

## FROM INFLATION TO TRANSLATION: A STUDY OF SYRIAN BANKNOTES

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines Syrian banknotes as translations of the nation. Through a contextualised visual analysis, it showcases the interrelatedness of political reality and money design, focusing on the issue of 500-, 1000-, 2000- and 5000-pound notes in the context of the Syrian war (2011-present). With the aim of demonstrating the potency of abstract icons to address, reinforce and/or deflate questions of power and representation, the study offers insights into the (re)fashioning of national identity at a time of political crisis. Authorised by the government, money iconography reflects the effects of the Syrian war and contributes to the self-fashioning of the Syrian state at large.

**KEYWORDS:** Banknote Iconography, Syria, National Narratives, Translation

### 1. Introduction: Money, nation and translation

I recently had a casual chat with the director of the Bureau of Immigration, Hyderabad, about the significance of money in cultural production. The incident led me into thinking how, throughout history, coins and banknotes, from ancient Greek drachmas to contemporary British sterling pounds, have featured great kings and emperors, as well as a whole host of other symbols of relevance to the issuing culture. Despite that, the iconography of money has been largely overlooked as a site of cultural analysis. Though money itself, as an abstract commodity, has attracted a lot of attention from cultural theorists,<sup>1</sup> the symbolism of its material carrier has received much less. Isabel Gil, in her introduction to *The Cultural Life of Money* (2015), perhaps sheds light on why:

The abstract dimension of money renders it an object that is utterly subsumed into its outside. *Rhetorically, the face value of money has no identity.* Just as a coin or a banknote carry a face that is not the object's own, the value of money is always dependent on the perception of others. (Gil, 2015, p. 10, emphasis added)

However, despite this perception, there has not been a complete dearth of studies into the 'face value' of money. Shtalenkova (2018, p. 291), for example, has shown that, beyond its economic value, money is an ideologically determined communicative tool that helps promote certain images of the state; while Penrose and Cumming (2011), studying the iconography of Scottish banknotes over several centuries, reveal that they serve both national and non-national political agendas in their symbolic content.

Since state ideology almost always works in camouflage,<sup>2</sup> money offers a space for it to operate freely. Working under the state are the central banks, which authorise money-cum-meaning circulation. And while the everyday usage of money might make it seem a

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<sup>1</sup> See Gil (2015, pp. 2-9) for an overview of the most significant contributions.

<sup>2</sup> See Fiske (1987, p. 11) on how ideology may present itself "in the aggregate of apparently insignificant encodings".

‘banal’ form of nationalism (Billig, 1995), the very recurrence of images, words, and symbols, assured by its circulation, ultimately enables an ‘imagined political community’ (Anderson, 1983) to emerge. Thus, the visual lexicon deployed comes to signal the official discourse of the nation (Marten, 2008, cited in Penrose and Cumming, 2011, p. 821). Hence, money contributes, *inter alia*, to the visual construction and (re)production of national identity, one of the manifold ways in which nations narrate themselves (Bhabha, 1990).

Banknotes are instances of translation, both in terms of cultural significance and political implicature. Like conventional verbal translations, they are never innocent, but profoundly embedded in networks of value and signification, which makes them into a privileged site for studying questions of representation, power, and historicity (Niranjana 1992, p. 1). Studying money as part of culture thus requires “an examination of the processes of encoding and decoding characteristic of translation” (Bassnett, 1998, pp. 138-9).

This article looks at money in the Syrian context with the ultimate aim of understanding the close links between nation and translation (Bermann and Wood, 2005; Selim, 2009) in this particular case and their politics of representation.

## **2. Arab uprisings and the Syrian war**

From December 2010, Arab protests swept across the Middle East and North Africa. The events, extensively covered by Western media, brought about an unprecedented crisis, as Arab states like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain erupted into violence, with unprecedented uprisings against their ruling regimes. In Syria, the crisis took the form of a gruesome war that has lasted for over a decade now. Dubbed as the one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history, the war has left 350,000 dead, nearly 14 million displaced and basic infrastructure destroyed.<sup>3</sup> As tension escalated between pro-governmental and anti-governmental Syrian forces in March 2011, there was no consensus amongst Syrians as to what really caused the war or which interpretation of it to accept.

