Revolution and the Hijab in the Political Satire of Noor Khanom

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intersections of gender, satire, and political resistance through a case study of Noor Khanom, a satirical Syrian television show that aired on Syria TV between 2018 and 2021. Hosted by journalist Noor Haddad, the program challenges dominant narratives surrounding the hijab, female agency, and public visibility in the context of Syria's revolution and its ongoing transitional period. Drawing on intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and feminist media theory, the study analyzes how Noor Khanom deploys satire to critique both authoritarian power and patriarchal norms. Through ironic reappropriations of domestic imagery and visual parody, the show reclaims the figure of the woman as an active political subject. Noor Haddad's evolving public persona is also central, for instance her choice of taking off her hijab, which sparked public debate and revealed the contested boundaries of religious expression, morality, and feminist agency. By analyzing selected episodes and audience reactions, this article argues that Noor Khanom turns satire into a form of feminist resistance, offering a critical space for reimagining gender roles and political participation amid the shifting realities of post-2011 Syria.

KEY WORDS

SYRIA, HIJAB, POLITICAL SATIRE, TELEVISION, REVOLUTION, INTERSECTIONALITY, POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM

THE HIJAB, GENDER, AND REVOLUTIONARY MEDIA IN SYRIA

The *hijab* has long occupied a central position in debates about gender, religion, and agency. For some, it remains a symbol of patriarchal oppression; for others, it represents religious devotion, personal empowerment, and cultural identity. These narratives often flatten the diverse experiences of Muslim women, particularly when viewed through patriarchal or orientalist lenses. In the context of Syria's revolution, the hijab takes on political and cultural meanings that reflect these negotiations over gender, identity, and public participation.

This article examines the debates through a case study of *Noor Khanom*, a weekly satirical TV-show that aired between 2018 and 2021 on the Istanbul-based Syria TV. Emerging at a critical juncture in Syria's revolution, the show provides a lens on the intersection of satirical resistance to gender norms and the broader political context of the revolution. The current leadership in Syria that took power in December 2024 has already faced criticism for its limited political inclusion of women in post-conflict governance, with only one female minister out of 22 in the new government (Hairsine, 2025). As such, questions of women's political participation and agency remain central to contemporary debates about Syria's nation-building process.

Drawing on feminist media studies, intersectionality theory, and postcolonial critique, this study investigates how *Noor Khanom* navigates these tensions through humor and satire. As Gouma and Dorer (2019, p. 345) argue, media act as "co-producers of social power relations," making them vital arenas for exploring how gender inequalities and intersectional identities are negotiated in times of political upheaval. The genre of political satire not only participates in shaping public discourse but also operates as forms of nonviolent resistance, constructing alternative narratives that challenge both authoritarianism and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Doona, 2016; Milich et al., 2020). As feminist media theorists such as Evans (2015, p. 22) argue, media not only reflect but also actively negotiate patriarchal structures. Satirical media can function as both a site of critique and complicity, depending on how it deploys humor and visual codes to either reproduce or resist dominant gendered ideologies.

The show's host, Noor Haddad, is a journalist and political commentator. Her decision to remove the hijab after the show ended, as well as her public openness about her neurodiversity and diagnosis of bipolar disorder (Morjan, 2025), provoked intense public scrutiny over her personal choices. The controversy surrounding Haddad's persona reflects the broader societal tensions at stake: who defines acceptable expressions of Muslim womanhood, political participation, and feminist agency? Through the program's use of satire, *Noor Khanom* navigates socially and politically sensitive issues, such as mental health, gender-based violence, patriarchal authority and the politics of veiling, that are often too contentious to address directly. Specifically, this paper asks: How does *Noor Khanom* articulate resistance to dominant gender norms and the political order in Syria using political satire? By locating this inquiry within feminist media studies from the Global South, this study contributes to broader debates on how satire functions not only as cultural critique but also as a form of feminist resistance that reveals the contradictions and possibilities of revolutionary politics in the Southwest Asia and North Africa region (SWANA). In the following section, we provide a background of the TV show *Noor Khanom,* its content and context to explore the discourses on gender-related issues.

NOOR KHANOM: OPPOSITIONAL POLITICAL SATIRE

Noor Khanom was a weekly satirical talk show broadcast from 2018 to 2021. Combining political commentary with humor, sketches, interviews, and musical segments, the show quickly gained a following among Syrians. The show was hosted by Noor Haddad, a Syrian journalist originally from Aleppo,

who joined Syria TV in 2018 (Alasaad, 2024). Within the program's diegetic world, Haddad performed the role of *Noor Khanom*, a Syrian housewife who engaged in political discussions while performing domestic tasks. The term "Khanom", borrowed from Persian, connotes respectable, modest femininity traditionally associated with the domestic sphere. By adopting this title, the show ironically reclaimed and subverted these associations, positioning its female host not as a passive figure confined to the home, but as a bold, satirical commentator engaging directly with political power structures in the public arena. The visual and narrative structure of each episode reinforces this irony: for example, the opening sequence featured Haddad wearing both a boxing glove and an oven mitt, while a pressure cooker explodes with kitchenware, newspapers, pens, and a microphone.

