my watch

Looking for a Rolex embossed with a bureaucratic seal? Try Abu Dhabi's second-hand gold shops

It's a collector's dream: a delicate, vintage, gold Piaget watch, set with sparkling diamonds, from the early 1980s. Very rare, Habib assures me – especially the markings on the watch-face. A close inspection reveals the colourful, intricate logo of the Gulf Cooperation Council, commemorating a summit held in Bahrain in 1982, a year after the council was formed.

Dozens of other pieces in Habib's locked display case also appear to have special markings: some embossed with flags and horses, others with police-, ministry- and government department crests.

Frequently given as gifts to long-serving employees, customised and commemorative watches often wind up in gold shops in the capital, where high-end horological pieces can fetch tens of thousands of dirhams. The asking price for the Piaget, for instance, is Dh25,000.

Some of the watch owners might part with their Concords or Ebels because they need the cash, says Habib, an Iranian manager at one store. Others, like the former owner of one particular never-worn Rolex, can't find any use for their gift. Muslim men are not supposed to wear gold, Habib explains, holding up the Dh20,000 bright yellow watch with a police logo stamped on the face. "It's a very good piece," the shop manager says, "but he's not going to give a gold watch to his son or another close relative, so he had to sell it."

Rolexes are preferred gifts here, Habib says, while other brands are more prized in Saudi Arabia and Oman. But in all three countries, your status is reflected in the watch you receive. The brand of timepiece an employee is given may be determined by his place in the pecking order of an organisation, or by the sector in which he works.

For instance, technical-looking Breitling watches, known for their association with the aviation sector, are often bequeathed to pilots or long-serving air force workers. Top end watches often go to high-ranking Emirati officials and to "Yemenis, Sudanese, Egyptians, Mauritanians who have worked a long time in the army," Habib says. Less expensive embossed timepieces are sometimes given to graduating police or army cadets.

Other people who pawn their watches – like one woman who brought in a diamond-bejewelled piece with Sheikh Zayed's image on the face – have worked directly for high-profile families. "Sometimes maids or drivers are given the watches as gifts," says Habib. "But if my salary is low, like a couple of thousand a month, how can I wear a Dh20,000 watch? I have to sell it."

> *If my salary is low, like a couple of thousand a month, how can I wear a Dh20,000 watch? I have to sell it*

Though many people pawn legitimate gifts for quick access to cash, the stores are also wary of other possible, more unsavory reasons behind a hasty bid to sell. A system has been developed by the police to trace stolen items: if you don't have an original receipt for the watch you're selling, a quick visit to the on-site CID officer is required before the sale will be accepted. A picture of the seller's ID and the item are taken, filed electronically and compared against reports of thefts. Several stolen items have apparently been recovered this way.

Every now and then, someone from the wealthy classes – who clearly doesn't need the extra cash – will also sell off a commemorative watch. For the super-wealthy, Habib speculates, there might be a stigma attached to wearing a luxury watch embossed with a government department's logo.

"Maybe they feel that people would ask whether they could afford to buy one for themselves," says Habib.

There is a healthy market for the second-hand watches – composed of about 70 per cent foreigners and 30 per cent Emirati collectors, Habib estimates. But business has not been immune to the credit crunch.

"If I said yes, business is perfect, you would know it's not true," Habib says frankly. "But the watches still sell."

✶ Zoi Constantine

!!! the big idea

To its detractors, Egypt's government appears to be working with the US and Israel against the Palestinians, an impression not dispelled by pictures like this one of Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni enjoying a friendly meeting with Hosni Mubarak. Amr Dalsh / Reuters

Revive la resistance

Israel's assault on Gaza may cripple Hamas, but it will embolden those in Arab politics who would rather fight than talk, writes Nathan Field

The bloody carnage from Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip has dominated the Arab media since the bombs began to drop on Saturday, and the rising death toll has filled Arab streets with rage – especially in countries aligned with the United States. In Egypt, huge protests have erupted with an intensity not seen in recent years.

But Israel's air strikes, taking Hamas as their putative target, have highlighted a rift in the Arab world that has been evident since Hamas defeated Fatah in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. It is, at its root, a battle of approaches – a conflict between the negotiators and the rejectionists, between those Fatah supporters who blame Hamas for initiating conflict with Israel, and those Hamas backers who paint Fatah and its Arab allies as complicit in Israeli atrocities.

The "negotiation" front, led by Egypt – the first Arab state to make peace with Israel – advocates peaceful dialogue with the Jewish state. Since the late 1980s, this has been the path preferred by the Palestinian leadership, which supported the Oslo framework and sought a two-state solution through a peace process sponsored by the United States.

The rejectionists – Hamas and its allies – were sidelined during the false optimism of the Oslo years, but they did not disappear. The advocates of resistance argue that without the threat of continued violence Israel has no incentive to make compromises for peace; as the Oslo process ground to a halt, and collapsed entirely after 2000, support for the resistance camp grew among Palestinians and among the broader Arab public, particularly in Egypt and Jordan. The second Palestinian intifada was slowly but steadily crushed by Israel, but this did not discredit Hamas, which defeated Fatah at the polls and then violently took complete control of the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli attack on Gaza – no matter how it is framed by Israel – seems likely to mark a turning point in the contest between these loose alliances, tipping the scales definitively toward Hamas and company. For the foreseeable future, the Arab debate on Israel is going to be dominated by the self-styled forces of resistance – and if not by Hamas, then by something even more extreme.

The Hamas victory in the 2006 elections posed a serious challenge to Fatah and its allies in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. All were committed to the Oslo approach and the pursuit of negotiations with Israel on the basis of the agreements signed in the 1990s.

The problem was perhaps most acute for the Egyptians: 30 years of treaties and billions of dollars in American aid give Egypt very little room to manoeuvre, even if it were inclined to do so. But the government is under extreme pressure from its citizens to use its influence to push for Palestinian statehood. This was an easier task when Fatah was in power: both parties agreed on the means and the ends, negotiations concluding in a two-state solution. But Hamas, which now dominates Palestinian politics, is not formally committed to either – and most Egyptians support Hamas's right to resistance and its use of suicide attacks, and do not disagree with its refusal to recognise Israel.

That Hamas represents the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood poses another sharp dilemma for the Egyptian regime, which refuses to acknowledge the Ikhwan in Egypt. Talking with the Palestinian Brotherhood creates an awkward precedent, and co-operation between Egypt and the Gazan leadership has been limited only to security arrangements, with a series of conflicts over border closures.

To its detractors, therefore, the Mubarak government appears to be working with the US and Israel against the Palestinians – an impression not dispelled by the pictures published last week of Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni enjoying a friendly handshake with her Egyptian counterpart in Cairo shortly before the attack began. As one prominent Egyptian intellectual recently told me: "nothing damages the legitimacy of the Egyptian regime more than its policy towards Palestine."

Almost three years after Hamas won the elections, the Palestinians are more divided than ever, unable to form a unified front, much less discuss negotiations with Israel. As the response to the current attack shows, the Arab media – and regional governments – are divided as well, with each side accusing the other of obstructing unity.

Among those who blame the Arab states friendly to the US – especially Egypt – for the current crisis are pan-Arab newspapers like *Al Quds al Arabi* and the Egyptian opposition paper *Al Dostor*. Their common theme is that the Egyptian regime has sold out to Washington and Tel Aviv. Hardly a week goes by that Fahmy Huwedi, one of Egypt's most influential columnists, does not repeat some variation of this theme in *Al Dostor*. One late October column, for example, sarcastically suggested that the Egyptian government treats the leaders of Hamas with scorn but opens its arms to "every Tom, Dick and Harry with a pro-US orientation." He noted that the Hamas prime minister, Ismail Haniyeh, managed only a brief meeting with Egypt's foreign minister during a recent visit to Cairo. By contrast, Huwedi wrote, the Lebanese Christian politician and former warlord Samir Geagea, a member of the pro-US March 14 coalition "whose hands are covered with Palestinian blood", received a full audience with Mubarak.

Fatah – and its more moderate approach – are not without support in the media, most prominently from pro-Saudi media outlets like the London pan-Arab newspaper *Asharq al Awsat*, the Al Arabiya satellite channel, and Cairo's semi-official *Al Ahram* newspaper. They blame the conflict on Hamas, arguing that its intransigence and unrealistic unwillingness to compromise are at the root of the impasse. But the rising tally of dead Palestinians makes such arguments irrelevant – they are drowned out by calls for solidarity that surely benefit Hamas.

Even before Israel's attack on Gaza the pro-resistance crowd was radiating confidence that long-term trends were working in its favour, and Hamas – which appeared surprised by the overwhelming Israeli response to its recent Qassam launches – certainly seemed to believe this was the case. Yet this shift in the direction of the resistance is likely to be accelerated by the Israeli onslaught.

Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2009, and they will present a further opportunity for Hamas to solidify its control of Palestinian politics. If Hamas, already in control of the parliament, can take more seats and the presidency, the remaining moderate Arab regimes will be unable to ignore them.

At the same time, regional shifts in the balance of power appear to favour Hamas. In a recent column, Hussam Tamem, the editor of IslamOnline, a pro-Islamist website, argued that Hamas's decision to align itself with Syria and Iran was a sign of the changing times, a reflection that Egypt at present has little to offer as an ally. The Egyptian regime, burdened with a poor economy and preoccupied with a possible succession crisis, is weak and unable to resist American pressure. With the Obama administration expected to seek a rapprochement with Iran and Syria, Tamem wrote, Hamas has bet on the right horse.

Hamas, for its part, actively sought an escalation in violence at the close of the six-month ceasefire, perhaps with an eye toward the victory of the Likud hardliner Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel's upcoming elections – which would surely lend credence to the argument that no negotiations with Israel are possible. Well before the expiration of the ceasefire Hamas leaders made their opposition to its renewal clear, with the expectation that a return to violence would create conditions to bolster their support and diminish Fatah.

The mood today in the Palestinian territories is one of anger and desire for revenge. Fatah has been pushed to the margins of Palestinian politics and seems likely to suffer a permanent dent to its reputation. So far the widespread, though perhaps predictable, consensus in the Arabic media is that Hamas is the chief beneficiary.

The moderate Arab regimes, according to Abdel Bari Atwan, the editor of *Al Quds al Arabi*, have lost the most from this week's carnage – and, it must be said, Egypt is foremost among them. On Tuesday alone protests were reported outside Egyptian embassies in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

The fury of the protesters was given voice by the Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who called openly for the Egyptian people to reject their government's policies in Gaza – an unprecedented public attack that brought harsh criticism from Egypt. But most Egyptians prefer Nasrallah to their own leaders, and his salvo will only further damage the regime's popularity.

Egypt, ironically enough, had been attempting in recent months to set up a rapprochement with Hizbollah as a means of increasing its influence in Lebanon, but those plans now seem a distant dream.

Sometimes the best advice is "be careful what you wish for". Israel may manage to destroy the Hamas infrastructure in Gaza and seriously damage its ability to fight back, which may in turn further divide the Palestinians. But it could also open the door for factions more extreme than Hamas to hijack the mantle of resistance, including those that share the worldview of al Qa'eda. Given the anger coursing through the Arab world, they would not have to search hard for new recruits.

Nathan Field is a journalist based in Cairo and Washington.

