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The Joker in Iraq's Tishreen [October] protests: Resistance, dehumanisation and reclamation

Abstract

This paper explores how the cultural symbol of the Joker, from the 2019's American movie *Joker*, first unfolded during the 2019's Iraqi *Tishreen* [October] Revolution as *radical-gradual creative* imagery that was both shocking and contested among Iraqi activists. Looking at the visuals as *modes*, I argue that they first emerged as *antenarrative*, open to multiple interpretations. The *antenarrative* quickly transformed into a derogatory label to perpetuate a dehumanising anti-protest narrative by dominant powers and their militias. 'Axis of Resistance' media channels in Iraq and Iran have turned the Joker label into a weapon, framing the protest movement within a narrative of grand conspiracy with the west and consequently justifying the violent crackdown by security forces. Iraqi activists then reclaimed the label in an attempt to defy that narrative. The linguistic reclamation could not erase the parties' narrative. Instead, the two narratives have continued to compete, triggering another set of polarized labels.

Keywords: Joker, Iraq's *Tishreen* movement, creative protest, (ante) narrative, modes, linguistic reclamation.

1 Introduction

01 October 2019: the spark

Protests erupted in different cities in Iraq, including Baghdad. At first, they were limited, and no one anticipated that they would quickly spread across other provinces in the south to later transform into the largest protest movement in the contemporary history of Iraq (Lovotti and Proserpio 2021). On this day, and throughout the protests, demonstrators were targeted with an unjustified lethal force well-documented by human rights organisations (See Amnesty International 2021). The Iraqi government also imposed an internet shutdown to cover the crackdown (Chulov 2019). Nevertheless, activists still managed to circulate videos showing the repression on camera. The bravery of young Iraqi demonstrators facing death, their chants for a ‘homeland’, which refuted the post-2003 ruling class’ sectarian discourse, could capture the hearts and minds of many Iraqis inside or outside the country irrespective of their sect, religion, or ethnicity. From day one, and like many other Iraqis, I found myself following the protests, reporting on their updates in the English language on my social media accounts, and translating their slogans into English (See Mustafa 2022).

13 October 2019

Ahmed Shwqy, a young Iraqi graphic designer, released photocopied images integrating the Joker, the main character in the 2019’s *Joker* movie, with footage from the scenes of the protest in Baghdad and posted them on his Instagram account (Shwqy 2019). The images went viral on social media.

24 October 2019: The eve of the revolution

Like many Iraqis abroad, I was glued to my mobile phone screen, waiting for updates on the preparation for the second stage of Iraqi protests, which were supposed to resume the next day

following a two-week pause to observe a religious occasion. We were then encountered with videos from Tahrir Square showing the protestors already gathering in the protests space, chanting their demands in a carnivalesque atmosphere that appealed to many of us. Concurrently, several Iraqi activists started to change their profile pictures on Twitter and Facebook into Joker. However, not everyone was happy with the symbol.

25 October 2019: *Thawrat Tishreen* [October Revolution]

The spark transforms into a large-scale protest movement, which has come to be known as *Thawrat Tishreen* [October's Revolution]¹. Despite an unprecedented violent crackdown on the protestors, the movement was remarkably resilient and could last for months. It mainly lost its momentum due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mustafa 2022). During these months, the protestors occupied the protests squares, transforming them into communities, which were able to imagine a new reality and construct a new collective identity (Tunali 2018). Along with the use of force, an anti-protests narrative by ruling parties and their media apparatus intensified, demonising the demonstrators as *Jokeriya* [plural of Joker] to imply that they were followers of a foreign agenda, which put their lives at further risk of retaliation by powerful militias (See Al-Kaisy 2021).

Recalling these significant moments from *Tishreen* protests represents an 'epiphany' after which 'life does not seem quite the same' (Ellis et al. 2011: 275). Even for many Iraqis living afar, the protests were a vital moment in history we could not but relate to and remember with emotional intensity. Incorporating some elements of an auto-ethnographic approach here and elsewhere in the paper helps reflect on my social media presence and interaction with activists in an attempt to document decisive moments from *Tishreen*, co-producing knowledge about the most significant social movement in Iraq (See Danley 2021).

¹ Some scholars also use uprising (See Ali 2021). In this paper, I use revolution, protest and uprising interchangeably.

In this paper, I explore the emergence of the photocopied images showing the Joker amid some Iraqi protestors escaping gunfire and the subsequent debate. The paper asks how and why powerful parties weaponised the Joker and what the consequences were. The Joker's use was unique in the Iraqi context. Rather than a mask collectively worn by groups of protestors in the public sphere, the Joker first appeared and disseminated in the digital sphere as photocopied images by a young graphic designer to draw the world's attention to the repression facing demonstrators. Even though the images resonated with many other Iraqi youths familiar with the movie character, they did not appeal to all Iraqis. For them, the Joker represented a western cultural symbol detached from Iraqi culture and identity. The images were then quickly hijacked by influential ruling parties and their media apparatus by shattering them into a disparaging label and twisting their intended meanings. The exploitation has reinforced their dehumanising anti-protests narrative, justifying the violent crackdown against demonstrators. The dehumanising narrative has continued to be contested by activists reclaiming the Joker label and reversing its derogatory meanings. Although the linguistic reclamation promoted a counter-narrative, the latter did not ultimately push away the parties' narrative. Instead, the two narratives have remained in constant tension.

