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مركز الحوار السوري
Syrian Dialogue Center

THE IMAGE OF THE INTELLECTUAL AMONG SYRIANS: BETWEEN PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS AND THE PROSPECT OF CHANGE

Syrian Dialogue Center

A Syrian civil institution that aims to revive and promote dialogue and deepen discussion on issues that concern the Syrian people. It also seeks to strengthen relationships, enhance cooperation, and facilitate coordination among Syrians.

Since its establishment in late 2015, the Syrian Dialogue Center has held several dialogue sessions on Syrian affairs.

The center operates through three main thematic units: the Shared Identity and Consensus Unit, and the Policy Analysis Unit, and the Social Unit.

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Introduction

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of intellectuals, despite the term's relative nature and its shifting meaning across time and place. Nevertheless, certain common traits can generally be found among intellectuals: a sense of responsibility, independence from authority, depth in their field of expertise, and sincerity. Broadly speaking, intellectuals can be defined as those who critically analyze the present moment and work to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of a more just and humane society.

Intellectuals are regarded as representatives of the social force striving to advance society by developing its ideas and concepts. They possess a level of knowledge that grants them a holistic perspective, along with intellectual and political commitment to their respective societies. Their creativity drives progress and evolution. Additionally, there are specialized intellectuals in specific fields such as literature or politics, who contribute through deep expertise.¹

When focusing on the Arabic-speaking world, several patterns emerge. Many writers have identified five distinct types of Arab intellectuals: including those who are committed to their critical obligations and mission; those who navigate and manage the pressures they face; and even those who migrate and engage with new cultures without losing their knowledge or sense of identity.²

Looking more closely at the Syrian context before and during the revolution, the regime successfully co-opted the majority of intellectuals from various fields—including literature, art, religion, and academia—despite their minimal impact. This is seen as a natural outcome in a despotic environment where everything is linked to the dictator. Since the Baath Party came to power, intellectuals generally split into two factions: those who sided with the regime, using their talents to support it in exchange for personal gain; and those who opposed the regime

¹ Ahmad Kamal. "[Culture or Acculturation: A Growing Phenomenon](#)" *Al Jazeera*, March 9, 2017. Accessed on: 09/27/2024.

² Souad Hakim. "[Five Types of Intellectuals](#)" *Al-Khaleej Online*, 2013. Accessed on: 05/30/2024.

discreetly, without openly provoking it. Even among the opposition, some were persuaded by the regime's rhetoric, which carried modern and secular overtones, and attempted to bring the political left closer to the regime.³

As a result of the despotic control in Syria, a segment of intellectuals emerged in support of the revolution and its demands. However, their relationship with the broader masses remained relatively weak, despite the widespread use of social media—one of the most prominent tools for mobilization and influence. This situation naturally raises questions about the factors contributing to the weak relationship between these two segments of society.

Given these circumstances, numerous studies have emerged analyzing the reasons behind the weak relationship between intellectuals and the masses. However, the majority of these studies approach the issue from the perspective of the intellectuals, focusing on why their connection with the masses has been lacking.⁴ At the same time, there is a noticeable lack of studies that examine the issue from the perspective of the masses—especially regarding their weak relationship with intellectuals.

Therefore, this paper attempts to fill this gap by answering the central question: *How do the masses view their relationship with intellectuals?* From this question, several sub-questions emerge:

- What is the ideal type of intellectual that the masses can trust?
- What are the factors that shape how Syrian people perceive intellectuals?

³ Rosa Yassin Hassan. "[Where Are the Syrian Intellectuals in the Revolution?](#)" *Jadaliyya*, March 2, 2012. Accessed on: 04/20/2025.

⁴ See, for example: Burhan Ghalioun, [On the Elite and the People](#), Petra Publishing and Distribution House, Syria - Damascus, First Edition, 2010, p. 21 and onwards; Dr. Ahmad Qurbi, [Priorities of Syrian Intellectuals in the Post-Assad Era: Restoring Trust as a Prelude to Effectiveness](#), Syrian Dialogue Center, 01/01/2025. Accessed on: 04/22/2025; Fawzi Muhanna, [The Syrian Intellectual and Moral Responsibility \(The Betrayal of the Intellectual\)](#), Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 10/13/2020. Accessed on: 04/23/2025)

- Who are the Syrian intellectuals that the Syrian people admire? (both historically and in the present, inside and outside Syria) - and what are the reasons behind this admiration?
- What tools do Syrian intellectuals use to express their views about intellectuals and their role?

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how meaningful interaction between the Syrian masses and intellectuals can be fostered, and how such interaction can contribute to societal development and the production of knowledge from the perspective of the general public. A comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the masses and intellectuals can help in developing effective strategies to enhance dialogue and mutual understanding between these two segments of society. It can also enable intellectuals to gain deeper insight into how they are perceived by the public, which in turn can help them build stronger and more genuine relationships with the people.

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology, as understanding the public's point of view toward intellectuals requires depth and exploration of the underlying reasons and influencing factors. To gather firsthand knowledge, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted across different settings, including WhatsApp message exchanges, Zoom calls, and face-to-face meetings. The sample was selected using *convenience sampling*, a technique that involves choosing participants based on ease of access and willingness to participate, rather than through random selection across all segments of society.⁵ Nevertheless, efforts were made to ensure representation of broader Syrian society by including participants from diverse backgrounds—ethnic groups, religious denominations, and social classes—with the aim of reflecting the cultural and social diversity of Syria as much as possible.

⁵ 5 Chittaranjan Andrade, [The Inconvenient Truth About Convenience and Purposive Samples](#), Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, 43(1), 2021, pp. 86-88.

In addition, efforts were made to include Syrians both inside and outside the country, in order to better understand how different living conditions may influence their perspectives on the topic under study (see Appendix).

To ensure the quality of the data gathered through the interviews, the research team received training prior to conducting them. The training focused on best practices outlined in academic literature, including how to form unbiased questions, build trust with participants, and practice effective listening.

Regarding the literature review, there are numerous papers in both Arabic and English that deal with the topic of intellectuals, particularly in the context of revolutions. There is broad consensus that intellectuals did not play a direct role in initiating the revolution. However, the literature does indicate that a small number of intellectuals participated in the revolution and aligned themselves with the opposition. In contrast, the majority remained silent or refrained from expressing their opinions, largely out of fear of the potential consequences.⁶

Some studies suggest that these changes led to the isolation of intellectuals from society and a decline in their social influence. This shift can be linked to ideological transformations over the last century. In earlier periods, ideologies often connected intellectuals with specific social classes, shaping their relationship with the broader public. However, with the rise of postmodernism, the focus shifted toward the separation of intellectuals from society and an emphasis on cultural production, innovation, and individual expression—rather than on their connection to collective social concerns.⁷

In the Syrian context, some studies have examined public figures who initially gained popularity by advocating for social causes but later lost public support after openly expressing their support for the Assad regime, which has been responsible for numerous crimes against the Syrian

⁶ Ali, Adnan. *Syrian Intellectuals: A Problem of Fear, or a Crisis of Consciousness*. Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies.

⁷ Burhan Ghalioun, [*On the Elite and the People*](#), previously cited source, p. 21.

people. As a result, these individuals became the focus of widespread criticism due to their political stance.⁸

Overall, the existing literature—both Arabic and foreign—shows a lack of research that focuses on the perspective of ordinary people regarding intellectuals and their relationship with them. This is precisely what this paper aims to address and clarify.

The study came under two main aims: The first discusses the personality and subjective aspects of the intellectual, by clarifying the key personality and subjective traits that such a figure should possess. The second examines the factors that influence how people view the intellectual—whether these factors are related to the substance, personality or related to the intellectual themselves.