The advocates of resistance argue that without the threat of continued violence Israel has no incentive to make compromises for peace

the tangled web

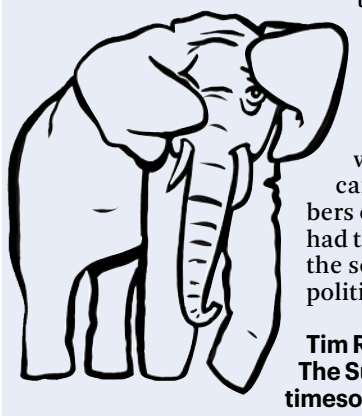
Republicans shamed by CD parody

A leading contender to become chairman of the Republican Party has left senior officials horrified after he distributed a CD featuring a parody song called *Barack the Magic Negro*.

At a time when the party seeks to recover from heavy electoral defeats in November – and amid calls that it should reach out to younger and ethnically diverse voters – the emergence of the parody, sung to the tune of *Puff the Magic Dragon*, has left many Republicans cringing.

Chip Saltsman, a former leader of Tennessee Republicans, who is seeking to take over the party's national committee, sent the CD to party members as a Christmas gift. But unlike him, few found it funny.

The ditty, written by Paul Shanklin, a conservative parodist, alludes to an opinion piece penned by the black writer David Ehrenstein in the *Los Angeles Times* last year headlined Obama the Magic Negro. In the article the author argued that voting for the "warm and unthreatening" Mr Obama helped whites to alleviate guilt over the country's past racial injustices. The song has been played by Rush Limbaugh on his conservative talk radio show. "Barack the Magic Negro," it begins, "made guilty whites feel good/They'll vote for him and not for me/Cos he's not from the hood."



Mr Saltsman, who managed Mike Huckabee's presidential campaign, was unrepentant, calling on Republican leaders to defend the CD. Members of the national committee, he said, had the "good humour and sense" to see the song as one of several "lighthearted political parodies".

Tim Reid
The Sunday Times
timesonline.co.uk

Publisher cancels holocaust memoir

Berkley Books, a unit of Penguin Books, has cancelled the planned February publication of *Angel at the Fence*, a memoir by Herman Rosenblat, a man who said he met his wife while a prisoner at a concentration camp during the Holocaust.

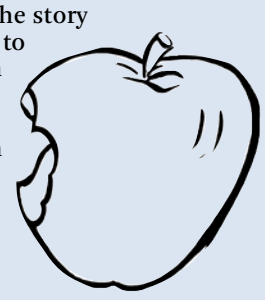
In Mr. Rosenblat's story, he said he met his wife Roma Radzicki while he was a teenage prisoner at a sub-camp of the Buchenwald camp in Germany. He wrote in *Angel at the Fence* that she was living on a nearby farm disguised as a Christian and would sneak him apples at the camp's fence, and that they reunited in Coney Island more than a decade later.

Several Holocaust scholars attacked the story in the blogosphere and in a recent article in *The New Republic*, noting among other things that it would have been impossible for the pair to meet at a fence because of the camp's layout.

In a statement Saturday evening, Berkley Books, which had earlier defended the book, said it decided to cancel publication "after receiving new information from Herman Rosenblat's agent, Andrea Hurst." Craig Burke, director of publicity at Berkley, declined to elaborate. Berkley said it was demanding that Rosenblat and Hurst return all money received so far.

Through Hurst, Rosenblat also released a statement Sunday: "To all who supported and believed in me and this story, I am sorry for all I have caused to you and every one else in the world."

He added: "Why did I do that and write the story with the girl and the apple, because I wanted to bring happiness to people, to remind them not to hate, but to love and tolerate all people. I brought good feelings to a lot of people and I brought hope to many. My motivation was to make good in this world."



Motoko Rich
New York Times
artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com

Locked and Loaded

From their newest label cut in June of '08 titled *Connected: Max Impact & Silver Wings*, comes one of The USAF Band's hottest new songs, *Locked and Loaded*. The song was written and recorded by members of the Band's rock group Max Impact who are directly back from playing the tune on deployment throughout the US Central Command Area Of Responsibility (AOR).

After a rigorous tour, Max Impact rocked out singing over 68 performances throughout the region. The band performed not only for deployed Airmen and other service members, but also performed for children at local orphanages, schools, and even for students at a music conservatory.

With powerful and dynamic lyrics, each stanza of *Locked and Loaded* is meant to exhibit the complete synergy of each imperative component of the fight. For instance, lyrics for the combat control Airmen who are calling in the drop says:

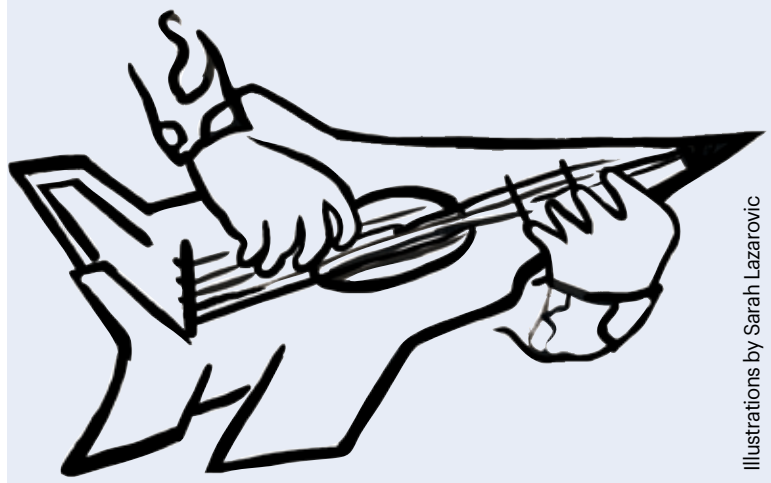
"Walk in the shade of the clouds at night,"
"Crawling in the dirt, calling an A-10 strike,"
"Dancing in the shadows, lives are on the line,"
"Bombs are gonna fall, just in time."

The lead singer for *Locked and Loaded,* MSgt Ryan Carson, whose favourite phrase at the beginning of each concert is, "We're going to rock your face off!" started out as an Opera Major at the University of Wyoming when the Air Force picked him up. Carson wanted to help the Airmen focus on why you do what you do for the Air Force.

"I told the guys in the band, 'Don't ever take our job for granted, because you could save a life tonight,'" said Carson. "There might be somebody out there tonight that doesn't want to be here anymore, but if we give them a little piece of home, and a little bit of encouragement, then they remember all those people who love them back home, and the way life really is, and they might just change their mind."

Gripping and compelling to their deployed audiences, one Army soldier told singer MSgt Ryan Carson after the concert. "I'll be doing my morning PT to this one. Your iPod is your weapon over there, if you don't have it you're lost."

Joseph Fordham
airforcelive.blogspot.com



Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic

review

th 39

Number of articles in Turkish law that restrict speech

In Turkey, one's newspaper is a bit like one's football team, and many old, established Turkish companies probably wouldn't have Taraf delivered to their offices

"*Taraf* is doing something very precious," said Soli Ozel, a professor at Bilgi University and columnist at the newspaper Sabah. "By and large, they have been able to set the agenda in the country."

"We now have a readership," Yasemin Congar says, "which is not only leftists and urban youth, or only conservatives or liberals, or only the Kurds or Turks, but all of these people."

→ **Taraf,** continued from **1**

But what Kurdish babies take for granted, many Turks only half-believe, and foreigners are inclined to dismiss entirely. This year, *Taraf*, as if spinning a serial novella on Turkish violence, may have single-handedly forced every Turk to reckon with the mounting evidence.

Ergenekon is, as the Turks beautifully call it, the *derin devlet* – the "deep state" – a shadowy force apparently connected to the army, plying the strings of Turkish power. The idea of a deep state has been around since the 1970s, but this year the Ergenekon mafia has been formally accused of committing crimes in the name of neo-nationalism, secularism, and anti-Kurdish sentiment. The allegations include everything from the assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink to plotting a coup against the ruling Islamic conservative AK Party. The Turkish media have been understandably preoccupied with the endless stream of sensational revelations emerging from the trial, but *Taraf*, an upstart daily founded by a book publisher and a team of liberal journalists, has done more than any other paper to place Ergenekon front and centre.

In Turkey, one's newspaper is a bit like one's football team, and many old, established Turkish companies probably wouldn't have *Taraf* delivered to their offices. In some circles, that would simply look leftist, anti-establishment, bad. When I met with Alaton, however, he had a copy on his desk. The paper had been painfully digging into his partner's murder case, but no matter. "I support *Taraf*'s existence," Alaton said, "because I think it's a very good contribution to democracy." Alaton is known for his progressive views – he founded TESEV, one of Turkey's most important liberal think tanks – and at age 81, he has been witness to his country's many undemocratic episodes; his memory is long. When I asked why Turkish corporations had recently refused to advertise in *Taraf*, I was not entirely surprised when he replied, "They are afraid."

Taraf's struggle for survival in some ways mirrors Turkey's awkward lurch toward full democracy. During its first year, the paper's unprecedented challenges to the military, and then the government, have scared off advertisers, even as *Taraf*'s readership has grown and rival columnists have embraced the paper as the "hope" of Turkish journalism.

In the often unreliable world of Turkish newspapers, *Taraf* distinguished itself by asking ugly questions: about the military's performance against the militant separatists of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and about the army's dominant role in Turkish politics; about the prime minister's commitment to human rights; and of course, about Ergenekon. The prelude to true democratic reform, the paper seemed to insist, was a truly open and free platform for spirited debate.

"*Taraf* has probably enormously contributed to Turkey's relative democratisation over the past year," said Halil Berktay, a Turkish public intellectual and professor of history at Sabanci University who contributes a column to *Taraf* twice a week. "It has been like a flash of lightning."

Taraf owes its boldness to a luxury that is increasingly rare – and not just in Turkey: an independent owner who does not interfere with the work of his editors. *Taraf*'s founder Basar Arslan, a 40-year-old bookstore owner and publisher, wasn't particularly active in politics before launching *Taraf*, and he still shies away from the public eye. (He did not respond to questions for this story.) But according to his editors, he had always wanted to own a newspaper – and he called up a few of his friends to recruit them to produce a small daily that represented their liberal views, what he envisioned as "a very prestigious, independent paper," according to Yasemin Congar, an editor, who added: "Now he loves it."

But at first they thought he was crazy. Three heavyweights signed on anyway: the bestselling novelist and columnist Ahmet Altan, and two veteran journalists, Congar and Alev Er.

In Turkey, a large segment of the mainstream media is controlled by one man, Aydin Dogan, who owns the popular papers *Hurriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Radikal*, as well as TV stations and various other business concerns. *Hurriyet* and *Milliyet* are more nationalist; *Radikal* more liberal. "We have seen an increasing cartelisation of the press and much more organic links between the press and political factions," said Berktay. "It's the Turkish version of the Berlusconi phenomenon. In fact, if Dogan came to power it would be a very precise parallel."

Zaman, another heavy-hitting popular paper backed by followers of the Islamic leader Fethullah Gulen, is an exquisitely designed broadsheet catering to religious conservatives, and is largely supportive of AKP. (They boast one of the highest circulations, according to one source, at around 650,000; *Hurriyet* sells about 550,000 copies, *Milliyet* 200,000 and *Radikal* only 40,000). A fifth major paper, *Sabah*, was recently sold to a holding firm, Calik, seen as close to AKP. *Cumhuriyet*, a small, text-heavy, serious paper, serves the old-guard secular elite. And there are many, many others – too many to characterise – but few of them bucked the status quo with the same intellectual gravitas as *Taraf*.