In 2013, three years after the start of the uprising, the central bank of Syria issued new banknotes of 500 and 1000 pounds. Though this was ostensibly to tackle inflation, there seemed (given the political conundrum affecting the country) to be a compelling need to represent the nation anew and to do so efficiently. Other denominations followed: a 2000-pound note in 2017 and a 5000-pound one in 2021 – each of them the highest denominations ever to be released. Money was clearly being used as a site for the transmission of cultural and political messages as well as economic value; and as a visual medium (Shtalenkova, 2018, p. 291) encoding questions of power and representation, lends itself to cultural analysis.

As the Syrian conflict is about to enter its thirteenth year, it is high time that the socio-political dimension of the conflict is addressed at the micro-level, something that has gone

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<sup>3</sup> See latest UN special envoy briefing, 24<sup>th</sup> of March 2022 <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14839.doc.htm> (Accessed: 13 December 2022)

unheeded until now. With the aim of identifying the forces which necessitated the issue of the new banknotes, this article traces the timeline of changes introduced by the government after the uprising, arguing that money embodies the struggle for control over how the nation is interpreted.

### **3. Methodology**

For this study, I selected Syrian banknotes of the 500-, 1000-, 2000-, and 5000-pound (SYP) denominations issued in 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2021 respectively – years which may be considered “relevant moments” (Handley and Ismail, 2010) in the Syrian war for reasons that will be given below. I then carried out a qualitative content analysis, with the image/figure/icon as the unit of analysis. In the case of the two lower-value denominations, the new notes were compared and contrasted with older ones in order to better understand the relationship between money and nation-building and the effect of the immediate context on such decisions.

What money offers is a site of translation where meaning is negotiated and hierarchies maintained. Through banknotes, a mainstream narrative emerges about the Syrian state in general and the war in particular. Money, like a camera, translates the nation pictorially, but, like a camera, it also lies by omission (Knightly, 2003, p.14), particularly when certain identities are excluded. Thus, absence becomes political. We take Syrian banknotes as signifiers whose meaning is determined by context, be it of growth and welfare or of crisis and warfare.

Some of the troubling questions addressed are: What do the figures signify? Are they presented as timeless or contextualised? Are they inclusive of all identities, and if not, which identities are left out and why? Why are certain figures chosen but not others? Is the choice driven by ideology and politics? Which face does a banknote carry and why, and does this bring an additive value? Who politicises, nationalises and invests money with meaning? Who authorises the narrative? Where else is the nation implied?

And finally, what do banknotes tell us about translation itself? This is a question that I will return to at the end of the article.

### **4. Data Description and Analysis**

#### **4.1 The 500-pound note (2013)**

Figure 1.1 shows the old 500-pound note issued back in 1998, under the rule of Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president Bashar. On the obverse, the note features Queen Zenobia<sup>4</sup> next to the city of Palmyra, and Philip the Arab<sup>5</sup> next to the city of Bosra. On the reverse, it features Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates, located in the al-Raqqa governorate, next to some agricultural products. The watermark is the head of an Arabian horse, which, like Philip the Arab, is a marker of supranational identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Zenobia was a warrior queen who ruled over the Palmyrene Empire in the third century and fought the Romans. Over the years, she has turned into a patriotic symbol engraved in the consciousness of Syrians.

<sup>5</sup> Roman emperor from 244 to 249, who was born in Auranitis in modern-day Syria.

Figure 1.2, on the other hand, shows the new 500 note issued in 2013, under the rule of Bashar al-Assad. On the obverse, we see the Damascus Opera House, located in the capital. The reverse shows the ‘Mosaic of the Musicians’, dating from the Byzantine era, alongside a 4000-year-old clay tablet from Ugarit bearing the oldest surviving fragment of musical notation (a text reading ‘Oldest musical note’ is written vertically up the left-hand side in English and Arabic). The watermark is the country’s coat of arms, the Syrian eagle.



Figure 1.1. 500-pound note (1998)



Figure 1.2. 500-pound note (2013)

Other than the crisis with Turkey over territory and water resources, the Arab uprising in 2011 was the most significant event in the recent history of the country. There was also a change in leadership from father to son in the early 2000s, but it pales in

comparison with the events of 2013, when the infrastructure was destroyed, economic sanctions imposed and the political rule challenged. As we consider the first two years of the Syrian conflict, the issue of the new 500-pound note becomes significant.

By 2013, the times were different to those experienced under Hafez al-Assad. ISIS had come into the picture, and there were heavy casualties. Large parts of Palmyra (the capital of Zenobia's empire) were either damaged or completely destroyed, and the area was no longer controlled by the government. As for the Tabqa Dam, Syria's largest reservoir, this had been targeted by oppositional groups since the early days of 2013, and by now was out of order, controlled by non-governmental armed groups.

