BRILL

Al-Abad: On the Ongoing

Eylaf Bader Eddin
Post-Doctoral Researcher, EUME Forum, Berlin, Germany
eylaf.badereddin@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article focuses on the word *al-Abad*, literally meaning forever, infinite and immortality, and how it was deployed by the Syrian regime. The word is used excessively in different discursive mediums within Syria's political culture, either in the form of banners, graffiti, photos, slogans or songs. The article seeks to analyze *al-Abad* through its different dimensions: its literal meaning in language, its position as a stagnant social structure and 'an eternal' political system, its connotations as a killing or extermination mechanism, and finally, *al-Abad* as Syria itself. My research sheds light on how authoritarian regimes use language as an important instrument of power and a mechanism to shape the political landscape. I demonstrate how terms and words are in constant flux and adjust in circulation depending on space, time and the political landscape. The changing relationship of a term or word is dependent on new layers of meaning that change its significance on multiple levels.

Keywords

Assad cult – slogans – multi-layered meanings – immortal leader

∙∙∙

If there is a time that is after [an] eternity, it [the Assad regime] stays after that time.

FAWWAZ HADDAD, The Poet and the Notes Collector

∙∙

Al-Abad has been an important term within the Syrian public space for more than half a century, which endures to this day. Syria's public sphere has been dominated by this term through different media, including banners, books, music, photos and slogans. For example, a regime poster with a photo of the current head of the regime Bashar al-Assad states *Al-Assad ilā al-Abad*, as if the late one Hafez al-Assad, the human being, is immortal and lives forever. The importance of this caption and others, according to Barthes, it 'helps me [as a reader] to choose the correct level of perception, [it] permits me to focus not simply my gaze but also my understanding' (1977: 156). This means that the photos of al-Assad, much like all other discursive means (slogans, songs, etc.), were designed to be understood by the public in one way, the caption. In this article, I analyze the meaning of *al-Abad* [eternity, forever, infinite] in Syria's public space and its use in different discursive media through different contexts and dimensions. It is a key term that has become synonymous with President Hafez al-Assad as the Godlike figure of Syria. *Al-Abad* has extended its meaning into notions different from its literal meaning(s), here in language, *al-Abad* reflects a stagnant social structure and an eternal political system, what I am calling 'an extermination machine' in slogans, and finally, *al-Abad* has come to represent Syria itself.

1   *Al-Abad* in Language

To appreciate the importance of the term *al-Abad* and its various dimensions, other Arabic temporal words, namely *al-Amad, al-Azal* and *al-Sarmad*, must first be explained. In this way, we can understand why the term *al-Abad*, and not any other, was used in the Assad regime's famous slogan *Ila al-Abad ya Hafez al-Assad* [Forever Hafez Assad]. *Al-Amad* is a time between two points with a limited beginning and end (Al-Munjid Dictionary 2008: 39). *Al-Azal* is a noun, and *Azali* is an adjective that means *continuing with no beginning*. It generally refers to God when it is said as *al-Azali* (Al-Munjid Dictionary 2008: 21). *Al-Sarmad* is the ongoing span of time that does not stop and has no beginning or end (Al-Munjid Dictionary 2008: 666). It is the combination of *al-Azal* and *al-Abad*. However, *al-Abad* means a time that lasts and never ends, and the start is unclear (Al-Munjid Dictionary 2008: 2). What distinguishes *al-Abad* from other terms, it ignores the concept of beginning while affirming longevity and lasting, just as in the case of the Assad regime. *Al-Abad*, in the Assad context, confirms that it has a known point of beginning but an unknown end. Accordingly, by using such an expression, the Assad regime is not emphasizing its beginning but instead the regime's continuation.

2   *Al-Abad* as a Religious Term

Al-Abad is related to the Islamic faith, conceived within the everyday language of Arabic. An example of its use in this context is 'دائماً وأبداً لا اله إلا الله' [always and forever, there is no god but God]. This is a saying that Muslim believers use to profess their faith, meaning 'all the time and forever there is no god but God'. Here *'Dā'iman wa-Abadan'* repeatedly confirms the continuity of the oneness of God. In this sense, *'Dā'iman wa Abadan'* are complementary words that go hand in hand to mean the durability of the oneness with God, as confirmed by the faith of those speaking it. The term's cultural ubiquity made it readily available for propaganda and familiar to Syrians of all socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, despite its simplistic character, the term can be interpreted on different levels, and the final *Dal* [d] has a rhythmic ending identical to Assad. These qualities made *al-Abad* a very useful and popular term for the regime. In all the time-related words discussed above, only *al-Abad* is mentioned in the *Dictionary of Frequency*, further illustrating its importance within the Arabic language (def. *Abad* Buckwalter and Parkinson 2011 201: 62).