Language tips off a paper's readership: *Zaman*, more religious, will employ Arabic words; *Cumhuriyet*, a nationalist paper, will use as much Turkish as the language allows. You could divide how people vote roughly according to the newspapers they read – AKP die-hards might read *Zaman*, secularists prefer *Hurriyet* and *Cumhuriyet*. Leftists favour *Radikal*, which boasts some of the country's best liberal columnists, though some have decamped – along with their readers – to *Taraf*.

Taraf eschews the paeans to the Turkish state typical of the other papers and hews to an antinationalist line. Yasemin Congar pointed out that even on national holidays, when all the other papers drape their front pages with red flags and photos of Turkey's founder-hero Ataturk, *Taraf* abstains from patriotic displays. "It's slightly irreverent in tone," said Jenny White, a professor of anthropology at Boston University who has written many books on Turkey and lives on-and-off in Istanbul. "In a framework where counter-discourse can get you hauled into court or worse, humour and wit may be the only 'safe' forms." "I'm amazed it hasn't been shut down," she added.

Instead, *Taraf* has continued to grow. "*Taraf* managed to reach a circulation which went over 90,000 at one point, but also managed to get a permanent readership of between 50-60,000," Congar said. "At the beginning what looked realistic to me was 35,000 at most. We now have a readership which is not only leftists and urban youth, or only conservatives or liberals, or only the Kurds or Turks, but all of these people. There is a good segment of religious conservatives in our readership which was a surprise because we're not religious or conservative."

Taraf has also succeeded in attracting marquee names to its pages; writers like the esteemed intellectual Murat Belge; the *Economist*'s Turkey correspondent, Amberin Zaman; the prominent Armenian writer Etyen Mahcupyan; the founders of the clever activist group Young Civilians, Turgay and Yildiray Ogur; the columnist Gokhan Ozgun; and many others. Some of these writers are beloved figures in Turkey, and none are radicals, but they do represent a cross-section of the liberal establishment, the sort of people who might have lent their names to the recent high-profile petition-apology to Armenians for crimes during World War I.

"[*Taraf*] is oppositional simply on the grounds of democracy," said Berktay. "And that has been completely missing from Turkish society for the last 200 years. They are real democrats. I don't know what else to call them."

And indeed, people seem to have a hard time classifying *Taraf* – the word "leftist" in Turkey has been subjected to a number of contradictory interpretations. To Berktay, who is often described as the first Turkish historian to recognise the Armenian genocide, there is a common thread that unites those who support the EU as a way of assuring support for human rights, who support the rights of the Kurds, the right to wear headscarves, and the right to criticise the army for its political interventions. "The neo-nationalists in this country have created their own gravediggers," Berktay said. And *Taraf*, he continued, represents "a new morality."

Turks often must take sharply-drawn sides on complicated issues – you're either for the military or the government, for secularism or Islam, for headscarves or miniskirts, for Kurds or the Turks. In 2008, picking a team became at once more important and more confusing, and *Taraf*'s evolution as the voice of the left – as supporters, and then critics, of AKP – was a study in this volatility. "*Taraf* is doing something very precious," said Soli Ozel, a professor at Bilgi University and columnist at the newspaper *Sabah*. "By and large, they have been able to set the agenda in the country."

That agenda has twisted and turned dramatically since AKP, boasting a sparkly economic record and facing no respectable opposition, again soared to power in the July 2007 election. A religious man, Abdullah Gul, became president, and the staunchly secular military confronted reality: the pious guys had the money, and they were here to stay. Left-liberal intellectuals, largely lacking a political party, and charmed by AKP's European Union-looking promises and the opportunity for a real counterweight against the military establishment, threw their small, but high-minded support behind AKP. Here was an interesting alignment: liberals, religious conservatives, economy-first voters, and some Kurds, versus nationalists, secularists, Alevis (a beleaguered liberal Muslim sect that feels rightfully threatened by AKP's fervent Sunni Islam), and young, liberal-minded Turks who couldn't quite abide what they saw as Turkey's version of the American Christian Right.

AKP immediately pushed hard to allow women to wear headscarves on university campuses, a sticking point among the military elite and secularists determined to preserve Ataturk's legacy of laicism. Had AKP proved that all they really cared about was headscarves? Sometimes it seems all anyone cares about in Turkey is headscarves. But, it turned out that Turkish politics were *not*, in fact, all about headscarves, because soon enough came Ergenekon.

Ergenekon may be an unfamiliar word, and if foreign journalists haven't taken pains to write about it, that's because it's too hard to explain. Some Turks feel AKP's god-fearing minions have manufactured the Ergenekon myth to take down the secular establishment. For Americans like myself – with our cheerful tendency to dismiss everything hard and ugly as a "conspiracy theory" – Ergenekon mostly inspires incredulity. Could one loosely connected group of 86 people, hailing from various sectors of polite society, really be responsible for decades of assassinations, coup plots, and bombings?

Over the past year, Turks watched as ex-generals (real generals!), journalists (including old famous ones), and lawyers were hauled off to jail and charged with a vast right-wing conspiracy to wreak havoc on the nation. The 2500 page indictment read like A Recent History of Turkish Violence, and it seemed like every bad deed of the past 20 years was laid at the feet of Ergenekon. The journalist Andrew Finkel wrote

A scene from the paper's Kadikoy offices: "They are real democrats," the historian Halil Berktay says. "I don't know what else to call them."

A laundry list of ridiculous laws can be dispensed willy-nilly to shut someone up, and most of the targets are not figures of international renown whose trials attract the world's attention

1,189

Number of people charged with violations of Article 301, for "insulting the Turkish nation", in the first quarter of 2007

Yasemin Congar, deputy editor-in-chief of *Taraf*. "You hear it in journalism circles," the Turkish historian Halil Berktay said. "So many people admire and envy *Taraf*. They will say, 'Let's face it: If our informants brought us the same information from inside the military, we wouldn't have published it.'" Photographs by Kerem Uzel for The National

an astute column called, "Ergenekon ate my homework," and that's exactly how it felt. Worse, a terrifying list of new assassination targets turned up in the rubble of the whirlwind investigation: Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Orhan Pamuk, the journalist Fehmi Koru. Ergenekon's goal, the conventional wisdom went, was to foment so much chaos that the army would be forced to step in, stage a coup, and overthrow the AK Party.

Ultimately, the ongoing Ergenekon investigation was seen as a triumph over thuggery, neo-nationalism, and strident secularism. But it polarised secularists who thought the religious government was up to dirty tricks, and puzzled many others who felt the prosecution was out of control.

For a time *Taraf* seemed to break a new Ergenekon story every other day, and this too raised the eyebrows of sceptics. "I don't see a journalistic achievement," said one experienced Turkish journalist. "They just gobbled up what the police intelligence was leaking them regarding Ergenekon. In terms of challenging the state – sure, maybe [that is an achievement]," the journalist continued. "But they have gone overboard, and basically came across as a paper that is just out there to attack the military. In their reckless columns day in day out talking about how corrupt the military is, I didn't find responsible journalism."

Some months later, the judiciary, traditionally in line with the military, launched a closure case against the AKP, threatening to ban Erdogan and others from politics for "anti-secular activities." Turkish liberals, and most of the world, rallied around AKP in the name of democracy. AKP won, and the Turkish army appeared to be in retreat.

Taraf had positioned itself as a harsh critic of the military well before the Ergenekon story. In the fall of 2007, *Taraf* questioned the army's handling of a PKK attack on a military outpost called Daglica. The PKK captured eight Turkish soldiers, eventually released them, and the army, embarrassed, branded the soldiers as traitors who collaborated with the PKK. Daglica whipped the nation up into a fury of nationalistic and anti-Kurdish sentiment; photos of men waving guns and flags popped up in the papers. Attacks on PKK bases in Northern Iraq soon followed. *Taraf* would later publish leaked documents from inside the military suggesting that the army knew in advance of the Daglica attack.

"We really pursued that story, and when they decided that those eight soldiers were to be made scapegoats, we said 'no way,'" Congar said. "They were arrested and blamed for acting like agents for PKK. We didn't buy it. Other newspapers did not go after it at all," she went on. "We ask questions: What happened? Why wasn't the commander at the post that night? There are all kinds of things that indicated to us that there was a lack of security – we knew, we felt, that the commanders were responsible. I'm not saying necessarily it was a conspiracy altogether, but they did not take the necessary precautions to protect the soldiers."

According to Congar, doubting the preparedness or skill of the Turkish military was a line the press would not typically cross. "You hear it in journalism circles – so many people admire and envy *Taraf*," Berktay said. "They will say, 'Let's face it: If our informants brought us the same information from inside the military, we wouldn't have published it."

Cengiz Candar, a popular columnist for *Radikal*, recently wrote that *Taraf* had made *Radikal* a better newspaper; Yavuz Baydar in *Today's Zaman* and Hasan Cemal in *Milliyet* have echoed that enthusiasm.

But *Taraf* has not confined its criticism to the military. After Erdogan, falling behind on reforms required for EU membership, began to take a harder line on Kurdish issues, disenchantment with the AKP spread to the pages of *Taraf*. This fall, another PKK raid on a base called Aktutun caused the deaths of 17 Turkish soldiers, and *Taraf*, aided by more leaked documents, again pursued the military's strange failure to protect itself.

When the chief of staff of the army told them to watch it, Erdogan sided with him, and *Taraf*'s front page carried the devastating headline "His General's Prime Minister." It sounds harsh in English, but in Turkish it is a very clever manipulation of the possessive, and all the more damning. Erdogan was enraged. The long-building disappointment with the Liberals' Favorite Religious Prime Minister had reached an early peak.

But the AK Party's political dominance makes the media's thoughtful antagonism of the government all the more crucial. "In the Aktutun incident he did not do what he was supposed to do as the prime minister, which was to question the military rather than questioning us," Congar said. "And then on the Kurdish issue he started speaking like a Turkish nationalist, not a reformer, and started saying things that didn't embrace the Kurds. He has slowed down in the reforms again. But when you talk to his people they say, 'OK, there are things in the making and, yes, we are behind our promises,'" she said. "So we're sceptical, but it's not like we don't believe in him anymore. It's just our job to push him or to push anyone."

Who would go this far in attacking not only the army, but the government too? *Taraf*'s critics have proposed a series of theories about the paper's funding, suggesting that it is secretly backed by exiled Islamic leader Fethullah Gulen, a controversial figure at odds with the Turkish army, by the AKP government itself, or even by everybody's favourite scapegoat, the CIA. (I think George Soros is in there somewhere too.) Gulen, the philosophical leader of a large Islamic brotherhood, tends to pop up in Turkish gossip as an Oz-like character whose followers are thought to surreptitiously control the country. "Ah, Gulen is like Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects*," Soli Ozel said. "Everywhere at all times." But here in Turkey, home of something called the "deep state," suspicion rules the day.

It is hard – for a great many reasons – for Turks to believe that an independent newspaper can exist in Turkey, and this scepticism speaks volumes about Turkey's hard-to-explain but insidiously suffocating atmosphere.

In some ways, Turkey can feel as free as any other developed nation, but deeply-held fears readily strangle dissent. Memories of military coups and the steady creep of a violent neo-nationalism make ordinary Turks scared to do or say the wrong thing, and paranoid about ulterior motives.

