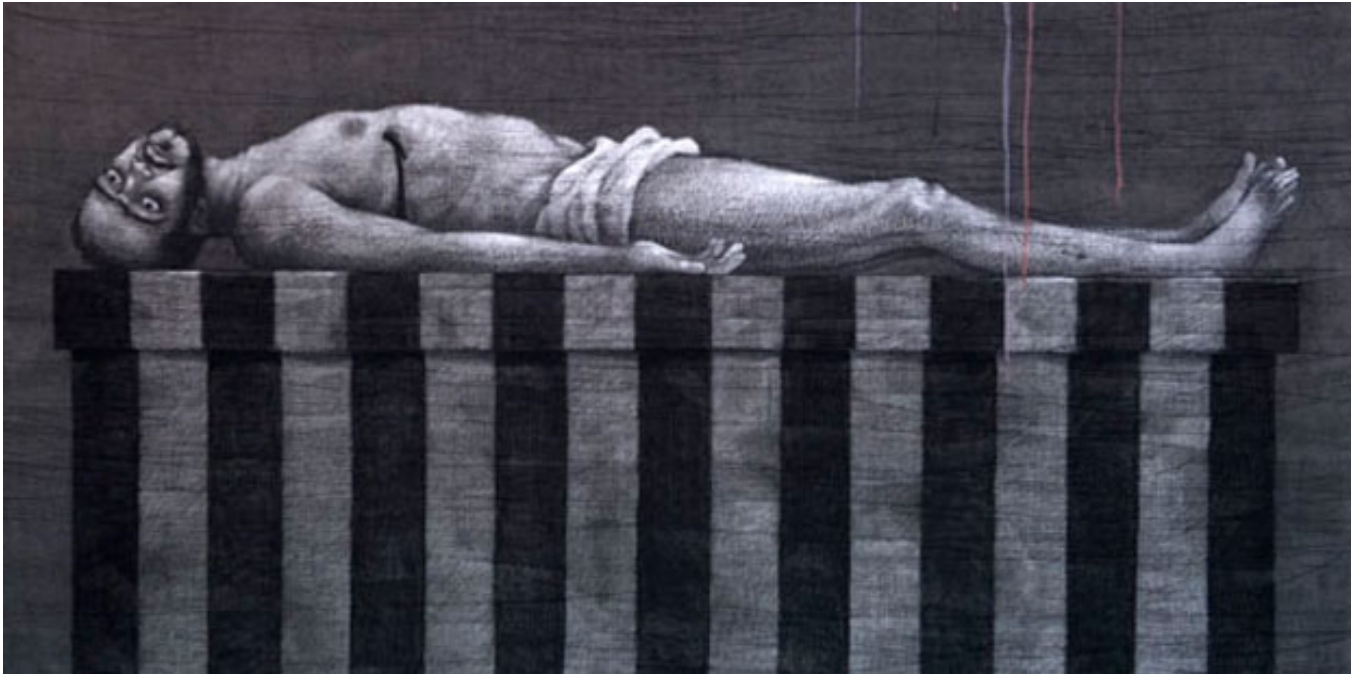


There Is No Light to Lead Us Out of this Dark Place

From Al Safir 28 Sep 2013



Saint John Chrysostom in Damascus, 2013. Youssef Abdelke.

Freed from prison, prominent Syrian artist and opposition figure Youssef Abdelke has little hope for the future of his country. In this interview with Lebanon's [Al-Safir](#), he remains convinced that the first mistake of the opposition was its eagerness to take up arms, and suggests that the foreign backing of the armed factions is at the root of the divisions among the Assad regime's armed opponents.

After 36 days in prison, Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke was released by Syrian authorities last month. His detention had been widely decried by intellectuals and artists in Syria and other Arab countries. Twice before, in 1978 and 1980, Abdelke had been imprisoned by the Syrian regime. After those detentions, he had left Syria for exile in France for 25 years, eventually returning to continue his work as an artist and his political

struggle as a Syrian leftist. We met in Beirut shortly after his release from prison.

Al Safir: Welcome to Beirut, it is good to see you. This is the first time you have left Syria since you were in prison and the first time since you returned from exile.

Abdelke: I had actually been prohibited from leaving Syria for years now. So yes, this is my first trip out of the country after a long stay, whether forced or by my own will. The last time that I came to Beirut was three and a half years ago.

