

Bidayat Magazine: to Radical Beginnings, Slow Thought and Collective Action

Interview with Cynthia Kreichati and Jana Traboulsi

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Bidayat was born in May 2012, at a moment when the Arab uprisings were inspiring new political, social, and intellectual horizons. As Cynthia Kreichati, a member of the editorial committee, and Jana Traboulsi, the magazine's art director, describe it, *Bidayat* emerged from the conviction that the time demanded renewed critical reflection and a rethinking of the role of knowledge production across the Arab region. The name *Bidayat* (Arabic for 'beginnings') expressed both an orientation toward new political and intellectual openings and a desire to revisit earlier experiments in Arab thought and culture.

While the launch of *Bidayat*'s first issue took place at Walimat Wardeh (a now-defunct café in Hamra's neighbourhood of Beirut, Lebanon), this conversation with the editors of the magazine took place over email and across continents, away from Beirut, where once all four writers involved in putting together this piece were based.¹ To reflect on this 10-year-long initiative and venture, which ended in 2023, this interview conducted with Kreichati and Traboulsi explored the beginnings, the objectives, and the challenges of putting together such a magazine for Arabic readers in the Arab world.²

This reflection comes at a time when the Arab world is going through wars, genocides, and what is often referred to as 'labour' in Arabic. This word, spelled مخاض *makhad*, alludes to the process of giving birth and is used as a metaphor for transition states that are difficult and/or painful and for which the results are pre-determined. As the editor-in-chief Fawwaz Traboulsi put it in his opening of the magazine's last published issue in 2023, *Bidayat*, its goals, scope, mission, and the

¹ The interview is based on written online exchanges and has been edited for clarity and concision.

² Referring to the countries currently part of the Arab league.



Fig. 1 *Bidayat* covers selection. Image: courtesy of *Bidayat* team.

contributions of the people around it, would have little meaning without hope, understood not as an affect in the abstract but as a structure of feeling that one can work towards. And if *Bidayat* was born out of a desire to accompany a new season of change by way of transforming journalistic labour and cultural production, for Kreichati and Traboulsi the time now seems about right for similar things to occur.

María Gómez and Myriam Dalal: Let's start with the basics, what did you want this magazine to be?

Cynthia Kreichati and Jana Traboulsi: The magazine was born from a collective conviction that the region's upheavals demanded critical tools and historical perspective beyond the narrow frameworks of short-form political commentary, NGO discourse, or the language of international development organisations. *Bidayat* sought to offer a platform where reflection on revolution, democracy, and social

justice could be grounded in everyday realities across the region and challenge dominant paradigms of social and political thought.

Its aim was also contrapuntal in a way: to revisit the legacy of earlier intellectual and cultural experiments, and to provide a platform for new generations of writers, researchers, and artists to engage freely with the questions of their time. It positioned itself against the depoliticising logic of neoliberalism that had, for decades, reshaped Arab economies and subjectivities, producing inequality and eroding the social fabric. The magazine became a place where these dynamics (from privatisation, deregulation, and commodification to the dismantling of public life) could be interrogated through critical essays, memoirs, and art.

The magazine's founding members were steadfast in their belief that there was a place for a quarterly print magazine aimed at broader Arab publics and that its publishing rhythms, circulation, and depth could help reinvigorate intellectual and cultural work that is neither fleeting nor rushed.

MG/MD: Who was behind its creation?

CK/JT: The magazine was founded by a group of leftist militants and comrades: Fawwaz Traboulsi, Zuheir Rahhal, Ghassan Issa, and the late Sulaiman Takieddine. Historian and writer Fawwaz Traboulsi's longstanding engagement in political thought, his commitment to historical inquiry, critical traditions, and translation helped define the magazine's direction and tone. The quarterly's advisory editorial board included both established and emerging thinkers, writers, and artists from the region, like Adam Hanieh, Elias Khouri, Sahar Mandour, Boushra Maqtary, Farouk Mardam Bey, Rasha Salti, Maysoun Sukkarieh, and Salim Tamari. *Bidayat's* art director, graphic designer, and illustrator Jana Traboulsi, and her team, also played a key role in defining the magazine's visual character, which reflected its commitment to both contemporary independent publishing and the Arab Left's political and aesthetic legacies.