While the role of social media and visuals during Arab Spring protests has well been documented (e.g. Khamis and Vaughn 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012), there is a lack of such research on the Iraqi context. In particular, Iraqi social movements and their visual communication are understudied phenomena. Research has mainly focused on the organisational aspect of Iraqi social movements and the broader structural conditions (e.g., Jabar 2018; Nadhmi and Hasan 2020; Ali 2021), their slogans (e.g. Al Rawi and Mahmoud 2019; Al-Shams 2021a; Al-Shams 2021b; Mustafa 2022), and semantics (Jawad and Arif 2020). This paper bridges this lacuna in the literature by examining the contested narratives around the Joker's images and label. It draws on Kraidy's (2016) concept of 'creative

insurgency’ to argue that the Joker images represented a radical and gradual form of creative protest that was shocking and incremental in its symbolism and impact. The controversy was partly due to the images’ incapability of putting together a single coherent and shared narrative. That is why I view images as modes (Kress 2009) with specific potentials and limitations, the latter inhibiting their ability to construct complete narratives. Visuals can arguably constitute what Boje (2001) calls an *antenarrative* (Boje 2001), i.e., a pre-story² with a possible set of interpretations that can invoke different narratives. The paper uses its data from various sources, including the Joker’s photocopied images, news articles, videos and tweets, and analyses them qualitatively.

The paper first engages with the aforementioned concepts in the first two sections. It starts with the key literature around visuals in social movements, viewing the Joker images as a form of ‘creative’ protest. It then explains why images are better understood as modes and antenarratives that can trigger a set of contested narratives. The following section introduces a contextual background on the protest movement, placing it within a broader political context. The following three sections examine the emergence and changes in the narratives surrounding the Joker. It concludes with an overview of the consequences of dehumanising the ‘other’, looking at the polarised labels that have dominated Iraqi social media.

2 Visuals, social movements and creative protests

Social movements emerge when people form networks that engage in ‘sustained, contentious, collective action, using methods beyond established institutional procedures’ (Tarrow 1998: 83). These oppositional methods and tactics are used and developed by activists accumulatively and creatively over time, constituting their ‘repertoire of contention’ or ‘collective action’

² Narratives and stories are used interchangeably in this paper.

(Tilly 1984; Tarrow 1998: 20-21; Bogad 2006; Tilly 2008). Their repertoire changes and evolves according to circumstances and is developed by activists as they write their history and establish their collective identities (Kraidy 2016). Visuals are one example of such tactics. Mattoni and Teune (2014: 876) describe protest movements as ‘visual phenomena’. Using images, different actors, including state, non-state groups, activists, and ordinary people, ‘engage in political struggle...[they] are not only mediators in this context, [but] they are also political actors, deliberately using images to exert political influence’ (Khatib 2012: 1). Social movements create images strategically for different purposes, including triggering emotional responses or political mobilisation (e.g. Jasper 2014; Doerr, Mattoni and Teune 2015; Poell and van Dijck 2015; Kharroub and Bas 2016; Neumayer and Rossi 2018; Casas and Williams 2019).

Despite playing a vital role in different protest movements throughout history, images have remained on the periphery of social movement studies for a long time (Adams 2002; Olesen 2013; Mattoni and Teune 2014). The hesitancy to study visuals in political activism has started to shift over the past decade, which has witnessed the rise of protests in different places around the world (Mattoni and Teune 2014). Advances in communication technologies and the increasingly important role of social media in political mobilisation have reinforced the visibility of social movements (Mattoni and Teune 2014). Researchers have, therefore, focused on the intersection between social movements visuals and social media (Ruiz 2013; Bruns and Hanusch 2017; Wetzstein 2017; Neumayer and Rossi 2018; Mina 2019).

In the context of Arab Spring uprisings, in particular, Arab activists and protestors have merged art with the revolutionary act to mobilise people artistically in what Kraidy (2016) describes as ‘creative insurgency’. Kraidy deliberately uses ‘insurgency’ instead of ‘revolution’, ‘dissent’, or ‘resistance’, etc., for its inclusivity of an array of physical and symbolic actions that can be violent or peaceful. In my paper, while I draw on Kraidy’s (2016)

concept to explain how the Joker images first surfaced, I intentionally replace it with protest for two main reasons. First, I want to avoid any negative connotations the word may trigger for Iraqis due to its association with terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS) (See, for example, Krause 2018). Second, the word deviates from the peaceful discourse Iraqi and other Arab demonstrators in Lebanon, Algeria and Sudan have re-iterated in their protests despite the violent repression (Ghorab and Harize 2021).

