
Between Protest and Resistance: A Conversation with Khalid Albaih

ALEXANDER KLOSS

INTRODUCTION

The question of how art and resistance relate to one another seems to be an intuitive one: art lends itself as the vehicle of resistance, propagating its message and widening its appeal. While compelling on the surface, this strain of thought warrants a distinctly more careful examination. But before undertaking said examination, some definitional questions will have to be answered.

The guiding notions explored in this essay are *art*, *protest*, and *resistance*. Without applying the necessary degree of scrutiny to these terms—and with particular emphasis on the latter two—any attempt to coherently conceptualize the nexus of *art as resistance* must ultimately remain futile.

Let us first address the question: What constitutes art? In recent times, the rise of the modernist avant-garde and, ultimately, postmodernism has decisively blurred the once-so-formal boundaries of what art is and what it is not. Without the need to follow either form or function in any specific way, it must suffice to settle on the lowest common denominator: art is any *expression of a creative process*.

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Khalid Albaih is a Romanian-born, Qatari-raised, Sudanese creative award-winning cultural producer and political cartoonist. In 2018, he has was named one of the top 5 cartoonists in the world by *The Independent*. Khalid also has two published books, “*Khartoon*” and “*Sudan Retold 2019*.” Khalid has been published and hosted widely in international publications and TV channels, including *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *PRI*, *NPR*, *BBC* and *Al-Jazeera*.

The distinction between the creation of art and art itself is an important one here. As Mel Topf states in paraphrasing Hannah Arendt, “The creation of art, then, is a private matter; art itself is a public—that is a political—one.”¹ While this definition of art is sufficiently broad, the focus of this essay will lie in briefly examining some of the more well-known and established forms of artistic expression.

This brings us to the remaining definitional tandem of protest and resistance. While *protest* art does not constitute a core element of this piece, it is important to distinguish it conceptually from *resistance* art. *Protest* can be considered as “an expression or declaration of objection, disapproval, or dissent, often in opposition to something a person is powerless to prevent or avoid.”² *Resistance*, on the other hand, remains a notoriously elusive concept to clearly define due to the manifold aspects and perceptions that scholars have attributed to it. As Hollander and Einwohner have found when “conceptualizing resistance,” however, the elements of *action* and *opposition* are akin to almost all academic definitions of the term.³ Utilizing these two reconciliatory definitional elements, we arrive at the following: Resistance describes a subset of protests that actively oppose a current or possible future status quo. Resistance stands out both due to the adherents’ perceived need for immediate action and their willingness to commit to its cause, which may employ non-violent, or, if deemed necessary, violent means. While we can say that every form of resistance is also a form of protest, not every protest automatically signifies an act of resistance.

Categorizing Resistance Art

For protests to become resistance, they cannot simply dispute an issue or authority but must actively and continuously fight against it. Resistance thus describes the persistent escalation of protest out of (perceived) necessity. Examples of such a continuous defiance against oppressive regimes, include the Algerian National Liberation Front against French colonial powers, the Black Panther Party against U.S. police forces, and the Belarusian democracy movement against the Lukashenko regime. As such, resistance art would amount to any art that either supports an already existing movement or aims to instigate a new resistance against a perceived injustice. Originally coined in relation to the South African anti-Apartheid movement in the mid-1970s, this conceptualization of resistance art maps well onto the historical development of the term. According to the Tate (a prominent British museum), “much of the art was public, taking the form of murals, banners, posters, t-shirts and graffiti with political messages that

were confrontational and focused on the realities of life in a segregated South Africa.”⁴ This supports the idea that resistance art serves as a powerful tool born out of historical resistance movements.

In practice, however, the theoretically and historically well-delineated separation between protest and resistance remains blurred. Take the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as an example: While aptly fitting our definition of a resistance movement, it is commonly labeled as a protest movement instead. A look into the art world reveals similarly ambiguous cases. A fitting example would be the work of famously incognito Bristol street artist Banksy, whose graffiti and stencils regularly provoke international attention. While Banksy uses his art to raise awareness of resistance movements such as the Palestinian resistance, there is rarely a direct call to action despite the often biting social commentary. In fact, his status as a “protest artist” seems to be so established that he has become a featured artist in London’s Art of Protest Gallery.⁵

The canonization of Banksy as a protest artist contrasts with art produced by those directly involved in recognized resistance groups, such as the spoken-word poetry of Black Panthers activist Gil Scott-Heron. Two pieces stand out in particular.

