

INFOESQUE

Navine G. Khan-Dossos

April 13 – May 13, 2017

FRIDMAN GALLERY

“When a cat is surrounded from all sides, he tries to look scary. We are on the brink and the only large weapon we got left is spreading fear.”

These words belong to a Daesh (ISIS) operative, a character in Mohammad Salemy’s short story commissioned for this catalogue. But they may as well have been spoken by a U.S. political strategist. The fear our government spreads is both propagandistic, such as its rampant anti-immigrant rhetoric, and terroristic, with civilian casualties of U.S. led bombings in Iraq and Syria exceeding 1,000 this month alone.

This fear emanates from insecurity, a sense that the colonial world order dominated by European and American empires is coming to an end, that global resources need to be redistributed, that reparations may become due. This fear is also fueled by deep-lying, largely unacknowledged imperial guilt over systematic obliteration of other cultures: Islamic, African, Native American. The instinctive response to such guilt is to sweep it away, to cover it up, to justify and continue the pillage.

Thus, we suffer from self-perpetuating PTSD on a colossal scale. The collective trauma of supremacist violence blocks our ability to truly empathize with other peoples, prevents us from seeing the killing of foreign civilians by our armed forces for what it plainly is – murder.

The work of Navine G. Khan-Dossos is a remarkable attempt to dissolve this blockage, to demonstrate the linkages between, and the interdependence of, ideologically opposed social groups.

Iliya Fridman - March 27, 2017

Fridman Gallery is pleased to present *Infoesque*, their first solo exhibition of British artist, Navine G. Khan-Dossos.

Since 2014, Khan-Dossos has closely followed the media narratives around Daesh: those produced by western news outlets and, more importantly, those manufactured from within the organization. Instead of focusing on the content of this propaganda, Khan-Dossos has looked to the structures and forms that support and mediate the material released.

Infoesque features *Expanding and Remaining* (2016), 36 panel paintings that make up the layout of Issue 5 of *Dabiq* magazine, a multi-language publication aimed at foreign recruits and a source of news stories for western media outlets. The series explores the identity of the magazine as an object, originally designed to be viewed in spreads but, given its digital nature, only ever read as a vertically scrolling PDF. The paintings aim to give physical presence to a propaganda device that, as a downloadable file, remains ephemeral and corruptible. The content is reduced to columns and blocks of color where text and image once were, focusing our attention on the compositions of information.

Infoesque (2017) is a new series of larger works on canvas that explore the design strategies of *Rumiyah* magazine, which took over the propaganda mantel when

Dabiq ceased publication in October 2016. The pages are presented as posters focusing deliberately on the use of Islamic art and data visualizations as two forms of authoritative aesthetics deployed by Daesh in their self-branding. These works pick out uneasy pairings of Islamic arabesques with military campaigns, and calligraphic swirls with warnings of the hell fire waiting for the unbelievers.

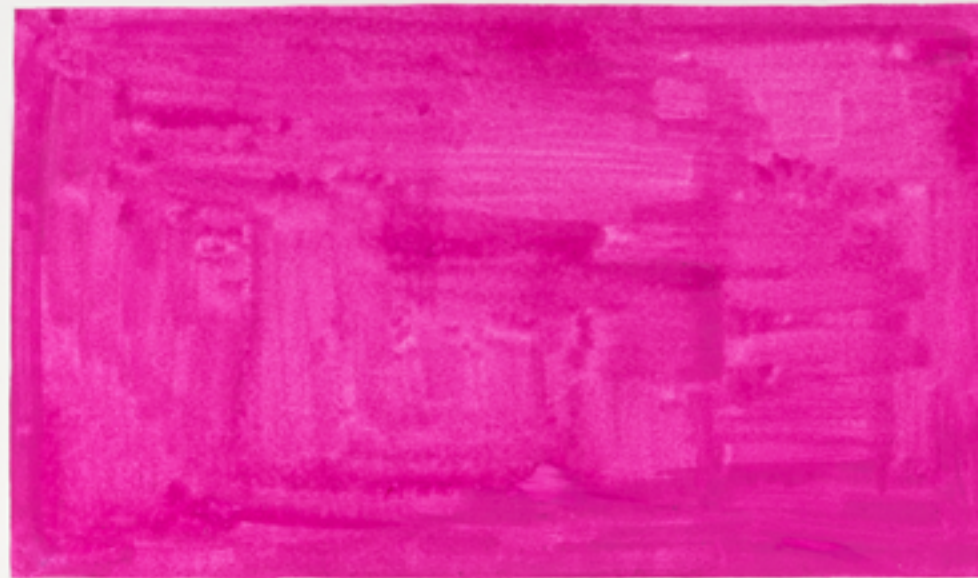
Through the medium of painting, Khan-Dossos explores the role of art as a site of transformation, using a limited and functional palette of CMYK and RGB that reference the worlds of printed material and screen, melding these into an almost too-bright palette for her subjects. Preferring gouache to oils, she quotes the material history of advertising sketches and miniature paintings, working at pace to emulate the act of labor of the unknown graphic author of the magazine layouts she copies, looking for a moment of connection across the political divide.