The new 500-pound note introduced different symbolic features. The Damascus Opera House replaced Queen Zenobia and a mosaic from the Byzantine era, alongside a Sumerian clay tablet depicting musical notation, replaced the Tabqa dam. The Syrian eagle now became the watermark on the currency.

There is a clear shift in the narrative triggered by the political conundrum. The message moves from political to cultural history, from war to harmony, and from supra-national to state-based identity affiliations. The musical heritage seems to serve as a soothing substitute for the horrors of the ongoing war, and perhaps also as an apolitical, and therefore uncontroversial, unifying element. The same is true of the Byzantine mosaic and the fragment of musical notation. At a time when Palmyra and Raqqa were about to fall, forms of art, particularly music, had a role to play. And as the Syrian people stood divided, perhaps more than at any time in history, it will have seemed appropriate to harness the uncontroversial potential of a great civilisation in the remote past. In short, there is a correspondence between the political reality of the times and the iconography chosen for the new banknotes. Losing control of the dam and of major cities implied losing control of the narrative associated with them. Perhaps it was thought that the stability of the past could in some way detract from the uncertainties of the present.

#### **4.2 The 1000-pound note (2013)**

Figure 2.1 shows the old 1000-pound note issued back in 1997, under the rule of Hafez al-Assad. On the obverse, the note features a photo of Hafez al-Assad himself wearing a suit and tie, alongside the Umayyad Mosque, located in the capital, two spikes of wheat, the first Arab dinar, and a clay tablet from the kingdom of Ebla. The reverse depicts the oil industry with ships, workers, and harvesters. The watermark is the face of Hafez himself.

Figure 2.2, on the other hand, shows the new 1000-pound note issued in 2013 under Bashar al-Assad. On the obverse, we can see the Roman Amphitheatre in Bosra (an ancient city in the southern part of the country). The reverse features the As-Suwayda mosaic (a Roman mosaic of a grape harvest in Deir al-Adas, located in that city). The watermark is now the country's coat of arms, the Syrian eagle.

A gamut of symbolic messages is evident on the old note. The figure of the president symbolises power, while the mosque is a marker of Islam. The harvest and oil are markers of development and growth; the Arab dinar represents pan-Arab identity; and the Kingdom

of Ebla is a symbol of civilisation. President Hafez, whose rule stretched from 1971 until his death in 2000, had been an aviator of the Syrian Air Force and Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Army, and he also served as the regional secretary of the Arab socialist Ba’th Party. The Umayyad Mosque, known as the Great Mosque of Damascus, is one of the largest and oldest mosques in the world, known for its Islamic architecture. The first Arab dinar is no less important, as it goes back to 7<sup>th</sup>-century Arabia, when Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan first used Arabic script on the gold coins. Ebla, one of the earliest kingdoms in Syria and a major trade centre, is also invoked through the use of tablets, which are said to shed light on the Abraham tradition and serves therefore as a reminder of the origin of all Abrahamic religions. All of the designs evoke the rich civilisation of the region.

Coming into circulation in 2013/2014, the new 1000-pound note featured new faces with different attributes. In this period, ISIS seized control of large parts of Syria and Iraq, the US-led coalition was established and subsequently launched airstrikes on ISIS, and President Bashar al-Assad was re-elected. Once again, the new note seems to signal an important shift in rhetoric. As larger parts of the country fell outside of the control of the government, and Assad’s leadership was increasingly questioned, the use of the presidential photograph became a site of contestation; an image from social history (in this case, the Roman Amphitheatre at Bosra) was clearly much less controversial. As for the markers of development and growth, with the economy stagnating, the narrative of development could no longer be sustained. Most of the oil fields in Syria had been lost to ISIS, which was smuggling crude oil abroad through Turkey, and the sanctions against Syria had led to one of the worst economic crises in contemporary history, leading to the devaluation of the Syrian pound.

The mosaic from Suwayda is particularly significant since it seems to signal a change of addressee. The city of Suwayda, home of the Druze minority, was the first to rise up against the government in March 2011,<sup>6</sup> and was still fighting for its overthrow at the moment the banknote was issued.<sup>7</sup> Including this reference expressly on the banknote seems to represent a directed appeal for unity and an end to resistance.

The transition from a state of prosperity, growth and firm leadership to one of war and devastation thus required a new narrative, one that would avoid political demarcation and foster unity. What facilitates such unity is a “set of values, institutions, and symbols common to a particular social group”, which allows the cluster of “unconscious images which are socially shared” to form a social imaginary (Taylor, 2004, p. 32). We can say that such a social imaginary exists for Syrian people, so much so that even among those who have never met and might never do there is an ‘imagined’ Syrian nation to which they all belong (Anderson, 1983). Images like the amphitheatre and the mosaic thus represent an appeal to this common Syrian identity over and above the ethno-religious differences.

