

# Translating the Egyptian Revolution

## Translation, Testimony, Activism: An Interview with Samah Selim

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As an academic, translator and activist, Samah Selim has produced a body of work that is of particular relevance to this special issue on the relation between translation and testimony. More specifically, it is the turn from academic research on Arabic literature and translation to a more directly activist engagement with translation in the wake of the revolution in Egypt in 2011 that is of specific interest here. Currently Associate Professor at the Department of African, Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Literatures at Rutgers University, Selim previously taught at Columbia University, Princeton University and the University of Aix-en-Provence. She is also co-director of the literature module of the Berlin-based post-doctoral research program, *Europe in the Middle East; the Middle East in Europe*. Her published research mainly concerns modern Arabic literature in Egypt and the Levant, and the politics of translation in (post)colonial contexts. In 2004 she published a monograph on *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt 1880-1995*, which explored the relationship between the rise of the novel genre, the politics of nationalist representation and the peasant question in 20th century Egypt.

In addition, Selim produced translations of works by Yahya Taher Abdullah, Khaled Ziadeh, Mohamed Makhzangi and Jurji Zaydan. She was the first translator winning both the Banipal Prize and the Arkansas Prize for Arabic literary translation.

In 2012, Selim's engagement with translation took an activist turn when she became a member of the video subtitling unit of the non-profit collective Mosireen. Inspired by this multifaceted, academic-activist engagement with translation and testimony, we interviewed Samah via e-mail in July of this year.



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**Your most recent work on activist translation has been influenced by your involvement as subtitler in the video collective Mosireen in 2012-2013. Can you give us a concrete idea of that involvement and how it affected your scholarly work?**

**Samah Selim:** When Mosireen's open call for translators went out on social media in the fall of 2012 I was already familiar with their work documenting the uprising. I was on research leave in Cairo at the time, working on an academic book project, and was one of many volunteer translators who responded to the call. Like so many Egyptians abroad, I lived the opening of the revolution in virtual space. The first few months of 2011 were an incredibly stressful time, sort of like being forced to live in parallel universes. My first real contact with the street came in the summer of 2011 and from then on I was lucky enough to spend most of the next four years in Cairo. So already before starting to work with Mosireen, I was on the ground, living through most of the events that form the bulk of their hugely important video archive. It was of course a time of tremendous upheaval, ferment, and violence. No one really knew what might happen from one day to the next. Suddenly, there were as many political actors on the Egyptian stage as there were people on the ground. My work with Mosireen was part of this general situation of chaos striving towards meaning and structure. I don't at all exaggerate when I say that "work" on anything but the revolution itself was impossible for masses of people in Egypt, most especially writers or academics like myself. My book simply fell by the wayside. It became completely unimportant, irrelevant even, and it wasn't until well after the coup of 2013 that I was able to remotely begin to figure out how it could be relevant again. Most of the work I did do during those four years was either translation work (Mosireen, but also miscellaneous texts emerging from the political situation, like Popular Socialist Alliance Party material and journalistic analysis) or public speaking engagements.

Now, all these years later, I suppose I can say that with regards to my academic profession and my vocation as a translator, the revolution honed my understanding of how an ongoing liberation project, very broadly defined, shapes the basis of modern Arab culture, including literature of course. My interests in translation have moved in new directions as a result. I'm not so interested anymore in the idea of translation as "marketplace" or "bridge", but as a form of radical knowledge production. My current book translation project (the first in five years or so) reflects this interest: a long-neglected memoir by a young Egyptian communist (and woman) of the 1970s student uprising generation. It has also made me much more interested in the poetics and political economy of translation *into* Arabic. Last year a small group of Egyptian colleagues and I founded a collective to develop an online community of translators to experiment with new ways of thinking and doing translation in Arabic.