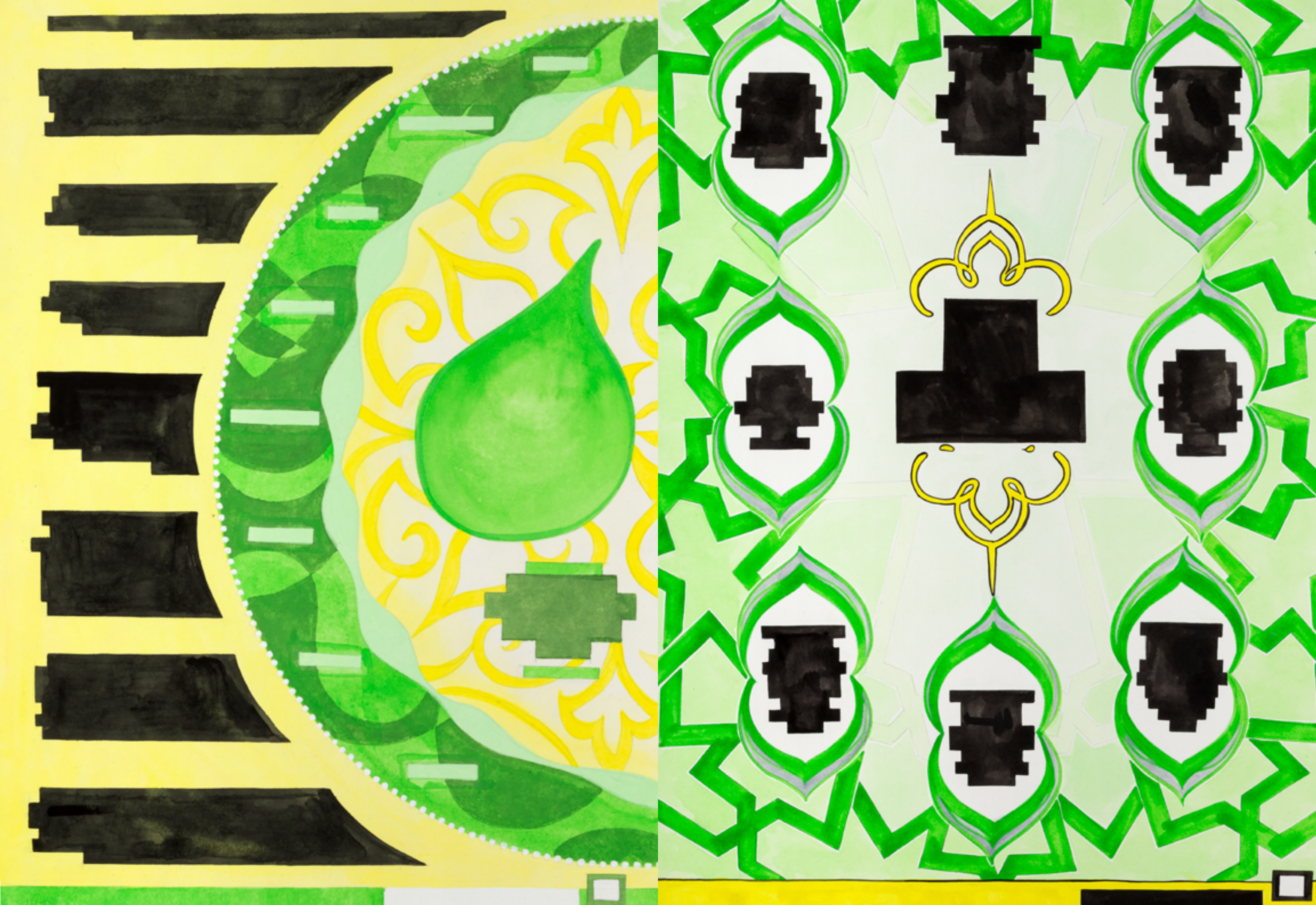
The exhibition is accompanied by this catalog featuring a specially commissioned piece of short fiction *The Sacred Meme Magic* by independent curator, critic and artist, Mohammad Salemy.