The first is “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” which counts among Scott-Heron’s most famous works. In a long list of cultural allusions, he ridicules the idea that tangible social change would come about easily, stating that “There will be no highlights on the eleven o’clock news” and that “The revolution will not go better with Coke.” Instead, he predicts that “You will not be able to plug in, turn on, and cop out” and that “Black people will be in the street looking for a brighter day.”⁶ The lyrics recall that bringing about real change is not a convenient matter, but a cause that requires individual will and agency to fight against oppression on a mass level.⁷

The second piece is “Comment #1,” perhaps better known by its repeated closing phrase “Who will survive in America?,” the title under which it was also sampled as the closing track of Kanye West’s 2010 album, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. In “Comment #1,” Scott-Heron notes that, while he believes in the importance of a revolution, it will not be one where Black, Latinx, and the privileged white protestors join forces, but one of the underprivileged. He does not sugarcoat the aspirations of those who he calls the “four-year revolutionaries” when juxtaposing them with his own:⁸

He is fighting for legalized smoke or lower voting age
Less lip from his generation gap and fucking in the street
Where is my parallel to that?

All I want is a good home and a wife and a children
And some food to feed them every night [...]⁹

To Scott-Heron, the revolution of white protestors is one of convenience, while his is one of survival. Both lyrical pieces are united in their usage of provocative language and stark imagery that Scott-Heron calls to his aid in order to showcase two things. First, the situation of the marginalized and underprivileged is dire. Second, the discrepancy between convenience and survival can be fixed—but certainly not from the comfort of one's armchair or by walking hand-in-hand with the oppressor. To him, revolution is the realized potential of a resistance that is willing to act upon what it preaches by taking the means necessary to overcome oppression. What follows is that the revolution must be composed of those who are forced to resist the current system to resist the current system.

KHALID ALBAIH: BETWEEN PROTEST AND RESISTANCE

One of the contemporary visual artists who has entered the domain of resistance art is Khalid Albaih. Albaih was born in Bucharest in 1980, raised in Doha, and is a member of the Sudanese diaspora in Qatar. Inspired by the likes of Ai Weiwei and Carlos Latuff, Albaih selected political cartoons as his art form of choice. His work mainly focuses on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) but also encompasses such topics as racism in the United States or anti-migrant sentiments in Europe.

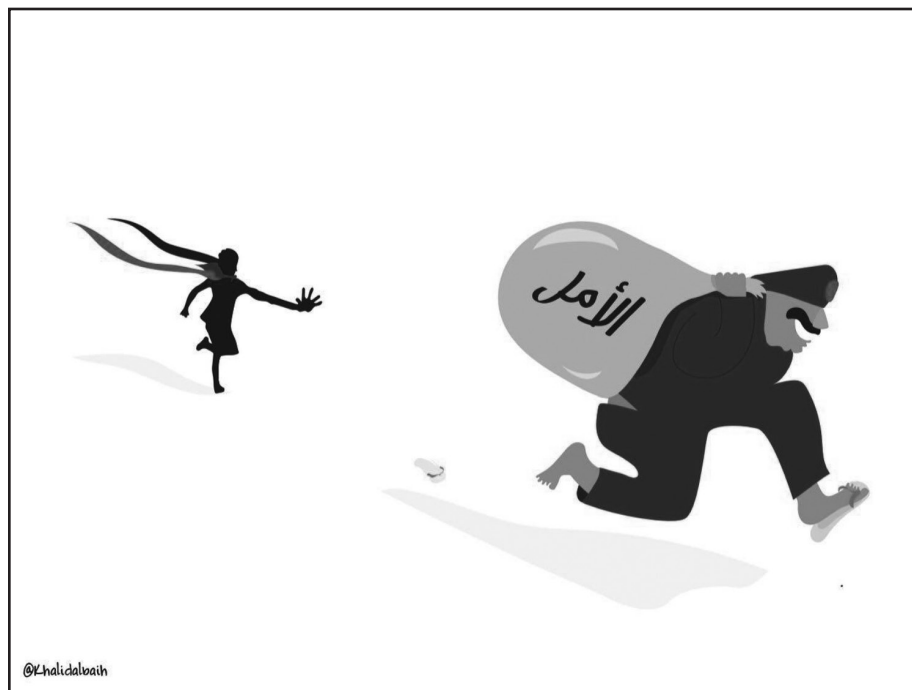
Albaih's identity is just as conflicted as his subject-matter. On the one hand, he distances himself from the United States and Western colonialism. On the other hand, he embraces an art form that he considers foreign, having been exposed through the popularization of American superheroes in his home region. While his work is frequently devoted to Sudan and Sudanese politics, his lived experience with the regime has largely been through occasional visits to the country and the lens of interactions with Sudanese people abroad.