First Requirement: The Perceived Image of What a Syrian Intellectual Should Be — In Terms of Personality and Substance

The interviews pointed to a particular perceived image of the intellectual in terms of both personality and substance — qualities that are considered necessary for gaining the public's trust. While these traits may be open to debate and disagreement, the interviews showed a clear consensus among most participants about the most important ones.

Personality Comes First

Personality is one of the primary issues people focus on when they talk about intellectuals. Before paying attention to the ideas or topics that an intellectual presents in the public sphere, people tend to give greater importance to their personality, conduct, and stances — especially in public settings.

Often, personality takes precedence, while the intellectual's ideas and themes come second.

⁸ Asaad Al-Saleh. Failing the masses: Buthaina Shabaan and the public intellectual crisis. Journal of International Women's Studies 13.5, 2012, pp.195-211.

Below, we outline six main aspects of personality that the surrounding environment (or social base) focuses on when forming its perception of intellectuals:

1. Humility as a Key to People's Hearts:

Humility generally stands out as one of the most important traits individuals need in order to succeed in influencing others. It is considered one of the key tools that an intellectual can rely on in their interactions with others, as it helps others recognize their value and fosters a sense of mutual respect.⁹¹⁰

This trait makes intellectually humble individuals more accepted by ordinary people, who often view them positively.¹¹ As a result, they are more likely to listen to such individuals and admire them.

All participants placed significant importance on the issue of humility. This term stood out clearly in their descriptions of what an intellectual should be. Many participants believed that the best way for an intellectual to connect with people is by showing humility in their speech. Participants strongly associated the "good intellectual" with the trait of *humility*, and the "bad intellectual" with *arrogance* and *conceit* in dealing with others.

For example, one Participant (16) said, "I admire the humble intellectual who interacts with all social classes, including ordinary people, and treats them with consideration—without arrogance or a sense of superiority."¹² Similarly, Participant (19) noted, "*He doesn't try to show off or present himself as an intellectual in front of others—you can tell he's cultured just*

⁹ In a report published by *Rincón de la Psicología* magazine on "Chekhov's Vision," the writer discussed Anton Chekhov's view of the intellectual. Chekhov advised that an intellectual should be humble. He wrote: "Intellectuals do not possess excessive pride. They are not interested in celebrity names or being recognized on the street, nor do they boast about being able to access places that are open to ordinary people." Source: Abdullah Imran, "[Humility, Aesthetic Sensibility, and Not Complaining: The Traits of the Intellectual as Portrayed by Anton Chekhov](#)" *Al Jazeera*, January 8, 2020. (Accessed on: 04/23/2025)

¹⁰ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Good Press, 2023.

¹¹ Benjamin R. Meagher, Joseph C. Leman, Caitlyn A. Heidenga, Michala R. Ringquist & Wade C. Rowatt, Intellectual humility in conversation: Distinct behavioral indicators of self and peer ratings, *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 16(3), 2021, pp.417-429.

¹² A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 16 on December 2, 2023

*by the way he speaks.*¹³ Participant (4) agreed, saying, “*The traits I look for and appreciate in an intellectual include humility above all.*”¹⁴

While humility is valued in most societies, it holds special significance in the Syrian context—likely as a response to the arrogance and elitism that intellectuals were often perceived to display during the Assad regime, or at least to the impression they gave.¹⁵¹⁶ Many participants mentioned how intellectuals either appeared detached or acted superior, which likely contributed to a collective push in favor of humility as a defining trait.

2. Openness and Willingness to Accept Criticism:

Openness to differing opinions and the ability to accept criticism are generally seen as intellectual virtues, but they are also ethical ones. These qualities reflect a genuine desire to pursue truth rather than to defend one’s personal interests.¹⁷ In other words, tolerance and the ability to accept critique are not virtues for their own sake—they signal that the intellectual is seeking truth, not personal gain. This is closely tied to the trait of honesty, which suggests that an intellectual’s only loyalty should be to the truth, not to their own opinions.¹⁸

“Openness and willingness to accept criticism” emerged as the second most important quality an intellectual should possess, according to the majority of participants. Many expressed the view that intellectuals must be open to new ideas and engage with different people, even when their audience may not fully understand the points being made. They emphasized that approaching critique with an open mind is essential for progress and development.

¹³ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 19 on December 18, 2023

¹⁴ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 4 on December 2, 2023

¹⁵ Bassam Youssef, *An Arrogant Intellectual / A Superior Culture*, Haramon Center for Contemporary Studies, August 17, 2022. (Accessed April 26, 2025)

¹⁶ Liyals Sweidan, [Has the Syrian Intellectual Betrayed His Role in Society?](#), Al-Hodhod: An Arabic Online Newspaper in Four Global Languages, April 27, 2025. (Accessed on April 27, 2025)

¹⁷ Heather Battaly, Must the Intellectual Virtues Be Reliable? INPC Session, 2004. p5.

¹⁸ Adam Carter & Emma Gordon, Must the Intellectual Virtues Be Reliable? INPC Session, p214

Participant (1) spoke about some common misconceptions that parts of society hold about intellectuals. He said, *“One mistaken belief is that intellectuals never make mistakes; we are human, and we should be aware that errors can happen. Recognizing mistakes should not be seen as a sign of weakness but rather as a reflection of maturity and civility. Admitting when you’re wrong is not difficult for a happy person.”*¹⁹

Participant (13) echoed this view on openness to criticism, stating, *“It is important for an intellectual to be open to criticism if they are proven wrong. They should play a role in correcting those mistakes, and together we should engage positively in exchanging ideas and correcting errors—even if the other person’s level of knowledge is higher than mine.”*²⁰

3. Commitment to Principles and Intellectual Independence:²¹

The intellectual is seen as someone who possesses deep awareness and intellectual independence. They do not use their knowledge and culture as a means to gain positions of power or influence. Instead, the true intellectual remains committed to their ideas and beliefs, without shifting or changing based on the context to gain personal or political advantage. Therefore, a key quality that can be identified here is the adherence to values, regardless of the cost.²²

When looking at how this adherence to values is reflected in participants’ views on the personality of intellectuals, some noted a negative counterpart: that one of the most prominent negative traits an intellectual can have is changing their positions and opinions according to personal interests. Hence, the intellectual is expected to be sincere and

¹⁹ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 1 on December 2, 2023

²⁰ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 13 on December 18, 2023

²¹ Most participants agreed that an intellectual should be neutral and independent in their views. However, there was also a perspective that intellectuals should avoid taking principled and radical stances, as such positions might weaken their objectivity and cause bias toward supporting what they personally believe.

²² Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Vintage, 2012. p11.

principled—reflecting the widespread view that the role of the intellectual is to embody values and principles with honesty and commitment.

Several participants criticized intellectuals who shift their opinions and stances based on self-interest. They argued that an intellectual should be sincere and principled, representing values with integrity and consistency. One Participant (4) described a well renowned Syrian intellectual: *“I don’t like him [a Syrian intellectual], and I can’t follow him. I feel he’s sycophantic. There are people I disagree with, but I still consider them intellectuals. And there are others who disagree with me, yet I don’t see them as intellectuals—because they’re naïve and overly flattering in their opinions. They would talk too much, theorize endlessly, support you one day, and turn against you the next. They change their views constantly. That’s not intellectualism—that’s blatant flattery.”*²³

In the same vein, Participant (20) offered a local example: *“There’s an engineer in our area who has been all over the place since the start of the revolution. When the Free Syrian Army came in, he supported them. When the SDF entered, he switched sides. Now he backs the regime. I’ve marked him with a red flag.”*²⁴

4. Humaneness and taking an ethical stance:

Intellectuals often possess the ability to uncover the “lies” of governments and analyze actions based on their motives, hidden intentions, and broader implications. This role has been more evident in Western contexts, where freedom and transparency provide the necessary conditions for such critical engagement. Intellectuals in those societies tend to hold a unique authority derived from political freedom, time, resources, and training, which allows them to seek out hidden truths behind political manipulation and distortion.²⁵

Moreover, due to the privileges they enjoy in such environments, the responsibilities of intellectuals in these societies are seen as far deeper

²³ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 4, previously cited.