An act of creative protest has a documentary element and can mix the local with the foreign in order to gain a global resonance (Kraidy 2016). It is ‘wilful, planned, and deliberate’ (Kraidy 2016: 15). It is not an individual act. Even though the Joker images were designed and distributed by a single activist, he was not ‘toiling alone in obscurity’ (Kraidy 2016: 16). The protestors captured in his images were risking their lives amid live ammunition, and therefore, they became ‘iconic revolutionary figures’ with shared collective representations (Kraidy 2016: 16).

Furthermore, the use and performance of the Joker characterised the new waves of demonstrations that occurred in different places around the world, including in several Arab countries, namely, Algeria, Lebanon and Sudan, marking a shift from past activist tactics and performances strategies (Ghorab and Harize 2021). However, this cultural borrowing was not appealing to everyone in Iraq. I will come back to these two points later in this paper.

A form of creative protest can be artistically radical, gradual, or both. The former is embodied, immediate, direct, depicting life or death rebellion. It represents something that is ‘violent and spectacular’ (Kraidy, 2016: 18). The latter, on the other hand, is more symbolic and incremental in its ability to subvert power. The Joker images were radical in capturing the moments when demonstrators were escaping the live fire. They powerfully displayed ‘heroic bodies’ ready to sacrifice at all costs and, could, therefore, stand as a witness to injustice and

repression (Kraidy 2016: 19; Olesen 2013). Kraidy (2016) reminds us that the body remains at the core of any revolution, and digitisation plays an increasingly crucial role in highlighting and disseminating the ‘bodily experience’ (Kraidy 2016: 19).

The Joker photocopied visuals were also gradual in their symbolism that challenged and warned the ruling parties of the consequences of their ongoing failure. Radical-gradual protests images can transform into symbols of ‘injustice’ through their circulation and adaptation in the public social sphere, whereby they become infused with new meanings (Olesen 2013). The (re) circulation of protests visuals on cyberspace further consolidates their ‘moral shocks’ (Jasper and Poulsen 1995), eliciting emotional responses that can impact the resilience and solidarity of the protestors (Tulin 2018). However, the case of the Joker images tells us that the emotional reactions can differ from one person to another, and different groups in society may contest the symbolism intended by the visuals. The symbolism dictates how specific images are received, interpreted and negotiated. In other words, when the foreign element produces a different set of emotions among the protestors themselves and their audiences, it would present activists with a dilemma that will affect their choices of whether to keep or get rid of the symbol altogether (Jasper 2004; Jasper 2014). The debate sparked by the Joker images was also partly attributed to their specific affordances in meaning-making and the fragmented narratives they produced, as I further explain in the following section.

3 Images, modes, labels, and (ante) narratives

Drawing on a social semiotic multimodal approach to communication (Kress 2009), I view images as modes representing the material means through which meanings are made. Modes have particular affordances, i.e., potentials and limitations, which can differ from one society to another (Kress 2009). As discussed in the previous section, unlike the modes of written or spoken words, images can be morally shocking, quickly transforming into larger symbols.

Images are far more influential than language in their ability to establish an emotional communication with the target audience, immediately impacting their ‘moral senses’ (Olesen 2013: 9). Reading or hearing about atrocities, sacrifices, or sufferings is entirely different from seeing the scars they leave on the human body through visuals (Olesen 2013). Herein lies images’ potentiality.

However, like other modes, images have limitations, particularly in their capacity to generate a single interpretation or one internal narrative (i.e. the content of the image) (Banks 2008). Instead, the viewers can read its content differently, resulting in multiple interpretations, which may not be intended by the image-maker (Banks 2008). Even though an image cannot weave in a complete narrative, it has the potential for activating more than one narrative. In this sense, static visuals are not resistant to narrativity, as some scholars may argue (e.g. Gabriel 2000). Rather, they can be seen as *antenarratives* (Boje 2001). An antenarrative is a fragmented narrative element that preceded it, establishing a ‘pre-narrative speculation’ (Boje 2001: 1). Ante has two senses: before a coherent narrative and a ‘bet’ for future possibilities (Boje 2001). A fragmented piece of a narrative, the Joker images, in this case, requires a process of ‘creative’ interpretation to be woven into a meaningful and coherent story (See Sadler 2018; Sadler 2021). This process is often dictated by the broader social context and the societal narratives within which the image is embedded, i.e., the external narratives (Banks 2008: 11). Because the Joker images were a borrowed symbol, disconnected from Iraqi culture, something was lost in the translation, broadly understood. Thus, they could not resonate among all Iraqi people, failing to establish a ‘collective action frame’ (Snow and Benford 1988) for the *Tishreen* social movement when they first unfolded. As a result, the images invoked contested meanings, interpretations, and narratives among the activists themselves and their opponents, (re)-constructing different realities (See Somers 1994; Baker 2006). In particular, the images were promptly further fragmented by ruling parties, militias and their media apparatus, and Tehran-

based media agencies into a negative label that furthered an existing anti-protests violent narrative. In doing so, their goal has been to invalidate the *Tishreen* movement, demonise the protestors as western spies, and disrupt their cross-sectarian narrative. More importantly, the hostile narrative went hand in hand with the use of force in the protests' public spaces.