MG/MD: Who is *Bidayat's* audience?

CK/JT: *Bidayat* addresses a regional audience across the Arab world: academics, artists, students, and broader publics seeking critical, original perspectives on social and cultural life in the Arab world. Its readers are those dissatisfied with media that produces uncritical short form articles for swift consumption. The magazine strived to speak to an audience shaped by neoliberal precarity and disillusionment but still invested in collective action and thought. In this regard, the magazine built on a shared political and cultural commitment that links Beirut, Damascus, Tunis, Cairo, Baghdad, and beyond through the question of Palestine,

Fig. 2 *Bidayat* issue 12, 2015.
Image: courtesy of *Bidayat* team.



Fig. 3 Spread of book review *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* by Hans Belting in Kitab section, *Bidayat* issue 5, 2013. Image: courtesy of *Bidayat* team.

broader histories of anti-colonial struggles, socialist experiments, feminist organising, popular struggles, and the manifestations of, and responses to, neoliberalism.

MG/MD: Looking back at its history, can you describe the main ways the magazine has changed since its inception and, in this regard, how it has engaged with regional or transnational solidarities?

CK/JT: From its founding in 2012, *Bidayat* evolved from a space responding directly to the revolutionary moment into a broader and more sustained intellectual project engaging with the transformations, contradictions, and defeats that followed. Its early issues were strongly shaped by the Arab uprisings and the urgent need to think through questions of revolution, counter-revolution, and the meaning of collective action. Over time, the magazine expanded its thematic and disciplinary reach while maintaining its commitment to independence, critical inquiry, and a politics of emancipation. There were multiple issues dedicated to the study of neoliberalism and consumer society in Lebanon and the region, as well as several special dossiers on Palestine, memory, Arab cities, revolutions, popular culture, and tributes to thinkers like Edward Said and Etel Adnan. Visually, *Bidayat* also matured into a distinct and recognisable publication. Our visual identity carried the magazine's ethos with clarity, independence, and aesthetic and political experimentation. The careful integration of photography, illustration, and design transformed each issue into a beautiful material object of thought.

In terms of funding structures, *Bidayat* began as an entirely independent, self-funded initiative thanks to the support of the cultural club Al-Liqaa' and to donations from friends. Its early years relied largely on voluntary labour, modest subscriptions, and sales. Over time, and in response to the magazine's growing budget and workload, we diversified our sources of support while maintaining full editorial autonomy. While we received occasional project-based grants from cultural foundations aligned with *Bidayat's* mission, this did not compromise its political and intellectual independence. This hybrid mode — combining reader support, partnerships, and small-scale funding — allowed *Bidayat* to remain both critical and viable for a solid decade.

We concluded our tenth year of publication with issue 36 (published in 2023) and suspended publication as we revisited our capacities. Shaped by pressing needs — from responding to Israel's genocide in Gaza and destruction across the region to navigating ongoing social and economic turmoil — as well as difficulties in securing funding and mobilising a community of writers and editors, the question of when and how to resume publication remains unsettled.

Fig. 6 *Bidayat*, table of contents (detail).
Image: courtesy of *Bidayat* team.



MG/MD: In a more practical way, how is the magazine distributed, both physically and digitally, and what considerations guide your approach to reaching audiences?

CK/JT: *Bidayat* was distributed mainly through independent bookstores, cultural centres, and subscriptions in Beirut, Baghdad, Cairo, Tunis, Rabat, Amman, and other cities. It was also distributed at conferences, festivals, exhibitions, Arabic book salons (through publishing houses like Dar al-Mutawassit, Dar Riyadh al-Rayess, and Snoubar Beirut) reaching both regional and diaspora readers. In Europe, it was available in independent bookstores in London, Paris, Marseille, Germany, and Belgium. For a few years, it was also directly printed in Palestine and Egypt. While *Bidayat* also exists online,³ our commitment was to print circulation as a political and aesthetic choice, valuing the slower, more reflective mode of engagement it fosters.