²⁴ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 20 on 08/12/2023. It is noted that this interview took place before the fall of the former Assad regime.

²⁵ Noam Chomsky, A Special Supplement: The Responsibility of Intellectuals, The New York Review of Books, 23, 1967. p15

than the general public's, especially in terms of adopting ethical positions. However, this kind of personality is far more difficult—if not impossible—under authoritarian contexts like Syria's, where freedoms are suppressed. Still, that does not entirely exempt intellectuals from bearing moral responsibility, especially on major national issues.

It is therefore argued that what distinguishes a true intellectual is not only their knowledge, but also what some refer to as *“the moral conscience of the intellectual.”* For instance, certain well-known figures who supported the Assad regime were harshly criticized by participants not simply for their political positions, but for their failure to stand with the people. This same criticism has been extended to some figures who supported the opposition and the revolution, highlighting a broader expectation of moral consistency.

One Participant (19) explained clearly why he sees a connection between intellectual life and politics in the Syrian context: *“In Syria, this is a moral issue. If we are talking about Syria, then let's talk about the Syrian people. Anyone who does not criticize Bashar al-Assad and his regime cannot be considered an intellectual. They are merely a machine... If you are truly seeking knowledge and awareness, you will realize this regime is in opposition to the aspirations of anyone who seeks. I don't expect everyone to speak boldly, but at the very least, say your opinion honestly. If I ask, just be truthful.”*²⁶

Another Participant (16) added a critical religious dimension to this idea, emphasizing how a certain religious figure lost public trust *“He [a Syrian religious figure] was once considered a respected intellectual, especially in religious matters, but during the revolution, he insulted Islamic beliefs. This hurt his credibility among large segments of the Syrian street.”*²⁷

In general, this theme was very common among the participants, even if not stated explicitly; a close connection between the ethical and knowledge dimensions emerges regardless of the intellectual's area of specialization—whether that be an actor, a religious figure, or a politician.

²⁶ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 19 on 09/12/2023.

²⁷ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 16, previously cited.

To be regarded as an intellectual, it is not enough for a person to possess information; rather, their decisions and ethical stance in facing people are essential elements. This could serve as evidence of the link between knowledge and politics for a segment of Syrians.

5. Influence Within Society:

Some participants presented a broad assumption that the intellectual must have a clearly defined public role in society that cannot be overlooked. The intellectual is not merely a source of knowledge, but also an active member of their community.²⁸ He is “an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public.”²⁹

In addition, it is expected that the intellectual bears responsibility toward their people and nation, offering ideas and various solutions to social hardships, all in pursuit of freedom, independence, and progress for the community. Being educated goes beyond accumulating knowledge—it should involve a rich, deep, and critical engagement, one that questions social values and presents alternative perspectives.³⁰

Thus, the role of the intellectual is to promote freedom and human knowledge, which often requires challenging societal norms and presenting external viewpoints. Even if they are not part of formal institutions, intellectuals must engage with the public to discuss social

²⁸ In his paper “*The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov*”, Walter Moss presents an example of a renowned intellectual, considered one of the greatest writers in history. Chekhov’s life is portrayed as a continuous journey of relieving famine, fighting epidemics, building schools and public roads, founding libraries, organizing marine biology collections, offering free medical treatment to needy peasants, planting gardens, helping young writers publish, raising funds for worthy causes, and hundreds of other efforts aimed at helping his fellow human beings and improving the overall quality of life around him. What distinguished this intellectual, beyond his knowledge and expertise, were his humility and his commitment to helping people—two qualities that earned him the hearts of others. This is precisely how a model intellectual should conduct themselves. These impressions were reflected in the participants’ views, as they emphasized these two traits, showing that they hold true not just in Chekhov’s time, but as historically rooted expectations of what an intellectual should be.

Walter Moss. *The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov*. The Wisdom Page, 2010

²⁹ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Vintage, 2012. p12

³⁰ Abdullah Imran. *Humility, aesthetic sense, and lack of complaint... Traits of the intellectual as portrayed by Anton Chekhov*, Al Jazeera, 08/01/2020. Accessed on: 23/04/2025.

issues. This balance between personal conviction and public engagement is essential, as it combines individual passion with collective impact.³¹

The importance of linking an intellectual's specialization to the concerns of the people becomes apparent when exploring the difference between their “private role” and their “public role.” The intellectual may express personal views that reflect their individual stance (their private role), but once they become involved in public life, they are expected to engage with issues of public concern, which defines their public role. Thus, the intellectual must achieve a harmonious balance between both.³²

In this way, the fifth characteristic mentioned by participants emerged — one that focuses on the usefulness of intellectuals to the people. An intellectual is not merely someone who generates ideas and information and transfers them to others; rather, their ideas and knowledge are expected to be useful and beneficial to society. Not only that, but this role extends to providing moral and humanitarian support wherever possible within their community.

Intellectuals do not surrender to widespread false ideas; rather, many participants emphasized that the intellectual must be influential and strive to change such misconceptions. As a result, the word “*influence*” was one of the most frequently repeated terms. Participant (15) said: “*The intellectual must have a mission — to have a positive impact on society, a positive impact on the people around them. They must carry a cause.*”³³ Another Participant (12) expressed a similar sentiment, saying: “*I admire the intellectual who changes people’s perspectives — who tells someone, ‘You’re wrong,’ and helps them see things differently.*”³⁴ Participant (16) also highlighted the importance of influence in one sentence: “*I like the intellectual who can bring out the treasure they carry within.*”³⁵

Among the examples given by participants of how an intellectual can be useful to their community, one Participant (19) said: “*An intellectual with*

³¹ Alan Lightman, *The Role of the Public Intellectual*. n.d.

³² Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Vintage, 2012.

³³ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 15 on 29/11/2023.

³⁴ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 12 on 07/12/2023.

³⁵ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 16, previously cited source.

*a vision in economics can try to help create small businesses by offering advice and consultation. This could help local people become independent and earn enough to live. This requires both knowledge and a will to help others. That is the ideal kind of intellectual.*³⁶

This means the role of the intellectual is not limited to contemplation and reflection but also includes real-world action aimed at creating real change. The active intellectual bridges theoretical knowledge and practical application, using their skills and experience to develop innovative solutions to societal problems. Thanks to this approach, the intellectual can serve as a bridge between ideas and implementation — between dreams and reality — making them a key player in driving development and social change. Therefore, the intellectual is seen as a thought leader and a fundamental element in improving people's lives and enhancing society's ability to face challenges and achieve its goals.

6. Adapting the Discourse and Choosing the Appropriate Language:

Adapting an intellectual's discourse to different audiences is essential, requiring attention to several key factors. These include demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and profession, which help shape content and communication cues in a suitable and empathetic manner. Equally important are the audience's values and attitudes, which must be considered to build a stronger connection and achieve greater impact. The discourse should also be tailored to the audience's level of expertise, ensuring the message is clear and accessible. This adaptation can be refined in real time by observing audience reactions and making necessary adjustments, thereby enhancing communication and engagement.

