Introduction

Syria is hugely diverse in languages and accents, religions and sects, ethnicities, geography, and otherwise. What is of particular interest for me as a research is the diversity of the intangible cultural heritage of Syria as this is a source of great cultural richness for Syrians and could potentially open many doors for social, economic and civilizational progress in our country.

This book is a creative summary of the findings of a research that tries to document some of the ignored or under-represented components of Syrian cultural heritage through the medium of food culture in Syria. The project's team visited 11 Syrian families at their homes, and they each taught us recipes for food which are for them intimately linked to their cultural heritage. We cooked and ate together, chatted about their gastronomical specialism as a family that belongs to a specific group of the Syrian society, and how the specific recipes they chose for us interlink with their cultural identity. The purpose of these visits and this book is to document and disseminate knowledge about these specific cultural groups and cultural practices as a conversation starter between Syrians. This is necessary because the mainstream cultural platforms of Syria have been huge one-dimensional and restrictive in Syria for over half a century, with Damascus dominating the cultural scene, and with some occasional limited representation of Aleppo and Latakia, and the rest of Syria almost non-existent apart from some tokenistic mentions in special occasions.

Capital cities dominating the media and cultural scene is not unique to Syria, but it has particularly dangerous consequences in Syria that we saw clearly in the Syrian civil war that started in 2011. Syria is officially an Arab nation, but it has multiple non-Arab ethnicities, and a very mixed background for those who are Arabs. Relatedly, Syria's official language is Arabic, but at least six other native languages are spoken in it: Kurdish, Armenian, Circassian, Turkic, Assyrian, Aramaic, etc. The cultural practices and languages of the non-Arab components of Syria have been suppressed and even their use in public criminalised for over half a century. Similarly, Syria is a majority Muslim nation, but every sect of Islam exists within it, as well as every denomination of Christianity, and any discussion about this religion diversity has been all but banned in the name of national unity and not stirring religious or sectarian tensions. However, banning open and respectful discussion about differences for half a century has led to ignorance and myths about these differences. Fear and mistrust of the unknown other festered in Syria and was utilised successfully by the different warring parties in Syria since 2011 as may groups preyed on people's fears and anxieties to either recruit or implicate them in the fighting one way or another. This was further exacerbated by regional tensions as well as rural Syria- once a major source of Syria's economy and its food security- had been decimated gradually since the turn of the 21st century by the withdrawal of government support that coincided with a sever draught. This created an extreme rural-urban

economic divide that was also utilised by the political and military powers in Syria's war.

This project is then an attempt to start conversations about the richness of Syrian cultural diversity that will hopefully work as an interactive educational exchange between Syrian; an exchange where everyone has a stake as an educator and as a learner, teaching others about what culture means for them and their circles, and learning from others about theirs. By learning about each other's intangible cultural heritage, we counter the politicisation and militarisation of our diversity and reclaim the richness and great potential within this diversity. Moreover, it is often said in Syria that humans are the enemies of what they don't know, so knowledge is the best remedy of the sectarian, ethic and regional tensions in the country. By sharing the knowledge about each-other's cultures we bring these cultures to the open and unveil the myths and propaganda that were used to weaponize our differences. Hence, we created this recipe book with a cultural twist in which we share more than food, but an overview of the demographic to which the family that taught us the recipe belongs, and some unique aspects of their culture. It was first written in Arabic and 1000 free hard copies were distributed inside of Syria, and now this English version is meant for anyone who is interested in the subject of Syrian food culture, and also for Syrians born or raised in the diaspora and cannot read Arabic.

But first, I must explain what tangible and intangible cultural heritage mean. Tangible cultural heritage are the components of culture that people first think of and that

are mostly fixed and unchangeable over time, or are changed through deliberate processes, and only change organically and naturally over a very long period of time. These components are things like written literature, historic and archaeological sites and buildings, language, religion, the political identity of a country with its borders and laws and histories. Intangible culture heritage, on the other hand, consists of components that are live and evolving and changeable perpetually, even though some of them have been practiced for centuries if not millennia. We are talking here about practices like music, dance, handicrafts, traditions and conventional practices we do when we celebrate the birth of a baby or mourn the death of a loved one, etc. In the case of Syria and the region one significant example of intangible cultural heritage are the unique genres of spoken and performative poetry like ataba, zajal, moulayya, zaghareed, etc., and they are linked directly to folkloric singing, like the very famous Dal'ona. Dal'ona is an excellent example of how intangible cultural heritage is so ancient yet ever evolving almost on a daily basis whenever someone new sings it. No one really knows the exact meaning of the word 'Dal'ona', but one of the most popular theories is what Dr Hassan Abbas, the famous late researcher in Syrian culture shares that it comes from an Aramaic word meaning 'let's help,' and that people in Syria, thousands of years ago, used to this type of singing and rhythm to encourage each other to work harder and help one another during the harvest season[1]. Dal'ona is therefore a music genre that existed in