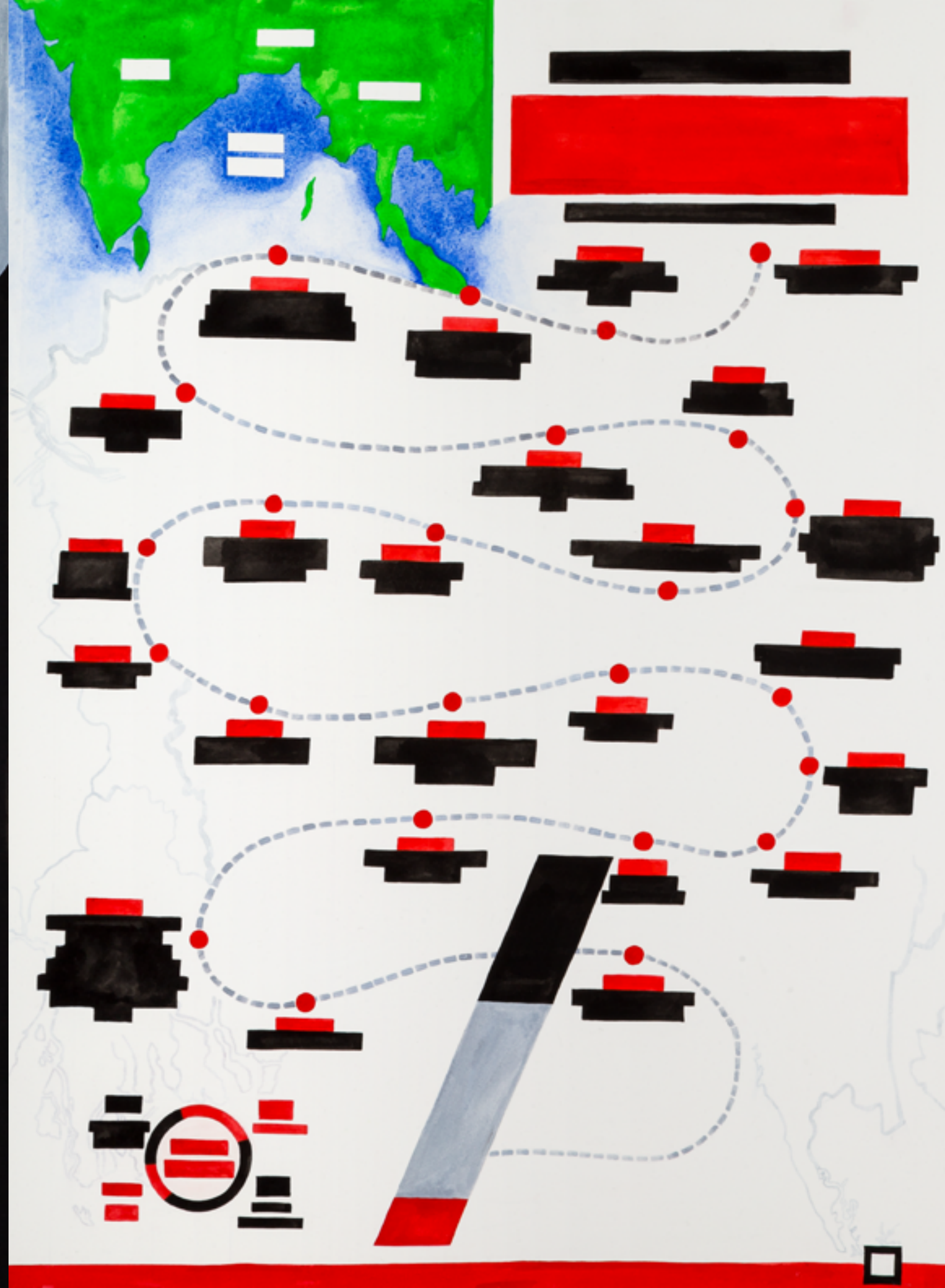
Designer’s note: This publication has been designed to mirror the visual elements and layout of *Rumiyah* magazine. To be consistent with the original, Garamond Pro and Oswald have been used throughout the text.