In line with the above, the majority of those interviewed agreed that the intellectual must choose a language that suits the people and should have the flexibility to adjust their vocabulary according to the audience they are addressing, in a way that facilitates understanding. For example, some participants believed that the intellectual should use colloquial language when appropriate for certain groups, especially since Modern Standard

³⁶ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 19, previously cited source.

Arabic can sometimes be difficult to understand due to certain complex terms it contains.

Participant (21) said, *“In the past, people used to feel frustrated when speaking with a communist politician because he would use complex terms like ‘proletariat’ and ‘bourgeoisie,’ instead of using simpler and more understandable words like ‘working class.’ An intellectual should show respect for others by interacting in a respectful and clear manner.”*³⁷

Along the same lines, Participant (18) said, *“When an intellectual wants to convey an idea, they must first understand the level of the person they’re speaking to and communicate in a simple way.”*³⁸

In other words, *“The intellectual should be close to the people and come down to their level.”*³⁹

This reflects the importance of tone and personality — a point that even intellectuals themselves emphasize when advising one another: the need for harmony and for using language appropriate to the context. As someone who represents a particular perspective, the intellectual must present their ideas clearly and accessibly to their audience.⁴⁰

Summary:

The views expressed by the individuals interviewed highlighted several key qualities that an intellectual should possess. Among the most prominent of these is that the intellectual must be humble and connected to the people they represent. They should be well-versed in knowledge, capable of solving problems, and able to think creatively and innovatively. In addition, the importance of honesty was strongly emphasized — the intellectual should be neutral, open-minded, and truthful both with themselves and with others. Furthermore, they should care about their community and actively contribute to helping it. Finally, the ideal intellectual is someone who is constantly learning, understands life, and

³⁷ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 21 on 19/12/2024.

³⁸ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 18 on 19/12/2023.

³⁹ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 15, previously cited source.

⁴⁰ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Vintage, 2012.

is capable of generating new ideas that benefit society and address its issues.

Second Requirement: The Substantial Intellectual

The intellectual's role spans various fields and is not limited to simply having broad and deep knowledge across multiple disciplines. Rather, the **substantial intellectual** is someone who truly understands their subject matter, possesses wide-ranging expertise, and can provide precise, unbiased, and objective analyses.

This concept highlights the balance between extensive knowledge and the ability to deliver systematic insights while respecting diverse cultural and social values.

Below, we present four main thematic points that the incubator focuses on in forming its perspective on intellectuals, as follows:

1. Something About Everything:

It is natural for an intellectual to have broader and deeper knowledge in certain fields compared to ordinary individuals, due to factors like advanced education, a passion for reading, and research. Because of this, when discussing a particular topic, an intellectual can provide more detailed and scientific insights, which helps them understand issues more deeply and find innovative solutions.

Their broad knowledge and analytical skills also enable them to better grasp social and practical challenges, allowing for more effective contributions toward solving these problems. This wide-ranging knowledge enhances their critical thinking and ability to present multiple perspectives on complex matters, while also improving their capacity to communicate and engage with different cultures and ideas.

Participant (1) said, *"I like a person to be open-minded about everything and to have a good grasp of all fields."*⁴¹ Similarly, Participant (18) added, *"The concept of knowledge is broad. For me, it means having more*

⁴¹ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 1 on 2023/12/02.

concern for one's country or region than for one's personal interest. When discussing academic specialties, professionals such as doctors, engineers, and teachers are considered intellectuals not only because of their expertise but also because of their interest in various aspects of life. For example, someone interested in politics may also care deeply about literature, history, and other fields. Thus, an intellectual is someone with a comprehensive culture who can contribute meaningfully across different domains.⁴²

Participant (17) commented on this aspect, saying, *"An intellectual always possesses broader knowledge than the general public. When discussing a specific topic, they have sufficient and comprehensive information, having studied and delved into details more deeply than ordinary individuals.⁴³"*

According to the participants, this broadening of knowledge among intellectuals is not seen as a negative trait. On the contrary, it is viewed as highly beneficial and plays an important role in driving progress and development within societies.

2. Connection to the Humanities:

Among the fields most frequently referenced when discussing the concept of the intellectual were philosophy, politics, and economics. This emphasis stems from the earlier definition we provided, which described the intellectual as someone who consciously engages in public life and adopts issues that matter to the public. These are all fields concerned with life's major questions and seek to involve people in addressing them.

This understanding was reflected in participants' perceptions of the areas an intellectual typically engages with—many focused on these three areas. Most agreed that an intellectual is not someone with limited knowledge but rather someone who should be well-versed in a range of subjects and possess broad and diverse expertise. Many participants highlighted the importance of addressing economic conditions and

⁴² Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 18 (previous source).

⁴³ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 17 on 2023/12/02.

speaking about the people's economic reality. They saw the intellectual as a creator of social awareness, someone who participates in shaping public opinion and guiding society toward its aspirations for a better future.⁴⁴

Accordingly, one of the qualities an intellectual must possess is "a certain directive [dirigente) and technical (i.e., intellectual) capacity: he must have a certain technical capacity, not only in the limited sphere of his activity and initiative but in other spheres as well⁴⁵"

In the same vein, participants placed responsibility on intellectuals, emphasizing that they must fulfill their primary role effectively.

3. The Methodical Intellectual:

One of the most important traits of the intellectual is possessing a method for analyzing issues, whether social or political. Moreover, the intellectual must avoid being swept away by populism that exploits emotion in a negative way. This analysis must be based on certain principles and not driven by emotions in a harmful manner.

Populist discourse relies on stirring emotions to create a division of "us" versus "them." This approach can be dangerous regardless of political orientation, whether left or right, as it negatively affects the masses by exploiting emotions to incite division.

During the interviews, the term emotion was mentioned several times in a negative context, both regarding the intellectual and the public. Some participants criticized intellectuals who use emotion unprofessionally,

⁴⁴ *ibid*

This aligns with the definition that divides intellectuals into two types: organic and traditional. The *organic intellectual* maintains a close connection with the world or lived experience of the class they represent. They develop a vision for liberation that is deeply embedded in the experience of their class—they belong to it and actively strive to support the causes and views of the broader public. In contrast, the *traditional intellectual* lacks a strong link to the lived experiences of the class they represent. They tend to reproduce and transmit conventional ideas and values without necessarily having a liberatory vision rooted in their own personal experience. This perspective can be described as a distinctly Marxist approach to understanding intellectuals. Nevertheless, some useful points can be drawn from it: the core idea is that it is important for the intellectual to strive to support and give voice to the people they represent.

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volume 2*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

⁴⁵ *ibid*

often appealing to racist or sectarian bases to incite people. For example, Participant (7) spoke cautiously about the methodological issue, expressing that: *“You feel like they exaggerate or that their rhetoric is either natural or artificial.”*⁴⁶ Another Participant (3) said: *“From just one video, I liked the methodological way he spoke.”*⁴⁷

From these points raised by participants, it becomes clear that each discipline has its own methodology, which helps us understand the dangers of populist or emotional rhetoric, as mentioned. Although this type of discourse is ineffective and incapable of solving problems, it is still used as a tool for incitement against others. Therefore, intellectuals must be cautious to avoid such speech that could, for instance, incite Syrians to division.⁴⁸

4. Clash with Society and Identity:

Intellectuals are distinguished by an unusual sensitivity toward the deeper, often spiritual or sacred aspects of their culture and society. They do not simply accept things as they are but engage in deep reflection on fundamental meanings and values. Intellectuals tend to think extraordinarily; they immerse themselves in broad contemplations about the nature of the broader social system, its underlying factors, and governing rules. This means they deeply understand both their immediate environment and the wider social context.⁴⁹

The participants in the interviews emphasized the importance of respecting religious and social values. Many expressed both admiration and criticism toward certain intellectuals based on their stances on sensitive issues. For instance, some intellectuals were criticized for promoting ideas seen as conflicting with the people’s core beliefs. This highlights a key point: when addressing the public—even if the intellectual

⁴⁶ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 7 on 2023/12/06.