MG/MD: If we take a closer look at its contents, what kinds of articles did *Bidayat* publish?

CK/JT: The magazine's sections were multiple and diverse, ranging from theoretical reflection to the coverage of contemporary affairs. It also upheld a journalistic mission in two respects: to bring into the Arabic language thorough and critical work about the Arab region produced abroad and to cultivate a distinct visual and

³ <https://bidayatmag.com/>.



Fig. 7 Dossier icon for a dossier on Syria, *Bidayat* issue 3-4, 2012-2013. Image: courtesy of *Bidayat* team.

artistic identity. Contributions varied to include archival and documentary practices, analytical pieces, memoirs, and artistic, graphic, and literary expressions, with an editorial strategy that aimed at encouraging intellectual exchange. As already mentioned, several special issues and dossiers addressed the topic of Palestinian resistance and the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the section on memory and history, special issues focused on the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the centenary of Lebanon's founding in 1920, the centenary of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and others. In our section on thought and theory, the magazine published dossiers on Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Islamic thinkers such as Ali Shariati, Mahmoud Taleqani, and Mahmoud Muhammad Taha, and dedicated three issues to extensive research, studies, and analyses of neoliberalism and consumer society in Lebanon and the region.

Additionally, the magazine proposed sections rarely found in cultural journalism in Arabic: 'The Right to the City' on architecture, urbanism, and associated themes; 'Popular Culture for the People' on popular culture; and 'Nahawand' for

Arabic music. In the section 'Noon and the Pen', we published dossiers on literary giants like Abdul Rahman Munif and Edward Said, while the works of Etel Adnan, a dear friend of the magazine and collaborator, appeared in almost every issue. John Berger was also a frequent collaborator and friend. The 'Ya Ain' section (Arabic for 'Oh Eye!', a colloquial expression of astonishment in Arabic) featured dossiers and studies on artists like Diego Rivera and Amin al-Basha of Lebanon. Though we did publish regularly on these topics, we think we could have done more with regards to critical youth and feminist studies, interviews with intellectuals, artists, or militants, and the coverage of ongoing cultural activities in the different Arab cities where our team lived and worked.

MG/MD: In a digital age where much content circulates online, do you see *Bidayat* primarily as a material object? What significance do you give to its format, printing, and physical circulation, both in terms of the reader's experience and as a cultural or symbolic artifact? How does the physical form of the magazine contribute to its editorial mission and identity?

CK/JT: *Bidayat's* insistence on existing in print in a very challenging publishing landscape was key to the magazine's identity. First of all, *Bidayat* positioned itself as a hybrid between an academic journal and a magazine. This aspect of its identity is reflected in its form: its catchy, colourful magazine-like covers contrast with the more sober long reads and black and white images of the content inside. While *Bidayat's* content has a longer life span than most magazines — it is a quarterly and its approach to current affairs is analytical and reflexive — its physical form is that of a paperback. Similarly to paperbacks, it is sold at an economical price, allowing it to reach a large audience.

In its design, *Bidayat* is both nostalgic and contemporary: nostalgic in the way it references leftist publications of the 60s and 70s in its paper, type choices, use of calligraphic titles, black-ink-based graphics and coarse half-tone images. At the same time, *Bidayat* has been a lab for experimentation by proposing navigational and layout suggestions that act as contemporary digital interpretations of manuscript practices. In its later issues, it moved from typographic choices that imitate previous letterpress aesthetics to privilege more contemporary looking typefaces whose designs were inspired by modernist newspaper headlines.

