



The Syrian Civil War Through the Lens of Syrian Documentary Filmmakers

By Semra Güzel Korver

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Reviewed by Kübra Aktaş

Researcher at TRT World Research Centre

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Semra Güzel Korver's book offers a compelling examination of the Syrian Civil War through the lens of Syrian documentary filmmakers. Rather than treating the war merely as a geopolitical crisis or a chronological sequence of military and political developments, the book approaches it as a struggle over representation, memory, testimony, and historical narration. In doing so, Korver places documentary cinema at the centre of a broader discussion on how wars are recorded, remembered, and transmitted to future generations.

The book is particularly timely in light of Syria's post-war transition. Although currently available only in Turkish, its contribution deserves a far wider readership. The questions it raises—and the perspectives it brings to the study of war, documentary cinema, and historical memory—resonate well beyond its original linguistic audience. As millions of displaced Syrians return home, issues of historical documentation, collective memory, legal identity, and accountability have become central to the country's reconstruction. Beyond their artistic value, the documentaries examined by Korver constitute part of a broader visual archive that preserves experiences of violence, displacement, and survival that might otherwise be contested, forgotten, or erased. In this sense, the book speaks not only to film studies but also to contemporary debates on transitional justice, collective memory, and the preservation of historical evidence in societies emerging from conflict.

The book's contribution is twofold. Firstly, it examines the Syrian Civil War not only as a "new war"¹ marked by asymmetric violence, proxy actors, paramilitary formations, and media warfare, but also as a conflict whose meaning is shaped through images and narratives. Secondly, it foregrounds the importance of self-representation by focusing on Syrian filmmakers who document their own society's destruction, resistance, displacement, and trauma. This emphasis is particularly significant because Syria has often been represented through external, and at times Orientalist, frames. Korver's work shifts attention from those who look at Syria from the outside to those who filmed the war from within.

This distinction carries implications beyond questions of authorship. Self-representation challenges long-standing asymmetries in the production of knowledge about conflict, in which external observers have often wielded disproportionate authority over how wars are interpreted and remembered. By foregrounding Syri-

an voices and visual testimonies, the book argues that those who experience violence are not merely sources of information but producers of historical knowledge in their own right.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical background of war. Korver situates the Syrian Civil War within broader debates on fourth-generation warfare, hybrid conflict, proxy war, paramilitary violence, and asymmetric confrontation. This section is important because it prevents the reader from approaching Syria only through the language of domestic unrest. Instead, the book presents the war as a multi-layered phenomenon in which local grievances, regime violence, regional rivalries, global power struggles, sectarian divisions, forced displacement, and information warfare intersect. This theoretical grounding allows the later film analyses to be read not simply as cinematic interpretations of suffering, but as visual engagements with a transformed form of warfare.

The second chapter provides the historical and political background of Syria. Beginning with the country's imperial and colonial inheritances, Korver traces the formation of modern Syria, the French Mandate, the rise of the Ba'ath Party, the Hafiz Assad era, the brief hopes associated with the Damascus Spring, and the gradual build-up to the 2011 uprising. This historical discussion is one of the book's strengths, as it contextualises the documentaries within a longer trajectory of authoritarian rule, social fragmentation, state violence, and frustrated political demands. The transition from peaceful protests to armed conflict is not presented as an abrupt rupture, but as the outcome of accumulated tensions and violent repression.

The third chapter turns to documentary cinema as a form, a practice, and a mode of knowledge production. Korver discusses documentary cinema in relation to reality, perception, history writing, memory construction, propaganda, and the representation of war. This is where the book's central intellectual concern becomes clearer: documentary film is not treated as a neutral mirror of reality. Rather, it is understood as a medium that selects, frames, orders, and interprets reality. This approach gives the book a stronger analytical foundation than a conventional film summary would have. The question is not only what these documentaries show, but how they make war intelligible, emotionally legible, and historically memorable.

The fourth chapter is the core of the book. Korver analyses eight Syrian documentaries: *Return to Homs*, *Silvered Water*, *Syria Self-Portrait*, *Last Men in Aleppo*,

¹ As conceptualised by British academic and political theorist Mary Kaldor in her seminal work *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (1999).