⁴⁷ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 3 on 2023/12/02.

⁴⁸ Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser, Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Stromback, and Claes de Vreese, *Us and Them: How Populist Parties Get Their Message Across*, LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog, 2016, accessed on: 30/5/2024.

⁴⁹ Edward Shils, "The Intellectuals and the Powers: Some Perspectives for Comparative Analysis," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 1 (19 8-59), p5.

is not personally religious—they should refrain from directly challenging or attacking the beliefs of the people.

Participant (20), who comes from a tribal background, shared his concerns about policies imposed in his region. He said *“In 2020, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) imposed an educational curriculum that contradicted our beliefs, given that we come from tribal communities. A man from our area took a firm stand against this decision and rejected the curriculum entirely. He declared that he was ready to shut down schools in Deir ez-Zor and stop teachers from teaching. He has maintained this firm position to this day, despite threats of arrest against him and his family aimed at changing his stance.”*⁵⁰

This principle of respecting values is not limited to group dynamics; it also applies on an individual level. As Participant (9) put it *“I’m honestly not a fan of his poetry, even though he’s a big name. All his poetry focuses on the topic of women, and he portrays women in a superficial way in his stories.”*⁵¹

This tendency among participants can be explained by the fact that Syrians—across sects and backgrounds—are generally characterized by religiosity. While levels of religious observance may vary from one denomination to another, a shared sense of faith remains a central part of Syrian identity.⁵²

It is worth noting that this point does not appear to be limited to the perspectives of the individuals we interviewed; rather, there are also opinions among Syrian intellectuals themselves suggesting that the insistence of Arab intellectuals—who emerged in the twentieth century—on separating themselves from the people, by adopting social and cultural frameworks alien to the population, contributed to the failure of the

⁵⁰ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 20. Previously cited source.

⁵¹ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 9, dated 17/12/2023.

⁵² Hussam Al-Saad, *Patterns of Syrian Religiosity and Civil and Political Issues*, The Day After, 2022, p. 24.

intellectual elite in achieving the “modernity project.” This, in turn, widened the gap between them and the public.⁵³

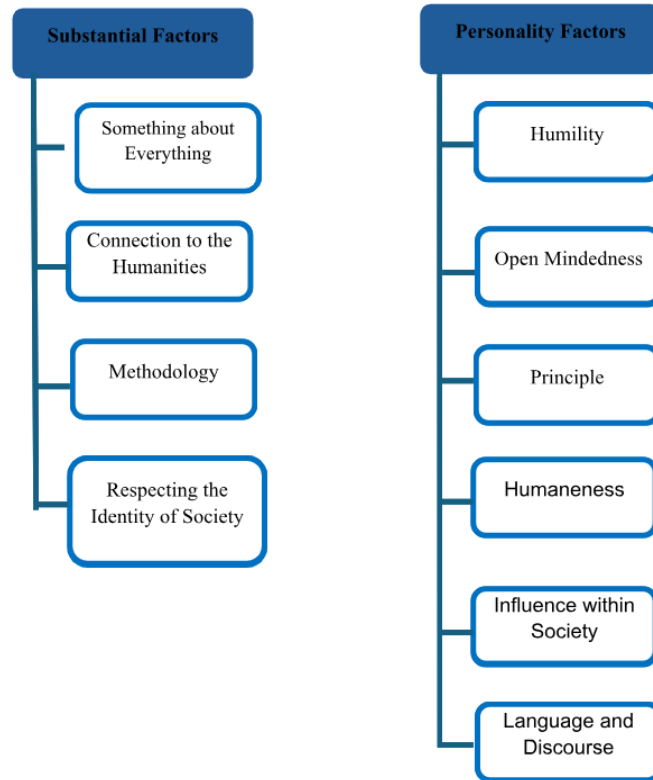


Illustration 1: Summary of Key Personality and Substantial Traits Shaping the Public Image of the Intellectual in Syria

Summary:

In the context of evaluating intellectuals, discussions often focused on subjective aspects, such as scientific knowledge and academic expertise. However, studies and observations indicate that the personality aspect may have a greater impact in the evaluation of intellectuals. In this context, it is essential to address the question of whether personality characteristics are more important than subjective aspects.

Examples of both good and bad intellectuals showed that the personality aspect was more important than the subjective one for the participants—whether they admired them or not. As one Participant (4) put it "*The most*

⁵³ Dr. Burhan Ghalioun, *The Elite Society*, Arab Development Institute, First Edition, 1986, p. 10- 11

*important trait that an intellectual must have is honesty.*⁵⁴ This was affirmed by Participant (5) "*I advise the intellectual that the most important thing in life is honesty.*"⁵⁵

Studies on intellectuals emphasize that the definition of an intellectual should not be restricted, but rather, their image and personality should be assessed. There are many definitions, but not enough focus has been placed on image, signature, involvement, actual performance, sense of public interest, willingness to take risks, and the will to speak out on issues such as colonialism, commitments, or social conflicts.⁵⁶

This aligns with participants' responses, indicating that the definition of an intellectual is not limited to their scientific knowledge, but also includes their personality, stances, and how they interact with people. It highlights the importance of the intellectual being humble, open-minded, sincere in their ideas, and morally upright. participants emphasized that people will not accept their influence unless they embody these traits, stressing that the importance of personality outweighs the subjective aspect, whether in their public or private role.

Second Requirement: Other Factors Influencing the Host Community's Attitude Toward the Intellectual

Despite the importance of personality and substantive factors in shaping the host community's perception of the intellectual, a number of other factors also emerged as having a clear impact in shaping that perception and determining their stance. These factors combine to form an integrated and contextual mix, and can be divided into four main points:

1. Personal connections and relationships
2. The nature of the intellectual,
3. The individual's own personal traits, and
4. Common themes present in the collective consciousness.

⁵⁴ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 4 on 12/2/2023.

⁵⁵ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 5 on 12/2/2023.

⁵⁶ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Vintage, 2012. p13

Firstly: Intellectuals among close relatives

The idea of considering those close to them as intellectuals was present among the sample; most participants viewed relatives or friends as examples of good intellectuals, such as a father, son, or uncle. Participant (4) spoke about this point, saying *“An intellectual doesn’t necessarily have to be a well-known person. For example, my cousin—my trust in him is absolute, his conversations are enjoyable, his company is wonderful, and I feel very excited when talking to him.”*⁵⁷ Similarly, Participant (1) shared the following view *“The idea of the intellectual is, in a way, personal to me; for example, my father—he was a very intellectual person. I took him as a role model because he was right there in front of me.”*⁵⁸

What has been mentioned above can be understood as pointing to the idea that all human beings — regardless of their level of education or learning — engage in some form of intellectual activity. Therefore, no one can be described as completely “unintellectual,” because everyone contributes in different ways to intellectual processes. This means that we can talk about intellectuals, but we cannot talk about non-intellectuals, because they do not truly exist. Intellectual activity is a human endeavor that cannot exclude any form of participation. In the end, everyone participates in all fields, regardless of their size or importance.⁵⁹

From the above explanation, we can understand why participants in the Syrian context consider their friends and relatives to be intellectuals—based on the idea that intellectual activity is necessary in all fields, regardless of whether the activities are major or minor. This highlights how all forms of human activity require some kind of intellectual engagement, which supports the idea that everyone can be considered an intellectual to some degree.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 4 (previously cited).