Labelling 'reflects any discursive process that involves using a lexical item, term or phrase to identify a person, place, group, event or any other key element in a narrative' (Baker 2006: 114). Several politicians and media channels employed *Jokeriya* (plural of joker) to smear the protestors, linking them with 'foreign interests...and implying that the *Jokeriya* are those supporting the agendas of the US and Israel' (Al-Kaisy 2021: 14). The label helped reinforce the disinformation campaign against *Tishreen*, jeopardising the lives of the protestors (Al-Kaisy 2021).

Activists can deliberately and strategically reclaim pejorative labels to challenge dominant powers and their stories and re-construct their collective identities. Godrej (2011: 111) defines linguistic reclamation as 'a tool for disarming the power of a dominant group to control one's own and others' views of oneself, to categorise oneself or one's group in a totalising way'. Terminology re-appropriation, therefore, is an attempt to regain control by removing the negative meanings around a specific term, conjuring up a counter-narrative and destabilising the opponents' derogative narratives. Like the Joker images, the labels of the Joker and *Jokeiya* became antenarratives when they were ruptured from other narrative elements. The context in which they are used, the actors involved, and their relations with other narratives can help inject them with meanings and coherence.

But before analysing how and why the Joker images first came out, what debate they caused, and their later transformation, a contextual background on the 2019's protest movement is necessary.

4 Contextual Background

The Tishreen protest movement was not a unique phenomenon in the post-2003 Iraqi socio-political context. Anti-government protests have erupted at different points in time since 2011, mainly for the same reasons: corruption, weak institutions, unemployment, poor basic services such as water and electricity. Nevertheless, the *Tishreen* uprising was distinct in its anti-ethno-sectarian status quo chants, which initially borrowed the ‘Arab Uprising’ famous slogan ‘The people want to overthrow the regime’ (Sky News 2019).

Ongoing protests in Iraq underline the vast schism between the people and the ruling parties. In addition to the above reasons, two key events partly triggered the *Tishreen* revolution. The first was removing a popular senior military figure, Lieutenant General Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, head of Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), who played a crucial role in the fight against the Islamic State, from his position (Ali 2019). Ali (2019) points out that al-Saadi’s dismissal ‘was widely seen to be at the behest of corrupt politicians, possibly linked to Iran’. Protesting the decision to demote a ‘national’ figure indicates Iraqi’s growing outrage over Iran’s interference in their country’s affairs. That anger was translated into slogans against foreign interference, particularly by Iran (Mustafa 2022). The second event was the repression of localised protests by graduates over unemployment in September. Responding to protestors, particularly women, with water cannons caused another public fury (Ghafuri 2019).

Unlike 2011’s and 2015’s protest movements, the 2018’s protest and the 2019’s *Tishreen* uprising were largely decentralised and leaderless. *Tishreen* was predominately led by Iraqi youth, who raised the slogan of *Nureed Watan* [We want a homeland], which generated a national cross-sectarian narrative and, therefore, could appeal to the majority of Iraqis (Hasan 2020; Ali 2021). This narrative shocked the Iraqi government to the core, so much so that it imposed an internet and media blackout to undermine the protest’s message and influence (Chulov 2019).

The decentralisation was a source of both weakness and strength. On the one hand, the lack of leadership caused fragmentation in the demands raised (Hasan 2020). Still, on the other hand, it threatened the political ruling class and their divisive sectarian narratives. That is why; the protest was confronted with an unprecedented security crackdown reminiscent of the Baathist regime's repressive and authoritarian measures (Mustafa 2019).

The oppression was accompanied by an official narrative of violence and vandalism to diminish the protest's support and discredit the movement. This narrative constituted a recurring trope in response to previous years' demonstrations but was more aggressive this time. Labels such as 'infiltrators' and 'Baathists' have often been used to cast doubt around the protests and their demands (Mustafa 2018). However, Iraq is no exception. Authoritarian regimes adopt similar vocabularies to frame the protests as 'existential threat' (Pinto 2014: 165). In Iraq, framing protestors as 'Baathists' in reference to the Baath regime was intended to delegitimise their movement and alienate them from other Iraqis. More significantly, it provided an excuse for the use of force.

In his first televised speech shortly after the protests erupted in Baghdad and the southern provinces, Adil Abdul Mahdi, the then Iraqi PM, warned that the demonstrations would bring chaos: 'We stand today in the middle of two options: the state or the non-state'(TRT Arabic 2019). Such language was akin to Arab dictators' rhetoric against the 'Arab Spring' protestors (Alduhaim 2019). Nonetheless, in the Iraqi context, it borrowed the same terminology many Iraqis use to describe Iraq's network of militias that have deeply penetrated the state. Moreover, it was embedded within a sensationalist narrative that 'has measured the grievances and calamities of the country against the extremes of civil war or Baath-era rule' (Alaaldin 2019). This narrative was utilised as a strategy of survival intended to maintain the status quo.

