

Nadia Khiari's satirical cats recount the contradictions of today's Tunisia

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Nadia Khiari's satirical cats



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Naima Morelli [naimamorelli](#)

October 1, 2020 at 8:34 am



"It was one humiliation too many," is how artist Nadia Khiari recalls the speech of Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on 13 January 2011, following the street protests and immediately before he fled the country. She transformed the rage and indignation of the moment into sharp irony with her pencil. Khiari delivered her disillusioned humour through a cartoon cat; Willis was born. Appearing in magazines and on signs held aloft by protesters, Willis soon became the iconic "Cat of the Revolution".

Khiari shares a few characteristics with her cat, notably an outspoken and combative attitude. Following the golden rule of cartoons — "Show, don't tell" — she has borne testimony to the different phases of Tunisia since the Arab Spring, letting her irony adapt to the changing socio-political situation. Satire has always been her way to "learn to trick, to suggest rather than to say", a mordant way to tackle problems without being targeted by the regime.

"However, like most artists, intellectuals, journalists, bloggers," she tells me, "I also had some problems with those in power, especially during the bloody days of the Islamist-dominated Troika. Like many others, I received threatening messages, some of which on social networks promised to lynch me. Some of these were even launched by 'influencers'."

Despite that, she never focused on the insults and threats; they were part of the game. Her aim was to disrupt the singular thinking that marked the Tunisian regime, as much as any other. Initially, she published her cartoons on Facebook, from where they were shared widely.

Today Willis the Cat comments on the daily frustrations of the Tunisian people as well as regional affairs. Khiari never shies away from taboo topics such as women's rights, police brutality, homosexuality and corruption. In a world dominated by social media, she has become increasingly mindful of how she selects news and topics to tackle, and is worried by the amount of fake news encountered on the internet.

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"As a citizen, I bear witness to what I live from day to day, what I read in the newspapers or on the web," she explains. "The problem is the misinformation or approximation of the news on the part

of the vast majority of digital newspapers or other media. The search for buzz at all costs is a real plague for quality information. I often avoid talking about a hot topic because I know that the information is often biased, if not false. Not to mention the media which belong to political parties and which only do propaganda."

Now the artist is stepping back when she broaches a subject. "I am less prone to drawing on the spot, when I'm instantly hit by the news, although I continue to do it from time to time."

Her approach to satire has evolved with her. Over the years, she has also made her own the lessons provided by many artists and authors. "Jossot, Siné, Chimulus and Tignous always inspired me. I also love the work of Dilem, Aurel, Luz, Cristina Sampaio and Neyestani."

Working a lot in Italy and France, Khiari has observed different traditions of humour, especially political satire. "In Tunisia, freedom of expression is something really new, so it's not really comparable to the long tradition of these two countries. Of course there are taboos in Europe just as there are in Tunisia, and they are generally tied to political or religious power," she points out.

While acknowledging that the Jasmine Revolution has brought about an unprecedented degree of freedom in Tunisia, she feels that a return to authoritarianism is always just around the corner. That is why, in 2018, she published the *Manual for Perfect Dictators* to remind forgetful Tunisians of their struggles under Ben Ali's dictatorship. "The nostalgia for Ben Ali has been a reality for years, and surprisingly it involves all social classes. The incompetence of the Islamists and the other parties in power for nine years has succeeded in making people regret the fall of the dictatorship. It's crazy!"

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She thinks that the situation has possibly become worse for young Tunisian artists, compared to when she first started. "As with other professional sectors, the work environment is very complicated for young people. The situation for artists is already extremely precarious in normal times, but Covid-19 is a particular disaster for the artistic community. Like many of my colleagues, since March I have had no work such as festivals, signing sessions, exhibitions, conferences, and suchlike. Making a living solely from your art is almost impossible. Everyone has a side job to survive."

However, despite the struggles, Nadia Khiari sees a lot of energy coming from the new generation of Tunisian artists. "There are promising young people out there and they give me hope for the future, even if that implies leaving the country to have a successful career."

She is currently working on a new book to be published in November by Elyzad Editions. "It is a collection of articles and drawings from 2011 to the present day." Her wish, she concludes, is to refresh people's memory and not let them forget all that they have been through over the past 10 years. "It's the only way to avoid making the same mistakes again."

You can find out more about Nadia Khiari [here](#) and [here](#).

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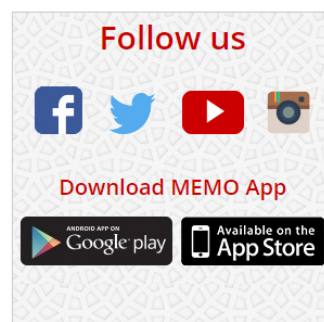
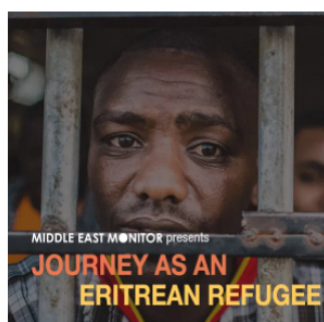
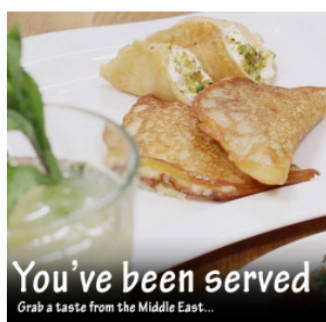
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