The presence of *Bidayat* in print was significant in three main ways. First, very simply, for the reading and tactile experience of skimming through a magazine, going back and forth and stopping at some article, letting one's eye catch a sentence, bookmarking a page, or enjoying the mobility to carry a magazine and read it in different places. Second, *Bidayat's* interest in history is reflected not only in its sections and articles, but also in its desire to inscribe itself in the history of

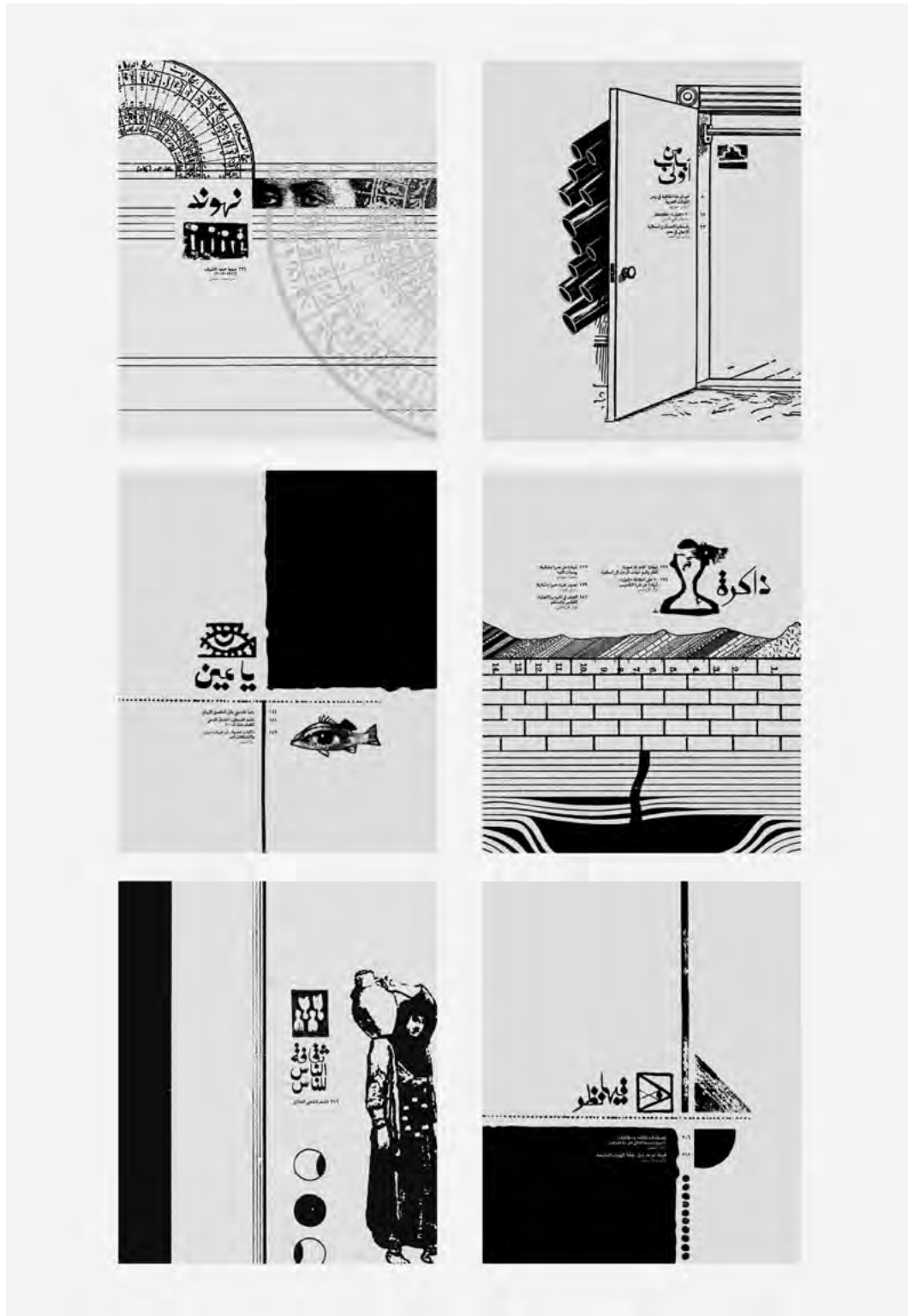


Fig. 8 Bidayat, selection of section opening pages. Image: courtesy of Bidayat team.

writing in the region, going through waves of social and political upheavals. While *Bidayat* makes all of its content accessible online, its print edition functions as a document and archive of a period undergoing a multitude of rapid changes.