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<sup>6</sup> This echoed the important role played by the Druze of Suwayda in the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925 against the French mandate.

<sup>7</sup> See Al-Shami (2022) for an in-depth analysis of the Al-Suwayda’s position in the present conflict.



Figure 2.1. 1000-pound note (1997).



Figure 2.2. 1000-pound note (2013).

#### **4.3 The 2000-pound note (2017)**

Figure 3 shows the new 2000-pound note issued in 2017, under the rule of Bashar al-Assad. On the obverse, the note features a photo of al-Assad in a suit and tie alongside the Umayyad Mosque; on the reverse is the Syrian Parliament. The watermark is the Syrian eagle.

The note is peculiar in many respects. Firstly, the 2000-pound bill was the highest Syrian denomination ever to be released and many Syrians opposed it on purely economic grounds, fearing a rise in inflation. Secondly, this was the first time that Present al-Assad's image featured on the currency since he took office in July 2000. What is more, the image was not a contemporary one but seems to have been purposefully chosen to evoke the 2000s, functioning as an assertion of power. Finally, the denomination 2000 has been read

by some as significant for the same reason (Moubayed, 2017). The specimen came out in 2015, fifteen years into Assad's rule, but it was not until July 2017 that it went into circulation, due in part to the controversy it provoked.

Let us start with the photo of President Assad. The controversy around the issue of the banknote was mainly related to the use of his photograph, since it seemed to indicate a refusal, on the part of the president, to heed the clamours for him to step down (Moubayed, 2017). However, by 2017, when the Russian forces were already helping, the state regained its balance and was in a position to issue such a firm statement through money. The implication is that, although the Umayyad Mosque, marker of Islam, had been damaged several times, the Assad leadership could protect the UNESCO world heritage site and, by extension, protect Islam and its artifacts. As for the Syrian Parliament featured on the reverse side, this is not meant to be read in isolation, as it signifies that very legitimacy. The image attests to the will of the Syrian people and reminds us of the first time Bashar al-Assad was elected in 2000, while also alluding to his re-election in 2014. As such it becomes a counter-narrative to that circulated in the West in which Assad is predominantly portrayed as an oppressor of his people. The watermark, too, seeks to emphasise national identity.



Figure 3. 2000-pound note (2017).

#### **4.4 The 5000-pound note (2021)**

Figure 4 shows the new 5000-pound note issued in 2021, under the rule of Bashar al-Assad, which remains the highest denomination note in circulation today. Although it was meant to be issued in 2019, controversy again pushed the decision forward to 2021. On the obverse, it features a Syrian soldier in military uniform saluting the Syrian flag, next to a mural from the temple of Baal Shamin in Palmyra. Ten years into the war, this was the first time the currency had depicted a soldier in uniform alongside the Syrian flag. Perhaps this

was the state's way of honouring, commemorating, and publicly acknowledging the sacrifices of its soldiers. At the same time, the photo may have served to mobilise the people to take action and defend their homeland. It also clearly identifies the Syrian Armed Forces as the sole legitimate defenders of the nation. On the other hand, the choice of a detail from the lintel of the Temple of Baal Shamin combines three national symbols: the sun (which is what 'Syria' means in Sanskrit); the olive branch, which across the Levant is seen as a symbol of peace, life and continuity; and the Syrian eagle, the country's coat of arms and symbol of resilience.



Figure 4. The 5000-pound note (2021).

### **5. Gender issues**

Although Syria is among the very few countries to feature women on its currency, we cannot be content with the mere fact that Queen Zenobia was represented on the old 500-pound note; rather, we need to ask ourselves how she was represented and why. Which image of Zenobia was chosen? Where was she placed? On the obverse or reverse, on the right side or on the left? Why were women musicians used on the reverse? Is money thus a gendered site of narration? And what do we learn from the combination of gender identity, gaze, and social status in these particular images? (Cañadas and Lupiáñez, 2012)

We might begin by looking at the representation of the men. In all cases, the al-Assads are presented on the obverse of the banknotes and on the right-hand side. This is significant because the right has been associated with the future and legitimacy, whereas the left is associated with the past and illegitimacy (Cirlot, 1971, p. 138).