The PM's language echoed in statements issued by the Ministry of Interior in which protestors were blamed for sabotaging governmental buildings and public properties (BBC News 2019). The official anti-protests narrative extended to media channels of political parties and their armed groups. For instance, *Al-Ahad*, the media agency of Iran-backed *Asaib Ahl al-Haq*'s militia, used 'infiltrators' to dismiss peaceful protestors, condemning them as 'saboteurs' (Alahad 2019).

More crucially, it was a transnational narrative reverberating across 'Axis of Resistance' media channels in both Iran and Lebanon. Echoing Arab regimes' meta-narrative of 'grand conspiracy' of western powers against their countries, Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, tweeted against the protest, describing it as a 'conspiracy created by the enemies' (Alwatan 2019). Similarly, the Iranian *Faris* News Agency published a lengthy article- which was later removed from the website- titled 'What comes next after the chaos in Iraq?', accusing protestors of being supported by Israel, Saudi Arabia and Britain (Ilias 2019). *Al-Mayadeen*, a Lebanese media agency, also framed the protests within the meta-narrative of the grand conspiracy (Zainy 2019):

لكن الشعار الأخطر (إسقاط النظام)، هذا دليل على مشروع مدعوم من الخارج والداخل، ويتخذ من مطالب المواطنين غطاء لتحقيق أهداف أخرى تتمثل بإسقاط النظام في بغداد وإستبداله بآخر، ربما يكون ودوداً مع أطراف في المنطقة مثل "إسرائيل" وظلاً لدول من أميركا والسعودية.

[But the most dangerous slogan was 'Overthrowing the regime'. This slogan was evidence that there was a project supported by internal and external actors. It used people's demands as a cover for fulfilling other goals, including removing the regime in Baghdad and replacing it with another, which might

be an ally with actors in the region, such as Israel, and a shadow for states such as America and Saudi Arabia].³

Against the backdrop of a deliberate disinformation campaign, Iraqi protestors and activists resorted to various peaceful means to challenge the institutional narratives. The protest's decentralisation provided an individual space for creative resistance. The Joker images were one example.

5 The Joker Images: Creative antenarrative

As mentioned in the introduction, the Joker photocopied images were released by Ahmed Shawqy, an Iraqi young graphic designer, on 13 October 2019. In one photo, the Joker is seen in the mayhem surrounding the protestors in Baghdad. Instead of looking at the chaos, one of the protestors appears to be looking back at him (See Figure 1). The image caption says, 'The Joker exits the cinema to join protesters on the streets of Baghdad' (Bedirian 2019). In another image, the Joker appears dancing amid fire and smoke (See Figure 2). What motivated Shwky to borrow a western cultural symbol and orchestrate it with scenes from Iraq's protests?

³ All back translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

Figure 1: The Joker first image (Bedirian 2019)⁴



Figure 2: The Joker second image (Bedirian 2019)



Brown (2021) demonstrates that the latest adaptation of the Joker character in 2019's *Joker* film broke away from the dichotomy of good vs. evil or order vs. chaos, represented by Batman and the Joker; respectively. Instead, Batman, the hegemonic figure, is

⁴ I have gained permission to reproduce the two images from Shwqy.

erased in favour of the Joker, who is portrayed as a ‘counter-hegemonic agent’ against social injustices and economic inequalities (Brown 2021: 13). The Gotham city is brought to the centre, highlighting the underlying conditions for its current status of chaos and criminality. Rather than an alternative to New York City, for the Arab audience, the fictional city of Gotham represented ‘an independent heterotopia that symbolises all corrupt nation-states’ (Ghorab and Harize 2021: 91). The adaptation of the Joker meant that the reception of the film was different in the Arab world as opposed to its reception in the United States or the west as a whole (Ghorab and Harize 2021). Gotham was a fictional manifestation of different cities in many countries suffering from negligence and corruption.

For Shwky, the scenes of the protest squares reminded him of the imagined city of Gotham in the Joker movie and the transformation that it went through until crimes and chaos prevailed as an outcome of sustained injustice and discrimination. In an interview with *The National*, Shwqy explained that the purpose of designing such images was to create a metaphor to remind people and those in power of the possibility of a similar transformation occurring in Baghdad and other cities if protestors’ demands were not to be met. According to Shwqy, ‘When the protests began in Baghdad, it was very reminiscent of Gotham City. It was dark, there was the frequent sound of gunfire, and the sky was filled with black smoke from the burning tyres used to block the roads’ (Bedirian 2019). Therefore, the images were creative in combining the fictional and the non-fictional, the local and the foreign, the radical and the gradual, to warn against the likelihood of a parallel turmoil in the future should the status quo remain unchanged. Shortly following their circulation by Shwqy, the images went viral on social media.