Lastly, the circulation of *Bidayat* in the public sphere (in street kiosks, specific cafes and bookshops, in key publishers at book salons, or read in public or shared spaces) carries a strong political message. It is a leftist magazine and being associated with it as a seller or a reader is a form of public display of ideological adherence, and in its own way, a form of resistance to or rejection of various political contexts depending on country and time: either towards neoliberal economies, or against authoritarian regimes, etc.

MG/MD: Related to this, how do visual creations interact with editorial content to convey meaning and engage readers? In what ways does the visual component contribute to the magazine's editorial mission?

CK/JT: *Bidayat's* visual identity was linked to a time marked by pan-Arab nationalist and anticolonial leftist movements, and a period of rich political, intellectual, and artistic production. It somehow expressed its historical legacy: its logo and section titles are hand-drawn, using contemporary takes on calligraphic compositions; its section titles are executed using the linocut technique; and its dossiers' titles for the first three quarters of the magazine's lifespan were lettered. Its typographic palette ranges from typefaces and rules reminiscent of letterpress techniques or of bold modernist newspaper headlines. Overall, the feel of *Bidayat* is one in which its techniques of production are very present through the prominent traces of ink on paper, either left by the manual tracing of letters and icons, or by the typesetting and photo reproduction techniques used in magazines published between the 1950s and the 1980s. We also put great emphasis on the ways text and images added a dimension not present in the text or which produced new meanings.

We often chose images that either introduced the work of regional artists to our audience, or uncovered archival material curated after rigorous image research. Occasionally — and often for more abstract content like that of theoretical articles — typographic compositions, digital collages, and hand-drawn illustrations were used. They allow our visual content to convey meaning that is more abstract or sometimes symbolic. For instance, to illustrate an essay on Arabic Social Sciences by social scientist Ghassan Hage (Issue 6, summer 2013), the team of *Bidayat* conceived an infographic that used symbolic (and also playful) representations that made sense of theoretical concepts. Distinguishing between radicalism and critique on one hand, and political and analytical practice on the other, Hage traced two critical traditions in the production of knowledge. The infographic built on his theoretical discussion of Pierre Bourdieu's counter-political critique and Bruno



Fig. 10 Fiha Nazar opening section page, Bidayat issue 3-4, 2012-2013. Image: courtesy of Bidayat team.

thus enabled a dialogue between Arabic and intellectual and cultural traditions in other languages that are similarly aligned with popular movements. In addition to politics, we placed great emphasis on poetics too. For instance, Bidayat featured previously unpublished translations into Arabic of the works of poets such as Etel Adnan, Forough Farrokhzad, or Nazim Hekmat.

Further, our editor-in-chief and founder Fawwaz Traboulsi is a veteran translator, having brought a vast and rich intellectual production into the Arabic language including the work of Edward Said, John Berger, Antonio Gramsci, and the French poet Jacques Prévert (in collaboration with the poet Onsi al-Hajj). Finally, a third reason translation was important to the magazine’s approach was the continual struggle to find contributors who can or want to write in Arabic.

MG/MD: Bidayat was defined as a magazine for a regional readership. What does ‘regional’ mean to you in this context and how are the different countries represented in the magazine connected historically, politically, or culturally?