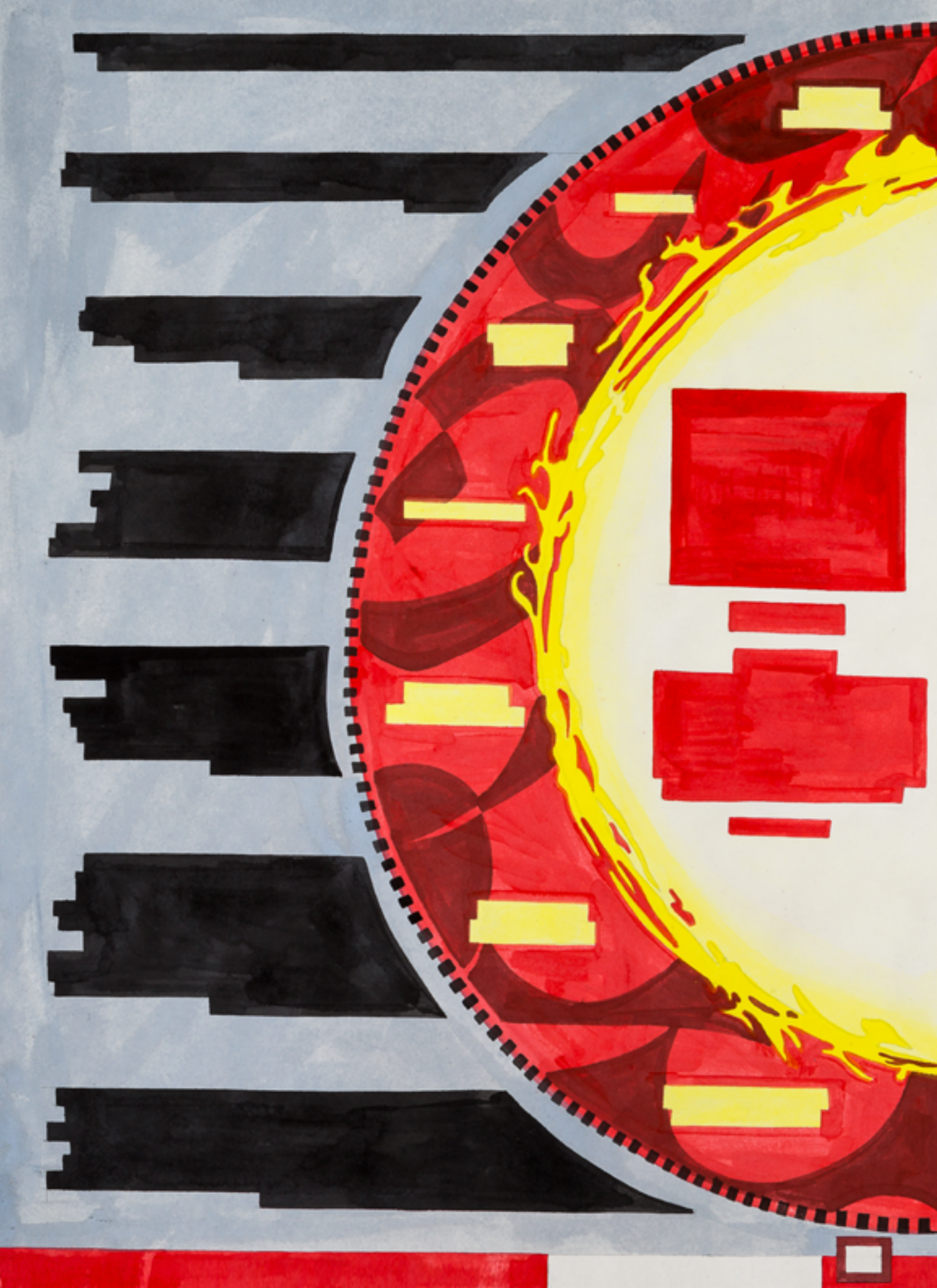












The Sacred Meme Magic

Mohammad Salemy

‘I hate my boss, he’s a stupid loser. He’s bearded and all, but he shapes it like the hipsters in New York. The men here smell like bottles of perfume. There is no real masculinity. Why do westernized Muslim men hate their beautiful smell and try to cover it up with this stinky shit?’ Amir closed the Telegram window on his phone and put it down to continue what he was doing on his workstation.

A minute later he heard the notification for the response from his friend Marwan living in Aleppo. ‘Shut up. You are already having first world problems.’

Amir moved away from his new top model Microsoft Surface laptop and glanced over at page one of the rare printed version of Dabiq Issue 15 gathering dust on his glass desk overlooking the Bosphorus. Memories of his small dingy basement office in Damascus’ northern suburb of Douma where the last two issues of the magazine were produced rushed to his head. He flickered his eyes and thought, “It was only an experiment, a superficial flirtation like having a crush. It should have just stayed as that.”

From Amir’s first hand experience, the rise of Daesh was a world affair and essentially had very little to do with Islamic or Arab identities. Raised by parents who were both Baath Party apparatchiks and Syrian government officials, his early life consisted of traveling back and forth between Iraq, Syria and Libya during the revival of Pan Arabism in late 1980s. Amir’s attraction to political Islam was neither formal nor transcendental. For him, contemporary history had three overlapping cycles: first came nationalism in the 19th century, then communism in the 20th and later Islamism in the 21st. He saw Islam as a generic carrier, a sacred form of what we now call meme magic: a shapeless spacious vehicle with which to infect and remold the minds of the Muslim youth the world over.