Nonetheless, not everyone understood their message. This was particularly true for those unfamiliar with the film or the character. The static visual mode did not allow for communicating the internal narrative constructed by the images’ designer. Instead, the photos

were antenarratives that could be differently received according to the audience in question. Radical-gradual creative protests are never without consequences (Kraidy 2016). Shwqy- who was in Iraq when he designed and released the images- was aware that there could be repercussions, especially after some artists supporting the protest movement were arrested (Bedirian 2019). He still had no idea that the Joker would soon turn into a weapon against protestors.

As discussed earlier, even though forms of creative protests may be initiated by an individual, they can be inspiring, quickly acquiring a collective characteristic. Soon after the images were released, and during the mobilisation for the second wave of protests- after the demonstrators decided to temporarily suspend the protests to allow for the commemoration of Imam Hussein's Arba'een⁵- young activists started to collectively change their social media profile photos into the Joker image. However, the picture did not seem to appeal to all Iraqis.

On the eve of 25 October, the date of the protest movement second wave, a debate was sparked on social media on the relevance of the image to the protests and Iraqi society and culture. I was involved in the controversy as an activist reporting on the demonstrations and translating its slogans into English. It was necessary for those who used the image to draw the international community's attention to Iraqi protesters' repression. Those who were reluctant to use it felt that it was an alien symbol representing a western culture and might open the space for unnecessary criticism. They, thus, advised others to remove the image from their profiles. The opposing group won the argument as the Joker photo was shortly removed. In this sense, the Joker's picture did not constitute a complete narrative, but it was another antenarrative with at least two possible interpretations: a positive one intended to grab worldwide attention and a negative interpretation alienating the protests from Iraqi culture and connecting it to the west.

⁵ Arba'een marks forty days following the Day of Ashura in which Hussein Bin Ali, prophet Muhammed's grandson, was killed during the Battle of Karbala (See WhoisHussein.org n.d.).

Despite this division around the Joker as a symbol for *Tishreen*, it transcended social media to the protests squares-albeit in a minimal way. Some activists chose to cover their faces wearing the Joker mask. One such activist was known among his fellow protestors as ‘The Joker’ for deliberately wearing the Joker mask for months. The Iraqi Joker, or Mustafa Makki Kareem, has recently revealed his identity after appearing in a documentary by *Aljazeera English* documenting his role in the protests and the risks facing him and his family. For Mustafa, the significance of the mask was two-fold. First, it allowed him to hide his identity and avoid persecution by parties and their militias. Second, it was a defiance tool to ‘embody a comical character known for standing up to power’ (Aljazeera English 2021).

Lavender (2019:5) argues that the use of masks in protests is an act of ‘mask performance’, which ‘ensures that protest [itself] is seen as performance...charged with symbolic value’. Ruiz (2019) further adds that wearing masks in protests’ squares is unsettling for the power hierarchies that usually organise public spaces. In examining the use of the Joker by Arab protestors, in general, and Algerian demonstrators, in particular, Ghorab and Harize (2021: 99) describe the Joker as ‘a performance of dissent’: ‘a cautionary gesture to express the crowd’s readiness for total anarchy if their demands remain unheeded’. Similar to the adaptation of the Guy Fawkes mask worn by different demonstrators in various countries, the Joker mask has gone through a series of ‘intertextual borrowing and international uptake’ (Lavender 2019: 5). It has travelled from the comic book, into films, into photocopied images and, then, into social media- in the Iraqi context. It eventually moved beyond the visual modes into protests’ spaces: from Iraq to Lebanon, Algeria, Chile, Hong Kong, Spain, and America in association with the Black Lives Matter protest movement (Brown 2021; Ghorab and Harize 2021).

In the case of Iraq, wearing the Joker mask could not last for a long time, though, because it was quickly contested by political parties and their militias. Nor was it collectively

worn by many activists, which could be partly due to the controversy around the adaptation of the Joker in images to frame *Tishreen*. In other words, wearing the Joker's mask did not amount to a collective action constituting a shared frame or identity, as was the case with Hong Kong's protest, for instance (Pang 2021).

6 From an antenarrative to a narrative of complicity and treason

Islamist parties and their militias soon exploited the circulation of the Joker images on social media, their utilisation and contestation by several activists. They consequently solidified their hostile narrative against *Tishreen* by shattering the Joker visuals into a derogative label that dehumanised the protestors. In their media channels, the labels Joker and *Jokeriya* have been frequently employed in conjunction with other pejorative terms or adjectives, such as 'infiltrators', 'agents of the embassies'(i.e. spies particularly of US and Israel), 'Baathists', 'thugs', 'bastards' and 'American'(See for example Afaq 2019; AnwarTV2 2019; Rhadhi 2020). In a headline by former PM Nouri al-Maliki's news website *Almasalah*, '*Isabat al-joker* [Joker's thugs] brought forth a narrative of vandalism and violence (Almasalah 2019). This new redeployment of the term concurrently invoked a narrative of treason and conspiracy with the west, legitimising the killing of peaceful demonstrators.