Albaih considers himself a strong believer of freedom of speech as a vehicle of empowerment yet decided to settle in Qatar, a country where this freedom cannot be taken for granted. Instead of viewing these contradictions as a sort of discrediting hypocrisy, they should be understood in their proper context: as a balance between the fundamental and the pragmatic, where certain compromises have to be accepted in order to safeguard what is essential. For Albaih, it is his message that is essential: that to fix things is not just pointing out what is wrong, but to also propose how to make things better instead.

A trademark of his style is the sparse and pointed use of textual elements. The key question of most of Albaih's cartoons is already enclosed in the art, making additional commentary superfluous. As such, he allows the artwork to be interpreted widely, emphasizing his belief in no singular dogma through which to approach the multifaceted socio-political themes that he addresses.

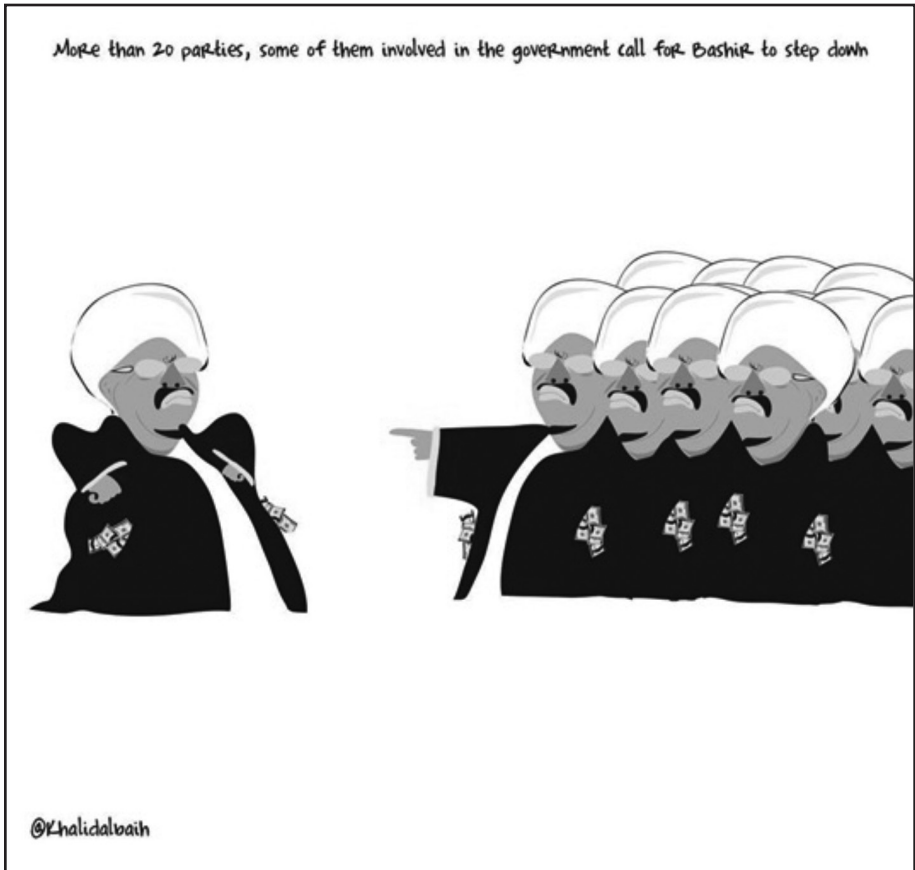


His minimal use of text also illustrates how he reconciles a staunchly anti-imperialist attitude with his reliance on American-centered forms of artistic expression. Whenever he includes textual elements, it is usually in Arabic and only rarely in English, squarely placing his work into a distinctly non-Western tradition of cartoon that has transcended from its modern Anglo-Saxon origins into its own subgenre, inspired by the likes of Mahmoud Kahil and Naji al-Ali.



The above-featured cartoon was published by Albaih in November 2021. It was released in the wake of the military coup attempt in Sudan in October 2021. The central character is most probably a stylized version of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, main instigator of the insurgency, now serving as the *de facto* head of Sudan's government. The stolen bag—from what we can presume to be a personification of the Sudanese people—is only marked by one word: الأمل – “hope.”

A second way in which he subverts many of the existing Western comic tropes is to invert the center of attention. Rather than focusing on specific protagonists, he reveals that those who like to portray themselves as the heroic saviors of a situation oftentimes turn out to not only be part of the problem, but also instigators of that very issue. In subverting the focal character of his drawings, he essentially discards the superhero to make the villain his leitmotif.



Albaih's adaptations to the craft of his genre make his work a compelling testimony. Not to a particular line of thought or stance, but rather to an approach: that there are rarely simple or satisfactory answers to complex contemporary issues, but nevertheless many good questions to be asked. In that way, Albaih explores the space between protest and resistance art.