This climate of fear goes beyond Turkey's notorious anti-speech laws, though those have a lot to do with it. The infamous Article 301, which prohibits "insulting the Turkish nation," swept Orhan Pamuk to a much-publicised trial and inflamed the European Union's theatrical exasperation with their wayward Muslim brothers. Before I moved to Turkey, many Americans asked me whether, for example, I'd be able to say the forbidden words "Armenian genocide" out loud. Perhaps they imagined goons would snatch me right off the pavement.

This is certainly not the case, though restricting free speech seems like a curiously obvious authoritarian flaw in a country supposedly desperate to prove its democratic bona fides to the West; taking a Nobel laureate to trial certainly makes Turkey an easy target. But the currents of Turkish nationalism run deep, and at the heart of this Kemalism is a concern for the fragility of the nation, which demands the jealous protection of the state at all times.

It's important to note that not only Article 301 puts Turks on trial. A laundry list of ridiculous laws can be dispensed willy-nilly to shut someone up, and most of the victims are not figures of international renown whose trials attract the world's attention.

This is why, when *Taraf* first appeared in the fall of 2007, one friend of mine, a young Kurdish academic, had no doubt as to its fate: "I don't see how a paper like this will last," he'd said. "They're going to shut it down." After all, in April 2007, the magazine *Nokta* was closed for publishing the diaries of a military officer who revealed coup plots within the army.

Taraf has not been shut down, and in November the paper celebrated its first birthday. On Istanbul's Asian side, in a neighbourhood called Kadikoy, nestled beside the Bosphorus and surrounded by the surreal lights of this undulating city, the staff gathered on the roof of their building. There was a bonfire, American R&B music, lots of smoking, a little dancing, beer on ice in large bins, and a cake the size of a table. Spirits were high, despite the apparent departure of the paper's corporate advertisers and what looked to be a period of looming financial crisis.

Taraf never had a great deal of advertising anyway, but these days their ads usually appear on a single page and say things like, "It's good that you exist, *Taraf*"; "I support *Taraf*"; or "Without a democratic press, there can't be democracy." *Taraf* had drummed up support for the paper by selling ads for 500 and 1000 lira (Dh2400) to largely anonymous individuals.

"Among the businessmen and women we know – those who are very supportive of the newspaper and call us up and praise us," Congar said, "when it comes to open support with advertising, they're very reluctant."

But neither the declining financial fortunes nor the threat of anti-speech trials seemed to faze the staff; everyone I spoke to at the paper insisted self-censorship was simply unheard of. "We just act like a bunch of crazies," Congar said, and didn't seem terribly afraid of the consequences. "There was the open threat of a raid [of the office] and I think it was stopped somehow by the government," she continued. "We receive e-mail threats, personal death threats – I do, and Ahmet does, and probably some of the columnists do, because we are more out there. Some of them we pursue through the prosecutor's office. Most of them we don't."

"I used to take the ferry [to Kadikoy] all the time, and Ahmet told me not to do that," she added. "Not because they're going to kill me, but someone could say something. And Ahmet carries a gun. But he always carried a gun. Alev carries a gun. These guys like guns, it's not like they *have* to carry guns. But it also shows me that they feel more secure having a gun. They don't want a bodyguard after them all the time. And this is all partly because of what happened to Hrant Dink."

Altan is likely the most famous figure on Taraf's staff. His novels and nonfiction have sold millions of copies. He comes from a well-known leftist family, and during his career as a columnist – marked by an appealing mixture of wit and gravity – he has suffered through numerous anti-speech cases. One arose over a column called "Atakurd," in which he imagined a country called "Kurdey," where Turks were the minority. When I interviewed him last winter, he said, "I don't have any auto-control. We taught all the editors that we publish everything, if it's news and if it's true. There are no boundaries, we don't stop anyone from publishing anything." Altan and Congar each face seven different court cases for their writing.

Congar, for her part, seemed confident that even a provocative newspaper could operate freely in Turkey – particularly now that the country's EU aspirations have made the government sensitive to world opinion. "I think the government knows that closing or raiding a newspaper offices will make them look very bad in Europe," she said. (It should be noted that this concern did not prevent the country's decision to ban YouTube earlier this year.)

Perhaps, Congar suggested, the all-seeing powers of the state itself ensure *Taraf*'s ability to do as it pleases: "We know that the Turkish intelligence, military and civilian, are keeping a very close eye on us – reading our e-mail, listening on our phones, and bugging our rooms, even this conversation," Congar said, looking around the room. "But then they know the truth. We don't have secrets. If they take me and, I don't know, *torture* me," she laughed, "there's nothing I can tell."

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The infamous front page: "His General's Prime Minister."

TheNational

review the world

The throwback kid

Samir Farag wants to reclaim the glories of ancient Luxor, even if it means demolishing a village or two. Will the governor's dreams of tourism dollars save the city or destroy it? Simon Mars reports

It's the first week of December and a woman, her four-month old baby in her arms, is sitting outside her home in Gourna, a village high up in the hills of Luxor's West Bank. She's waiting for her final eviction notice. She expects it any day now. If all goes according to the official plan, she and the other remaining villagers will be gone in a few days, and their houses will be leveled. The woman's child will almost surely be the last to have been born in Gourna, a village built on a network of ancient Egyptian tombs.

On another recent day in Luxor, I am sitting in a garden looking up at the New Winter Palace hotel – one of Luxor's tallest and, it's generally agreed, ugliest buildings. As the sun sets, I watch a lone labourer, perched on a narrow ledge on the hotel's roof, chipping away at the building with a sledgehammer.

The garden where I'm sitting is attached to the Old Winter Palace hotel, a grandly appointed 19th-century structure built in the British colonial style. While the shabby modernist New Winter Palace is being demolished, the antique charms of its hundred-year-old sibling are being enhanced with a five-star upgrade.

Out with the new and in with the old: this is Luxor in a nutshell. With plans to turn the city into one of the world's largest open air museums, the Egyptian government has busily set about demolishing eyesores such as the New Winter Palace and obstructions such as the hardscrabble village of Gourna. Meanwhile, they are preserving everything that is fine and ancient– all so that tourists can commingle with a carefully curated version of Luxor's past.

The Egyptian tourist board says that Luxor, a city of 350,000, situated some 700 kilometres south of Cairo, boasts a third of the world's ancient monuments. After spending a few days there, you begin to believe it.

On the Nile's West Bank in Luxor, there are the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and Queens (including Tutankhamen's, which is like a box cupboard compared to others that stretch on into the mountains in chamber after chamber); the temples of Madinat Habu and Hatshepsut and the colossal remains of the Ramesseum (the statue that inspired Shelley's *Ozymandias*, still lying there broken on the ground). On the East Bank, in Luxor proper, there's a main cluster of hotels, restaurants and shops as well as the magnificent and extraordinarily well-preserved temples of Luxor and Karnack.

Luxor is a city that lives off the past. Its monuments, tombs and temples draw over two and a half million visitors each year. And tourism will be even more vital to the city's – and Egypt's – future. More than 12 per cent of the country's workforce currently works in tourism. With Egypt facing the need to generate at least six hundred thousand jobs each year just to keep pace with new entrants into the country's labour market, expanding the tourist industry is an official priority. The country may lack the oil money that's building the Gulf's new cities, islands and landmarks, but it does possess a resource the Gulf lacks: the remnants of one of the world's most astounding civilizations. And so Egypt has begun making a concerted effort to use its past to build its future.

In July 2004 Samir Farag was appointed governor of Luxor by President Hosni Mubarak with a mission to renovate Luxor's antique sites and redevelop the city as a world-class tourist destination. The task entailed removing all the signs of human habitation that had, over the years, built up on and around the city's historic sites. As soon as Farag took office, in other words, Gourna's days were numbered.

Over the past two centuries, the village of Gourna cropped up bit by bit over the tombs of thousands of lesser nobles halfway between the Valleys of the Kings and Queens. The dead supported the living there for decades, with the tombs providing the four thousand villagers an income either as tour guides or via the sale and manufacture of souvenirs. Always a ramshackable development, the village provoked frequent complaints over the years – that its inhabitants were robbing the tombs or that their very presence spoiled an important archaeological site. Various plans to move the villagers off the site were broached. But none, including a celebrated attempt by the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy to move them into a specially built new city, ever came to fruition – in part because the villagers refused to leave.

And then Farag arrived. Sitting in his dark, wood-lined, office, the governor speaks passionately about his mission. Complaining that Luxor has long been neglected by developers in favour of holiday resorts such as Sharm el Sheikh, he runs me through a powerpoint presentation of his plans for the city. Hundreds of photographs are projected onto the wall: of old slums and housing; of brightly coloured tomb-wall paintings in the cellars of houses in Gourna; of new homes and widened streets, along with artists' renderings of Luxor's sleek future.

That future is still a long way off. Farag's first task was to modernise the city's infrastructure: electricity, sewage, water, phone lines and roads. "The only real road we had was the Corniche," he says. "But I didn't start with the Corniche, because every other governor used to come here and begin working on the Corniche. I knew if I started there I would lose the support of people."

But a loss of public support was inevitable when Farag proceeded with the rest of his plans. He clicks again on his laptop and brings up a five year-old picture of Gourna: "It was a slum area," he says. "The people lived on top of the tombs in their houses. They didn't have water, electricity, nothing. It was a very miserable life."

That's not a description many of Gourna's inhabitants would accept. Many say that Gourna has been their families' home for more than a century. They were born there; their parents and grandparents died there. But most importantly, they made their living there.

To persuade them to relocate, the governor built New Gourna, a freshly constructed, planned settlement with schools, a hospital, police station and a cultural centre, five kilometres from their old location outside of town. "Of course, nobody wanted to move," he admits, "but we started with the young generation. I went to them and told them they could have a better life; 'you can have electricity, sewage, clean water, TVs, everything.'"

The new settlement, he says, cost $20 million (Dh73m) to build, and Old Gourna's inhabitants were given their new houses outright. Some extended families in the village have been given multiple, adjoining homes, Farag says, and the entire settlement's construction reflects their preference for single-storey houses. The governor also insists that no undue pressure has been exerted on villagers to get them to relocate.

But that's another thing the remaining inhabitants of Old Gourna dispute. When I visit the half-demolished village, the electricity has already been cut off for a week. It may be true no one has been forcibly evicted, one old man tells me, but it all depends on how you define "forced".

One villager shows me the small workshop in his home, where a couple of workers are still sawing limestone for the bas-reliefs and small statues they sell to tourists. The villager clings to Old Gourna. When he moves, he says, he will lose his shop and his livelihood. "You kill my future," he says, "you kill my life."

Another man, my guide through Old Gourna, once owned a small shop in the village. But he has already relocated. He wants me to see what New Gourna looks like, so drives me there on the back of his motorbike.

At first glance New Gourna looks similar to some of Dubai's housing developments – a collection of newly painted box houses lining clean tree-lined and flower-lined streets.

My guide – a smiling, spry and well-preserved 60-year old – lives with nine members of his extended family in two houses separated by a courtyard that contains pigeons, chickens and a sheep for Eid. Inside, he's painted the walls a beautiful Moroccan blue. "Yes, it's clean here," he says. "You have water. Everything is OK."

But there's no work in New Gourna. No tourists visit; in fact most tourists don't even know the new village exists. Back in Old Gourna my guide had his shop, one that had been in the family for decades. He opens a box to show me some artifacts and statues carved by his grandfather – carefully preserved and wrapped in biscuit tins, waiting for the day when the government gives him the new shop they've promised him. It's been over a year; he keeps asking and they keep giving him the same answer: "be patient." So he keeps his life in biscuit tins and he waits.