Through *al-Abad*'s use, the regime is conveying it has no end and will last forever, much like God. This is a common trope, as Al-Kawakibi noted when he said: 'each and every tyrant takes on an attribute of sanctity which is with God' (al-Kawakibi 2006: 47). *Al-Abad*'s rhythmic similarity to al-Assad is not chosen coincidently. Other temporal words in the above paragraph with the same 'd' ending could have been used instead. One interpretation for choosing *al-Abad* could be its resemblance to the al-Ikhlāṣ sura in the Quran, confirming the absoluteness, unity, the oneness of God and that no one is participating with Him, purportedly similar to Assad ruling Syria. This idea, resembling the rhyme of al-Ikhlāṣ sura, is apparent on one of the banners raised on a Syrian building in 2011, which is blasphemous (*Al-Bawwāba* 2011). In his book, Adonis tries to explain Arab politics and leaders through a metaphor of Shahrazad from *The Arabian Nights* (Adonis 1993). After Shahryar's discovery that his wife was unfaithful, he decided to marry a virgin each day and execute her at the day's end, thereby securing that she would never betray him. This metaphor in Adonis' chapter entitled 'Shahrazad' emphasizes the technique employed by Shahrazad to postpone her death—narrating stories to Shahryar, who waits patiently each day to hear a new story. Adonis says, 'hey spectators, audience, you are dead if you do not speak' (Adonis 1993: 135). He continues that what a ruler wants or thinks he can do, is based on killing his subjects (Adonis 1993: 135). Similarly, to Shahrazad, the only way to postpone the execution of a subject is by *al-kalām* [the speech], which is accomplished by 'deluding the ruler that he is the absolute lord, the best representative, the most reverend and the

most capable to endure and last to rule' (Adonis 1993: 136). In other words, a righteous ruler is one who can threaten subjects with death, but the latter prevents this by cherishing the ruler as a cult leader or a godlike figure, as is the case with Hafez Assad. The continual negotiation of offering *al-kalām* to the ruler as a plea for mercy or to halt execution further reinforces his perpetual or everlasting rule. Performing *al-kalām* or facing execution as Shahrazad does is an *al-Abad* dimension characterized by the policies of violence, waiting, anticipation, left in limbo and murder and its memory through the echoes of not executing the subjects once they speak about the reverend leader. Therefore, the fact that killing does not happen in the future guarantees ongoing compliance, domination and violence. Similarly, Ismail's analysis of violence and remembering is a policy that 'works through the [effect] and elicits cognitive and affective states formative of Syrian political subjectivities' (Ismail 2019: 160). This effect of killing for remembrance and the threat of killing all the time functions as the God who gives forgiveness or takes lives when it is needed. As Adonis said, 'a nation is one body (…) the members of this nation are the organs of the body (…) the body does not revolt against the organs. It is clearer that the nation does not revolt against its president; (its head) (…) there is only one in heaven and only one on earth' (Adonis 1993: 140). From Adonis' description of the Arab ruler, we can surmise there is only one ruler. He is the only one who resembles the oneness of God, which will be discussed later with some examples of praise for Assad.

3   *Al-Abad* as a Stagnant Social Structure and an Eternal Political System

The complicated layers and multiple contexts of Syria's '*al-Abad*' are manifested in the postponing of the execution. He or she may never be executed if they know how to behave. Within the repetition of *al-kalām* during everyday life in Syria, *al-Abad* becomes an abstract concept that is socially constructed to maintain an eternal political rule for Assad. The use of *al-Abad* is a successful strategy because it asserts Assad's eternal political rule during an ongoing sectarian conflict among various Syrian sects and ethnicities, creating the pretext of the regime as the only peacemaker and savior of all. *Al-Abad* signifies that peaceful co-existence is only possible if the regime is the sole protector of the people and minorities, as *al-Abad* claimed.

Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2019) plays with the meaning of *al-Abad* by deriving different meanings from its root word and showing how they function within a Syrian context. The first is *Awābid* أوابد and its singular *Aābida* آبدة, literally

meaning 'world wonders: e.g., the Pyramid of Egypt and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon' (أوابد الدنيا: عجائبها وبدائعها مثل أهرام مصر وحدائق بابل) (Al-Munjid 2008: 2). It's usually associated with archeological sites maintained and preserved up to the present day. These are wonders because they resisted the erosion of time and survived through many changing political eras. The concept of durability is connected here to *al-Abad*, as these structures remain standing in situ, and continue enduring much like the Syrians sects. This sense of eternality and durability is used by Al-Haj Saleh to describe the Syrian sects as *Awābid* [archeological wonders] because they have endured and lasted for several decades in Syria. Al-Haj Saleh uses the plural of *al-Abad* as *Awābid*, which is similar to the stem of the word, but not the grammatically correct plural form—*Aābād* آباد or *Ubūd* أبود (Al-Munjid 2008: 2). *Awābid* is the plural of the word *Aābida*, meaning a wonder, unlike *al-Abad*, which has a different plural form and definition. Al-Haj Saleh probably wanted to combine the archeological sense of *Awābid* and with the meaning of *al-Abad* in order to intensify and multiply its meaning. An interesting point from his description, those who are *Awābid* are inflexible, rigid, and solid to the core; however; in reality, they are very pliable as the regime used them to sustain itself within Syria. Thus, Assad has bricks (structures or *Awābid*) making it endure eternally, thereby extending the meaning of *al-Abad* from a formal temporal timeline that starts but continues into a political and social system based on the core sect.

4   *Al-Abad* as an Extermination Machine

Another meaning of *al-Abad* can be denoted from the verb *Abāda*, meaning to commit genocide. Despite the different stems of either words, both reference time to emphasize a committed act that occurred and lasts. *Abāda* is not connected only to the mere act of killing but the symbolical; performative side of violence as well. This dimension of *al-Abad* is essentially connected to executions and their postponement as it is related to *al-kalām*, as suggested by Adonis. According to al-Haj Saleh, a main component for Assad's *al-Abad* to endure and last, in addition to the *Awābid* أوابد represented by inflexible sects in Syria, is the commitment to genocide. This dimension of *al-Abad* is illustrated by perpetuating atrocities and the performative dimension of the Assad regime's symbolic violence (Ismail 2019; Bader Eddin 2018). This violence does not depend on killing Syrians only but also relies on the echo of previous massacres, a more successful strategy than committing new atrocities, other than when necessary. In the same way that Ismail illustrates the performative aspects of violence through narratives, prisons and schools throughout

Syria, the echoes and rumors say, in an abstruse way, look what would happen if we do not act in compliance with the regime. The reality that a massacre following the example of Hama could happen again is reflected in the performance of violence, thus forcing Syrians to feel the 'anticipation of a massacre' (Ismail 2019: 167). This strategy has been employed by the regime on different occasions, including the Hama massacre, the Qamashli massacre of 2004, the Sweida protests in 2000, and the numerous massacres after 2011. Violence was used not only to perpetuate the act of killing but also to be remembered as a lesson for the public. It was a lived experience in the minds of Syrians before facing death or after the act is rendered, constructing the main basis for the eternal reign, or al-*Abad* for the Assad regime. In this sense, *al-Abad is* a strategy Assad regime uses to rule, dominate, and seize power by eliminating any chances to change in order to obtain a specific stability. A stability resembles an ongoing and never-ending regime. Al-Haj Saleh explains *al-Abad* as 'the negation of history and negation of any social and political change. It imposes a present that does not change [,] and the term of [the] state is used as a military power that is used to prevent the future to come' (Al-Haj Saleh 2018). Conceived from *al-Abad* as a temporal instant meaning and its relation to publicness and lived experience, this military power highlighted by al-Haj Saleh is accompanied by the excessive use of symbolic violence, maintaining the Syrian *al-Abad* and a discursive practice constructed through a repertoire of many other aspects, especially slogans.

5   *Al-Abad* in Slogans

The aforementioned layers of *al-Abad* as a concept were used discursively and took shape in different media, e.g., banners, music, slogans and the language of everyday life (Bader Eddin 2018). The use of *al-Abad* did not appear suddenly within the Syrian public space, it gradually spread, culminating in the last fully developed stage with Assad, the eternal godlike figure, during the 1980s (Wedeen 1999, 2019; Cook 2007; 2017; Bader Eddin 2018; Ismail 2019). Based on slogans of the Assad regime from 1970 to 2011, we realize that Hafez al-Assad was represented by different chronological slogans reaching the phase *al-Abad* illustrated above.