Episodes were segmented under domestic titles such as "Kitchen Talk," "A Cup of Coffee," and "Gossip," staging gendered domestic spaces as arenas for political debate. It regularly addressed gender issues, including sketches turning stereotypical gender roles upside down, criticism of sexual harassment, and discussions of gender-based violence (Syria TV 2018a). Through this format, *Noor Khanom* carved out a space to criticize not only Syria's former regime but also the patriarchal norms that structure Syrian society. In what follows, we present the theoretical lenses of intersectionality and postcolonial feminism that inform our analysis.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM IN THE SWANA REGION

This study applies an integrated theoretical framework that brings together intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and feminist media theory to analyze how *Noor Khanom* negotiates gender, agency, and representation. This framework provides a lens through which to examine how Syrian women's identities are constructed, contested, and mediated during the Syrian revolution and in the current transitional period. Through its use of satire, the show challenges intersecting systems of oppression and opens spaces for reimagining female subjectivity, political agency, and resistance in a transforming media landscape.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY IN DIASPORA

A key concept in the analysis is intersectionality as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality provides an analytical tool to understand how overlapping identities, including gender, religion, class, ethnicity, and migratory status, produce unique forms of both marginalization and empowerment among Syrian women. Crenshaw's intervention challenged the additive models of identity prevalent in earlier feminist theory by demonstrating how the lived experiences of women, particularly women of color, are shaped through the simultaneity of multiple intersecting power structures. In the context of *Noor Khanom*, intersectionality reveals how Syrian women navigate both patriarchal structures as well as Islamophobic and racialized discourses. These dimensions shape both their lived experiences and their mediated representations. Intersectionality thus provides the necessary scaffolding for analyzing how *Noor Khanom* engages with these overlapping social forces, particularly as it frames debates around the hijab, agency, public visibility, and political participation.

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM: NEGOTIATING REPRESENTATION AND AGENCY

Building on intersectionality, this study draws on postcolonial feminist media theory, which investigates how global and local discourses intersect in constructing representations of women from SWANA. Postcolonial feminist scholarship has long critiqued the reductionist and often orientalist discourses through which (Muslim) women have been depicted, especially in Western media discourses where the hijab frequently serves as a visual

shorthand for female oppression (Ahmed, 2011, p. 226; Zimmerman, 2015, p. 148). As Odeh (1993, p. 1534) has argued, Arab women's bodies often become contested terrains onto which various ideological projects are inscribed, including patriarchy, capitalism, religion, tradition, and the enduring legacies of colonialism. Within this matrix, the hijab functions as a semiotic artifact whose meanings shift depending on the viewer's positionality "as affirmation of identity and community, as pride in heritage, of rejection and resistance to, and even as protest against, mainstream society" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 210).

THE MALE GAZE IN VISUAL REPRESENTATION

In addition to intersectional and postcolonial feminist approaches, this study incorporates insights from feminist media theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of *the male gaze*. Mulvey argued that visual media structures often position women as objects of male desire, rendering them passive spectacles for an active (typically male) viewer. In representations of veiled women, the male gaze operates with additional complexity. The hijab may simultaneously render Muslim women hyper-visible as cultural *Others* in diaspora and erase their subjectivity and agency. While Mulvey's work centers on the objectification of women in Western cinematic forms, her framework illuminates how visual markers like the hijab become sites of projection, where Muslim women are made visible in ways that emphasize their difference while denying them agency (pp. 809, 815). Yet, *Noor Khanom* subverts these visual logics by presenting women, using herself and her voice, as active interlocutors, political commentators, and satirical agents. Intersectionality, combined with postcolonial feminism provides a framework for analyzing *Noor Khanom* as a site of mediated gender negotiations. By situating the show within broader feminist and postcolonial debates, this approach challenges reductive binaries that continue to shape Muslim women's visibility in in media across both the Global North and the Global South.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how the Syrian satirical TV show *Noor Khanom* constructs and contests narratives around gender, religion, and power. We draw on discourse analysis to explore how language, humor, and satire function as tools for negotiating meaning within broader socio-political and cultural contexts. Discourse analysis, as conceptualized by Fairclough (1992), reveals the socio-psychological and cultural dimensions of people's practices, rather than focusing solely on textual structure. It helps uncover the dynamics of socio-cultural life from a social constructionist perspective, where people act based on shared, often implicit, understandings of meaning and action (p. 72). In this study, media discourse analysis is employed to explore how *Noor Khanom* represents the hijab as a symbol of identity, resistance, and cultural belonging. These processes are "culturally mediated within a symbolic space laid out by a variety of semiotic vehicles and devices" (Brockmeier 2002, p. 25), and the positioning of 'self' and 'other' remains fluid and contestable (Brockmeier 2002, p. 38). Through satire, the program creates a discursive site of political contestation where dominant narratives are challenged and alternative perspectives on gender, agency, and belonging emerge. A comprehensive viewing of all episodes aired between 2018 and 2021 on Syria TV's YouTube channel was undertaken, from which five episodes were selected for close analysis based on the presence of gender-related themes including attire, labor market participation, gender-based violence, migration, and law. Attire and appearance were chosen as the central focus, since the hijab debate provided an entry point into wider struggles over gender politics that extended beyond the program itself. Supplementary material included interviews and public statements by host Noor Haddad, debates in Arabic around her decision to unveil after the program's conclusion (Morjan 2025), and audience responses on social media and in YouTube comment sections. Our analysis followed a layered process: content analysis identified recurring patterns and rhetorical strategies across episodes;

critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) examined how humor and satire shaped narratives of the hijab as a contested symbol; multimodal discourse analysis (Esposito, 2024) explored how meanings were produced across spoken language, visual imagery, and performative gestures; and audience analysis traced how viewers interpreted and negotiated the program's feminist themes in digital debates. By combining these methods sequentially, we were able to connect thematic patterns with discursive and symbolic processes and situate them within wider contexts of reception and interpretation.

As researchers, we approach this study with strong personal and professional connections to Syria, where we have lived and studied. Our linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity enrich our ability to interpret satire, idioms, and intertextual references, while our commitment to gender equity shapes our analytical lens. By making this standpoint explicit, we aim to ensure transparency in the research process and remain attentive to how our own commitments shape the questions we ask and the interpretations we produce.

DISCOURSES OF THE HIJAB IN THE SHOW

Building on the intersectional, postcolonial, and feminist media theoretical perspectives outlined above, this study conceptualizes the hijab in *Noor Khanom* as a dynamic and contested symbol situated at the intersection of multiple discourses and power structures. The analysis is organized around three interrelated discourses that capture the complex ways in which the hijab operates as a site of identity negotiations and political agency in both the Syrian diaspora and post-revolutionary Syria. The three discourses are 1) the hijab as personal resistance, 2) the hijab as gendered resistance, and 3) the hijab as political resistance in (post-Assad) Syria. Through these three interrelated discourses, the analysis explores how *Noor Khanom* uses satire to navigate the complex politics of veiling, and women's political agency across both the revolutionary context of Syria and its diasporas.

THE HIJAB AS PERSONAL RESISTANCE: NAVIGATING SOCIAL PRESSURES FOR THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

We start the analysis by looking at the hijab as personal freedom. In this discourse, the hijab is analyzed as an expression of personal autonomy, religious devotion, and cultural belonging. Rather than depicting veiling as either a purely imposed practice or a simplistic act of empowerment, *Noor Khanom* presents the hijab as part of women's individualized negotiations between private beliefs and public identities, particularly in the context of displacement, migration, and political upheaval. The show highlights the ambivalence and fluidity of these choices, reflecting the shifting social contexts facing Syrian women in diaspora. Noor Haddad's own personal decision to unveil after the program ended became a public controversy, illustrating how acts of self-fashioning, even when framed as personal, remain politically charged and subject to public scrutiny among Syrians. The hijab here becomes a symbol of women's right to navigate their own identities amid multiple and often conflicting pressures. In an episode opening the fourth season of *Noor Khanom* (Syria TV, 2020), called "Backstage", viewers can pose questions to Noor Haddad, who then answers as herself instead of as the TV persona. The episode offers a glimpse into her personal views on the role of the program, and its relation to its audience and the political reality it navigates. Haddad reads the questions aloud and several of the questions focus specifically on her hijab. One viewer writes, "You are *muḥajjaba* (wearing the Islamic headscarf) and your upper arms are visible all the way to the elbows? Well done, the epitome of belief" (Syria TV 2020, 12:00). The viewer employs sarcasm to criticize Noor Haddad for wearing a hijab, but not, in the viewer's opinion, according to "real" Islamic dress code. The viewer employs Islamic terminology *ma sha Allah* 'as God has willed it' to direct criticism towards her choices. *Ma sha Allah* is

