

## “If We Are Determined to Succeed, We Will Survive Together”: An Interview with Syrian Novelist Fawwaz Haddad



In the history of the Syrian novel, the name Fawwaz Haddad stands out as one of the most vital voices chronicling the country’s major transformations. His work delves deep into the layers of memory and reality, telling the story of the Syrian individual confronting power, upheaval, and turbulent eras.

From the very beginning, Haddad’s literary project has been consumed with seeking truth behind the walls of repression and ideology, tracing the complex relationship between individual, society, and authority. Spanning decades, his novels form an archive that pursues what politics neglected and official narratives erased.

In this exclusive interview with Noon Post, Haddad reflects on his literary identity, examines the trajectory of the Syrian novel under the weight of censorship, and considers how authoritarianism and sectarianism have shaped narrative structures. He also discusses the role of intellectuals during times of great transformation and offers a vision for the future of Syrian culture after the fall of despotism.

Here, we speak with a novelist who has remained loyal to Damascus a city he has written through its many phases and to Syrians, who form the very substance of his novels, portrayed as flesh-and-blood beings carrying their illusions, defeats, and dreams.

How do you view the literary identity of Fawwaz Haddad today, in light of the upheavals you personally experienced, and the broader changes in the Syrian novel?

A novelist typically possesses multiple identities, though some are more fixed—such as mine as an Arab Syrian writer. As for my religion, that’s a personal matter, whether I’m religious or not. That doesn’t mean I won’t defend Islam when it’s misrepresented or attacked with hostility.

I’m also drawn to truth, and that pursuit doesn’t neglect the human identity that binds me to people everywhere. This is a kind of identity rooted in humanitarian causes, one that doesn’t distinguish between people.

I’m not alone in this. We see it in Syrian and Arab fiction more broadly, which isn’t disconnected from global literature—even if our primary concern remains our own societies, just like writers elsewhere who write about their countries and themselves.

My novels are tied to my homeland, Syria. I wrote about Damascus because it is closest to me I was born there, and my bond with it is intimate. I wrote about the mandate and independence period, then the era of coups, and later about a country trapped in dictatorship—where we spent most of our lives. That period, too, found its place in my novels.

But I wasn’t writing a history of these phases. Rather, I was tracing how we lived through them how we navigated shifting, complex, and often stormy realities. What’s our share, as human beings, in reacting to them and being affected socially and politically?

To what extent do they influence our daily lives, behaviors, and private selves? My novels are, in some way, about us our weaknesses, our strengths, our ambitions, our stumbles, our losses and catastrophes.

They’re about our glories and our pains, our defeats and victories. About the human being within us and the richness of values and ethics they carry. About living with dignity. Of course, not everyone will share this perspective. Every novelist has their own vision.

To what extent did Syrian censorship before Assad’s fall limit the themes that Syrian novels could explore? How did this shape the literature produced during that era?

Censorship cast a long shadow over literature throughout the Assad era. There were subjects writers could approach, and others they couldn't touch. At times, even subtle gestures suggesting criticism of authority were chased down.

To put censorship in its proper context, it was enforced primarily by Baathist-aligned intellectuals within the Writers' Union and cultural journalism. They became a kind of cultural authority one that accused writers of backwardness, bourgeois tendencies, tribalism, and social regression.

They branded others as sectarian, Islamist, or even terrorists, all under the guise of promoting a progressive literary current cleansed of social and religious “reactionary” influences while brutally silencing dissent and punishing any perceived critique of the party or presidency.

As a result, the acceptable topics were those cloaked in the veil of “beautiful art,” concealing the grim realities on the ground. So we saw an abundance of stories about lecherous Don Juans chasing women, revolutionary heroes risking everything against imperialism, or imagined prison struggles set in the bourgeois past or during the unity period.

Meanwhile, they completely ignored the actual prisons and security agencies that had consumed the entire country.

Many of your works have been described as dissections of Syria's political and social structures. How much did resisting authoritarianism shape the narrative architecture of your fiction?

A novelist writes about the world they grew up in, about the people they live among how they appear on the surface and in depth. The tension between those two layers is what creates a novel. It's the contrast between appearance and truth, between what authority shows and what it conceals. This applies equally to the human psyche and interpersonal relationships. That's the essence of it without overcomplication.

If a novel engages with reality and doesn't just exist in the realm of imagination it must dismantle the structures it seeks to critique. That's a purely narrative task, achieved through storytelling techniques that differ from one novel to the next, even when bearing the author's distinctive voice. Art plays a vital role in how this message reaches the reader.

When writing about fear, repression, ideology, and extremism, how do you maintain a balance between the heaviness of these topics and the aesthetic quality of the novel as an art form?

There's no single or universal aesthetic standard for novels. They vary in subject matter some are dense, others simple or complex. The novel is a vast, expansive

form shaped by global literary currents. Generally speaking, novels invent their own aesthetics. They differ from one author to another and defy categorization. There is even an aesthetic of ugliness, of torture, of imprisonment.

But this aesthetic doesn't justify or beautify suffering. It frames it with deep expression, allowing readers to feel the pain intimately not to romanticize it, but to experience it so profoundly that it elicits empathy or even tears. This is a kind of anti-aesthetic, counter to conventional notions of beauty.

Your novel *The Syrian Enemies* was accused by some of stoking sectarianism, while others hailed it for exposing how sectarianism was instrumentalized by the regime. How did you approach writing on such a sensitive topic?