During the early stage of Assad's rule in Syria, slogans of Baath ideology were the most common, without any reference to Assad, such as اليد العاملة هي العليا في دولة البعث[The upper hand is the one that works in the Baath state]. After Assad eliminated his opposition in the early 1980s, his name appeared as the ransomed leader in the slogan of نحن فداء الوطن والعروبة والقائد المفدى [We sacrifice

ourselves for the country, Arabism, and our ransomed (beloved) leader]. Here, he is shown as a leader for Syria within the greater context of Arabism. Within this context of Baath ideology, a slogan like حافظ أسد رمز الأمة العربية [Hafez (...) Assad (...) the Symbol of the Arab Nation] appeared to centralize Assad within it. This slogan places Assad within the context of Arabism as the leader of an Arab nation. Later slogans confirmed the political stability of his reign in Syria using *al-Abad*, including قائدنا للأبد حافظ الأسد [our Leader forever is Hafez Assad]. This slogan resembles many other differently formulated ones, namely الأسد إلى الأبد [Assad Forever]. I would like to mention here that the meaning of *al-Abad* does not intimate the godlike figure Assad, but instead confirms his intention to be the only president of Syria, as part of the only enduring political regime in the nation.

The slogan قائدنا إلى الأبد الأمين حافظ الأسد [Our leader forever the honest, (trusted, faithful) Hafez Assad] changes the role of Assad the political leader to Assad the saint, as *al-Amin* is one of the words describing the prophet Mohammad in the Quran (At-Takwir, Sura 81:19–21). This represents a shift in perception of Assad, from the leader of a durable regime, to a holy figure himself, akin to a prophet. This was supported by the election campaigns in 1992 that were labeled *bay'a* [a pledge], an Islamic term reflecting '(...) a pact between a ruler and the ruled. The ruler undertakes management based on justice and is responsible for Muslims' interests' (Husayn 1982: 59). In the late 1990s, the slogans حلك يا الله حلك يطلع حافظ محلك [Oh, God! It is time to give your place to Hafez] or لم يتبق لنا إلا أنت [No one left for us but you] resemble the famous religious line there is no god but God.

6 Syria as *Al-Abad*

Syria's public space has become overwhelmed with Assad's *al-Abad*, reminding Syrians of the metaphorical and real transformation of their country into a prison. The metaphorical prison is one where all Syrians are forced to live under the rule of Assad reproducing compulsory *al-Abad* in everyday lived experiences. Another meaning, the actual prisons created for those who oppose *al-Abad*. Within these frames of reference, there is a strong relationship between the abstract concept of *al-Abad* and the geographical place or the location where this term was utilized. *Al-Abad* is the ongoing political regime of Assad that has created another two *al-Abad*(s); the interior Syrian *al-Abad* and the exterior Syrian *al-Abad*. I argue here that the existence of an Assad *al-Abad* led to many different *Abad*(s) represented by the regime's opposition. They were

obliged to live forever [Ila al-Abad], as the Assad slogan says, 'Assad forever', in Syria (in jails if refusing the political *al-Abad* or praising *al-Abad* and live in Syria as a metaphorical prison) or they were obliged to be forever in exile. This prison or exile of *al-Abad* is identical to the one of Assad, and it is based on his ongoing political system and non-stop use of *al-kalām* that Adonis discussed. Questioning the meaning of *al-Abad*, especially for the exiled and imprisoned, raises an important question, does it have an end? The political *al-Abad* of Assad ends when the political rule of Assad ends. However, for now, it is an eternal rule (*al-Abad*) because it is not identified when it finishes in the short or long term. Regardless of the length of Assad's rule, the effects of *al-Abad* on exile and imprisonment will last longer than its true products. One day, *al-Abad*, the ongoing political system of Assad, will cease, but the literature of prison and exile will endure and achieve the literal meaning of *al-Abad*. In this case, *al-Abad* of exile and prison is a metaphor, an inherited characteristic of not only the exiled people but of the generations that witnessed these terrors through oral narratives. This oral *al-Abad* is experienced from within Syria, the geographical place, and divided between exile and prison, or *al-Abad* from contiguous traumas endured from one generation to the next, even if they never live in Syria again. Contrary to that, *al-Abad* of Assad might be remembered only through the different layers of meanings, and all the discursive loads will gradually stop once the Assad *al-Abad* dissipates.