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCoOdfbL9pM

Syria for thousands of years, but is surely very different to the way it looked when it started or even a couple of centuries ago, not least because of the different languages that were spoken in the region over this time. In the last few years we saw new and vastly popular phenomenon of new and young bands and musicians merging Dal'ona and other folkloric music with other contemporary and sometimes western musical styles, and the huge success of bands like Takkat and Sa'aleek who specialise in these adaptations is very telling about the liveness and popularity of intangible culture in Syria. Another interesting example here is the Syrian musician and academic scholar Ali Asaad who mixes the ancient poetic/musical genre of Ataba with western orchestral music[2]. So, if folkloric music is a cultural practice that has new life breathed into it with each new singer and their addition to it, the famous waterwheels of Hamah and Nizar Qabbani's poems are fixed and easily identifiable components of Syrian culture, hence they are examples of Syrian *tangible* cultural heritage.

I am focusing in this book on a specific aspect of Syrian intangible culture which is particularly tricky to identify and quantify and trace its origins, which is food culture and its associated practices from farming to cooking and hospitality. But why is it important to produce a book about Syrian food and hospitality now with the nation is just emerging from a devastating war and people experiencing a debilitating living circumstances? And why

[2] https://www.ali-asaad.com/

is it important to document the differences and specificities of Syrian cuisines now? I will try to answer this question below.

1. **Economic reasons:**
2. Attention to the Syrian cuisine can result in significant economic gains on individual and collective levels inside of Syria and in the diaspora. There are many cuisines that have gained international reputation and popularity as an indirect result to diaspora and forced migration, like the Indian, Turkish and Lebanese cuisines. In fact, one of the annoying experiences that I have personally experienced repeatedly as a Syrian living in the UK is that I have often visited restaurants, in the UK and across Europe, which offer Syrian food, owned and staffed by Syrians and a Syrian chef, but the sign outside introduces the restaurant as Lebanese! I've often asked about the reason for this and was told that Lebanese cuisine is already known for Western customers and attracts them. Due to the huge wave of Syrian migration into Europe in the past 10 years, this phenomenon is decreasing slightly, and more investors are taking pride in using 'Syrian cuisine' in their marketing. Maybe this is an historic collective opportunity for Syrian cuisine to establish its place as an international brand, with all the great economic benefits that this will bring for Syrian at home and in the diaspora. To get a better of the potential we are talking about here, let's look

at the British government's statistics about the food industry in the UK as an example. According to gov.uk, the food industry in this country is worth £107.4 billion and employs 3.7 million workers. There are 33000 restaurants in the UK, and more than a third of them, 12000, are Indian, and they attract thousands of specialist chefs, investors and other workers from India, as well as employing tens of thousands of Indian workers in the UK[3]. Chinese, Turkish and Lebanese restaurants are also hugely popular here, although I could not find reliable statistics about them. Syrian restaurants have already become a phenomenon and a success story in Egypt and are leaving their mark in Southern Turkey and Northern Iraq, and the potential in European countries where significant Syrian communities emerged in recent years is promising.

On an individual level, many Syrians, especially inside of Syria, and even more especially women, resorted to cooking as a means to generate extra income in dire living circumstances. Cooking and catering is a smart way to generate income for a Syrian woman who already has this skill and doesn't need to train or qualify for it, and she can do it from the comfort of her home without having to rent a place or find childcare arrangements. This has proved a crucial life-line particularly for the huge number of families

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/food-statistics-pocketbook/food-statistics-in-your-pocket#:~:text=%C2%A3240bn%20Total%20consumer%20expenditure,d

that lost their main bread-winner, the father, during the war.

These are only few examples of the plethora of areas in which Syrian cuisine and food culture can be utilised for economic gain. Therefore, a closer look at this culture and a wider exchange of expertise can open many doors.