For instance, *Rab' Allah's* Iran-backed militia has targeted individual protestors and activists supporting Iraqi protests both inside the country and abroad by disseminating videos on social media orchestrating the Joker image with activists' photos (See Figure 3). One video, for example, shows one protestor with his identity and location revealed, overtly accusing him of being a US spy working on destabilising the country (Al-Khazraji 2021). In the video, the Joker label appears several times in reference to the protestors and the protest movement, concluding that the 'invisible Joker' identity is now unveiled (Al-Khazraji 2021).

Figure 3: Screen shot from *Rab' Allah's* video (Al-Khazraji 2021)



English translation: Ayoub al-Khazraji, the invisible Joker.

The use of *Jokeriya* has perpetuated and weaponised a broader narrative accusing protestors of receiving support and funds from the US and the Gulf and threatening them with violence should they not uphold from receiving these funds. The narrative has been prevalent on social media accounts of powerful political figures and militias, including Muqtada al-Sadr and *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, and had repercussions on the protestors (Al-Kaisy 2021). For instance, *'asaib ahl Haq* militia released an assassination list containing the names of 700 journalists, activists, and researchers inside and outside the country (Basnews 2019). Riham Yaqoubi, an Iraqi female activist from Basra province, was shot dead on 20 August 2020 following the circulation of a video of her chanting in the streets in 2018's Basra protests, 'accompanied by rumours that she was acting as a US agent fomenting violent unrest in the city' (Al-Kaisy 2021: 15). In addition to Yaqoubi, Human Rights Watch has documented the

‘unlawful killings’, ‘forceful disappearance’, and ‘detention’ of ‘dozens of Iraqi activists, journalists, lawyers, and other civil society members’ (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Again that narrative transcended the Iraqi border and echoed in Iranian media, particularly, which sought to place it within a broader narrative of a US-Iran conflict in which Iraq is stuck (Felbab-Brown 2020). Among the slogans raised by Iraqi protestors was ‘Iran out’ (Al-ain 2019), which angered parties loyal to Tehran, Iran-back militias, and the Iranian regime. Even though protestors repeatedly chanted against foreign interference by any foreign state, including the US, these parties still capitalised on the first slogan to further their narrative. This narrative has become more aggressive following the killing of Qasem Suleimani, Iran’s Quds Force top commander-general and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Iraqi commander of the Popular Mobilisation Committee (Reuters 2020).

Iranian *Alalam*, for instance, lashed out against Iraqi protestors in May 2020 in response to the burning of *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* office in Maysan province in the south of Iraq. A provocative article using a photo of a protestor covering his face with the Joker mask as its leading image incited hatred and violence against the protestors by labelling them as ‘Joker gangs’ (AlalamTV 2020). Its title went further to claim that they were more dangerous than Daesh [IS]. The article reemphasised the conspiracy narrative, citing militias’ leaders and alleging that the protestors were obeying the orders of their ‘American masters’, who could not face the ‘men of resistance’ on battlefronts (AlalamTV 2020). Conflating protestors with terrorists is a dangerous charge that manipulates their legitimate demands and further jeopardises their situation.

7 From dehumanisation to reclamation

Up until now, *Jokeria* [the *Jokers*] has been widely disseminated on social media in reference to *Tishreen's* protestors and their supporters amid systematic assassinations, detention and intimidation campaigns (Al-Kaisy 2021). However, the antagonistic narrative has been re-contested by Iraqi activists by reclaiming the *Joker* label itself and adopting it as a badge of pride to bring in 'group solidarity' (Coles 2016: 425). By 'taking up' and 'taking back' the negative terms *Jokeriya* or *Joker* by their targets from abusers of power, activists were trying to collectively re-identify themselves, practising self-emancipation and resisting ruling parties and their narrative (Brontsema 2004: 1).

The new recirculation of the term by *Tishreen's* activists has moved beyond social media. Ahmed Albasheer, an Iraqi satirical TV host, has recently appeared in DW's *Jaafar Talk Show*, delivering a message to the ruling parties in the country. In his statement, he spoke in the 'I' pronoun endorsing a collective narrative of Iraqis' grievances and reminding the political class that time and again, their failure has been the leading cause of people's suffering. Albasheer concluded his speech using the same derogatory terms distributed in the media channels of parties and their militias:

أني الي إتهجرت من بيتي ، أني الي إنخطفت من
قريتي ، أني الي دفنت أحبابي بسبب فشل هذا النظام
السياسي. أنا البعثي ، العميل إبن السفارات ،
المتآمر المخرب ، أني الجوكر.

[I am the one displaced from my home. I am the one displaced from my village. I am the one who buried their beloved. It is all because of this political system's failure. I am the Baathist, the

spy, the complicit, the saboteur. I am the Joker]

(DW Jaafar Talk 2020).