One Day in Aleppo, The Greatest Sacrifice, Of Fathers and Sons, For Sama, and The Cave. Through these films, the book follows the evolution of the Syrian uprising, the fragmentation of revolutionary hopes, the rise of armed actors, the suffering of civilians, the work of doctors and rescue workers, the role of media activists, and the everyday attempts to continue living under bombardment.

One of the most productive formulations in the book is the idea of the “camera-bearing fighter” or “Kamerah Savaşçı.” In Korver’s analysis, the camera is not merely a device of documentation. It becomes a tool of resistance, a means of testimony, and a response to erasure. In the Syrian context, where violence is accompanied by denial, propaganda, and competing narratives, filming becomes a political act. The person behind the camera records not only events, but also the claim that these events must be seen, remembered, and judged.

This is especially visible in the book’s discussion of media activists, citizen journalists, and documentary filmmakers. The Syrian war is described as one of the first conflicts in which digital platforms, mobile phones, and online circulation played a central role in producing a visual archive of violence. The book, therefore, captures a crucial transformation in the relationship between war and media: the battlefield is not only territorial, but also visual and narrative. Images become evidence, appeals, accusations, and fragments of collective memory.

Korver is also attentive to the civilian dimensions of war. The sections on the White Helmets, doctors, health workers, women, children, funerals, protests, prayers, and everyday life under siege give the analysis emotional and sociological depth. In *For Sama* and *The Cave*, for instance, the persistence of medical care, childbirth, marriage, motherhood, and professional responsibility under bombardment reveals that survival itself can become a form of resistance. The book’s treatment of these films avoids reducing civilians to passive victims. Instead, it shows how ordinary acts - treating the wounded, feeding animals, filming a street, protecting a child, or refusing to leave a city - acquire political and moral significance in wartime.

Another valuable aspect of the book is its engagement with the ethics of showing suffering. Korver does not assume that the display of pain automatically produces understanding or solidarity. On the contrary, the book warns that images of dead bodies, wounded children, grieving women, and destroyed cities can generate compassion, but they can also lead to emotional saturation or passive spectatorship if they are not placed

within a meaningful narrative frame. This discussion gives the work a critical edge. It recognises the necessity of testimony while also questioning the limits and risks of visual exposure.

The book is particularly strong when it brings together cinema, memory, and history writing. The documentaries are presented not only as artistic works, but also as fragments of an archive. They preserve experiences that could otherwise be denied, forgotten, or absorbed into abstract geopolitical language. This is where Korver’s study becomes more than a contribution to documentary film studies. It also speaks to debates on war memory, political violence, forced displacement, and the struggle over who has the right to narrate history.

Though the study is rich and carefully structured, its breadth occasionally works against its sharpness. The extensive theoretical and historical sections are useful, but at times they delay the reader’s arrival at the films themselves. A more concise framing in the early chapters could have allowed the central concepts, especially self-representation, visual testimony, and the “camera-bearing fighter,” to appear earlier and with greater force. Similarly, while the book successfully analyses a wide range of themes across eight documentaries, some of its most original insights could have been developed more explicitly within a sustained argument about Syrian documentary cinema as a form of counter-narration.

Overall, *The Syrian Civil War Through the Lens of Syrian Documentary Filmmakers* is a valuable and timely contribution to the study of documentary cinema, war representation, and Syrian memory. Korver demonstrates that the Syrian Civil War cannot be understood only through diplomatic negotiations, military actors, or humanitarian statistics. It must also be read through the images produced by those who lived through it.

More broadly, Korver’s study reminds readers that contemporary wars are fought not only over territory but also over visibility, legitimacy, and historical memory. In this environment, documentary cinema occupies an increasingly strategic position—not simply recording events after they occur but also shaping how conflicts are understood while they unfold and how they will ultimately be remembered.

By foregrounding Syrian filmmakers’ own visual testimonies, the book reminds readers that documentary cinema can function as witness, archive, resistance, and historical intervention.