As the governor's reclamation plans continue, a fate similar to that of Old Gourna's villagers now awaits some 5,000 or so people on the East Bank of the Nile. This time Farag is opening up the Avenue of the Sphinxes, a three-kilometre pathway, once lined with thousands of Sphinxes, that links the Karnack and Luxor temples, which was used each year as a processional route during the festival of Opet to celebrate the seasonal flooding of the Nile. Again, the Governor says, all the people moved will be compensated. "The owner of the house will get the price of his land and the price of the house," he says. "People who are renting will be offered either a new home or money." (Property owners will get a huge windfall, he says, given that rent caps have prevented them from earning much in the past.)

And all this comes in addition to one of Farag's earliest beatification projects: demolishing the shacks, shops, houses and football pitch that once occupied the piazza in front of the temple of Karnack. Go there now and you see a vast open area that permits, for the first time in hundreds of years, a view of the Nile and the temple of Hatshepsut high up on the Theban Hills.

Farag's energy and excitement are impressive, but it's hard to reconcile his zeal for the clean sweep with the messy realities of Luxor. He insists his plans are meant to ensure the city's future – that the pain some of its residents are now enduring will be worth it in the end, both for them and for their children.

And the Governor also wants to make clear he should not be regarded simply as a one man demolition crew; he's also been building. There are now highways linking Luxor to the Red Sea resorts of Hurghada and Marsa Alam, so that people on holiday there can make day trips to the city. Six thousand tourists make that journey every day now, all of them bringing money to spend in Luxor. The city has an airport terminal that can now accommodate up to seven million passengers a year; a new railway station and souk; a hospital; a cultural centre providing work and training for the city's 30,000-strong Nubian community; a women's centre; a large wireless internet zone; a library and a heritage centre. An Imax cinema is also on the way.

Overall the governor says the city has spent 1.2 billion Egyptian pounds (Dh808m) on infrastructure since he's arrived – changes that have already had an impact on the city's economy as a whole. "We used to close most of our hotels after Christmas and New Year but now have full occupancy most of the year," he says. "Starting from this October, we don't have a single hotel room – not one."

But still the opposition persists: earlier this year a demonstration of 3,000 people outside Karnack almost turned into a riot. A court case protesting the Gourna evictions is pending – marking the last hope of Old Gourna's few remaining few residents.

But that only means it's time for the next stage of the plan, Farag believes. Just around the corner is a development sure to create new livelihoods for the inhabitants of places like Gourna. The governor says he's building new resorts capable of holding tens of thousand of people outside the city; that Luxor will soon have the biggest youth hostel in the Middle East; that a forest of jatropha trees, whose seeds contain up to 40 per cent oil, is being grown to provide the city with engine oil; that treated wastewater is being used to irrigate 22,000 acres of farmland; that investment zones are being opened to bring in new businesses. "We are building a new factory just to produce a lot of things for the hotels," he says. Farag thinks the city can double the annual number of tourists it currently hosts. In the end, he says, people will appreciate what he's done.

Meanwhile, my guide sits in New Gourna with his family. His children seem willing to give the governor the benefit of the doubt. They're hoping that Farag means what he says – and that he has the power to make it happen. But for now my guide waits, hoping for the chance to bring his grandfather's statuettes out of their tins and set up shop again.

Simon Mars is a TV producer based in Dubai and Cairo.

If you build it (and demolish that), they will come: Luxor's governor, Samir Farag, stands in front of the Karnak Temple. Photographs by Victoria Hazou for the National

A house slated for demolition in a plan to recreate the Avenue of Sphinxes between the temples of Luxor and Karnak.

When I visit the half-demolished village, the electricity has already been cut off for a week. It may be true no one has been forcibly evicted, one old man tells me, but it all depends on how you define 'forced'

review the art

Guerrilla marketing

A new book chronicles the war of images waged in Lebanon's political posters – and the way artists and designers shaped the country's larger conflicts, writes Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

Walk through the streets of virtually any neighbourhood in Beirut and you'll find the faces of political leaders – past and present, local and foreign – plastered onto construction walls, building façades and shuttered storefronts. Lebanon's president, Michel Suleiman, has gone so far as to call for an end to the relentless postering, but his pleas have been largely ignored, and the city is still marked by ubiquitous images, large and small, of Hassan Nasrallah, Imad Mughniyeh, Nabih Berri, Musa Sadr, Michel Aoun, Rafik Hariri, Saad Hariri, Samir Kassir, Gebran Tueni, Pierre Gemayel, Bashir Gemayel, Elie Hobeika, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Syria's Hafez and Bashar Assad and Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Some of the city's posters are tattered and torn while others are freshly pasted, evidence of the ongoing process of marking territory as loyal to one faction or another. Some of the names and faces on the posters have changed over the years, but the poses, slogans, sentiments and styles are recycled again and again, an apt metaphor for the politics of a country that seems cursed to continuously replay the sectarian conflicts of its civil war.

What haunts the streets of Beirut is not the scars of wars past – though they are still visible, on buildings pockmarked by bombshells and bullet holes – but the spectre of conflicts future, whose scripts are foretold by the posters jostling for prominence in what passes for public space (in the absence of grand public parks or plazas). With parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in Lebanon this spring, the paper arms race is certain to intensify further in the months to come.

Zeina Maasri's new book, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*, is the first sustained study of Beirut's poster wars, and the first serious and comprehensive investigation of the way that fifteen years of fighting left an indelible mark on the city's visual culture – one that persists to this day. Maasri is not the first person to single out the posters as a uniquely Lebanese phenomenon: in recent years a number of Lebanon's visual artists have taken the posters as subject and inspiration.

Jalal Toufic's short video *Saving Face* (2003) offers a clever rumination on the thick texture created by the accretion of posters for various candidates who are apparently vying for public office, even though the winners have been decided in advance and behind closed doors. For an artist's project that appeared in a special, Beirut-themed edition of the German magazine *Shift!*, Ola Sinno launched a hoax political campaign by papering her neighbourhood with posters of her own face accompanied by the slogan: "Acknowledge Me!" In 2004, the anonymous art collective Heartland staged an urban intervention, titled *Al Murashah* ("The Candidate"), for which the group used a round of municipal elections as an occasion to create an imaginary politician, plastering his enigmatic face across the surface of the city.

In a handful of essays, historians, sociologists and urban theorists have explored the impact of political posters on the residents of Beirut, suggesting that these seemingly benign pieces of paper guide the ways in which people move through the city, barring them from one neighbourhood while welcoming them in the next. As physical manifestations of confessional tensions, these posters have contributed significantly to what Samir Khalaf, a professor of sociology at the American University of Beirut (AUB), has described as the geography of fear and the retribalization of space in Lebanon's post-civil war era.

Maasri, a graphic designer and professor, has collected some 700 political posters, culled from the archives at the American University of Beirut, the media offices of various political parties, the personal affects of former partisans and the ageing portfolios of artists, illustrators and designers, whom she interviewed over the course of her research as well. In April 2008, Maasri presented parts of this collection in a meticulously installed exhibition titled Signs of Conflict, which was produced by the arts organisation Ashkal Alwan for the fourth edition of the Home Works Forum in Beirut.

In the five years since she began her research, Maasri has been collecting, documenting and digitally archiving her poster collection, and she brings to her work a designer's touch for making the material accessible and interactive. Anyone can visit AUB's website and spend time with the posters online. But what sets *Off the Wall* apart is the arguments she makes and the conclusions she draws.

Fawwaz Traboulsi's foreword and Maasri's chapter on the aesthetics of Lebanon's political posters are swift and confident. The pace of Maasri's introduction, however, is grinding, like day one in a cultural studies class. Here, Maasri takes immense care to delineate and define her terms, such as discourse, articulation and hegemony. She gives ample credit to the work of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose wide-ranging concepts she tailors to the specifics of her case study. The language could have used some finesse, but the precision with which Maasri treats certain theoretical constructs lends tremendous credibility to her work.

The thrust of her argument is that Lebanon's political posters do not constitute propaganda campaigns but rather mark symbolic sites of struggle. She reads the signs, symbols, texts and images of the political posters that were produced during the civil war as evidence of how different communities and factions fought to define, assert and articulate themselves on Lebanon's social, cultural and political landscape.

The sheer number of groups whose posters Maasri considers speaks volumes about the factional chaos of the civil war: the book features examples from Amal, Hizbollah, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), an assortment of independent Nasserite movements, the Lebanese outpost of the Baath Party, the Communist Party, a conglomeration of other leftist groups, the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon, the Progressive Socialist Party, the Kataeb Party and the Lebanese Forces. Maasri groups them into themes – such as leadership, commemoration, martyrdom and belonging – and explores the visual iconographies and textual strategies at play.

The most illuminating passages in the book are those that examine competing posters wrestling to define the same event. The Lebanese Forces and the Arab Liberation Front (a faction of the PLO), for example, produced dramatically different posters commemorating April 13, 1975, the date when Kataeb fighters ambushed a bus full of Palestinian passengers in the neighbourhood of Ain al Rummaneh, killing more than thirty and sparking the fuse of civil war.

The LF poster, from 1983, glorifies combatants (and, by implication, bloodshed) in an illustration that hovers above a slogan reading "April 13, The Dawn of Freedom." The Arab Liberation Front poster links the Ain al Rummaneh incident to the loss of Palestine in 1948, collapsing the two events into a single, tragic narrative of devastating dispossession. The LF poster tries to capitalise on an eight-year-old "victory," probably for the purpose of recruiting future fighters in the aftermath of the 1982 Israeli invasion, the assassination of LF leader Bashir Gemayel and the horrific massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatila camps – while its Arab Liberation Front counterpart seeks to cast the start of the Lebanese civil war as yet another episode in the epic of Palestinian resistance.

Off the Wall is peppered with a number of revelations, such as Maasri's discovery of a cache of SSNP posters in which partisans who had signed on for "martyrdom operations" took photographs of themselves and wrote down a few final words before blowing themselves up. The appearance of their posters on the streets of Beirut signified the sordid execution of their missions.

But the most significant and instructive portions of the book are those that put forth an uncomfortable but urgent argument about the role artists have played in shaping not only the terms of Lebanon's political discourse but the twists and turns in its violent history. In the early days of the civil war, many leading artists contributed to the political poster campaigns of various parties. Omran Kaysi, from Iraq, created posters expressing solidarity with South Lebanon and promoting resistance to Israeli incursions. The Lebanese artist Rafic Charaf adapted his painterly style to posters for Amal. The Lebanese artist Paul Guiragossian, whose paintings are now a benchmark of modern and contemporary Arab art auctions in London and Dubai, contributed artworks for posters that were circulated by the Communist Party.

Youssef Abdelkeh, a former Syrian dissident who is currently represented by the Ayyam Gallery in Damascus and Dubai, also created posters for the Communist Party. Jamil Molaeb, the darling of Galerie Janine Rubeiz in Beirut, made posters for the PSP. Ismail Shammout, the grandfather of modern Palestinian painting, made posters for the PLO's Lebanon branch. Kameel Hawa turned out several posters for the Baathist-orientated Socialist Arab Union; Aref al Rayess for the Lebanese National Movement; Pierre Sadek for the Lebanese Forces; and Wajih Nahle for the Kataeb Party.