commonly used to commend actions, but can also be employed sarcastically to deride someone, which is the case here. The soundscape accompanying the question, as well as Haddad´s answer, features background music commonly associated with Salafism. Salafism is a puritanical strand within Islam that forbids music but allows a sort of acapella sung only by men. These connotations will be clear to Syrian viewers and creates an association that is intended to link the questioner to a religious strand that stresses outer features and appearances of religious piety. In her reply, she pokes fun at the position and says, "first, we have anatomy class". She proceeds to point out the location of the upper arm and elbow, adding a humorous effect while subtly undermining the questioner´s level of (anatomical) knowledge. She then orders the questioner to" review the anatomy class and present the question again in the next season" (Syria TV, 12:17). By using the Salafi association and indicating that the questioner lacks basic anatomical knowledge, the program plays on a widespread perception among Syrians that Salafism´s obsession with regulating the female body is grounded in a lack of basic religious knowledge. When reading the next question, we hear the Salafi hymn in the background again. The questioner asks, "why are you wearing the hijab when half of your hair is outside? Just take it off, and by the way, if your hair was any good it wouldn't appear" (Syria TV 2020, 12:30). Haddad employs irony to confront this comment and exclaims that she "congratulates" the viewer on his great sense of humor. Thus, she refuses to acknowledge the premise of the question. Instead, she presents the way she wears her hijab as her personal choice and insists on her freedom to wear it as she wishes. The last question is less bodily focused and instead looks at the hijab as pertaining to ideas about public morality. The questioner positions himself, or herself, as speaking on behalf of a presumed public, voicing opposition to perceived moral corruption caused by the show: "Madame Noor, we really love you, but fix your hijab a bit. There are girls who watch you and see you as a role model. In the future they will grow up and imitate you." (Syria TV 2020, 14:00). Here the background music changes to the theme song from a famous Syrian historical drama series, *Bab al-Hara*. The series has popularized ideas about masculinity and femininity based on events taking place in Syria in the 1930's and 1940's, since its first season was broadcast in 2006 (Zaateri, 2014). Throughout the episodes of *Noor Khanom,* this same music is used to create an ironic distance from the hyperbolic nationalist rhetoric closely tied to the militaristic masculinity propagated by the former Baath-regime (Aldoughli, 2024). The comment here is therefore shaped less as a religious or doctrinal criticism, but more as promoting a certain national idea of femininity associated with motherhood and female virtues, as portrayed in the old-fashioned portrait of Syrian society of *Bab al-Hara*. The question directed at Haddad can be interpreted as an accusation of national betrayal and a lament over the moral decline of future (female) generations.

Haddad responds to the comment with laughter remarking that the viewer made it seem as if her actions were shameful by saying: "there are girls that watch you!". According to Haddad, her program contains nothing that could corrupt the morality of its (female) viewers as the questioner suggests. In the next section, she articulates further her refusal to be categorized by conventional representations of femininity or gender norms.

> I am not an educational or a religious program and do not promote myself as a role model in those fields (...). And the way I wear my hijab is not exemplary or a role model to the girls whose hijab is, let's say, less (religiously) committed than me. Also, I will not 'corrupt' those whose hijab is more committed than me. (Syria TV 2020, 14:20)

Here, she challenges dominant notions of representations as well as societal and religious expectations, instead positioning herself as a "non-exemplary" individual, a journalist that conveys messages, but resists being seen as a figure to be emulated. She attempts to place the hijab, and the way she wears it, as a choice and not only as a moral obligation.

The next questioner shifts focus away from the hijab instead invoking stereotypical tropes of women, lifestyle and consumerism: "Bravo, each episode, a new look, and a new style and color. I wonder, how many families in a refugee camp could be fed only for the price of those clothes?" (Syria TV 2020, 15:20). The viewer again uses the Islamic expression *ma sha Allah* ironically. The questioner places her appearance in a public and moral context by hinting at the dire economic situation inside Syria and in refugee camps in the neighboring countries. Here it is important to remember the program's deliberate play with, and subversion of, stereotypes associated with different social classes in Syria. On the one hand, the character *Noor Khanom* is presented as a stay-at-home housewife as indicated by the epithet *Khanom,* doing traditional Arabic cooking and gossiping with her female neighbors. On the other hand, she is a political satirist, journalist and oppositional figure who does not conform to expectations associated with stereotypical femininity within this social class. The questioner implies that she is certainly not the authentic working class *khanom* she pretends to be. Rather, she is yet another media celebrity indulged in an upper-class lifestyle who does not care about the victims she claims to defend. Instead of engaging directly with the criticism of her clothing choices, Haddad subverts the logic of the question by responding:

> On the basis of that question, I could pose an indefinite number of questions: For example, if you went without dinner for thirty days how many families could you provide for? If you and your family didn't eat meat for a year, how many families could that satisfy? (Syria TV 2020, 15:30).