**Commenting on your involvement in Mosireen in your contribution to the recent volume *Translating Dissent* (Baker 2016), you note "a remarkable, almost seamless continuity between the presence of witnessing and the work of translating" (82-83). Could**

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**you expand on this continuity? Is translation a process that enables the international and cross-linguistic dissemination of testimonies, or is there a more substantial affinity between both activities?**

Translating in the middle of a battle is certainly a way of disseminating testimony as you call it, of testifying (as a translator and a partisan). At the very least, it muddies the waters of what people call “objectivity”. I can’t really imagine how a translator or interpreter might construct an “objective” practice in the middle of a massacre (as opposed perhaps to sitting in an office halfway around the world). I can’t imagine why a translator would insert herself into the middle of a massacre in the first place unless she intends to “testify” in some way. Not every one of the thousands of people who were present at any one of the big street battles of 2011 or 2012 was actively involved in fighting the police. Many were there to support the fighters (in spite of all the toxic nerve gas and the danger of snipers) in a variety of ways – first aid, supplying water and food, raising battle chants, or witnessing. This witnessing is part of the arsenal of the revolution because it forms the basis of insurgent collective knowledge. It’s very dangerous, and it’s why the state will do everything it can to erase it (as is now happening).

– Clashes with riot police  
in Mohammad Mahmoud  
Street.



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The Mosireen archive is one form of this witnessing, and my close to real time translating work was part of the process of dissemination, only taken to a broader scale. Always at the back of my mind as I worked in the panic situation I described in the essay you mention was the knowledge that my friends and comrades back in New York – many of whom were directly involved in Occupy – would soon be with us in an important sense, by watching these videos we were uploading just a few hours after (and sometimes still during) the events. It always felt like a job of the utmost urgency, to broaden the circle of the “we” speaking in the videos and therefore make it stronger.

From time to time I go back to the Mosireen website, just to make sure it’s still there, but also to re-watch certain videos, and I’m amazed at how much I’ve forgotten. Though watching them again now is very painful, it’s still enormously moving, inspiring even. I’m so glad to have been part of the work of keeping them alive in other places and languages.

Referring to Edward Said’s radical politics of reading, you posit an equally political notion of translation as “a form of bodied attachment” (80) in which the translator sets out to “change the world, rather than simply surveying it” (82). Essential to this activist concept of translation is “a form of commitment not only to words and meanings but equally to specific *places* with deep political, cultural and semantic histories” (78). You also argue that “[t]he translator’s commitment to the place of struggle entails responsibility for eliciting this deep context and making it legible to insurgent communities and movements abroad” (85-86). This latter activity you refer to as “deep translation”, aimed at the building of international solidarity networks. This mode of translation is distinguished from “crisis translation”, in which the translator actively contributes to a “constant circulation of image and spectacle on social media” (84).

How do you conceive of the relation between both modes of translation – one closely tied to local events and localities and the other aimed at connecting to a broad international community? And does this also pertain to your work as translator, subtitler and academic?

I think I might have already partly addressed this question in my answer above, but basically the way I visualize the two modes is spatial, architectural even. Crisis translation produces an effect like the ripple in a pond, an event of critical mass sets off expanding, in ephemeral circles of resonance and possibility. Deep translation is a form of excavation and building; of shaping space and creating structure. It intends to capture the fading resonance of the crisis event and turn it into knowledge – of as much of the deep context of the crisis event as possible: its history, its political-economic bases, its cultural effects, but also the minutiae, the ins and outs, of the daily dealings surrounding it. Deep translation is the basis of the kind of cross-border political understanding that makes solidarity work as well as local activism possible and effective. The WRL tear gas campaign<sup>1</sup> that I talk about in the essay is a great example. In that campaign, WRL worked closely with Egyptian customs workers

(1) In 2011, the New York-based War Resisters League (WRL) began building a campaign against the use of tear gas to violently suppress popular protest movements at home and abroad. In June 2012, the movement launched its ongoing story telling project, *Facing Tear Gas* (<http://facingteargas.org/>), and began gathering personal stories of men and women who had been gassed in different places of insurgency. WRL collaborates with activists in countries such as Egypt, Chile, Palestine and Bahrain to boycott the export of US-manufactured riot control gear.