Al Safir: Did all of the protests by the so-called ‘moderates,’ and those who admire your political and artistic work, help secure your release? While you were in prison, were you even aware that there was a campaign for your release?

Abdelke: I would like to thank all of those people who helped, all of the friends, both journalists and non-journalists. Such a demonstration of solidarity, it was an affirmation of humanity for me. There is nothing more deadly to someone in prison than the feeling that he has been abandoned, that no one cares that he is there. Knowing that someone, some voice, is speaking for you while you are locked up, gives you an extraordinary capacity to resist. When I was in prison, I only had a single solitary indication of what was happening outside: a guard came and said to me: “Do you know that there is a TV channel talking about you?” I answered that I did not. He threatened me: “We will deal with this later.” But as it happened, I never saw him again, and so I never had to answer for that issue. [laughs] That is how I found out that something was going on outside.

Other than that we detainees were completely cut off from the world. The only other way to hear anything is when a new prisoner arrives, and of course they are not always involved or really interested in politics. They

have their own miseries and problems to deal with.

Al Safir: How was your detention different this time, compared to when you were locked up 30 years ago?

Abdelke: The differences were enormous. The techniques of torture that were used in the past, somehow I feel like they were more 'humane' than now. In the past, they would stuff a prisoner inside a tire and then beat him with sticks on his feet or his back. Pretty benign compared to what they do now. Today, they take a prisoner out of his cell, and when they throw him back in, he looks like he had been stuck in a cage with a ferocious wild animal. He comes back covered in blood, his skin branded with red and blue stripes. Sometimes it is already infected; you can't understand how this could have happened so quickly. It is a kind of violence that has gone completely mad. As if the violence that is taking place outside the prison is reflected inside the prison. Even worse than torture is the feeling of being humiliated, stripped of your dignity and your humanity. A humiliated being who cannot protect himself before these people who seem like blind machines.

There is no treatment for the prisoners, no medicine. And as for food, it is terrible, olives in the morning and bulgur in the evening; it never changes. Thirty-two or 33 years ago, when I was in prison, they would give us tea. Tea is nothing but a dream today.

Beyond all of that, we are all packed into cells, sometimes 120 prisoners in a cell only 20 feet by 25. The heat is extreme and the humidity is unbearable. The prisoners are obliged to take off their clothes. The guards sometimes prevent us from sleeping; sometimes they prevent us from talking to each other. At times the cells are a bit more comfortable, like the one I spent most of my time in; it was 12 feet by 15 and had only 20 people in it. We could sleep and wash ourselves and were generally better treated.

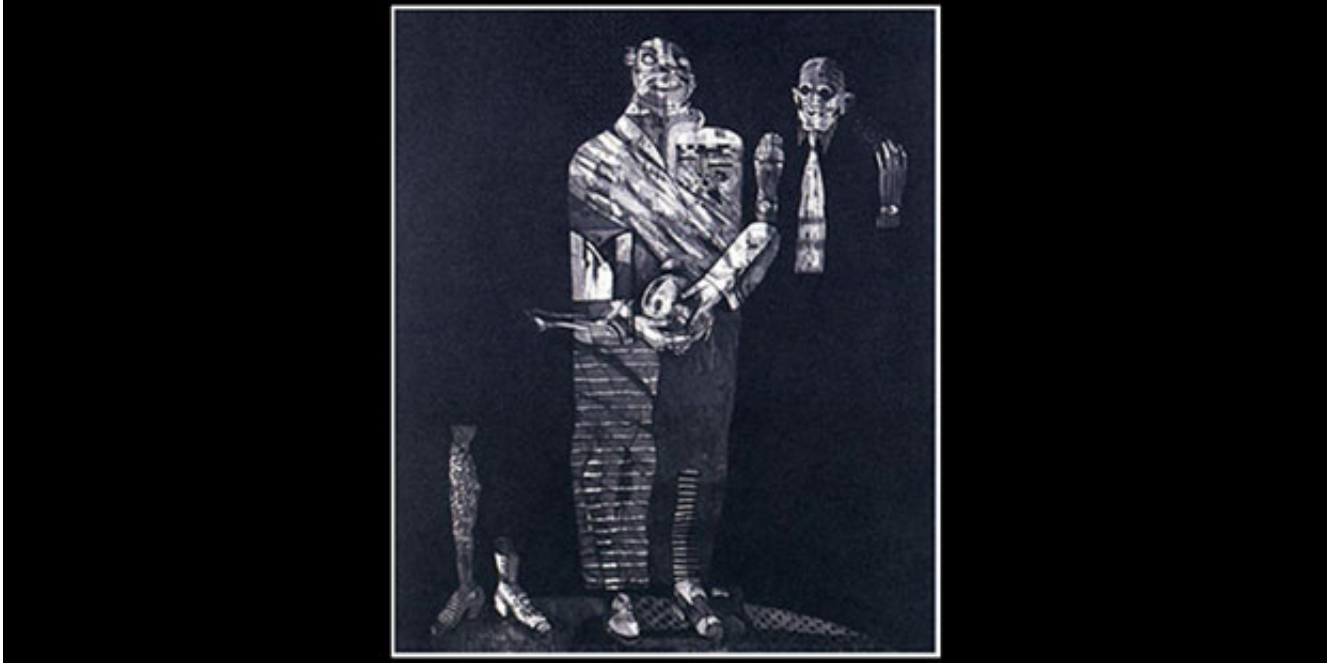
Al Safir: Were you tortured?