By using sarcasm, she avoids being dragged into a battle of words about moral superiority, instead challenging the presentation of the veil as a moral obligation and an issue subject to public inquiry. Her message centers on personal freedom and agency, emphasizing a woman's right to make her own choices regarding the hijab. By untangling the veil's symbolic connotations from the complex web of religious, moral, and national values and representations, she challenges the idea that the hijab must serve as a singular symbol of religious virtues, instead redefining it as an individual choice.

THE HIJAB AS GENDERED RESISTANCE: DEFYING THE MALE GAZE

Drawing on Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, we explore how *Noor Khanom* challenges patriarchal visual and discursive regimes that attempt to regulate women's bodies, choices, and public visibility. Through satire, the show exposes how women's appearance, and their decisions regarding the hijab are continuously evaluated and policed through patriarchal norms that conflate female morality, respectability, and social worth with bodily conformity to male-defined standards.

Many of the critical and hateful voices come from men, who act as if entrusted with upholding religious and social norms in the public sphere. In our analysis, we found that critical, and often overtly hostile, comments regarding Haddad's decision to unveil, in the domain of influencers and social media were dominated by male profiles. This is in line with recent research on the "manosphere" and "manfluencers" where social media platforms are used to promote misogyny and opposition to feminism (Zhu, 2024). In the following, we look at how journalists and influencers frame the veil as a matter of public scrutiny and importance for the moral fabric of society.

We therefore move beyond the content of *Noor Khanom* and look at an interview with Noor Haddad on Syria TV in 2024. After the program *Noor Khanom* stopped broadcasting in 2021, Haddad decided to unveil. This sparked intense debate on social media with many voices being critical of the step, some going as far as contributing her "mistake" to her mental state. The interview is titled "Noor Haddad... an honest conversation about work, end (of work), the hijab and other things" (Syria TV, 2024). The first part of the program is dedicated to the question of why she decided to unveil. The male interviewer suggests that the reason for the show's success may

be due to her wearing the hijab, and her resembling "the majority of Syrian girls", thus positioning the veil as a symbol of national identity in a majority Sunni Islamic country. Haddad agrees that the hijab might have contributed to the show's success as it brought her "closer to the Syrian audience and the Syrian audience is in general conservative" (Syria TV 2024, 07:10). However, she does not believe that the veil was the secret of the program's success. The interviewer keeps insisting on the public's right to scrutinize her decision to unveil, "The question is not personal. You are a famous face among Syrians." We see how the veil is caught up between the private and the public and how a (male) representative of the media claims the right to morally police the personal lives of a (female) public figure. Haddad attempts to deflect the question, by describing it as one of her "most inner secrets" but does answer in the end. She insists that it is a violation of her private sphere, by saying "Why did I take off the veil? I will answer you even though this is a very personal question" (Syria TV, 2024, 10:10).

Unable to avoid having her decision scrutinized and cast as a socially subversive act, she instead attempts to confront the interviewer by choosing a word with different connotations than *khala´* "to throw off", the term preferred by most of her detractors. She explains that:

> The Tunisians have a very nice expression; they say she took *aside* her hijab. They do not say she *threw off* her hijab. And the verb *to take aside* is very nice because it doesn't confer a negative association like tearing off something by force or resistance. So, I *took aside* the hijab of my own personal will (Syria TV 2024, 10:25).

The interviewer uses the term only once and in a sarcastic tone after having used the *khala´* -terminology. This illustrates the difficulty in inventing a neutral language to talk about unveiling because of its religious connotations. Haddad also attempts to present the religious obligations as part of the private realm by arguing:" I don't imagine anyone ever came to you and said, why don't you perform the evening prayer? Even though this is *farīḍa* (obligatory) and the hijab is *iʿbāda* (worship)." (Syria TV 2024, 10:50). In Islamic jurisprudence *farīḍa* designates obligatory acts while *iʿbāda* designates voluntary acts of worship. She thus draws on religious reasoning here to frame the hijab as a non-obligatory practice, thereby defending herself against the label "bad Muslim". She also uses a rights-based discourse to situate the question of attire within the Syrian revolution´s struggle for freedom: "This is personal freedom, and the Syrians paid their blood for the cause of freedom" (Syria TV 2024, 11:05). Hence, she uses her position as a well-known voice of the Syrian revolution to defend her personal choice. She even performs this right in practice to push back against the male gaze by saying, that "it is none of your business" and "no one has the right to impose any social or religious control on anyone". For Haddad freedom means "that a person can choose what to wear, what religion to embrace, what to believe in, what to strive for." For her, freedom is not only defined as the collective freedom *from* a repressive regime, but also the freedom of "thought, freedom of expression, even the freedom of privacy" (Syria TV 2024, 15:10).