His speech seemed to creep into the consciousness of Iraqi activists who collectively tweeted under the Arabic hashtag *ana alJoker* [I am the Joker].⁶ In so doing, they attempted to remove the power contained in these derogatory terms establishing a collective resisting identity for the movement. So, unlike the fragmented position towards borrowing the Joker as a symbol associated with *Tishreen*, activists now collectively re-appropriated the term and its symbolism, which alludes to the power of the incremental influence of creative forms of protests. The new counter-narrative has not replaced the dominant narrative of the parties, though. As Baker (2006) demonstrates, stories cannot be controlled by one group. Similarly, it is hard for a single narrative to take over.

8 Conclusions

This paper has explored how images of the Joker first unfolded in the context of the *Tishreen* uprising as a form of creative protest, which was both radical in its immediate impact and gradual in its transformation, particularly its reclamation by activists to resist ruling parties. When the images were first disseminated, they were contested by activists and opponents. The debate was partly sparked by the divisive position of Iraqi activists around the adaptation of a western symbol to represent a local protest movement. The limitations of the mode of images also contributed to furthering this controversy. Single static visuals can be described as antenarratives to capture their potentiality in generating a set of different narratives and their shortcomings of communicating a coherent narrative as intended by their designer. Engaging

⁶ See [#انا الجوكر - Twitter Search / Twitter](#)

with some elements of an auto-ethnographic approach, I reflected on how Iraqi activists debated the use of the Joker on social media. Even though some protestors chose to wear the Joker mask in the protests spaces, this was very limited partly due to lack of consensus on the Joker and partly due to ongoing repression and intimidation.

The visual then quickly ruptured into a label negatively used by ruling parties, their militias' media, as well as by Iranian media to further their existing anti-demonstrations narrative of violence and vandalism. In their mainstream and social media channels, the Joker has continually been associated with other derogatory terminologies, such as 'Baathists', 'embassies' agents', 'infiltrators', and 'thugs'.

Viewing the *Tishreen* movement through a US-Iran conflict lens has put the demonstrators at additional risks. More critically, the narrative of a grand conspiracy of western funding and comparing the demonstrators to IS established a heavily weighted charge that provided an excuse for systematic assassinations, killings, kidnappings, forceful disappearances, and detentions. The dehumanising narrative and the crackdown have worked in tandem.

In return, Iraqi demonstrators, activists, and supporters have endeavoured to challenge powerful parties by reclaiming the derogatory labels and re-constructing their collective identity. Nevertheless, they have not been able to erase the hostile narrative, which has remained to exist in tension with the protestors' counter-narrative. Does this mean that the activists have failed in completely restoring *Jokeria* and eliminating its pejorative sense? Not necessarily. Brontsema tells us that it is hard to measure successes or failures of linguistic reclamation (Brontsema 2004). It is rather a continuing process without a specific end. It is a process that entails different possibilities and captures the uncertainty of the future (Brontsema 2004). More importantly, the ongoing contestation around the various meanings and narratives of Joker and *Jokeriya* captures 'a broader struggle against the system' (Kraidy 2016: 207). And

so long as the struggle is ongoing, acts of creative protests will linger and keep evolving (Kraidy 2016).

In Iraq, demonstrations have not seized to exit-albeit on a limited basis. Nor has the repression against activists. Creative protests have unfolded in different acts of activism, both online and offline. For instance, most Iraqis boycotted the latest parliamentary elections held on 10 October 2021, which gave a blow to Iran-backed parties whilst maintaining the *Muhasasa* [quota] system and the status-quo (Rasheed and Davison 2021). More significantly, several political parties affiliated with *Tishreen* have been established. Some participated in the elections, while others decided to boycott and build an opposition base that would ‘continue to call for the overhaul of the political system from the outside’ (Alkhudary 2021).

Meanwhile, the narrative of binaries was contagious. Polarisation has dominated social media sites. *Thiyool* [tails] has appeared as the opposite of *Jokeriya* to describe Iran-backed militias’ supporters or those presumably loyal to the Iranian regime. Furthermore, some demonstrators and their supporters have continued to strategically restore negative terminology as a means to regain control over their narrative. For example, ‘infiltrators’ was re-used in reference to members of security forces involved in shooting at the protestors (Hejja 2019). Baker (2006) explains that the same word may evoke a different narrative depending on who is using it and the context in which it is mentioned. It may be a tool to counter abusive institutional narratives.

Moreover, other protests’ supporters were not satisfied with the role played by diaspora activists, dismissing them as ‘agents of embassies’[spies] (Hejja 2019). For them, some of the diaspora activists played a negative role in fuelling tension and escalation, a point that needs to be shed light upon in future research on transnational activism. Recycling pejorative labels and phrases like these has (in) advertently fed the same polarised and dehumanising narrative

promoted by militias' media channels. Consequently, it has arguably worked in favour of the ruling parties, whose survival partly relies on dividing people. Reproducing new binaries is a reminder of the sectarian narrative that enabled Islamist parties to impose their control and power after 2003. However, the main difference is that one of the binaries in the new polarised narrative, i.e. the Joker, has become a weapon targeting dissidents and activists and their families without accountability for the culprits.

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