As with any other state institution, banknotes are prone to a gendering process where women continue to be under-represented, if not effaced altogether. At face value, Zenobia featuring on the 500-note has been viewed by some as “a sign of social progress” on the part of Syria (Poppick, 2015). As we have seen, Zenobia, known as the Queen of Palmyra, is celebrated as the rebel who took on Rome, honoured for her military success

and physical prowess. I, however, argue that the state has appropriated Zenobia in order to turn her into a patriotic symbol for Syrians and a reminder of a glorious past, to further its own cause. Rather than a goal in herself, Zenobia, here, is a means to an end.

If we compare her portrait to those of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, we encounter a discrepancy in representation that is revealing. Both Assads are presented on the right-hand side of the obverse, smiling, confident, besuited and formal, and most importantly, staring at the beholder with an assertive gaze. Zenobia, on the other hand, despite being positioned similarly on the banknote, is dressed as a warrior and shown in profile, which emphasizes her sharp features. The fact that Zenobia does not return our gaze as the Assads do but is the object of ours is significant. Like Britannia or Marianne before her, Zenobia is presented as the personification of the nation, idealized and abstract.<sup>8</sup> The historical queen has been translated into a powerful female icon that embodies the homeland in a simultaneously maternal and belligerent role – ultimately, a female figure as conceived by a powerfully patriarchal society.

As for the four women on the reverse of the note, their role is different. This is a detail of a fourth-century mosaic from Mariamin, near Hama, which depicts female musicians playing different musical instruments and gazing directly at the viewer as if playing for an audience. Whatever the mosaic tells us about the status of women in late Antiquity,<sup>9</sup> this is subordinated, on the banknote, to the overall glorification of the modern state. Cropped and juxtaposed with other references to ancient culture (the clay tablet and text reading ‘Oldest musical note’ in English and Arabic), the image becomes an element in a new narrative about ancient civilization and music, as described above.

In such representations, the power of the state is (re)asserted even over the dead, who are revived (like a translation of old classic texts), to suit contemporary purposes. This simple instance of translation, in my view, is symptomatic of the general attitude pervading Syrian society in which women are marginalized.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has sought to show how the iconography of money contributes to the daily (re)production of national identity. It also highlights the persistence of a visual lexicon in the (re)tellings of the contemporary conflict in Syria. Akin to national articulations found on flags and maps, and in museums and anthems, the elements depicted on banknotes are clearly worthy of attention, becoming, by implication, the nation itself.

At a time of crisis, money seems to have offered a site of translation that allows the state to exert power over the narratives of war. The new 500-note was issued in 2013 at a time when the government was losing control over water resources in the northern and north-eastern part of the country, and territory in Palmyra had already been lost to armed

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<sup>8</sup> On the role of feminine figures as personifications of (otherwise patriarchal) nations, see Hess and Klee (2021).

<sup>9</sup> Experts are divided as to whether the mosaic represents professional performers, members of an upper-class family group posing as musicians, or ideal allegorical images (see Kiilerich 2011, pp. 99-100).

groups; the depiction of the Damascus Opera House alongside specimens from the past thus offered a historico-cultural narrative that was easier to control. Similarly, when the new 1000-note was issued in 2013/2014, the economic prosperity associated with Hafez al-Assad's name was long gone; hence, the use of the Bosra amphitheater and other features of the cultural heritage, particularly from Suwayda (a city with a history of political unrest), were an attempt to generate unity by evoking a national imaginary that all the warring groups might share.

The new 2000-note, however, was sending a different message. With it, Bashar al-Assad was reminding Syrians, and the rest of the world, that seventeen years had already passed since he came to power, and that here he still was, strong and resilient.

And finally, there is the 5000-note issued as recently as 2021 as a response to the rise in inflation rates. This note is a tribute to the soldiers who lost their lives serving the nation, a homage to a glorious past that could perhaps be regained with effort, and a call for further sacrifice.

Finally, what does this study of banknotes tell us about translation?

I would suggest that, above all, it showcases the relationship of translation and time. As the literature on retranslation (e.g. Albachten and Gürçağlar, 2017) shows, what stands as a good translation at one point in time may be perceived as inadequate later, and thus has to be revised, translated anew. In short, all translations are bound to a particular time and place; they are finite, and replaceable.

These banknotes, which translate the Syrian national identity, have been politicized in much the same way as written texts are politicized. And like written texts, the narratives of the nation are always provisional, prone to re-translation. Money has here become a site for the contestation and rewriting of national narratives, an attempt by a beleaguered government to reassert control in the context of an unprecedented and violent political crisis.

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