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– Separation wall near the Interior Ministry HQ. The stencil image is taken from a photo of a police officer who became notorious for aiming at protestors' eyes during the Mohammad Mahmoud clashes. "Wanted" images of him were circulated on social media.

who had blocked a seven-ton shipment of tear gas from unloading in Suez in 2011. The collaboration grew into a full-scale campaign against US-based arms manufacturer Combined Systems, with essential material (documents, reports, information campaigns) being regularly translated back and forth.

Another example: the images and footage coming out of Cairo in 2011 and 2012 were legible only in the broadest of terms (protesters vs. police) in the US, even amongst activist circles. Only a form of deep translation would have made the swirl of competing actors and interests come into focus for people working in similar insurrectionary contexts abroad. There was a whole range of political parties that sprang into being in the middle of the blood-soaked electoral politics that began in 2011. At the time it seemed that, for the first time in decades, there was a genuine chance for an organized and radical democratic left to emerge. Anyone on the international left seriously interested in making cross-border alliances, or even just undertaking a sustained analysis of the revolutionary situation in Egypt, would have necessarily depended on translation work. I translated the newly-formed Socialist People's Alliance Party platform back in 2011 almost as soon as the ink had finished drying on it. It was just the beginning of what I hoped would be a full-fledged English language website (alas, the party collapsed ignominiously in 2012). There should certainly have been much more work of this kind across the board. Because there was very little of this kind of deep translation throughout the revolution, very few potential allies abroad knew what was at stake and why by the time 2013 rolled

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around. Of course I don't at all intend to imply that the proper kind of translation work would have saved the Egyptian revolution, only that committed international alliance building is next to impossible without it.

Somehow, all this brings me forward to 2016. I think it was this impetus to translate “deeply” that compelled me to work on Arwa Saleh's book, *The Stillborn: A young woman's notes from the student movement generation in Egypt*, which I mentioned above. The book is so profoundly shaped by an “unauthorized” local history, it speaks so directly to a local audience (and a very specific one at that – Saleh's fellow ex-student communists of the 1970s), that the task of making it mean something in English – and even to “interested parties” at that – is really daunting. And yet, I do believe that the book goes a long way in helping the target English-language reader, of whatever national origin, understand something essential about where the 2011 revolution came from and why it “failed”, if indeed it did. These are questions I and countless other Egyptians have been asking ourselves for the past couple of years, but I also believe that they surely must be of interest to anyone who cares about the past, present and future of the international left.

Your article ends in a call for an “organized collective effort” (86), based in narratives of community (referring to Mona Baker's recent work, 2010). Do you see concrete instances of activist translation today, for example in the context of current conflicts/revolutions the Middle East? And does this activist translation allow for the emergence of “embargoed” testimonies beyond the internationally dominant form of news coverage that is “fatally coloured by neo-liberal and Eurocentric paradigms” (86)?

– Martyr's mural,  
Mohammad Mahmoud  
Street.

Yes, there are certainly a number of activist information projects out there on the web that feature translation as a major component: for example, social media

communities like Translator Brigades (recently renamed Real International News Network), Anarchist Network and Tahrir-ICN (which also has a dedicated website). The last two in particular have the Middle East at the center of their interests and feature translation in and between Arabic, Persian, Kurdish and English, Spanish and French. They are forums for alternative analysis and news dissemination, largely via translation mechanisms of different kinds. These groups mostly tend to be based in anarchist collectives around the world, but they don't necessarily articulate a structuring politics of



translation, and they don't have a sense of a corporate identity as militant translators, like Tlaxcala or Babels do. While Tlaxcala is a news clearing house much like Anarchist Network or Translator Brigades, its mission statement explicitly foregrounds the work of the translator as being absolutely central to the production of alternative knowledge and international solidarity building, while Babels is constituted as a professional corps of volunteer translators/interpreters for the World Social Forum. What all these groups have in common though is their horizontal, volunteerist and quite radical understanding of the importance of translation for internationalist struggle in the age of neoliberal, corporate media. And I do think that the more the stranglehold of this global corporate media grows, the more groups like these will continue to proliferate, evolve and thrive.