Amir had studied Art & Design in Syria and had it not been for the uprising in the Spring of 2011, he would have obtained his architecture degree in the same year from Damascus University. Unlike his departmental peers who chased international trends around the world on the Internet, he was aesthetically ahead of his time. In the 2000s, he was Vaporwave without too much vapor. His style was the embodiment of how music and sound impact visual forms. He grew up loving his parents’ favorite western pop music; selections which weren’t hip hop and indie rock but bands popular in the Arab world like Air Supply, Modern Talking & Journey. And around the time of the uprising he was beginning to fall in love with the ordinary outer forms of communication. He was normcore before normcore was even coined. Uninterested in the legacy of the 20th century Avant-garde which rewarded authenticity, his main objective at *Dabiq* magazine had been to popularize the everyday look of corporate and government brochures by infusing it with the radical content of weaponized Islam. He enjoyed the matter of fact forms that framed pictures of explosions

and beheadings. Amir designed the magazine while avoiding both kitsch-oriented sincerity and non-committal irony which he saw as the tired and old strategies of global designers involved in the production of pop culture.

His dialectic approach took the edges off Daesh’s hellish utopia and presented it not as a rational choice for the future of Muslim nations but an inevitable one. His design work for *Dabiq* wasn’t so much about pumping out innovation after innovation but maintaining consistency. He loved monochromatic gradient backgrounds, bordered photographs with wraparound text in Garmond and Oswald typefaces. He was a quiet provocateur who couldn’t care less about the westerners’ abhorrence of the magazine. Instead, he hoped that his newsletter aesthetics signaled to the westerners the winning logic of the world-wide Islamic awakening. Amir’s refusal to ‘design’ the magazine in the classic sense went hand in hand with Daesh’s disdain for ornamental monuments from the past that they eagerly blew up at every chance. Thus he did his best to replicate in his virtual dominion what his heroes were doing to the Arab and Islamic heritage out in the physical world.