The interviewer attempts to prompt her to give her opinion of the religious and moral significance of the hijab. Haddad questions the logic of the question again drawing on a rights-based language stressing individual choice "It's not an issue of whether you have an opinion or not. It's a choice, an individual choice." At the same time, she rejects the dichotomy of *religiosity* vs *personal freedom* that lies implicit in the interviewer's question by referring to her own upbringing: "I was raised in a family, and our father raised us, even though he is religious and conservative and from a conservative family, but our father raised us with freedom." She refuses to take a moral stand on the hijab by saying:

> I am not a preacher, I respect those who wear the hijab or who put it aside and who make a choice. I didn't promote the hijab or promote putting it aside. And I don't criticize the *muhajjabat*

(women wearing the hijab). By the way, when I was muḥajjaba, I was happy about my hijab, I was never forced to wear it (Syria TV 2024, 17:00).

Rather than opposing the *muhajjabat*, she aligns with them, adopting a non-judgmental and intersectional stance that includes all women. We have seen how the male gaze dominates and imposes gendered expectations about how to wear the hijab and claim the right to interfere in the sphere of women's appearance. This interview has garnered almost 3400 comments (Syria TV, 2024), most of them revolving around her decision to unveil - most of them posted by men based on their username and profile picture. We will look at some of the comments, as this illustrates the way gendered expectations of male domination police women's behavior and bodies. Most of the comments are critical of her decision to unveil while others defend her right to dress as she wants. No one questions the legitimacy of public scrutiny of female attire, body, and psyche. As mentioned above, she touches upon mental health issues during the interview. Many comments employ a religious discourse to pray for her recovery, for example passages from the Islamic confession of faith *al-shahada* 'lead us on the straight path'. Others argue that when she recovers from her mental illness, she will certainly don the hijab again. Many comments criticize the way she links revolutionary ideals with her decision to unveil. One commenter asks, "Did the regime prevent you from taking off your veil? Do you really see the revolution from this perspective?" (@t6wsamnimashet, 2024.) Here we see how battles over values and conceptualizations of freedom within revolutionary circles are also taking place on social media using the veil as a prism. Another user accuses her of taking advantage of the revolution for personal gains using a language that combines religion and social class to discredit her revolutionary credentials. He writes:

(...)If it wasn't for the revolution, you wouldn't have become famous and earned a lot of money, the money corrupted your heart and your mind, and I wish you hadn't done it, may God forgive you and guide you (@yaserelhajras7856, 2024).

A few voices support her in her defense of personal freedom as a revolutionary ideal. Here as expressed by Fadi who addresses one of her detractors, "The woman expressed her opinion on the veil, if you see this opinion and right as a problem let me tell you that the revolution and freedom does not suit your thinking with all due respect "(@fadi9799, 2024).

We find similar examples of male domination by positioning her decision to unveil as an expression of female mental instability in other online fora. In a video by the influencer Samir al-Ahmad (Samer Alahmad, 2023) whose channel has more than 700.000 subscribers, he attributes her decision to unveil to her mental state. This is clear from the title of the episode: "News-presenter hit by insanity after unveiling". Here, he draws a link between mental health and gender suggesting that Haddad´s decision to unveil is not only irrational but also the underlying cause of her psychiatric diagnosis. He even categorizes others who unveil as being "tools in the hands of organizations that seek to destroy society." The program (Samer Alahmad, 2023) uses videos from Haddad´s Instagram account to picture her as an unstable person, who is incapable of making rational decisions. In the videos, she is seen talking about being diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and her treatment, but the influencer interweaves this with other clips of her dancing and acting in various roles to highlight her unstable mental state. Historically, the concept of hysteria was frequently used to pathologize women's emotions and behavior (Tasca et al., 2012).

This section has explored gendered expectations as a male gaze, and the attacks directed at Haddad and her decision to unveil by male media personalities and social media users. Through the male gaze Haddad's religious, moral state and political values are scrutinized and questioned, while Haddad confronts the attacks by drawing on a discourse of personal choice and privacy as a revolutionary ideal.

THE HIJAB AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE IN (POST-ASSAD) SYRIA

As Syria moves into its fragile transition, debates over women's roles have continued as part of competing projects to define the country's future. Despite women's central participation in the revolution since 2011, women remain largely excluded from formal leadership positions in the new Syria. Even after the fall of the al-Assad regime in December 2024, Noor Haddad remains an active participant in Syria's post-conflict media landscape. Through her Instagram account (haddad_noor), Haddad continues her political satire, now directed at both the newly established leadership within Syria and international actors. As in earlier periods, the hijab continues to function as both a symbol of contested domestic ideologies and as an object through which foreign powers project their own normative expectations onto Syrian women.

In Damascus and across public spaces, new campaigns have emerged promoting "proper Islamic attire" on public transportation and in the streets (BBC News, 2025). In response, counter-campaigns have used similar poster layouts to present alternative images of "the attire of the free Syrian woman" (Samism, 2025), including both unveiled and veiled women represented in ways that resist rigid prescriptions. This visual struggle illustrates how the hijab remains a battleground for defining the boundaries of women's public roles, autonomy, and national identity in post-conflict Syria.