I wrote that novel to answer many questions one of them being sectarianism. And for that, I was accused of promoting it. They used the Hama massacre as evidence, claiming I shouldn't have touched it at all. They said the regime was right to destroy the city, that the massacre was a lesson to Syrians. That's what repression looks like when it's applauded.

My condemnation of the Hama massacre which bordered on genocide—was twisted into accusations of Islamism. Anything remotely Islamic makes them seethe, because they think their hostility to Islam proves they're progressive. In truth, they're sectarian to the bone, hiding behind demagogic slogans.

Any writing that confronts sectarianism gets accused of being sectarian. That's why it must never be ignored. It shaped our societies, yet we were told to disregard it instead of addressing it. This rot needs to be exposed, especially because it bred hatred and extremism on both sides.

The regime acted like a foreign invader, an enemy to its own citizens. Those who committed these atrocities boasted about them. They killed, burned, looted and set the stage for the son to outdo his father with even greater massacres, barrel bombs, and chemical attacks.

Do you believe novels still influence Arab readers, or have fast-moving images and social media diminished literature's role?

At its core, the novel's power lies in shaping the reader's awareness—enriching their understanding of people, values, the world, and life in a deeply personal way. That's its true space. Actual change, though, is the reader's responsibility—it comes through engaging with reality.

Yes, image culture and social media have eaten away at literature's space and stolen precious reading time. But they cannot replace literature. They're more suited to excitement and entertainment. Despite their ability to provoke and spread ideas, their surface-level, fast-paced nature limits their serious impact.

In contrast, literature not just in depth, but in idea-generation—remains unmatched in its capacity to produce true art and thought.

In times of crisis and transformation, the question arises: what’s the point of culture? How can we build a unifying Syrian cultural model? What role should intellectuals play in dismantling corrupt cultural networks?

In such times, culture may be the only thing that truly matters. It’s what helps people stay clear-eyed, resilient, and human in the face of catastrophe. People need meaning—something beyond petty differences. They need to grasp history’s motion and the dangers they face, and resist despair. Culture brings people together in collective dialogue.

Assad destroyed culture. He treated intellectuals as either loyal operatives or enemies to imprison. After liberation, the illnesses of the intellectual class were exposed: cliquishness, sectarianism, shallowness, arrogance, absolutism, and a knee-jerk hatred of Islam disguised as progressiveness. They failed to look reality in the eye.

Old ideologies need reevaluation. The world has embraced even more brutal ideologies, led by billionaire elites seeking to devour the globe through pandemics, famine, and mass killing. Their greed knows no limit.

Now that the revolution has triumphed and the Assad era has ended, has your vision of Syria changed? Can we expect a new literary work that crowns your “Syrian series” with the revolution’s victory?

At the dawn of this new phase, there’s reason to believe the Syrian individual can now think and express freely even if it’s a transitional stage, it’s full of promise. We still carry much inside us. We might wait until it ripens. What holds us back is the seeming chaos: some want to split from Syria, others sabotage the new authority, some wage war with assassinations and theft sometimes backed by intellectuals.

There’s a belief that being a “real” intellectual means attacking the new government mercilessly even fabricating crimes. Yes, the authorities may err, and perhaps far more than they should. But opposition must be responsible.

Many still carry the wounds of half a century of accumulated crimes. Can a fragmented, displaced, impoverished people living in tents, freezing or burning without electricity heal from this? Many still live in the shadow of the Assads. How do we shake this curse? Can we regain clarity? There’s still a fear of change and a nostalgia for the past under many pretexts.

But if we fall now, we may never rise again. If we are determined to succeed, we will survive together.

You've been a narrative mirror to Syrian society through novels like *The Syrian Enemies*, *The Poet and the Footnote Collector*, *Interpreting Nothingness*, *Judgment Day*, *Republic of Darkness*, and *The Suspicious Novelist*. Do these works form a literary archive of Syria's transformations? Can they serve as a document for understanding Syria's past and present?

I've attempted to build a narrative not complete nor definitive. The Syrian event is larger than all of us. Future generations of historians, researchers, and novelists will explore more than 50 years not just of authoritarianism, but of lies, propaganda, distortion, brainwashing, and dehumanization. These are real diseases that infected life itself.

I wrote about life, through seven novels spanning half a century. I wrote what I lived, knew, saw, and felt from my perspective. Others will come and write, and many already have. This is our wound. We were stabbed in the heart, and our world was destroyed.

Yes, what I wrote may be seen as a literary document for future generations to consult. What matters to me is that I placed my narrative on the literary map.

Between critical acclaim and Arab literary prizes, what does literary recognition mean to you compared to a simple reader who sees themselves in your work?

Arab prizes are a flawed creation. They emerged already diseased, mirroring the ailments of culture and intellectual life. Rarely were the results truly deserved because they were often influenced by non-literary factors.

Prizes have become spectacles tools for states to feign cultural investment while promoting loyal intellectuals. Critical acclaim, too, is often manufactured. It's meant to simulate a vibrant cultural scene while merely exporting obedient voices.

Of course, there are exceptions remarkable works have emerged. But they are not enough for a region with our cultural depth.

The only true honor is the reader. With critics largely absent, the reader's taste is now the judge. And I've been lucky with readers, and I hold them in the highest regard. As they found me, I found them.

Finally, if you could leave the Arab reader with one sentence about Syrian culture today, what would it be?

It is undergoing a rebirth a renewal and is preparing for its promised resurgence. It is time for it to reclaim its role, one pioneered by generations of late writers who carved the path for us and for others under the weight of an oppressive regime. The time has come for this new generation to seize their literary destiny.

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