Abdelke: No, I was not personally tortured or mistreated. But torture is an everyday practice in all the prisons.

Al Safir: What were the charges against you?

Abdelke: I don't know. During my first interrogation, they asked me about a meeting with friends of mine. They said: 'did you talk about politics?' I answered: 'yes.' The second time, the interrogation went on much longer. It was about my life, my studies, where I have travelled to, my family, and some other political questions. But there were no accusations made to me. The interrogation ended without me being charged with anything, and the judge ordered my release within minutes.

Why they keep one person for a day or a week, another one for a month or five months, I have no idea. We are confronting a group of security agencies whose ways of thinking are just completely different than our own. It is as if we are dealing with a mathematical equation with multiple unknowns. One person is tortured, the other is not. One is released and the other is kept in prison. Sometimes it is hard to understand the motivations behind people's treatment in prison. Can anyone really explain why the authorities are detaining lawyers and political activists like Dr Abdel Aziz al Khayer, attorney Khalil Maatouk, Adnan al Debs or Ali al Shihabi?



Untitled. Youssef Abdelke.

Al Safir: As an artist, how did you deal with your time in prison? Did you try to envision paintings that you were going to work on after your release?

Abdelke: Prison is a completely alien environment. I would sometimes think about my art, but what really dominates your thoughts is the fact that you are enclosed between four walls with no way out. Your mind is continuously occupied with petty prison matters: how to eat and how to sleep and how to wash and to drink, these are the matters that consume all of your time. And also the dreams.

Al Safir: Do you mean nightmares?

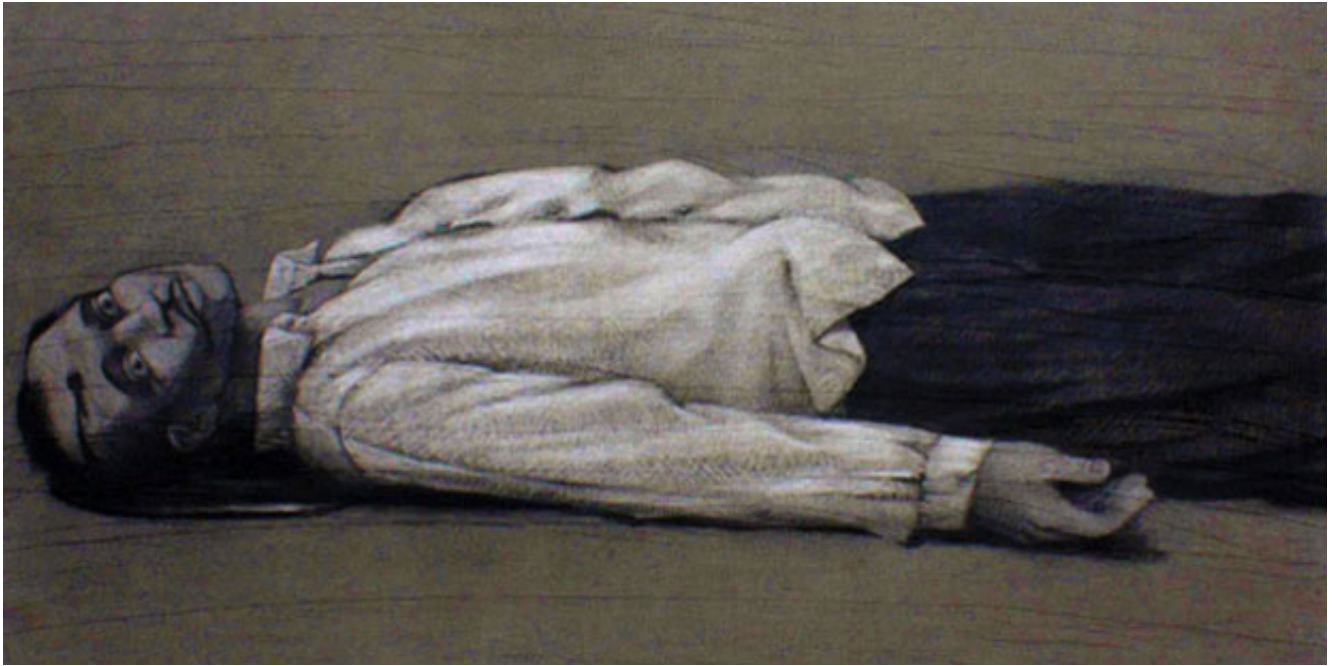
Abdelke: No, dreams, all kinds of dreams. Among the ways a prisoner shields himself is to continue dreaming about all kinds of beautiful plans: getting together with friends, going for walks in places with no walls around them. Dreaming is a way for a prisoner to maintain a certain balance. But when it comes to the work of an artist, thinking about serious artistic matters, that is really only possible once you are out of prison. [...]