Maasri ties the aesthetics of wartime posters to the development of modern and contemporary art in Lebanon and the Arab world at large. She explores how influences from Latin America trickled in by way of the Organization in Solidarity with the People of Africa, Asia and Latin America – a group that was established in Cuba in 1966 for the purpose of promoting liberation movements in the third world – and the readily exportable visual codes of class struggle and revolution. Oddly enough, she links the production of political posters to illustrations for children's books, and to the practice of yafta, popular across the Arab world, which involves stringing public banners across city streets to offer commentary during moments of popular uprising or political campaigning.

Because Maasri approaches political posters as visual culture, and through the lens of cultural studies, she grabs hold of an argument that art historians would likely dodge: namely that artists are not apart from politics, that their work is not merely responsive but actively engaged, that the aesthetic object is not isolated but is rather implicated in conflict and that artistic practices are not necessarily removed from the waging of wars.

If the political posters of Lebanon's civil war informed the construction and articulation of political identities and positions, then the artists who made them bear some responsibility for shaping that discourse. Artists, in this regard, were partisans rather than bystanders. Even if they did not fight themselves, they helped to mould the subjects who did.

Maasri's methodology – analysing artworks within their complex social and political contexts – is particularly crucial at a time when curators are tying themselves into knots trying to find meaningful frameworks for the presentation of Middle Eastern art. At a panel during last year's Art Dubai fair, a terrific spat broke out between the artist Lawrence Weiner and the curator Venetia Porter over the meaning and implication of Porter's exhibition Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East, which, in its Dubai iteration, included two examples of Weiner's work among some 75 other artists united only by their use of calligraphy. Porter argued that the calligraphic bound artists of the modern Middle East together under a shared identity, without reference to any one country's political history, because calligraphy was tied to Islam and considered sacred. Weiner, meanwhile, argued that calligraphy was no more than typography, and that Porter's reading of it was no less than exoticising.

In the catalogue for Word Into Art, Porter argues that the works are signposts in a shared history; she asserts that "texts tell stories," and that words embedded in images "provide us with real snapshots of history as well as revealing reactions to the region's devastating conflicts during the past few decades ... As members of emerging national communities, these artists and intellectuals had a clear view of their own identities and increasingly sought to express subjective and political truths through a medium that they themselves had transformed ... This strongly evoked sense of identity ... is arguably the single most important theme of the art highlighted here and what lends it its extraordinary richness."

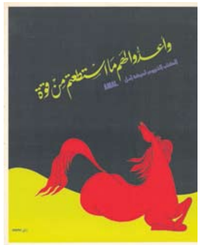
It's a nice idea. But Maasri's book proves otherwise, and shows that neither identities nor meanings are fixed. Certainly in Lebanon they have never been clear. Images and texts are tools for contesting, rather than telling, stories. Calligraphy, a feature of virtually all of the posters in Maasri's collection, is mobilised for purposes of political struggle, both secular and religious. *Off the Wall* may take as its subject a visual product that does not qualify as high art. But Maasri's precise, insightful and informed approach offers an important and effective antidote to the ways in which curators sometimes generalise the life out of art from this region by ignoring the lines of inquiry that may lead to complex, gritty, untidy and even unsavory conclusions.

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reports for The National from Beirut.

> *What haunts the streets of Beirut is not the scars of wars past but the spectre of conflicts future, whose scripts are foretold by the posters jostling for prominence on the street*

"We will resist": Political posters, like this one designed by the Lebanese artist Nazem Irani for the Lebanese National Resistance Front in 1984, are a mainstay of Beirut's streetscape. Reproduced here is a sampling of images from Zeina Maasri's new book *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*. All images courtesy of the author

"Against Imperialism and Zionism" reads a poster from 1977, made anonymously for the Lebanese Communist Party



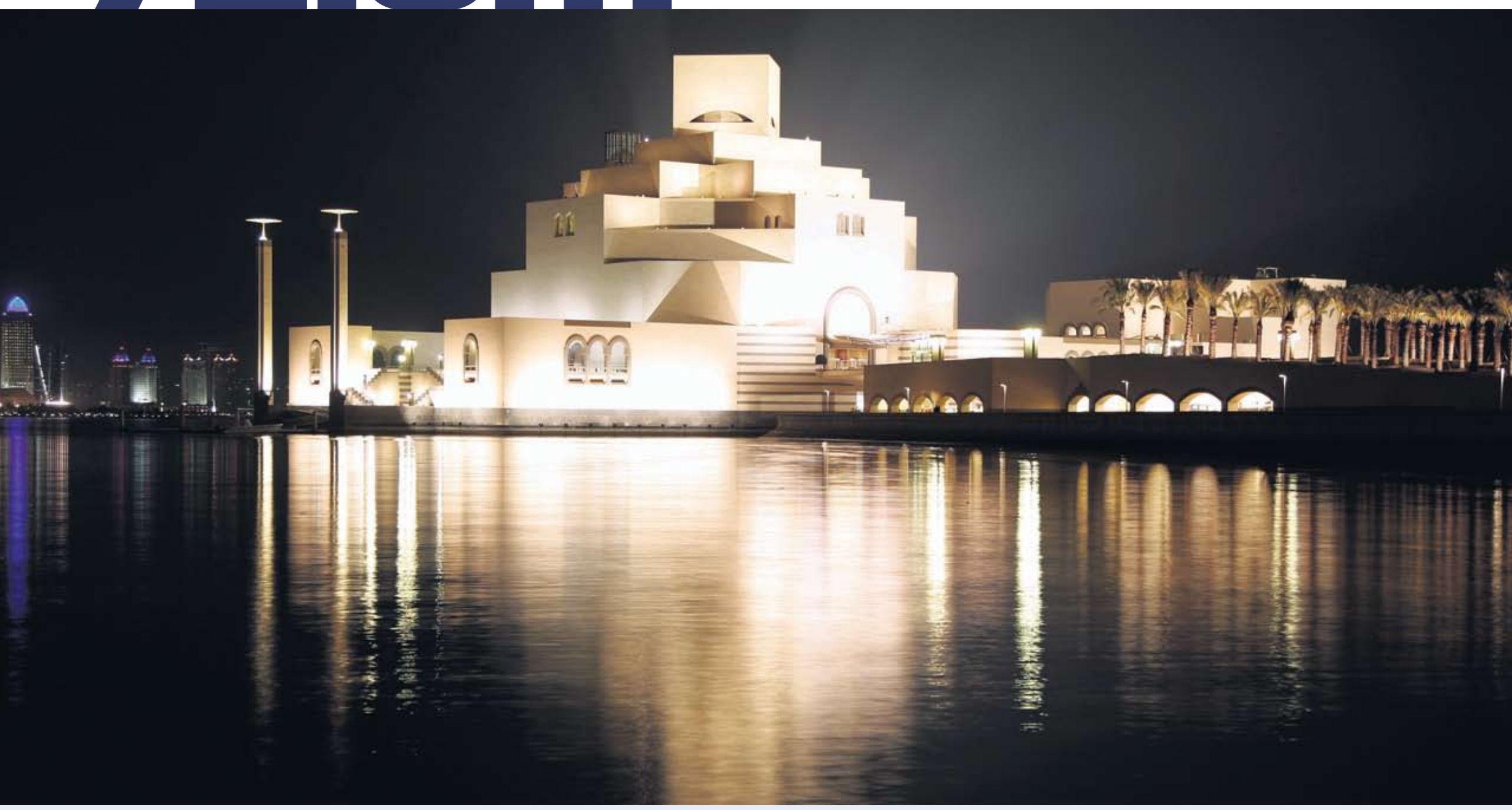
"The groom of the south: The martyr Bilal Fahs" says a poster made for the Shia militia group Harakat Amal by the political cartoonist Nabil Kdouh in 1984

TheNational

review

72.8m

Amount, in US dollars, that the Qatari royal family paid for a Mark Rothko painting in 2007



IM Pei travelled the world seeking "the heart of Islamic architecture" to underpin his design for Doha's Museum of Islamic Art. He found his inspiration in the 13th century ablution fountain at Cairo's Ahmad ibn Tulun mosque, whose austere geometry presents a surprisingly perfect match for the minimalist aesthetic of Pei's own work. Hassan Ammar / AP Photo

Collection of secrets

Doha's new Museum of Islamic Art, brilliantly designed by IM Pei, offers a first glimpse of the expansive, closely-guarded art holdings of Qatari leaders. Carol Kino visits 'the last curiosity cabinet in the world'

For more than 20 years Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and the rest of the royal family of Qatar have attracted the attention of the international art world through their widespread collecting – often beating the world's great museums at auction and paying top dollar for everything from contemporary art to Islamic and western antiquities.

Although there have been many rumours about the royal family's holdings, not much is known about them for certain. And though there has been plenty of speculation about the many museums Qatar may build, there is little on record about their plans. According to Roger Mandle, the recently-appointed executive director of the Qatar Museums Authority, who assumed his post in July, this is just how the Al Thanis like it. "The thing I have to emphasise is that the chair of our board [Sheikha Mayassa Bint Hamad Al Thani, the Emir's daughter] is not very comfortable with having lots of information or speculation raised about future institutions," Mandle said in a recent phone interview.

So when Qatar's first venture, the Museum of Islamic Art, opened in Doha last month, the western art world flocked there to get a glimpse of their holdings first-hand, and to get a sense of coming projects. If this venture is any indication, the future looks quite rosy.

To begin with, the building itself is glorious – the work of IM Pei, who was lured out of semi-retirement in New York for the occasion. Early on in the design process, Pei travelled the world seeking "the heart of Islamic architecture," as he is quoted in the museum's catalogue. He found it in the 13th century ablution fountain at Cairo's Ahmad ibn Tulun mosque, whose austere geometry presents a surprisingly perfect match for the minimalist aesthetic of Pei's own greatest work (most notably his 1985-89 glass and metal pyramid for the Louvre).

The result is a dome-like structure that looks both futuristic and timeless, made from cream-coloured limestone blocks set at angles to each other so that they catch light or cast shadow as the sun rises and falls throughout the day. The building's relationship with the light gives it a sense of measure and pace. Pei also offers a touch of whimsy, courtesy of the lunette windows on the top floor: if you catch them at the right angle, a friend pointed out to me at the opening, they suggest a woman's eyes gazing out from her abaya.

Yet what is perhaps most impressive is that, unlike many museum projects with a celebrity architect attached, this building doesn't overwhelm what's inside it – and its contents are more than a match for Pei's design.

An introductory gallery on the second floor showcases some of the collection highlights – a 15th century silk wall-hanging from Spain, which may once have hung at the Alhambra Palace in Granada, and the intensely blue Cavour Vase, one of the very few surviving examples of domestic enamelled glassware from the 13th century Mamluk period. There is also a carved jade amulet covered with minuscule calligraphy; it was made in 1631 for the Indian Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, who carried it to assuage his grief after the death of his wife, for whom he built the Taj Mahal.

Today the museum has about 4,000 such objects in its collection – all of which are now owned by the State of Qatar, not the royal family, and eight hundred of which are on display. (That's a huge proportion in comparison to most museums, which typically show only about one to five per cent of their permanent collections.) The objects date from the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century to the waning days of the Ottoman Empire and include plenty of secular objects, such as carpets, armour, cups, jewellery, panelled doors and the like, as well as religious ones, such as curtains and keys from the Kaaba and an extensive collection of Qurans.

In fact, Oliver Watson, a British curator who has been the director of the museum since June, said that the designation "Islamic art" is really just a shorthand description: "A more accurate way of describing it is art from the Islamic world," he explains. To qualify for inclusion, a piece must have been produced within a predominantly Islamic culture, in a country under Islamic rule, which means the collection's geographical reach extends from China to Spain.