⁵⁸ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 1 (previously cited).

⁵⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*, International Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Peter Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, Pluto Press, London, 2004: p 74

The traditional notion that intellectuals are only those with deep thinking or reasoning abilities becomes limited if we assess intellectual activity solely based on individual traits. Instead, we must view it in the context of social relationships and the roles these individuals play in society.

Building on this, what distinguishes intellectuals is their ability to form emotional connections and support certain perspectives to help understand the world—not just by presenting ideas. This shows that intellectuals are not only famous figures, but can also come from various classes and fields.

Secondly: Celebrities and Religious Figures

Among the factors influencing the relationship between intellectuals and their social base is the intellectual's own field of specialization. We observe that the individuals who were either admired or criticized by participants were mostly religious figures and celebrities.

Regarding the artists, their positions after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011 sparked controversy within Syrian society, due to their prominent presence and influence in the public sphere.⁶¹ As one Participant stated: "A large group of film and theater artists and directors let the people down... I feel sorry for this, because we have people who let their nations down, and a big part of them are artists. Because of their closeness to a large segment of the population—a segment of moderately educated people who receive culture and life experiences through artists—it is truly sad and painful when you have hope and a particular view of someone, and they completely let you down."⁶²

Some studies point out the important social role that Syrian drama plays in encouraging critical thinking and starting conversations about important

⁶¹ The most important characteristic a work of art must have is its ability to create an "illusion" for the viewer, encouraging them to keep watching and enabling the desired impact. From this point, the actor transforms from a human being who interacts with current events and has a personal life separate from their artistic work and the characters they portray, into a fictional persona from whom society expects specific behaviors and stances.

(Yamen Al-Maghribi, *"Why Did Artists in Syria Become Divided?"* Printed Newspaper, Arts and Culture section, 2023. Accessed on 30/05/2024)

⁶² A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 6 on 06/2023.

topics. One Participant said, “Syrian drama broadened my thinking and made me interested in important issues. It highlighted many sensitive topics—some made us think, others stirred emotions.” Another Participant described drama as “a mirror of reality,” adding that people can change in one way or another because of it. In some cases, drama can even change an entire country. It’s more important and influential than we might expect.⁶³

Because of its significance and direct influence on society, the Assad regime saw drama as a way to strengthen its cultural influence inside and outside Syria. That’s why it supported TV production and got involved in censorship decisions. It presented itself as a supporter of the creative class in Syria. This likely served two political purposes: first, to present a positive image of the regime to intellectuals, and second, to use television to push its own authoritarian agenda and control the media narrative.⁶⁴

Given this, it’s no surprise that drama and actors had a strong presence in Syrian society. Actors were among the few people who enjoyed real fame and public attention, and many became part of the regime’s soft power—used to promote its message and image.

Alongside actors and artists, participants also saw another group as influential in society: religious figures. One Participant said that religious leaders should be the first to stand for justice and support the oppressed. But some of them, according to the Participant, did the opposite—they supported the oppressor and the killer. This, in turn, damaged their reputation and weakened people’s trust in them and in religion as a whole.⁶⁵

Religious figures have always had the power to change the course of history—not just the fate of communities and nations—due to their ability to influence public opinion. While decisions may be made by higher authorities, their impact often takes time to reach the general public. In

⁶³ Fanack, Syrian Drama Regains its Shine, Fanack, 2023, accessed on: 30/5/2024

⁶⁴ James Reilly, Fragile Nation, Shattered Land: The Modern History of Syria, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018. p148-49

⁶⁵ A Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant (3), previous source.

contrast, religious leaders have direct contact with people, giving them the power to quickly spread opposing ideas to any new decisions or directions. As a result, they can cause people to reject these changes the moment they appear, preventing them from gaining acceptance.⁶⁶

A large number of participants focused primarily on religious figures ("men of religion"), as they are seen to possess a unique ability to control and influence people. This influence stems from their charismatic presence and their oratory skills—particularly their use of language and terminology that can be understood by different segments of society. In addition to their persuasive abilities, the human tendency to submit to authority gives these figures an edge, especially over the general public and many social classes.

Historically, this group played a central role in establishing influential collectives, one of the most significant being the Association of Scholars, which exerted pressure on decision-makers to promote moral values and preserve religious identity. Moreover, politicians relied on religious scholars during the 1930s to gain support in working-class neighborhoods.⁶⁷

As for religious minorities in Syria, the Alawite religious leaders had a considerable religious and social influence over their followers—even among those who belonged to the Ba'ath Party, a secular leftist party. For example, a Ba'athist officer once suggested publishing books to refute the sectarian accusations aimed at Salah Jadid. In response, someone warned: "If we do that, the sheikhs will crush us." The officer replied: "You're a revolutionary, and you're afraid of the sheikhs? How can we fight an empire if we're too scared to confront religious leaders?"⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Saleh Al-Din Haffafsa, "[Why Do Religious Leaders Have Power and Influence Over People?](#)" *Al Jazeera Net*, December 23, 2018. Accessed May 30, 2024.

⁶⁷ For example, through its influence and pressure, the association was able to convince the government to introduce the five daily prayer times into public schools in the years 1954–1955, and to ban the showing of alcohol in cinema halls in 1955. See: Thomas Pierret., *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 2013. p168-174

⁶⁸ Goldsmith, Leon, *The 'Alawi Shaykhs of Religion: A Brief Introduction*. Sociology of Islam. 2018. p199

The same applies to the Druze community. Throughout the various critical junctures the governorate has experienced—starting with the popular protests it witnessed against the former Assad regime, followed by efforts to calm tensions and prevent clashes between Daraa and Sweida on one side, and between the families of the governorate and Bedouin tribes on the other.⁶⁹ The events ended with the agreements between Sweida and the new ruling authority in Syria—“the Sheikhs of Reason” have maintained a steady and prominent role in public affairs and continued to exert influence over the broader community.⁷⁰

Thirdly: The Personal Factor and Its Influence on the Public’s Perception of the Intellectual

In the evaluation of individuals towards intellectuals, personal values — including the subjective and experiential aspects they carry — play a fundamental role. These include a person’s beliefs and personal experiences, which are among the most important factors influencing the formation of opinions and perceptions about the intellectual.

For example, Participant (11) said *"My brother is a humble school principal. These are the qualities I find important—he is humble and has faith in God... He loves people and helps them. The (mayor) is also the same—he is a humble man who loves people and believes in God. Personally, I respect and appreciate anyone who has faith in God, no matter who they are... and he is a very respectable person."*⁷¹

Another (1) said *"For me, being an Islamic person is more important than being nationalist or patriotic. My primary principle is Islam. National affiliations come after that. In the end, each of us loves their homeland—the place they were born and raised in. They love the people around them."*

⁶⁹ Diyaa Ouda, [“The Third Druze Leadership on the Frontline of Sweida Protests... What Has Changed?”](#) Alhurra Channel, August 24, 2023. Accessed on: 31/05/2024.

⁷⁰ [Sheikhs al-‘Aql of the Druze community clarify their stance on the authorities in Damascus and the delegation’s visit to Israel](#), Shaam Network, 15 March 2025. Accessed on: 14 April 2025.

⁷¹ Zoom interview conducted by the research team on 17/12/2023 with Participant 11.