Haddad directly engages with these tensions in her satirical Instagram video, addressing visiting foreign delegations: "Foreigners, every time you visit the new administration, you ask about the woman. Leave the woman alone; we will take care of her, we will take care of the Syrian woman, don't worry" (Haddad, 2025). Here Haddad criticizes both the patriarchal governance structures inside Syria and the neo-colonial gaze of Western diplomats who attempt to instrumentalize women's rights as a bargaining chip in Syria's international negotiations. This mirrors a broader discourse on the region, where Western interventions are often framed as civilizational projects aimed at "saving Muslim women" (Abu-Lughod, 2002), reproducing the orientalist patterns described by Said (1978) and postcolonial feminists. The hijab also functions as a symbolic battleground within Syria's new political system, where the de facto leadership led by Ahmad al-Sharaa and his Islamist-aligned coalition, though having distanced itself from al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, continues to embed Islamic norms into public policy. Women's political participation remains constrained by ideologies that primarily position women within the private sphere as caretakers and mothers, rather than as political agents. This conflict between secular and Islamist visions of Syria's future has resulted in demonstrations and growing demands for the inclusion of women in leadership positions (Michaelson, 2025). Within this polarized context, Haddad uses her social media platform as a space for feminist political resistance, publicly criticizing the newly appointed President of the Office for Women's Affairs, Aisha al-Dibs. In an interview on TRT (TRT, 2024), al-Dibs argued that Syrian women should prioritize their "God-given" responsibilities to family and household, rejecting secular or civil models of governance. She framed foreign training programs aimed at empowering women as harmful "agendas" that have led to negative outcomes such as increased divorce rates, insisting instead on creating a Syrian model grounded in Islamic doctrine.

In her satirical response, Haddad embodies the role of an investigative journalist, mocking al-Dibs' vague references to foreign conspiracies and posing the question: "How did men manage to escape these agendas? Maybe we can learn from them" (Haddad, 2025). By humorously questioning why men are exempt from the same "foreign influence" narratives used to discipline women, Haddad exposes the gendered double standards inherent in both religious and nationalist discourses. Her intervention reflects the ongoing postcolonial feminist critique that such narratives are not simply rooted in religious doctrine but also serve to reinforce patriarchal control while simultaneously resisting Western stereotyping

of Muslim societies (Ahmed, 2011). Haddad's own personal history further informs this political stance: married at 19, later divorced, and having pursued her own education and career, she embodies the contradictions and possibilities facing many Syrian women navigating revolutionary, religious, and patriarchal structures simultaneously (Morjan, 2025). Through her satire, Haddad contests not only the state-sanctioned vision of womanhood promoted by the new Islamist administration but also the Western diplomacy that continues to instrumentalize Syrian women's rights within broader geopolitical interests. Haddad's satire situates itself precisely at this intersection, offering an alternative feminist voice that refuses both Western savior narratives and internal patriarchal prescriptions.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND POSTCOLONIALISM - THE HIJAB AGAINST WESTERN HEGEMONY

Throughout *Noor Khanom*, the hijab operates not simply as a religious symbol but as a deeply contested site of identity negotiation shaped by overlapping global and local power structures. Within Western discourses, the hijab is frequently reduced to a marker of oppression, incompatible with notions of modernity. This binary portrayal reflects what Edward Said (1978) famously conceptualized as Orientalism; the essentializing of an imagined East as backward, exotic, and inherently "other." Such narratives persist in the representation of Muslim women, who are often positioned as either victims of cultural traditions or passive beneficiaries of Western intervention.

Noor Khanom challenges these postcolonial and orientalist frameworks by employing satire to deconstruct and subvert Western assumptions about Muslim women's agency and the meaning of veiling. Rather than presenting the hijab as an unambiguous symbol of either subjugation or empowerment, the show foregrounds the complex socio-political and personal negotiations involved in decisions regarding women's bodies and agency. In doing so, it criticizes both orientalist discourses and internalized colonial logics within SWANA societies, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's agency as intersectional and context dependent. Intersectionality is crucial to understanding how these dynamics operate. The decision to wear or not wear the hijab is rarely made in isolation; it is shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, religion, migration status, class, and race. For example, while racialized bodies in the Global North are subject to forms of systemic social exclusion, the hijab represents a more fluid but equally politicized marker of identity. Women in France, for instance, face state-imposed bans that criminalize the hijab in public sector workplaces. Intersectionality reveals how pressures surrounding women's appearance are mutually reinforcing expressions of global power relations, which constrain women in different ways depending on their social positions.