7   Conclusion

Al-Abad is one of God's attributes that Assad took for himself. *Al-Abad* functions not only as the immortal leader but it describes an ideology, political order, system and a fixed (so far) ongoing span of time. This is why *al-Abad* literally means permanent and does not finish or stop, while in practice, *al-Abad* is a term that can be called continuing the status quo, enduring, ongoing and derives its functionality from binaries. There is no *al-Abad* without the regime's stagnant rule opposed by Syrians who refuse it. A further dimension related to *al-Abad*, political temporality, is an important factor in its understanding because the essence of comprehending *al-Abad* is time. Assad occupied Syrian public space with different terms and words related to the concepts of time and eternity. The relationship to the temporal meaning of *al-Abad* and its functionality in this article is not fixed but changeable. It works to serve the ongoing political reign of Assad beginning in the 1970s and continuing today as a fixed and stagnant political era. Gilber Achcar explains that the revolutions and revolutionary acts starting in 2011 are in process, and different episodes will take

shape, similarly to the English and French revolutions that occurred during different historical points and continued the previous revolution (Achcar 2012: 5–10). In this sense, the temporality of *al-Abad* as never-ending and ongoing has an equal and opposite *al-Abad* that endures with the protests of 2011 and the acts of resistance thereafter. Those episodic revolutions in opposition to *al-Abad* function in a comparable way to *al-Abad* itself. They continue—never-ending and overlap. They represent a process that contains waves propagating just as the Assad *al-Abad*. In this context, *al-Abad* (a political system) itself as an abstract concept is defined by its binary of *al-Abad* from the revolution and revolutionary acts. As long as Assad's *Abad* continues, the *Abad* of revolution will continue and last as a binary to Assad *al-Abad* and the ongoing status quo of Syria.

References

Achcar, Gilbert (2013). "The People want: a Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising". Trans. by G.M. Ghoshgarian. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Adonis (1993). Al-Nizām wa-al-Kalām [The System and the Speech]. Beirut: Dar al-Aadaab.

Al-Bawwāba [*the Gate*]. Bāshār al-Assad fī Surat Qul Hūwa Allāh Aḥad [Bashar al-Assad in al-Ikhlāṣ Sura]. July 13, 2011. Accessed September 27, 2021. https://bit.ly/3mg5RBD.

Al-Haj Saleh, Yassin (2019). "Al-Abad: al-Tawā'if ka Awābid, wa-al-Ibāda [Al-Abad: sects as Wonders, and Genocide]". *al-Hewar* https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=652057. 10-10-2019. Accessed 20 April 2021.

Al-Haj Saleh, Yassin (2019). "Al-Abad ka-Manfā Min al-Tārikh [*Al-Abad* as an exile from history]". *al-Hewar*, 18 April 2018. https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=596065. Accessed 20-04-2021.

al-Kawakibi, Abd al-Rahman (2006). Asaad al-Sahmarani (introduced). "Tabā'i' al-Istibdād wa-Masāri' al-Isti'bād [The Nature of Despotism]", Introduced: Asaad al-Sahmarani, Beirut: Dār an-Nafā'is 2006. (Arabic).

Al-Munjid Dictionary (2008) 3rd edition, Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq.

Arberry, John Arthur (ed.) (1935) *The Mawāqif and Mukhātabāt of Muhammad Ibn' Abdi 'L-Jabbar Al-Niffarī with Other Fragments'*. London: Cambridge University Press. (Arabic & English).

Bader Eddin, Eylaf (2018). 'Indamā Hatafū ilā al-Abad: Lughat al-Thawra al-Suriyya [When They Cried "Forever": the Language of the Syrian Revolution], Damascus: Dār Mamduḥ 'Idwan. (Arabic).

Barthes, Roland (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press.

Buckwalter Tim, and Dilworth Parkinson (2011). *A Frequency Dictionary of Arabic Core vocabulary for learners*. London: Routledge.

Cooke, Miriam (2017). *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution*. New York: Routledge.

Cooke, Miriam (2007). *Dissident Syria: Making the Oppositional Arts Official*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Husayn, Ṭaha (1982). *Al-Majmuʻa al-Kāmila al-jiz' 4* [The complete collection: Vol 4]. Beirut: The International Company for Books. (Arabic).

Ismail, Salwa (2019). *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory, and Government in Syria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wedeen, Lisa (1999). *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wedeen, Lisa (2019). *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in* Syria. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, Raymond (1983). *Keywords a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.