*Our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), when he migrated, his heart remained attached to Mecca."*⁷²

This can be interpreted through the concepts of *representation* and *principles*: an intellectual—regardless of how accurate this perception may be—gains public support if they represent the people’s ideas and principles. Naturally, participants feel drawn to those who believe in and represent their ideas. Hence, a secular person who adopts secularism through their values is usually influenced by a secular intellectual, while a religious person is typically influenced by a religious intellectual—and vice versa.

This is where the idea of *representation* becomes clear: it becomes difficult to imagine someone who opposes Arab and Islamic customs as “representing” the Syrian people, who are predominantly Arabs and Muslims.

Fourthly: The Topics That Concern the Syrian People:

The participants unanimously agreed that the most important topic occupying the minds of the Syrian people is their living conditions, whether for Syrians living inside Syria or in neighboring countries. They face difficult economic challenges, which is something no one can deny.

As long as the people suffer, the participants emphasized that if this issue is not addressed, any talk about other topics will not be effective. Several topics were mentioned repeatedly, such as women’s rights and patriotism, but according to the participants, a Syrian audience living in difficult conditions cannot truly care about these issues unless their basic problems are resolved. Therefore, this can be interpreted to mean that the priorities of the intellectual should be linked to the interests of the people and the improvement of their living situation.

Participant (4) said *"The Syrian people and street currently care only about living conditions and health. I’m not saying they want to live in*

⁷² Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 1 (previously mentioned).

*luxury, buy houses and cars, eat at restaurants, and travel. No, they only want enough to eat and to feed their children."*⁷³

There was agreement that Syrians' priorities differ depending on their location; for example, Syrians living in Turkey may prioritize their migration situation, while others believe that Syrians residing in Europe should participate in political life and focus on political matters in the countries where they live.

Participant (22) said *"If you represent a poor person talking about certain issues, the intellectual must speak and discuss the economic reality — such as increasing salaries, improving job opportunities, addressing unemployment, and improving education and health conditions."*⁷⁴

Participant (6) said *"How can a person free themselves from this? Syria has become like a swamp, fundamentally a swamp, even if it is the same country!"*⁷⁵

What the participants mentioned aligns fully with Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a person naturally focuses first on their basic needs such as food and drink. Once these needs are met, they move to the next level, such as safety and stability. When those levels in the hierarchy are fulfilled physically and psychologically, the person seeks to reach higher levels, which include social and emotional needs such as belonging and love.⁷⁶

Studies have shown a clear relationship between economic conditions and people's interest in culture, as evident from multiple cases in Europe. For example, during economic crises, funding for cultural activities tends to decline, directly affecting the vitality of cultural institutions and their activities. In the Netherlands, for example, major budget cuts during the financial crisis reduced the number of orchestras and dance troupes, as well as funding for museums, demonstrating how financial constraints can reduce cultural participation. In the Vâlcea region of Romania, economic

⁷³ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 4, previous source.

⁷⁴ Zoom interview conducted by the research team on 19/12/2023 with Participant 22.

⁷⁵ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 6, previous source.

⁷⁶ Saul McLeod, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Simply Psychology, 1(1), 2007 , pp. 1-18

difficulties significantly impacted local cultural clubs and public libraries, contributing to a decline in cultural engagement.⁷⁷

These results align with social research showing that cultural consumption decreases during economic crises, as both governments and individuals allocate resources toward more urgent economic needs.

Fifthly: The political context in Syria and its impact on the view of intellectuals:

Before the Ba'ath Party seized power in Syria, the relationship was extremely intertwined between intellectuals and politics; as the role of intellectuals was embodied in offering support to various political ideas, especially leftist and nationalist ones. Thus, culture and politics were closely linked, which made intellectuals attached to the issues of their citizens and the politics of their era.

After the Ba'ath seized power in 1963, its policies were based on imposing an oppressive authority, silencing voices, monopolizing information and the public sphere as a whole. This was one of the main reasons for the weakness of the relationship between the people and the intellectuals.

One of the participants (1) expressed about the general context in Syria, saying *"The intellectual who is outside Syria talks about the things happening inside it, whereas the people living in Syria find it difficult to speak freely; meaning here, the person becomes weak because the regime does not allow that to happen."*⁷⁸

Another Participant (15) also said *"In fact, the regime tried to distort the relationship between the people and the intellectuals, and we saw how it tried to assassinate influential civil figures. Our main problem was the absence of an alternative to the leadership's ideas that organize the people around them. But unfortunately, the regime shattered the spiritual image of the intellectuals."*⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Maria Moldoveanu, & Ioan-Franc Valeriu. THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON CULTURE. Review of General Management. 2011: 14. 15-35.

⁷⁸ Zoom interview conducted by the research team on 02/12/2023 with Participant 1

⁷⁹ Zoom interview conducted by the research team on 02/12/2023 with Participant 15

Since its seizure of power, the Ba'ath (Party), in general, sought to fragment any front that could pose a danger to authority — including intellectuals. The intellectuals thus became divided — a wing joined the dictatorship and another maintained opposition to the dictatorship, but silently or indirectly.⁸⁰ Through the approach of the extinct Assad regime in restricting freedom of expression and preventing the raising of any issue that contradicts its orientations, this negatively affected the relationship of the Syrian people with the intellectuals.

Therefore, the intellectual could not take the initiative to discuss any issue that concerned his people and community unless the authorities agreed to it. In most cases, the authorities tended to prohibit it, which made the group of intellectuals appear detached from their context and the issues of their people.

One of the participants (16) confirms this by saying “*Despite the importance of the issue of compensation for the lands submerged by the Euphrates Dam, which has been pending for over fifty years, intellectuals from the region were not allowed to discuss this issue, even though it represents a very important social issue for the region.*”⁸¹

One of the participants (15) pointed to the repression of intellectuals in Syria, saying “*The intellectual, unfortunately, was always targeted by the regime. If he had media influence, he was constantly marginalized, because the regime considers intellectuals among the groups that most threaten its authority, as is the case with most dictatorial regimes.*”⁸²

Comparative experiences point to the same case; for example, the French Revolution of 1789 witnessed a significant influence by revolutionary intellectuals who played a decisive role in shaping the events that led to the fall of the monarchy. Philosophers like Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Diderot played a pivotal role in inspiring the masses

⁸⁰ Rosa Yassin Hassan, previously cited

⁸¹ This is one example, but it can be extended to cover the entire 1970s, when the Ba'ath Party tightened its grip on power. This repression reached its peak during the 1980s after the crackdown campaign during the well-known events in Hama.

Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 16, previously cited.

⁸² Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 15, previously cited

with their ideas about freedom, equality, and fraternity. They sought to challenge the authority of the monarchy and called for governmental reforms based on the social contract and the separation of powers. This clarifies why dictatorial regimes fear intellectuals; throughout history, they were among the catalysts for change and were influential in many revolutions due to their decisive role in shaping public opinion and igniting the flames of change and revolution. Their revolutionary ideas can inspire the people and move the masses toward rebellion against the existing regime, which constitutes a direct threat to political stability and ruling authority; therefore, the authorities see intellectuals as a danger that must be countered, which often leads to their arrest or suppression of their freedom of expression.⁸³

We can say that Syria was never empty of intellectuals; however, the lack of an appropriate environment for them to freely express themselves made the majority assimilate into the regime, except for a very few. Therefore, the regime bears the greatest responsibility for the weak relationship between the intellectual and the people, due to the positions and opinions it imposed on the former, which align more with its own interests than with the public good. However, this does not negate the existence of a few intellectuals who never disappeared from the events that their homeland and people went through.