In *Noor Khanom*, these intersectional tensions are addressed explicitly and implicitly across multiple episodes. In episode 8 ("Racism," Syria TV, 2018b), Noor Haddad interviews a Syrian woman living in Germany who describes the Islamophobic hostility she faces as a woman wearing the hijab. The woman recounts how people have pushed her and spat on her, while constantly questioning her choice to veil. "What does the hijab mean for you?" (Syria TV, 2018b, 47:40). Haddad's question to her guest creates an immediate shared identification between interviewer and interviewee, emphasizing their common experience as Syrian Muslim women navigating contexts where their choices are questioned. In this episode, the hijab becomes a visible boundary marker for inclusion and exclusion within Western societies, where racialized and religious difference is policed through both formal and informal mechanisms of discrimination.

Similarly, in episode 1 ("Empowerment of Women," Syria TV, 2018b), Haddad interviews the actress Azza al-Bahra, who recounts her experiences as a refugee in Sweden. Al-Bahra observes that most Syrian women she encountered in exile were veiled, in contrast to the more diverse dress practices in

pre-revolution Syria. She highlights the dual pressures Syrian women face: Western expectations that associate Syrian refugee identity with the hijab, and internal local expectations linking hijab-wearing with religious virtue. She describes how a Swedish migration officer expressed confusion when she, as an unveiled Syrian woman, presented herself at an asylum interview: "You don't have to wear the hijab to be Syrian, and you are not necessarily not Syrian because you are not *muḥajjaba*" (Syria TV, 2018a, 48:40). In this exchange, al-Bahra resists both Western stereotypes that equate Syrian identity with veiling and internal community pressures that equate piety with outward appearance, thereby asserting the fluidity and individual specificity of veiling choices. The politicization of veiling extends beyond the diaspora to global debates about women's rights and cultural authenticity. Within these discourses, the hijab is frequently framed as the battleground between "authentic" local values and "imported" Western norms. As seen in *Noor Khanom*, figures like Samer Alahmad frame women's rights discourses and criticism of veiling as part of a foreign conspiracy aimed at undermining Muslim society's moral fabric. Such discourses reflect both authoritarian anxieties and patriarchal defensiveness, positioning the hijab as a boundary marker of national and cultural sovereignty.

On a global scale, these debates often collapse into simplistic binaries that obscure the complexity of women's lived experiences. The hijab becomes either a symbol of oppression or of resistance, leaving little space for recognizing its multilayered meanings. As *Noor Khanom* demonstrates, for many women the hijab represents a complex personal negotiation of religious belief, political identity, and social belonging. The show's feminist satire allows for public contestation of reductive stereotypes while foregrounding the lived complexities of Syrian women negotiating multiple axes of power. In doing so, the show embodies what postcolonial feminist scholars describe as third space agency; a form of situated agency that neither conforms to dominant Western nor patriarchal expectations but carves out alternative spaces of self-representation and resistance (Licona, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The hijab remains a highly contested symbol at the intersection of gender, religion, and political power. Through the lens of *Noor Khanom*, we have examined how media representations of the hijab both challenge and negotiate dominant narratives of femininity, agency, and oppression. Applying intersectionality and postcolonial feminist theory, the analysis has traced how the discourse surrounding the hijab across three interrelated domains: personal freedom, the male gaze, and political resistance in post-Assad Syria. *Noor Khanom* complicates reductive binaries that have long dominated both Global North and regional discourses, where the hijab is often framed as either a sign of victimhood or a marker of moral virtue. Instead, the show presents veiling as a fluid, individualized practice situated within broader negotiations over identity, exile, and political struggle. Whether through the personal controversies surrounding Haddad's own unveiling, the show's satirical deconstruction of patriarchal visual regimes, or its direct engagement with debates over women's political roles in post-revolutionary Syria, *Noor Khanom* highlights how choices around the hijab remain embedded in complex structures of power that intersect across gender, class, religion, diaspora, and international politics. In the evolving landscape of post-Assad Syria, the hijab has become a highly politicized symbol in ongoing struggles over national reconstruction, women's public participation, and foreign intervention. As this study demonstrates, *Noor Khanom* offers a space for feminist satire that resists both domestic patriarchal structures and external neo-colonial narratives. By mobilizing humor and critical engagement, the show foregrounds women as active political subjects capable of challenging authoritarianism, contesting the male gaze, and rejecting Western savior discourses. Ultimately, this analysis situates *Noor Khanom* within broader debates on feminist media practices in the SWANA region, demonstrating how satire

functions as a powerful form of creative resistance. Rather than viewing the hijab as a fixed emblem of either oppression or agency, this study underscores its role as a contested site of identity negotiation, constantly reconfigured within the shifting intersections of revolution, diaspora, and global power. Through its satirical interventions, *Noor Khanom* contributes to reimagining feminist identities and opening space for alternative narratives of women's roles in Syria and beyond.

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