Al Safir: Violence, and the rejection of violence, have been central to your art. Do you think that your time in prison, and what you are seeing happening now outside of prison, will have an impact, will change your style?

Abdelke: I think that the violence that takes place inside the prison is a reflection of the violence that mars the broader society and political life. A source of infinite anxiety for me, something at the heart of my art recently, is the idea of death. The death of a human is a loss that can never be compensated.

Al Safir: Your paintings seem to have foretold the massacres before they happened. How do you expect your art to evolve, after all that has happened?

Abdelke: That someone can lose his life over his political choices, whether he is pro-regime or in the opposition, is unacceptable. Death is a terrible thing, and it is happening to tens of thousands of Syrians. They are dying, along with their parents, their children, the people they love, their friends. Death to me is unbearable. This is what I have been thinking about lately. It is an idea that is difficult to put into words. I cannot stand the idea that somebody dies because of something he said or because he protested or participated in some kind of political activity. No action deserves such a punishment. This is an existential matter for me, something that shakes my being to the core, shakes my existence, something that goes far beyond the world of politics. People do not deserve such a fate. Anything can be put right, but not death. If I put myself in the place of those mothers who have lost their children, what do they feel? They have been robbed of their lives; this is an open wound that lives with a mother until she goes to her grave. [...]



Youssef Abdelke.

Al Safir: When you went to prison, there were differing reactions to your detention. Some people were demanding your release, but others were happy about what was happening to you. You are denounced by both the regime and most of the factions of the opposition. Do you see it as a paradox that Abdelke, once seen as a leftist, is now considered a ‘moderate?’

Abdelke: I don’t go along with this label as a ‘moderate.’ I insist, right here, that politics is a suicidal enterprise if it is dominated by hatred, by emotions, by instinct, by the desire for vengeance. There is no field with more need of careful reflection than politics, no field that has more need of objective analysis. The question of freedom is more important than any political differences of opinion. Those who are more concerned about their political differences with others than they are with the question of freedom are betraying themselves and the ideas they are defending. There are two oppositions in Syria. I can understand that there is a schism in political visions, but I cannot understand why those divisions should be an obstacle to the goal that unites us all.

Al Safir: There are more than only two oppositions...

Abdelke: Broadly speaking, there are those who are advancing foreign agendas, who are seeking to bring about a foreign military intervention which they think will be the key to their victory. And then there is an internal opposition, who want a change that will be entirely driven by Syrians and for the benefit of Syrians; they refuse to consider any foreign intervention, because they think it will be the beginning of a foreign occupation, or the partition of the country into sectarian 'entities.' Partitioning Syria has been a goal that American administrations have never even tried to hide.