One might find fault with his convenient position of criticizing Sudanese politics from afar without having lived under them, thus discrediting his status as a genuine resistance artist. At the same time, the existence of a significant Sudanese diaspora, including Albaih's own family, speaks to the tangible repercussions that authoritarian politics has had on the Sudanese people, whether inside or outside the country. Albaih belongs to the latter category. While the immediacy of his personal resistance to Sudanese politics seems less apparent, it is not any less important.

Nevertheless, what better than to hear from the artist himself? The next section features an interview with Albaih about himself, his work, and his thoughts on art as protest and resistance. Some portions have been omitted for length.

A CONVERSATION WITH KHALID ALBAIH

You're a Sudanese cartoonist and artist. You're also part of the Sudanese diaspora and grew up mostly outside Sudan. How do you think this has shaped your identity as a Sudanese and your relationship with the country?

I think this touches on a main aspect of who I am. I have always understood that no one is one thing, and their history reveals that they are more than that. For instance, the idea of being contained by borders was something that I knew as not real. It is not that I am only part of those fora. Through reading my own history, I found out that my country—Sudan—is in itself part of the colonial creation of Africa and the Middle East.

My grandfather [...] fled Sudan to Egypt in 1885 because of the Mahdist War that gave rise to a Sudan led by religious groups. My father also had to leave Sudan when I was nine years old, and before that I was born in Romania, and now I have kids who were born in Copenhagen and Doha.

My history, my own family's history, my own country's history, my own region's history is a combination of crossing and creating borders in a region where people and impulses were flowing naturally across locations.

Through my work, I try to talk about that—working in different countries, creating art *about* different countries, understanding the history of the region and world, about how things change. Also, about how what you see today is not really how it used to be even 50 or 60 years ago—in terms of countries, in terms of borders, and in terms of politics.

ALEXANDER KLOSS: *What made you decide to get into the habit of cartooning in the first place and what made you pursue it as a career?*

KHALID ALBAIH: I have always liked art, especially comic books, because I grew up in a part of the world that does not really have any superheroes at all. I grew up in the 1980s-1990s Middle East and North Africa and that was very *defeatist*. Superheroes gave me a different perspective, one in which there are people that are willing to fight for what they believe in and make things different. And there were characters, especially Superman—who is a refugee—trying to fight for what they believe in. Superman is also a character that believes in the good of people, no matter what.