The exhibition design by Jean-Claude Wilmotte has created dark, subtly detailed galleries that are dramatically illuminated with spotlights. Hassan Ammar / AP Photo

According to Watson, who was formerly keeper of Eastern art at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University, this definition of Islamic art is essentially the same as that used by the great museums in the West, including the Metropolitan, the British Museum, and the Louvre, as well as national collections in the East, such as The Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul, The National Museum in Damascus, and The Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo.

The collection looks extremely fresh, a real achievement considering its ancient subject matter. This is partly due to the exhibition design, by Jean-Claude Wilmotte, Pei's collaborator on the Louvre pyramid, who has created dark, subtly detailed galleries that are dramatically illuminated with pin spotlights. Some of the objects are mounted on pedestals fashioned from the same dark grey porphyry as the floor, so that they appear to float in space, and everything is housed in vitrines made of non-reflective glass that seems to disappear as you approach. In addition, each goblet, vase and piece of jewellery is given plenty of space – quite different from the crowded, jumbled-together displays of Islamic art one sees in most museums.

Ironically enough, this lighting scheme – producing a dark, mysterious cavern pierced by spotlights – is reminiscent of an exhibition style fashionable in America in the 1970s, the era of the touring blockbuster exhibition. It was usually employed to amp up the mysterious allure of exotic objects from foreign lands, such as Islamic art.

Yet as used here, the style works to focus your attention on each individual object – as does the flat-screen monitor in every gallery, which presents some of the pieces in each room in soundless, close-up detail. The museum's decision to include very little wall text also adds to this effect.

"Our philosophy is that putting more and more text into your gallery doesn't actually help the interpretation," said Watson. "In fact, it can be distracting, particularly when you do it in two languages." For greater detail, visitors may consult the audio guide, which should cover 100 pieces by this month, or attend one of the many daily tours led by young Qataris.

The museum's display has also been organised to tell the story of Islamic art in a rather unusual fashion. The second-floor galleries are divided thematically into different sections: calligraphy, writing in art, figuration, science and pattern. Each room mixes objects from different periods and locales to highlight themes that have remained consistent for centuries.

In the calligraphy section, a page from the legendary ninth or 10th century North African Blue Quran, with gold-leaf lettering on indigo-dyed parchment, sits near a page from the Central Asian Baysunghur Quran (1400-1430), whose black ink-on-paper script is sparer and more elongated. Science in Art presents ornately decorated scientific instruments, like a celestial globe from India (1676-77) and a North African astrolabe (1732-33). Figure in Art offers many different depictions of people – quite common in non-religious Islamic artworks, said Watson – such as a silk carpet (late 16th to early 17th century) that presents a scene from the love story of Leila and Majnun.

The third-floor display cuts through the collection differently, with a chronological layout that shows how these themes were varied in different regions and time periods. Here there is a focus on the 12th to 16th century Middle East, India, and Central Asia.

What's missing is contemporary art from the Arab or Islamic world – because, Watson believes, it does not fit the museum's mandate: "Contemporary painting is a recent development which is taking its impetus much more from western art traditions," he said. In addition, he noted, much of the craftsmanship associated with traditional Islamic art – weaving, enamelling, manuscript illumination – died out in the 19th century once industrial production took hold, much as it did in the West. (Paradoxically, in an international art world that sometimes seems obsessed by the new, the absence of it here is one of the things that makes this museum stand out.)

For the moment, those who seek contemporary work may repair to the temporary exhibition galleries on the first floor, which host an exhibition called Beyond Boundaries: Islamic Art Across Cultures. It includes new work by the 93-year-old artist Maqbool Fida Husain, dubbed by some "the Picasso of India," who lives in exile in the Gulf. There is also a fascinating multimedia display based on The Book of Secrets, an 11th century Spanish manuscript that depicts dozens of curious machines, such as cannons, water clocks and automata. The book has been digitised, so one can page through it and examine the machines in detail. There are also a few models of the machines on view.

Hubert Bari, the curator who organised this show, said that the temporary exhibition galleries will draw on all of Qatar's state collections, as well as loans from other museums, to mount shows that explore different aspects of Islamic art.

"Nobody can imagine what we have in our storage," said Bari. "It is probably the last curiosity cabinet in the world – and assembled by a royal family, by the same principle as it was by the emperor Rudolf II in Prague. It is fantastic." (Rudolf, the Holy Roman Emperor who ruled central Europe from 1576–1612, was renowned for his encyclopaedic, rigorously organised collection.)

2009 will bring exhibitions on Assyrian treasures from the British Museum, Islamic tiled architecture and pearls in the Gulf. In 2010 – when Qatar will be designated the Arab Capital of Culture – the museum will borrow work from the French business magnate Francois Pinault, whose contemporary art collection is one of the world's largest. Also in the planning stages are several exhibitions on pre-Islamic art.

In fact, these temporary exhibitions may well offer a preview of Qatar's future museums. Although Mandle remains mum about all of them – except for the National Museum, designed by Jean Nouvel and slated to open in 2012 – another source at the QMA said that they are planning three more: one for photography; another for modern and contemporary Arab art; and a third devoted to Orientalism, a concept that will likely be expanded beyond its usual connotations involving 19th century Europe's fascination with the East. According to this source, the Orientalism museum is now being designed by the Swiss architects Herzog and de Meuron.

Mandle, when asked about these plans, said, "I can't deny those claims but I can't substantiate them with facts, either. It's a cardinal rule here that rather than giving bold promises about things that are supposed to happen, we feel it's better to be really secure about what we're doing, and then announce something when we're really ready to do so."

Carol Kino is a contributing editor at Art & Auction and a frequent contributor to the New York Times.

review

books

Prison-house of language

Abdelfattah Kilito's new book explores Arabic literature's long, tortured relationship with translation. Meditating on the perils and possibilities of multilingualism, Kanishk Tharoor reads across the divide

The Arab and the Greek: A 14th century painting depicts an imaginary debate between the philosopher Ibn Rushd (also known as Averroes) and the neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry. Ibn Rushd's commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics was widely celebrated. But his commentary on the Poetics was a muddle, Kilito writes, "a sterile misunderstanding" based on bad translation.

In the much-quoted 2002 Arab Human Development Report, literature stood as a barometer for stagnation and cupidity in the Arab world. According to the UN-sponsored study, there was a paucity of new, dynamic writing on the market, where "religious books and educational publications that are limited in their creative content" held sway. Moreover, dialogue between the sacred realm of the Arab language and the world outside was meagre. The report noted that "the figures for translated books are also discouraging. The Arab world translates about 330 books annually, one fifth of the number that Greece translates. The cumulative total of translated books since the Caliph Ma'mun's time is about 100,000, almost the average that Spain translates in one year." Published in the bellicose early years of the now winded "war on terror", the report's blizzard of statistics have since been challenged. (Spain, for example, translates less than 10,000 books each year.) But at the time the report provided damning evidence for critics of the Arab world: open societies required an open exchange of literatures.

But translation, particularly in the world of Arabic letters, has never been an innocent or simple process. In his slim, energetic work *Though Shalt Not Speak My Language*, the Moroccan scholar Abdelfattah Kilito burrows into the age-old problem of the translation of Arabic literature. The book, itself translated from Arabic, privileges anecdote over argument, drifting playfully through the centuries to explore the relationship between the Arab and the foreign. Kilito indulges in a wide panoramic view, taking into account writings of numerous periods and styles, including ninth century theoretical musings on Persian-Arabic translation, various accounts of Arab travel writing (including Ibn Battuta's famous journey to China), and passages from 20th century crime novels. This disparate material is shaped by the premise that there is something essentially unsound and compromised about the very act of translation, and that foreigners have yet to treat Arabic literature with appropriate sensitivity and care.

Arabic occupies a rather lonely place in the landscape of world languages. With the possible exceptions of Chinese and Tamil, no other major modern idiom enjoys such a long, unbroken scriptural history. Classical Arabic remains intelligible to much of the literate Arab world, while most other modern languages only emerged in their current written form in the last 600 years. Modern Greek is gobbledygook compared to its ancient predecessor; French is the ruins of a ravaged Roman Gaul; English is the flighty, Latinised stepchild of earthy Anglo-Saxon; Hindi (and Urdu) are the mongrel beasts of Mughal army camps in South Asia. Arabic in the 21st century looks into the mirror of its antiquity and sees a familiar reflection. Its continuity can be threaded through the centuries, endowing contemporaries with both a deep sense of the coherence of Arab linguistic traditions and the burden of their legacy.

At the same time, the Arabic language has always been surrounded by others. From the days of the first caliphs, Arab intellectual history was framed by interaction with other languages. Kilito – echoing fairly conventional wisdom – places the high noon of Arab thought and writing in the period between the seventh and 13th centuries. As Arab forces gobbled up the lands of the Persian and Byzantine empires, Arab scholars absorbed Persian and Greek texts. Translation here was principally one-way, from ancient languages like Greek, Persian and Syriac into Arabic. It was guided by the arrogant but understandable assumption that those seeking knowledge should now do so in Arabic; at its peak the caliphate was the real heir of both the Mediterranean power of Rome and the universal pretensions of Persian kingship. Much has been written and said in recent years about how the accumulated lore of other lands stirred a cauldron of intellectual ferment in the Arab world, and about how the eventual flowering of the Renaissance in southern and western Europe rested on the soil of Arab knowledge. In this period, Arabic indisputably surpassed its regional competitors as the principal vehicle – and engine – of scholarly innovation.

But while numerous philosophical, historical and scientific works crossed into Arabic, barely any poetry made the same journey. Al Jahiz, the ninth century Afro-Arab writer, Arab scholars had already begun to argue that while it was possible to translate philosophy, the same could not be said of literature. In fluent close readings, Kilito shows how al Jahiz distinguished between the two; the "universality" of philosophy allowed it to be shared across tongues, while the "particularity" of poetry confined it to its language. How can schemes of alliteration, rhythm, and word play be made sufficiently legible in the parallel universe of another language? Poetry in its very nature resists the estranging force of translation.

Al Jahiz maintained a fundamental distrust of translation and the translator, and he suggested multilingualism was a form of failure: "Whenever we find [the translator] speaking two languages, we know that he has mistreated both of them, for each one of the two languages pulls at the other, takes from it, and opposes it." Some echo of this belief is present in the possible association between the modern verb to translate, tarjam, and the root verb rajam, which means, among other things, to throw an object through space (as in stoning, but also as in shooting stars and, by association, spell casting); in this sense the practise of translation, or tarjamah, may carry a subconscious connotation of arbitrariness, unreliability, or transgression.

Kilito himself seems to share in this distrust, but his own suspicion grows from more modern, political roots in the inversion of power relations with Europe and in the experience of colonialism. Breached and looted, Arabic has been invaded by the west. The problem now is not one of translating into Arabic, but of the implications of translation from Arabic. "The fundamental change for us in the modern age," Kilito says, "is that the process of reading and writing is always attended with potential translation, the possibility of transfer into other literatures, something that never occurred to the ancients, who conceived of translation only within Arabic literature." Classical Arab poets never considered the world of letters beyond their own. Their contemporary counterparts have no option but to do so.