Sixthly: The Role of Social Media

Social media has worked to establish new modes of human communication. In a relatively short period of time, modern means of communication have managed to significantly reduce the relevance of traditional communication tools—especially among the younger generation. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and others offer substantial opportunities for self-expression, critical thinking, and the sharing of emotions with others.

In the Syrian context, there was a clear divergence in participants' opinions regarding the importance of social media for intellectuals. Some individuals emphasized the necessity of intellectuals being present on

⁸³ Sanjeev Kumar, "Impact of Intellectuals and Philosophers in the French Revolution of 1789," 2020

social media platforms to strengthen their connection with the people—especially with the younger generations. Others added that intellectuals can use these platforms to share content and information and to interact with audiences, which allows them to understand public opinions and relay their voices. This is especially important because these platforms amplify people’s voices. Social media also plays a role in empowering the public, as it gives them a tool to hold intellectuals accountable in cases of mistakes or deviations.

In this context, Participant (1) stated *“The intellectual must be close to the people and use social media to reach broad segments of society. Through it, they can access comprehensive and useful analyses that help envision the future. Their role is fundamental here—they must use appropriate language to simplify ideas and guide the cultural discourse in a broader and deeper way. Moreover, the intellectual should work on raising cultural awareness among the public, not just focus on guiding their own children. They should contribute to building their community culturally, because through this, real success—both culturally and intellectually—can be achieved. Significant support should be directed to cultural institutions to ensure genuine benefit in this area; otherwise, there will be no tangible financial return.”*⁸⁴

While most participants confirmed that social media can be a tool to enhance communication between the intellectual and the people, they also pointed out its potential negative aspects that could impact the relationship. Participant (3) remarked *“We can view social media as a tool; it allows intellectuals to appear in their best form, because anyone can respond to their posts without restrictions or interference. You can even limit who comments, but even your close friends and followers can now easily express their opinions. They can try to correct your mistakes and comment on what you say, enabling you to reflect on and evaluate your thoughts. On the downside, however, anyone—even those who are not intellectuals—can speak out, debate intellectuals, and try to clarify their*

⁸⁴ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 1. Previous source

views. *This can create tension between the intellectual and the general public.*"⁸⁵

Participant 13 said *"Social media plays a major role now because it guides people. Many people now spend their time behind computers and smartphones. Whether you use it to do evil or to do good, it can cause corruption in the world. With a single word, you can stir people, incite discord, or 'raise hell.' But with a word of truth, you can motivate people to stand for what is right, to resist oppression, and to stand together against injustice."*⁸⁶

In the same context, some participants emphasized the need for intellectuals to use social media properly. This was tied to a previously mentioned point: that intellectuals should consider the beliefs and values of the Syrian people when engaging on these platforms.⁸⁷

Participant 9 stated *"It's the exact opposite. Social media increases the gap between intellectuals and the people because it pushes the intellectual to go along with what the masses desire. Social media makes it easier for shallow ideas and poor-quality content to spread, which causes people to get immersed in it instead of engaging in deep thinking. This, in turn, leads to scattered interests and a diminishing capacity for critical thinking and the absorption of deep knowledge."*⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Zoom interview conducted by the research team with Participant 3. Previous source

⁸⁶ Interview via Zoom conducted by the research team with Participant 13

⁸⁷ See paragraph: "Clash with Society and Identity" in this study

⁸⁸ Interview via Zoom conducted by the research team with Participant 9

Conclusion:

This study uncovers a range of factors that shape how the public views intellectuals in Syria. While many aspects align with the general regional context, the findings also reveal characteristics specific to the Syrian case—insights that may help strengthen the role of intellectuals in Syrian society and bridge the gaps in their relationship with the public.

A key theme is the importance of humility and accessibility. participants expressed expectations that intellectuals remain modest, approachable, and engaged with the public. Intellectuals who appear distant or arrogant are often viewed negatively. participants also stressed the need for intellectuals to address pressing societal issues, especially during times of crisis.

A clear distinction emerged in how people perceive intellectuals based on their stance toward the Assad regime. Those who supported the regime are often dismissed as inauthentic intellectuals, regardless of their educational background or knowledge. Integrity and commitment to principles were highlighted as core values; intellectuals are expected to be ethical role models who contribute to others' intellectual and moral development.

The study concludes with several key findings and recommendations:

1. **Cultural and intellectual activities have become secondary to basic survival needs.** Consequently, intellectuals and cultural institutions are often criticized for disconnecting from the public's real concerns.
2. **Respect for societal values and identity is essential.** While it is an intellectual's duty to critique the status quo, this must be done within reasonable bounds to avoid alienating large segments of society.
3. **Intellectuals should remain open-minded and adaptable.** They must tailor their communication methods to their audiences,

embrace constructive criticism, and continuously seek growth.

4. **Arrogance creates a barrier between intellectuals and the public**, even when the intellectual is factually correct. Awareness of this dynamic is crucial.
5. **With increasing reliance on social media over books and newspapers**, intellectuals must stay active on these platforms—provided their content holds scientific or intellectual value—and seek face-to-face interaction with people, which remains the most effective way to build connections.
6. **Using clear, structured arguments rather than emotional or populist rhetoric** helps the public better understand complex issues and fosters greater openness to engagement.
7. **Intellectuals must stand by their principles** rather than change their positions for popularity or personal gain. Intellectual and personal development is normal, but opportunistic reversals of opinion for self-interest are criticized.
8. **Prioritizing issues appropriately is essential.** Topics like democracy, social justice, and feminism are important, but a Syrian struggling with daily survival may not be able to focus on them. Intellectuals should focus on solving urgent public problems first. At the same time, Syrians living abroad in relative comfort have different responsibilities and space to address such topics.
9. **It is important to benefit from intellectuals' expertise in their fields**, encouraging their curiosity and deepening of knowledge. However, this does not mean blind acceptance—critical thinking must remain central.

Appendix: General Characteristics of Participants

Participant No.	Age	Educational Status	Place of Residence	Origin
1	36	University degree / Architecture	Istanbul	Father from Latakia, Mother from Damascus
2	30	University degree / Civil Engineering	Ghana	Tartous – Raised in Damascus
3	38	Master's in Educational Methods	Canada	Damascus
4	35	Started studying French Literature but did not complete	Countryside of Jableh	Countryside of Jableh
5	36	Master's in Media Arts	Germany	Father Kurdish, Mother Circassian
6	43	Graduate in Medical Sciences	Turkey	Hama
7	29	Did not complete education	Northern Aleppo Countryside	Idlib Countryside
8	—	Master's in International Relations	Sweida	Sweida
9	31	English Literature	Istanbul	Aleppo
10	41	PhD in Islamic Banking and Finance	Turkey	Daraa
11	35	Not specified as educated	Daraa Countryside	Daraa Countryside

12	35	Completed up to 8th grade	Idlib	Idlib
13	43	Arabic Literature (currently studying at university)	Al-Bab City	Homs
14	38	PhD student in Geography	Damascus	Tartous
15	39	University degree	Turkey - Gaziantep	Syria - Aleppo
16	31	University degree	Turkey - Gaziantep	Syria - Aleppo Countryside, Manbij
17	27	High school diploma	Turkey - Adana	Syria - Hama Countryside, Karnaz
18	40	University degree	Turkey - Gaziantep	Syria - Aleppo
19	37	University degree	Turkey - Gaziantep	Syria - Daraa
20	37	Intermediate education	Syria - Raqqa	Syria - Deir ez-Zor
21	45	Intermediate education	Syria - Sweida	Syria - Sweida
22	27	High school diploma	Northern Syria	Syria - Homs

الحوار

مركز الحوار السوري
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