2. Social reasons:

For reasons alluded to in the earlier paragraphs, and more, Syrians are not reaping the benefits of their rich diversity. In fact, there is often fear and mistrust caused by this diversity due to the prevalent misconception that equates difference with conflict. Difference is a source of richness and strength for society as it opens doors for creativity, collaboration and progress. We need to work hard on cultural competence in Syria in order to overcome the imposed cultural segregation between the different components of society. When we know more about each other's cultural practices and each other's backgrounds and histories, we dispel myths we've been fed for decades about our partner's in society, and we strengthen our ties and protect our communities from many dangers.

Food might be the easiest and most fun way to start this conversation about our differences as Syrians is food! We are a nation who loves cooking and gathering for food, we take pride in our food and invent new ways in cooking and insist on inviting those we love over to lunches and dinners. We even love discussing food so much! How many of us got into heated debates about whose method of cooking mlokhiyeh is best, and how many of us smiled

when they discovered that someone never heard of a meal they love so much, and then started explaining it to them very excitedly! In this way, food is a strategic choice as a conversation starter between us to build cultural competence.

3. Reasons related to our cultural identity: Most aspects of intangible cultural heritage, around the world and not just in Syria, share the risk of disappearance. This could because of the modern life style that changes many traditional practices, the inventions and technological advancements that render many practices and exchange obsolete, the easy communication between people from different cultures that sometimes reduces interest in certain very local practices, etc. More significantly though, wars and political/economic instabilities make any conversation or consumption of culture sound like an elitist luxury. Worse still, forced displacement hinders cultural consumption for diasporic communities as they have much less access to their cultural forms, and this is exacerbated for those who are either born in or raised in diaspora as their native culture is a mere abstract concept for them and something their parents attempt to instil in them with varying levels of success, not an organic components of their lives and experiences.

Unfortunately, all the factors listed above are happening together in Syria, posing a real existential threat to many aspects of our intangible cultural heritage. Therefore we have an urgent collective duty as Syrians to revive, document, showcase and disseminate knowledge

about this heritage. Dr Abbas says 'it is indeed people's right to keep their cultural heritage,'[4] so this is not a privilege but a necessity, and I would go as far as claiming it is a human right that should be protected for everyone. Cultural heritage plays a central and invaluable role in formulating, enhancing and maintaining an individual's sense of belonging to a people, with all the social, emotional and mental stability and security that this belonging brings.

Three very important notes to make here:

Firstly, this is not an exhaustive empirical documentation of Syrian food culture or even of the food cultures of the demographics to which our interviewees belong. What we are actually doing here, as expressed before, is start conversations about different and often unrepresented demographics in Syria through eh means of generic introductions to these demographics and groups, then by sharing recipes and experiences narrated to us by our sample of interviewees. In other words, this is how these individuals see their cultural identity manifested through food, not a claim to represent entire groups. Others who belong to the same groups will inevitably have different opinions and ways of expressing their gastronomical/cultural identity, and for those people we are keeping the door open to share your stories and perspectives, so please read the last section of this book for details on how you can do that.

Secondly, we were logistically confined to only interviewing 11 families that were chosen using the

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRb8J9RwBto

snowball sampling method conducted by the research associate in Syria. Therefore, we are forced to be very limited by how many demographics we could include, and we regret that we could not include more cities, towns, sects, ethnicities, etc. This is another reason why we implore people who read this book to get in touch and share their experiences, recipes and stories (again read the last section of the book for details on how to do it), and we especially welcome contributions from demographics that did not feature in this book.

Finally, the women who generously opened their homes for us and cooked and chatted with us did not receive any money for doing so, they did it because they had a passion and a drive to represent themselves and make their voice heard. Some of these women did not wish to share their real names, so we made up nicknames in some cases and used real names for those who consented to it. An important note for the non-Syrian readers here is that the majority of Syrian adults, especially the traditional ones, refer to themselves not by their actual names but by a nickname consisting of two parts: Abu (meaning 'father of..'), or Om (meaning 'mother of..') followed by the name of the first born male child. This is a way of adding reverence and respect to people after they become parents- and in some cases eager young men give themselves these nicknames even before they become parents, as a way to demand respect very soon in life! So, if a couple's names are is Ahmad and Layla, and their older son's name is Ali, they would traditionally introduce themselves as Abu Ali and Om Ali, and they will

keep Ahmad and Layla for the closest friends and for official use. You will read a lot of Om's in the following chapters, so please don't be confused and think that Om is a weirdly popular first name in Syria!
We are extremely grateful for each of these families and women, without whom this project wouldn't have happened.

And now, we wish you and enjoyable and informative read, and we strongly recommend you trying each one of the following recipes!