So I started drawing comics, having read them since I was a kid. And the more I grew up, the more I went into the details: I explored the idea behind comics, the philosophy behind it, and where these characters came from. Superman was created by two Jewish immigrants, who felt like they could be Superman if they were given a chance. And I believe in that as well.

[...]

When I was 14-15, I got introduced to political cartooning through some magazines my father bought. These were Egyptian political cartoon magazines. They helped me place the politics into my cartoons, because politics may consist of panels of anti-heroes and villains, and now I was making fun of the villains all the time.

So I had to learn to navigate that space without going to jail and learning where the invisible red lines are. I always remember that my dad never read the newspaper properly, not even the first page. Most people just turn around the first pages and looked at the cartoons because that's where the real news was.

KLOSS: *How do you select the topics of your cartoons?*

ALBAIH: I work solely on social media. At the beginning, this wasn't by choice, because I tried to work for newspapers and for a few organizations. You know, I actually got kicked out of an editor's office once.

After that, I decided "you know what, I'm just going to work on the internet because who cares about your 200 readers in this circle, I'm just going to work where I know my viewership." I know who these people are, because they're all people my age and we use the internet in this certain way. This is when I started working on social media and this is how I started to pick what I wanted to talk about: "what's the discussion right now?" That way, I kind of took what was happening in newspapers, and then I put it on the internet in a way that the internet would accept it and people would accept it. And people look at it, even if they don't understand what it is, but it looks good. It was kind of a cross between political cartooning, graphic design, and street art. It was very simple, and it was actually made for you to reuse them, to make them into stencils, whatever it is. That kind of became my style and following the topics came that way. But then again, the internet has changed, right? [...]

This dream we had of this space that was democratized, free for all to use, and connected people, started becoming this monster that you just had to follow all the time. [...] At a certain moment, I just wondered, "why am I doing this? Is it just for the likes or is this to catch whatever is going on in that kind of vicious hamster wheel of news; because news became entertainment at the end of the day." And I had to make up my mind: am I an entertainer, or am I an artist? Am I a journalist? Am I trying to say something? Or are they making me say what they want [me] to say? I kind of stopped doing that and now I've really slowed down more than 80

percent of the work I used to do. I'm still deciding the best way to deliver my message. Because at the end of the day, all I wanted to do was ask questions and open a conversation. When I find that I'm not asking the right question, or if the purpose of asking these questions is not sincere, then should I do that?

[...]

Cartooning is a negative art. You rarely talk about anything that's good that happens because it's a critique. I come from that critiquing background. I went to an interior design school. I walk into a building and I'm like "this is shit, this is terrible, I got to change this, the door should be here, the window should be there." This is what happens when I walk into a political situation, I'm like, "hey, we could fix this." Is it just a theory? Is it right? Am I always right? I don't know. But this is what I believe in.

So now, I do cartoons on topics that I think are important to me. I try to deliver the same messages, so that these things are lasting longer

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than the few seconds that we get on the internet. I'm trying to do projects; I'm starting a mobile library for arts and design in Sudan. I'm working on this platform to host artists from your community and donate spaces and facilities. I'm working on trying to find an artist fund. What I'm trying to do is to create a lot of me; I came around when there weren't a lot of people doing what I'm doing online. And now, there's a lot of people doing what I'm doing online. I think I need to support this coming generation with the expertise that I've taken. It's not about only being a cartoonist, it's about delivering that message by whatever means possible.

KLOSS: *Do you think that art, including cartooning or other kinds of art, is something that is inherently political? Should art always be read through a political lens?*

ALBAIH: I think everything is political. I think if something is not political, the author would be trying really hard not to make it political. What I wanted to call myself is a political cartoonist, because I think that this way, I can convey to the reader that the cartoon is not just a joke.

In my part of the world, art has, sadly, not been looked at as an important aspect of society. Maybe that is because they see cartooning art as a bad fit with existing customs. Hence, many modern artists from the

region went to Europe to study, and they came back with an “alien art.” That does not mean that this kind of art is *wrong*, of course, but they adopted a lot of Western philosophies, while their audience didn’t.