Noticing his design on the first page of Issue 15 was a reminder that he could not forgive himself for falling into the trap of experimenting with the Arabesque and, as a consequence, unwittingly changing the direction of the magazine in the future.

Amir’s Istanbul office was grand. Too bad that like startup workplaces across the globe, he was forced to share it with others. The firm operated under a graphic design and digital solutions license and was called Bayrak (‘Flag’). Competing with similar offices in Tehran and Beirut over lucrative clients, it contracted design and decoration work from all over the Muslim and Arab world. Their mission was superficial postcoloniality; to infuse as many Islamic forms as possible into the capitalist aesthetics of contemporary Muslim metropolises. The office’s own interior however did not practice what it preached and was indistinguishable from the various Soho House members clubs popping up across the globe.

Amir left the city of Dabiq when the Turkish military force took over the town in 2016. After working for a while in a rebel hideout in Doumas, he and whatever archives of the magazine that could be salvaged were moved across the border by Daesh operatives to Turkey, and later to Istanbul. The exodus had been bittersweet, since he could not wait to be free of fear: the fear of being killed, the fear of being taken hostage by the Syrian Arab Army, and the fear of giving up and killing himself like some fighters. But he was also sad because more than anything else he longed to be back in the midst of the action with his friends in what he felt was real life on the front line. He especially missed a couple of the younger ones; he loved Marwan and Sami, with whom he could only keep contact now through Telegram or obscure gaming messenger platforms.

‘Ok, so how about this: I hate my boss not because he is not a real revolutionary like our comrades in Damascus or Dabiq but because he has bad taste. I just hate where he is taking the magazine and can’t help but want to vomit every time he talks about “good design.” I know how to satisfy the guy, it’s just that it runs contrary to

what made the magazine successful before, and the name change just makes me depressed.’

‘What about it?’ Sami typed back.

‘You know how important the name was.’ Amir continued. ‘Not only was it a futuristic reference to the site of our final battle with the infidels, it was also the actual place where we began publishing the magazine. We also named it *Dabiq* to highlight the parts of the country that were liberated. *Rumiyah* is a domination fantasy I don’t share with the Turks. What is good about Rome? Is this a soccer match between the Ottomans and the Italians? I got involved with the magazine to spread our ideas not to scare Westerners about taking over their land.’

‘Well,’ Sami responded, ‘when a cat is surrounded from all side he tries to look scary. We are on the brink and the only large weapon we got left is spreading fear.’

Besides changing his personal life, the journey to Istanbul was also surprising and disappointing on the work front. For one thing, the equipment in Istanbul was state of the art, but he was forced to give up using Macs and opt for the new Windows systems in Turkey. These machines came with the latest version of InDesign but it meant little to Amir since he used to layout his files minimalistically using an outdated version of Microsoft Office 2011 for Mac. As the only person familiar with digital pre-press and compression, in Damascus, he was master of his domain but in the Bayrak office there were five other people whose job involved file transfers across several servers in different countries. Sometimes he even wondered if it wasn’t for his knowledge of the past issues and the magazine’s chaotic archives, would they have even cared to rehire him for the job?

In Syria, the production of *Dabiq* was embedded in the blood and flesh of the rebellion and the civil war. Amir often laid out stories at night while the Syrian Arab Army devastated his surroundings with rockets and bombs. Even though the magazine was produced and distributed digitally, their dodgy Internet connection made it often impossible for him to communicate with the outside world via the Internet. In Istanbul, however, work seemed removed from the context and instead of talking with fellow writers and fighters around him, he was wasting most of his days on different social media networks trying to feel connected to the event back home. The real politics of Jihad were never as remote to his daily work experience as they were in Istanbul.

He wrote to Marwan: ‘I am surrounded by vultures seeing dollar signs like in the old cartoons. Money money money. This is why they want the Ottoman empire back. I sometimes think even Erdogan is a fake.’

‘Everything is fake.’ Marwan typed in reply. ‘You think we are real here? Do you think Saudis who pay for most things are better? Seeking purity got us to this brink. We need to learn from other liberation armies like the Jews and Kurds. We cannot discriminate against those who for whatever reason want to help. We need to focus on the job and let everyone join in to defeat Assad and the Russians.’