**Apart from scholar of Egyptian and Arabic literature, you are also a prize-winning translator of works by, among others, Yahya Taher Abdullah and Jurji Zaydan. How do you see this translation work related to your activist commitment? And would you consider literary translation also as a form of witnessing or testimony?**

That's a pretty difficult question, partly because I've come to feel the existence of a "before and after" 2011 in my translation work, one that I haven't yet really thought deeply about. What I am pretty sure of is that literary translation in no way carries the kind of immediacy and urgency of political translation work. Literary translation is all about recreating voice, style, rhythm in the target language. It is slower, more personal and contemplative and opens up a different kind of relationship to the target audience. Besides which, the publishing and distribution infrastructure of literary translation – or at least the literary translation I've done so far – is also very different from the kind of political translation we've been discussing. Whether you like it or not, you're working within a commercial structure and your readership may have very different kinds of interests and concerns than your own. You may or may not have chosen the texts in question for translation yourself and therefore your own relationship to the text can vary.

For the most part when I decide I want to translate a literary text it's because I find it beautiful, exciting, powerful; because I'm convinced it can give pleasure and knowledge to the English-language reader, because it can offer them a little window into a vast and complex world of affect and meaning that is both strange and familiar. This dialectic is what creates the possibility for all kinds of engagements, challenges and recognitions, in and between cultures. I see that process, that relationship as being distinct from political translation but at the same time, this latest experiment (*The Stillborn*) is perhaps a mixed mode, where the slowness and voice-shaping of the literary comes together on some level with the urgency and more direct reader-targeting of the political.

**You are currently working on a monograph about translation, modernity and popular fiction in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt. Can you tell us more about this project?**

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I've been working on this book for quite a few years now. Back when I started, *Nahda* (modern Arab "renaissance") studies were only just getting underway in the US and UK academy. My interest in this period (roughly mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early/mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) came out of my interest in the origins of the novel genre in Arabic. This is the period when the novel emerges as a major literary genre all over the Arab world, but especially in Egypt, which, during this period, was a busy crossroads for writers, publishers and intellectuals of the region. It was actually this subject that first got me interested in Translation Studies. Translation and adaptation was the medium through which the novel came into Arabic, though nationalist literary histories tended to ignore what is essentially a pretty huge and messy archive of adapted and highly popular fiction. The book focuses on an early 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction periodical, published in Cairo between 1904 and 1911. In it, I try to explore the centrality of translation and adaptation first, for the novel genre on a global scale, and beyond the borders and checkpoints set up by national literature frameworks and second, for a new way of thinking about culture and cultural voyage against how they tend to be defined in postcolonial studies.

It should be coming out in 2018 with Palgrave but I'm even more excited about it coming out in Arabic soon after. I gave a few lectures about it in Cairo in 2015 and was thrilled by the amount of interest it generated – especially amongst non-academics. It was a bit overwhelming to be directly confronted by the thirst for new critical paradigms that might help to break the hold of establishment cultural politics on independent (what we might call "renegade") thinking about culture and cultural identity. There is so much in the history of Arab cultures that gives the lie to the neat, disciplinary instruments of what are in some sense all theological regimes. Many people who approached me about the book were amazed at the existence of the archive I work on, its extent and its thriving historical context. I was even approached by a Cairo press about re-publishing some of the novels themselves (at best moldering in the National Library, at worst, fast disappearing into the abyss of bureaucratic process or illicit trafficking). It's this thirst that makes my scholarship valuable to me; this sense of contributing to an emancipatory intellectual project. ■

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