Few satirical cartoon publications have received as much attention in the past few years as Charlie Hebdo. While not strictly protest art or art of resistance, you could say that much of it falls in the realm of political satire, or maybe even an “art of defiance” in some cases. It has received a fair share of criticism, including from your side. Do you think there are limits to what art, such as satire, can or especially should say?

I don’t think there should be any official limits. I think there’s a diversion of limits, and it’s not really limits, it’s phrasing what you want to say. I think it’s all about punching up, not punching down. The most important thing is having knowledge about what you are trying to say. I really come back to that point in this age of everybody doing everything all the time: I think it’s very important that we think about why, why are we doing this? How is it helping? Or is it helping at all?

For me, this is really the issue, how Charlie Hebdo dealt with it, or how most Western cartoonists dealt with this. At the end of the day, they have editors on top of them and they’re doing what they think of the situation, which is great. At the same time, [they] are Western, white, [and] come from colonialist countries, especially somewhere like France, dealing with a Muslim population that less than 100 years ago was under occupation, dehumanized, and went through a whole, very dramatic, to say the least, experience facing the French army.

It’s all about how you want to do it and what do you want to say, what does it mean, and is it by any means worth saying? And knowing the history and the geopolitics of everything, because you don’t live in your own world, right? You don’t live in a vacuum, whatever you say is going to stay there forever.

KLOSS: *Censorship, government repression, and human rights are prominent themes in your work. At the same time, Qatar, the place where you reside, has come under very severe international criticism for its increasingly restrictive laws against biased publishing or “stirring up public opinion.” Do you feel restrained as an artist living and working in Qatar?*

ALBAIH: Well, *Al Jazeera* is here. And *Al Jazeera* is one of the reasons why the political atmosphere in the region was controlling the narrative or diverting it from a totally Western view. Taking news seriously in the region happened because of what *Al Jazeera* has done here since 1996.

Tiptoeing around red lines, lines which are not really defined yet because the laws are not really defined, is extremely hard because you don't always know what is going on.

But, thankfully, especially since I started working, which was at the time of the Arab Spring, the Qatari government and [the] attitude [has been] in support of the revolutions and in support of change. Would it be the same if they weren't? I don't know. But we've all seen what happens and what's happening now in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates. I don't think that's Qatar's approach. I'm very hopeful that that's not Qatar's approach to the issue. But Qatar is definitely restrictive to a certain point, because you don't know whether what you do is going to affect your day-to-day life, or what's going to happen because of the lack of [enforced] laws.

Even thinking about talking about this right now, I don't know if it's not a risk. But you don't know, that's the whole thing. You have no idea.*f*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mel A Topf, "Hannah Arendt: Literature and the Public Realm," *College English* (40) (4) (1978): 357.
- 2 Ralph H Turner, "The Public Perception of Protest," *American Sociological Review* (34) (6) (1969): 816.
- 3 Jocelyn A Hollander and Rachel L Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," *Sociological Forum* (19) (4) (2004): 538.
- 4 Tate Modern, "Resistance Art," <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/r/resistance-art?fbclid=IwAR0DyJNvN-xS59Xt5Ud-fzuZEBY7hYXTPJme2uBD2XnaO71tnOHf3T5iL3I>.
- 5 Art of Protest Gallery, "Banksy," <https://www.artofprotestgallery.com/banksy>.
- 6 Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will not be Televised," in "Pieces of a Man," 1971, *RCA Studios*.
- 7 Charles Morris, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised – Gil Scott-Heron's track paved the way for hip-hop," <https://ig.ft.com/life-of-a-song/the-revolution-will-not-be-televised.html>.
- 8 Scott-Heron refers to people he feels lack real commitment to the causes of the revolution, mainly due to their own privileged position. For him, these were the predominately White supporters of the Students for Democratic Society (SDS) movement.
- 9 Gil Scott-Heron, "Comment #1" in "Small Talk at 125th and Lenox," 1970, *Flying Dutchman Records*.