CK/JT: In 2012, the initial impetus for Bidayat was to have an intellectual and cultural quarterly that could serve as a platform for leftist production and engage-

ment. The aim was to contribute to the reconsolidation of a Lebanese Left in an era of neoliberal globalisation that was affecting the Arab region in particular ways, and Lebanon's emergence from the Civil War. The editorial team saw the Arab uprisings as an unparalleled opportunity for the Left to articulate its visions, rebuild its forces, and renew its connection with its social base. This could not be done without recognising the interconnected histories and present conditions of Arab societies. The regionalism you are thus referring to is more of a political and cultural commitment rather than a territorial one *per se*. We adhere to a practice of solidarity where action addresses different aspects of the same struggle, with efforts directed at a similar, or complementary goal, or enacted against a common adversary (such as a military occupation, the forces of imperialism, capitalism, etc.). It is in that sense that our publication is regional too.

MG/MD: *Considering the political and social transformations across the region in recent decades — which is a key aspect of this monograph — what recurring themes or concerns do you see as common across post-authoritarian or transitional contexts? Are there issues that consistently resonate beyond national and regional borders, and in what ways do they connect to past experiments in alternative publishing?*

CK/JT: Let's start by saying the magazine's journey was not without obstacles and difficulties. It remains banned in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Syria. Its distribution in Yemen stopped because of the war there. After more than a year of being printed and distributed in Egypt as a non-periodical book published by Dar al-Maraya, the authorities banned it under the pretext that it was a 'foreign publication'. More recently, the distributor in Tunisia requested that shipments of the magazine be suspended, for reasons that were not disclosed.

Now, on the question of post-authoritarian transitions, we have covered and critically reflected on this question in *Bidayat* to show how the dominant ways of thinking and talking about transitions were developed and implemented, in parallel with the consolidation of neoliberal policies, in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and different parts of the African continent. Dominant paradigms on transitions, associated with some North American academic circles and the work of international organisations, consider that transitional contexts, which happen to be countries mostly located outside of Western Europe and North America, require a form of political practice that is anchored in humanitarianism and that grapples with the legacies of war and violation. For example, take South Africa in 1995, which drew from these perspectives to create a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to tackle the legacy of the apartheid regime, a legacy formulated in terms of human rights crimes.

In the Arab region, international and local non-governmental organisations employed similar tools in contexts such as the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war and the 2011 Arab uprisings. Questions of memory and remembrance prevailed in the case of Lebanon, for example, while accountability for the past and respect for the rights and dignity of victims of state violence appeared to be more important in settings like Tunisia and Egypt. Seen through that lens, transitions are understood as a process that is related to human rights promotion while also being distinguished from it and premised upon a specific understanding of justice that juxtaposes dichotomous notions of good/evil, authoritarianism/democracy, violence/peace, conflict/post-conflict, and victims/perpetrators. These frameworks do not account for distributive justice and socio-economic equality. They connect processes and understandings of justice in these transitional contexts in a manner that requires the mending of human rights abuses and wrongdoings to make way for a new reconciled society, effectively displacing social and collective struggles and transforming them into human rights victimhood.

By implying that individuals must come to terms with and confront past human rights violations to move forward, this framing obscures the causes, consequences, and the social dynamics that underpin conflicts and at times legitimises and stabilises an authoritarian regime or a neoliberal consensus. This recasts violence by transforming war-torn states into market-dominated societies, implicitly promoting (and hence reinforcing) market-driven reforms by legitimising the reordering of state and society along the lines of a politics of human rights that neither addresses structural inequality nor entails radical demands — such as a redistribution of economic burden and losses, wealth, or land. Oddly enough, or perhaps not oddly at all, it is almost no longer fashionable to talk about transitional contexts or human rights abuses nowadays, at least not since the beginning of Israel's genocide in Gaza.

In contrast with the dominant outlooks, the 2011 uprisings and popular expressions in the street highlighted the close connections between neoliberal economies and authoritarian Arab regimes, and we sought to provide ample space to study the impact of neoliberalism and consumer culture on society, the state, politics, and culture in Lebanon and the Arab world. Thus, to answer your question about what emerges as 'common across post-authoritarian or transitional contexts', this is the kind of critical work we sought to contribute through *Bidayat*.