Europeans since the 19th century have had none of al Jahiz's qualms about translation, and have eagerly studied and translated works from Arabic; Kilito's roaming explorations spring in part from his disquiet at how foreigners have misappropriated Arab writing. He is particularly startled by the insistence of the French Orientalist Charles Pellat – who devoted much of his career to the study of al Jahiz – that all Arab literature "produces a sense of boredom". European interpreters of Arab writing, Kilito says, find it "boring unless it bears a family resemblance to European literature."

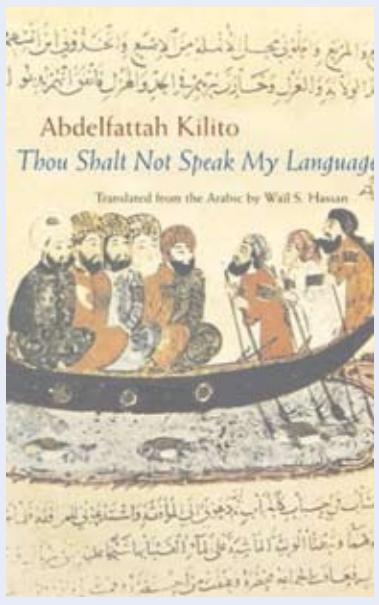
The translation of Arab literature into western languages yokes it to western sensibilities and conventions. As Kilito muses, "Who can read an Arab poet or novelist today without establishing a relationship between him and his European peers? We Arabs have invented a special way of reading: we read an Arabic text while thinking about the possibility of transferring it into a European language." That long thread of Arab language and culture unravels under the heat of the European gaze. "Woe to the writers for whom we find no European counterparts: we simply turn away from them, leaving them in a dark, abandoned isthmus, a passage without mirrors to reflect their shadow or save them from loss and deathlike abandon."

Woe to the writers for whom we find no European counterparts: we simply turn away from them, leaving them in a dark, abandoned isthmus

Of course, the sins of translation are not simply those of Europeans. Though he laments the fate of these marooned Arab writers, Kilito opens the book with his own account of the pitfalls of cross-cultural translation. Invited to give a lecture in France on al Hamadhani's maqamat (a 10th century collection of stories written in rhymed prose), Kilito describes his struggle to find a way to make the genre comprehensible to a contemporary European audience. The only European contemporary to al Hamadhani, he finds, is an obscure female German poet named Roswitha, who wrote dialogues in verse. He declines to make this connection – it strikes him as absurd, for who in his audience will have heard of Roswitha – but in his lecture he does equate the maqamat with the picaresque novels popular in Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries.

"In other words," he writes, "I translated the maqamat, not in the sense of transferring them from one language to another, but presented them as though they were picaresque novels, I translated them into a different genre, a different literature."

The celebrated 12th century philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Kilito writes, was another victim of the traps of translation. His fine commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* won him even the respect of Dante, who placed him alongside Plato and Aristotle in Limbo. But his treatise on Aristotle's *Poetics* remains an embarrassment of literary muddling. Ibn Rushd grappled with subjects of which he knew nothing (the Greek theatrical genres of "comedy" and "tragedy") which in the translation provided him had been rendered in the terms of Arabic poetry ("satire" and "panegyric"). Kilito calls this blunder a "sterile misunderstanding" that failed to open "new horizons" while bordering precipitously on farce. Legions of other Arab scholars have mourned the botched job as a missed opportunity for the mingling of Greco-Roman and Arab literary traditions. But was that ever possible? One can almost imagine al Jahiz grumbling in the background: I told you so.



Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language
Abdelfattah Kilito
Translated by Wail S Hassan
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Whatever uncertainties Kilito himself holds about the possibility of translations, they are not – like those of al Jahiz – seeming observations of fact. Instead, they were forged in the furnace of recent Arab-European history and, more importantly perhaps, in the memory of colonisation by the French, who were far more aggressive in their use of language as a pacifying and "civilising" tool than the British. However poignant within their own context, Kilito's doubts about multilingualism carry a whiff of the parochial about them. While discussing al Jahiz, Kilito argues that "to speak a language is to turn to a side. Language is tied to a location on the map or a given space. To speak this or that language is to be on the right or the left ... and since [the bilingual] looks in two directions, he is two-faced." This is a real dilemma for al Jahiz and for Kilito (albeit slightly less so). But it forgets that multilingualism in much of the world is (and was) a comfortable, untortured fact of life. Language is not always wedded to geographical and political loyalties. That Kilito suggests it is says much about a common Arab and European understanding of language: not the caliphate-era vision of language spread boundlessly by the sword and the book, but a vision of a fissured landscape of languages, each guarded by its own political project, its own nation. To accept this view of the world is to succumb to that false cliché produced by the era of the modern European nation-state: a language is but "a dialect with an army."

We can forgive Kilito, perched as he is in Rabat, on the joined frontiers of Arab and European history. Just as poetry (in al Jahiz's view) could not be lifted from its original language and dropped into another, Kilito's misgivings about multilingualism should not be translated out of their own context. His book should be understood as a commentary on the Arab experience of translation, not on translation in general.

In fairness, Kilito takes great pains always to cushion the sharp edges of his arguments. He disassembles the Orientalist view of Arab literature without resorting to the disheartening thunder (and fog) of post-colonial jargon. He even questions his own doubts about translation, spying an unsettling chauvinism in his jealous guardianship of Arabic from the European interloper. At all times, he uses a light touch, relying frequently on implication and allusion, leaving much unresolved and open to conjecture. Such a drifting, almost whimsical style may frustrate readers who need the anchor of a systematically and clearly articulated argument. Kilito does not guide, but instead charms you into his floating adventure.

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review

the last word

2009AD

Trolley

Lulu Hypermarket, Al Wahda, Abu Dhabi, 2008 | Photograph by Philip Cheung

I was in Lulu capturing last-minute shoppers on Christmas Eve. I had already seen lots of kids in their parents' trolleys when I went down the aisle full of Christmas items and I spotted this boy. He looked upset and depressed, clutching a Santa doll. Just after I took this picture the boy's mother spoke to him and he brightened up and was smiling again.

Innocents at home

Returning to New York after a season in Saudi Arabia, Nathan Deuel finds robotic Santas, cold curiosity and a struggle to explain

It's late December, 2008, and my wife and I are on furlough from Islamic lands. Snow falls on New York as we roll up to a friend's building. Buzzers list dozens of names, from dozens of countries. The door snaps open and we hear the Christmas classic *Jingle Bell Rock* emanating from the belly of an animatronic Santa Claus.

It's a shock: We're just a few hours off the plane from Riyadh, where music is effectively banned. There's no Christmas there, and certainly no animatronic Santas. Representing as it does the human form (in Saudi, forbidden), Christianity (very forbidden), and celebration that doesn't glorify God (also forbidden), this hip-swivelling elf is a bracing reminder that we're temporarily free from life under Saudi's implacable rules.

But with our visit just begun, the bigger surprise in store for us is that our own friends in America will, in their way, be nearly as uncompromising.

The next night, over a barbecue dinner at a music- and art-filled apartment, old friends marvel at how far we've travelled. All the way from the last forbidden kingdom, where they practice the most intense strain of Islam, where booze is outlawed, where women can't drive. The usual shorthand.

I steel myself to honour new Saudi friends by pushing talk beyond gloss and stereotype. I speak with feeling about life so close to Mecca, about the emphasis on family and tradition and religion.

"It sounds like the opposite of everything I care about," a friend says. I clench my teeth.

Staring down my meal of forbidden meat, beans, and beer, I begin with the corny, first-order language of tolerance: I tell him that, as unfamiliar as Saudi may sound, there's still a lot we can learn from each other. I steady my glass. Maybe you'll never experience life in Saudi or among its neighbours, I say, but their claim to good living is just as heartfelt as ours.

Then comes their opening salvo: So why must women still cover up? With lips kissed by barbecue sauce, my wife and I rally our response: Some see the abaya and other such coverings as a means to be unjudged by physical appearance. Some in Saudi (and in Turkey, Indonesia, Brooklyn) tell us it's an empowering convention, that donning the fabric is a way to honour generations of women who've done the same.

Our friends are unmoved in finding the practice offensive. The reaction from one of them, half-eaten pork rib in hand: "Don't they see they're kidding themselves?"

My wife and I hang our heads.

After the plates are cleared, talk settles queasily on the matter of public beheadings. On the fact that murderers, drug dealers, and certain sex offenders are drugged and dragged to a public square in downtown Riyadh, where a burly professional commands a scimitar. Kelly and I report honestly what we've heard: People clamour to watch the ceremony – and when non-Saudis are present, they're sometimes pushed to the front. Is this pride? I'm not sure, I say. Is it anger at disingenuous gawking? Also possible, I say.

I explain that we're not there to change their lives. We're there to observe, to bring back data, to ease misunderstanding in both directions

The friend who says he'll never visit Saudi says, "I'd go see one. How could you not?"

His wife is aghast. "What good could possibly come from that?" She regards us all unhappily.

For a minute, the room is hot and too small. There's accusation and judgment even in considering Saudi, regardless of whether any of us has actually seen the blade fall.

But I'm not ready to stop. I explain that we're not there to change their lives. We're there to observe, to bring back data, to ease misunderstanding in both directions. (Saudis can't fathom American divorce rates and hate the idea of elders in nursing homes.)

The topic settles. With Barack Obama's change train barrelling toward Washington, talk soon veers to our country – and the headlines reporting that a certain subset of Americans is suddenly calling for Obama's head.

Why? The friend horrified by executions says it's because the president-elect has invited a fundamentalist to speak at the inauguration.

We're on the same theme, different religion. The so-called fundamentalist is Rick Warren, the Christian megachurch leader and author of best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Earlier this month, to the shock of certain Obama followers, Warren compared gay marriage to incest.

All of a sudden I'm rallying again. It gets us nowhere to dismiss Warren, I say, my voice rising. Or if you must take the hard line, you should at least be inspired and challenged by Obama's effort to invite Warren and his followers – disagreeable as they might seem because of their belief.

How much easier would it be to snub, to end the conversation! But when Obama said he'd reach across the aisle, that he'd ignore partisan differences, he actually meant it. Certain people heard him say such a thing. Certain people were excited he said such a thing. They donated money and volunteered time.

I continue, pulse quickening: The amazing thing, I say – beyond that fact that Obama is actually keeping his word – is how hard it is not to feel uncomfortable, even for those who would otherwise pride themselves on professed tolerance. What Obama's done – giving a figure like Warren a place on his stage – wasn't easy, I say.

The room is quiet. My upper lip is sweating.

In my mind, I'm back in the lobby of that New York building where I first saw the swivelling Claus. My wife and I are standing there, eyes and ears buzzing from the cold and the culture shock. Our large-hearted friend who lives in the building comes to greet us. A Catholic engaged to a Jew from Long Island, he is uncharacteristically emotional: "Why just Christmas?" he says angrily, pointing at all the Christmas decorations in his lobby. "Don't they realise how many different kinds of people live in this building?"

It's a small question – Why exclude? – but also a deceptively powerful one. The basics of pluralism are still the basics, as vexing as ever.

Back at dinner, I sit there sputtering, beginning to realise how much more work there is to do – at home and abroad, on the largest stages and in the most intimate of dining rooms. And I begin to see a strange logic in pushing bystanders to the front. Maybe that's what people like Obama are doing: pushing us all to the front. Because openness doesn't mean much unless we get close enough to witness the depth of our differences. But for now, as dinner unwinds, my wife and I let discussion move to happier talk.

Nathan Deuel, a former deputy editor at Rolling Stone, is at work on a book about walking from New York to New Orleans.