In Istanbul, even though working on the magazine was his primary responsibility, there were times that he was asked by his manager to produce other graphic work, the content of which stood in total opposition of his beliefs. He also had to deal with controlling coworkers

who would interfere and recommend changes or even actually make changes as they saw fit when he wasn’t around. In reality, the new look of Rumiyah was effective and reflected the complexity and changing aesthetics of Global Islam. It was even focus grouped, without content of course, using a variety of samples targeting audiences both in Turkey and in other countries supplying fighters. It’s just that Amir felt a kind of guardianship for the original look and what it represented to him and the fighters on the battlefield.

‘I also hate the look of the new *Rumiyah* magazine. Its Islamic kitsch in a bad way.”

‘Is there an Islamic kitsch which is cool?’ asked Sami.

‘Yes, if it is self conscious and playful with its own elements. If it isn’t afraid of poking fun at itself, not that I recommend this for the kind of magazine we have, but still. The look these guys have adopted has turned the magazine into a vacation brochure for cheap three star hotels in Sharjah.’

‘Why don’t you make the magazine seriously kitsch or start with a clean slate and redesign the whole thing?’ said Sami.

‘Because unlike my boss in Damascus, these guys are “design smart”. They’d catch me immediately. It’s not like they don’t know what they want. Also it’s hard to get inspired here in Istanbul for designing a magazine about a holy war... I wish they’d sent me to Aleppo.’

‘To die? This place won’t last long. Erdogan will sell us soon to the Russians and the Iranian revolutionary guards and their mercenaries can’t wait to take revenge for their dead.’

‘Well whatever. I’d rather I be there. My life here is a slow death.’

‘Let’s switch spots then.’

‘Hmm... switching is what we did actually already. I have been reluctant to bring it up

but maybe you need to know that I am guilty of pushing the magazine in this direction. Remember the opening page of the Issue 15?”

‘Yes, the page with the beautiful calligraphic Arabesque in the center you designed in Adobe Illustrator.’

‘From all my work on the past issues, that’s what these guys liked the most. I mean this shit is all over the world already, but I think in this case, I inspired them to push the magazine in this direction.’

‘But I liked that graphic. It was amazing.’

‘I *know* you do. I designed it for you. At least it encapsulates something invisible and special between you and me...”

Mohammad Salemy is an independent curator, artist, critic based in New York. He holds an MA in critical curatorial studies from the University of British Columbia and currently co-organizes The New Centre for Research & Practice. He has shown his works in Ashkal Alwan’s Home Works 7 (Beirut) and Witte de With (Rotterdam). His writings have been published in e-flux, Flash Art, Third Rail, and Brooklyn Rail, and he has curated exhibitions at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Access Gallery, and Satellite Gallery in Vancouver as well as Transit Display in Prague. In 2014, he organized the Incredible Machines conference. Salemy’s curatorial experiment “For Machine Use Only” was included in the 11th edition of Gwangju Biennale (2016).



Navine G. Khan-Dossos

Navine G. Khan-Dossos (b. 1982, London) is an artist, based in Athens. Her interests include Orientalism in the digital realm, geometry as information and decoration, image calibration, and aniconism in contemporary culture.

Khan-Dossos studied History of Art at Cambridge University, Arabic at Kuwait University, Islamic Art at the Prince’s School of Traditional Art in London, and holds an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art & Design, London. In 2014/2015, she was a participant at the Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht (NL).

She has exhibited and worked with various institutions, including The Museum of Islamic Art (Doha), Witte de With (Rotterdam), The Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven), The Delfina Foundation (London), Leighton House Museum (London), The Benaki Museum (Athens) and the A.M. Qattan Foundation (Ramallah). She has published work in The White Review and The Happy Hypocrite.

List of plates in order

The Religion of Islam, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Losses, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Victory to the Patient, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Recommended Deeds, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Stories of Steadfastness, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

One Week, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Jannah, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Good Character, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Important Memorandums, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Operations II, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Operations I, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

The Fire, 2017
Gouache on paper mounted on canvas
57.5cm x 77.5cm x 4cm

Expanding and Remaining, 2016
36 works
Gouache on wood
25cm x 35cm
As installed at NOME Berlin
Command:Print, November 2016

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