But beyond that, there is an unfortunate tendency within the opposition toward division; there are countless conflicts between parties, religious sects, clans, and individual leaders. The foreign financing plays a role in that. The fractures in the opposition, particularly the opposition that is based abroad, are a disgrace, in the face of all of the suffering of the Syrian people.

It appears that among the politicians, none has the charisma of a true political leader, a person with the strength to unify the Syrian people around their collective interests, none who is worthy of the peoples' hopes, their immense sacrifices.

And in a context like this, really, the imprisonment of one person or another has only very minor importance.

Al Safir: Among the opposition, you have paid a price for your resistance to the idea of taking up arms against the regime. This armed struggle, where do you think it is carrying the country?

Abdelke: Everything I have to say about the question of armed struggle, I said that at the end of the year 2011. I said that it meant the theft of the Syrian revolution. I said that the launch of an armed opposition would take us to a place that had nothing to do with the revolution. Today, even a blind man can see that the arming of the opposition, and the foreign

financing, are carrying the revolution very far from its goals, toward ideals that are very far from what the Syrian people were hoping for. Many among the armed opposition, we don't really know what is driving them, or how dependent they are on foreign forces, what their real goals are. Many of them are anything at all but defenders of the Syrian people, of their choices and their future. So in this sense, the weapons have deviated the Syrian revolution from its original path and its real goals: freedom, dignity, democracy, justice, and a civil state instead of a police state. Little by little, the use of violence has eroded popular support for the revolution. If a revolution does not present a superior moral model to the system it is fighting, it loses its core meaning and loses the support of the people.

Today, we can see very clearly how entirely wrong were all the journalists and pundits who talked about the democratic character of the Syrian revolution with its lack of a central command and unified leadership. A revolution without clear tactics and goals and strategies cannot succeed. That is the consequence of the multiplication of armed groups, the multiplication of leaders, and the multiplication of their sources of weapons and money. This is why we are in such a lamentable state. The proliferation of armed groups is not helping the cause of the Syrian people or the cause of political change. Today there are groups whose ideologies and politics are so at odds that they are prepared to fight one another instead of the regime. There are also groups whose ties to their foreign supporters are much stronger than their ties to the Syrian people. This is why the armed opposition has not brought the Syrian people any nearer to what they wanted, and has only added to the cost in human lives and material.

Some will ask, well, would it have been possible to achieve the Syrian people's hopes through peaceful action? And I think it would have been impossible, given the savage response of the state to the peaceful demonstrators. But then I would ask, in turn, so, did the weapons help achieve the goals of the revolution? And the answer is definitely no, Syrian

blood is flowing in gushes, is drowning the country in more and more violence and sectarianism. And there is no light at all to lead us out of this dark place.

Al Safir: How do you expect the situation to evolve?

Abdelke: After the first year, local forces lost all of the decision-making power on the battlefield. Those who have the final say are the foreign countries. Local forces, whether they be the regime or among the armed opposition, have only limited room to maneuver, while the real decision makers are abroad. Each foreign interest taking part in the Syrian conflict refuses to see its own proxies defeated, so if one is on the verge of defeat, its foreign allies come to the rescue. The Americans' desire to attack Syria because of the use of chemical weapons, despite their acknowledgement that chemical weapons were used four times previously, is explainable by the fact that the balance of forces on the ground was shifting.

Unfortunately what is most likely is that the violence and destruction will continue. It will end up leading the country to partition. Unless, that is, there is some kind of political agreement on an international level that could be implemented inside Syrian by the various local factions. The problem is that our local factions still dream that victory might be just around the corner for them. But what we are living through now will not leave winners and losers; there will only be losers. We are in a dark hole, with no visible way out.

Al Safir: The conflicts between intellectuals sometimes seemed as violent or more violent than what was going on between armed factions on the ground. What is your view?

Abdelke: What has happened in Syria is unusual in every respect. The sharp differences of opinion on the political level are of course reflected among intellectuals. They might be particularly visible among the intellectuals due to the public place they have in the media.

The Syrian revolution has been a trial by fire for everyone, a trial of their thinking and of their true desire for change. But change seems to frighten many people whether they are intellectuals or not.

We need to see that ‘the system’ is more than just the military, the intelligence services, the government, some missile launchers and fighter jets. The system also has a popular base of support, something the opposition dismissed. I think that it was necessary to try to win this base of support over to our cause. But we failed to do that, and that ended up harming the revolution by narrowing its potential base of support. [...]

Ahmed Bazzoun

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