

## Preface

### Injustice

By Ali Farzat

The cartoons published in this volume are just a few of the 15,000 that I have created in the last 35 years. Caricatures by definition refer to a surface actuality. Yet the mental space where I conceived and shaped my drawings is more obscure. It is a sub-surface realm that is perplexed, that exists in suspension between joy and grief, laughter and tears.

My drawings reflect their origins. I devoted my cartoons to contemporary ideals: Freedom, Democracy, Love, and Peace. I pitted them against contemporary evils: Injustice, Repression, Dictatorship, Terrorism, Environmental Degradation, Corruption. Yet my drawings also reflect the sub-surface work space where they took shape. They have come to embody the simple and yet complex ambiguity of their creation.

For the most part my caricatures have no labels or captions. Yet they seem to speak to people far removed from the day-to-day circumstances that served as the pretext when they were drawn. I have exhibited my caricatures to the public in several world capitals. After seeing my drawings, viewers often conclude that my drawings were created to comment on specific national events in their own countries.

The road that I have walked has been full of opposition, threats, and trouble. Still, as this book will make plain, hardship has had benefits. My troubles have brought me into contact with sympathetic people, on several continents, who have offered encouragement and support in dark times.

### Humanity

By Scott C. Davis

We are presenting the political cartoons of Ali Farzat to the English-speaking world at this time because his work expresses the precise qualities that are needed to rescue humanity from its current predicament.

Following the onset of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000 and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon a year later, extremists on both sides of the East-West divide have been ascendant. Hardliners have captured short term support with military attack and counter attack. They have played on the fears of the people and eroded

their trust in the goodness of men and women who live on the other side. Leaders and ordinary citizens alike have seemed convinced that the world is filled with enemies who intend to do harm. People on both sides have interpreted the benign actions of foreigners as threats. Humanity has been caught in a downward spiral where the killing of innocents has led to military reprisal that has killed more innocents, and then the cycle has repeated itself. As the spiral has deepened, the pool of hatred and revenge has grown broader. Even though all parties have been losers, the spiral has turned more and more rapidly, the pace of killing and violence have quickened. Yet precision bombs, suicide attack, assassination, beheading, and other harsh measures will never bring peace.

In the Arab and Islamic world, as well as in the West, the vast majority of people yearn for peace. Is it possible for the ordinary people of the world, the sensible middle, to defeat extremists and hardliners?

What if the gathering negative forces and the thickening fear were replaced by an upward movement, a rising of thought and action. The theologian Teilhard de Chardin tells us, "All things that rise, converge." In convergence and unity we could begin to tackle the broader problems that face us. We need to ensure life on this fragile planet with its limited supply of water, delicate atmosphere, and finite mineral resources. We need to invent notions of economy that allocate resources precisely and efficiently and make the best use of investment and labor. Yet these notions also must share the fruits of human investment and work in an equitable way.

The downward spiral can be stopped and reversed. Amidst the gloom, elections in Palestine give hope, yet experts predict an even more savage cycle of violence if new leaders are unable to deliver full peace on an impossible time table. In Iraq, elections promise to initiate civil war. What's required is more than an election, or a new leader or a new government or a new negotiating strategy. Ultimately, ordinary people create the landscape in which their leaders move. What's needed is a chorus of voices from the middle to condemn short-sighted policies, to applaud altruism and good judgement wherever they may be found, and to establish themselves as a public conscience that can't be ignored.

We offer the images of Ali Farzat, displayed in this

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volume, as a way of triggering the avalanche of moderate voices that will be required.

For thirty-five years, Ali Farzat has stood against violence, intimidation, and force to champion the peaceful lives of ordinary men and women. He caricatures the hypocritical general who leads his troops into battle only to stand aside while they are slaughtered. Another target is the wealthy elite who seem to exalt in harvesting the wealth that diligent workers have assiduously cultivated. Farzat also skewers the bureaucrat whose inactivity dooms the economy, and the secret police whose suspicions victimize ordinary folk. He also chastises the herd mentality of the masses and their infatuation with shallow and debased preoccupations. Farzat slashes hard at the problem of torture in jail and prison. Other Farzat caricatures give particularized expression to pressing generic problems: overpopulation, poverty, homelessness, war, and environmental degradation.

A political caricature can't catch a criminal and bring him to trial. It can't veto a policy of military engagement or suicide attack. Nor can it remove a capricious and brutal tyrant from power. But a body of political caricatures by a sincere artist can inspire those of us in the middle to add our voices to the chorus until the power of the vast majority becomes tangible and demands respect from leaders in government and business. Ultimately, it is the citizens of the world who lend power to the economic systems, the global businesses, the national governments, and the super-national organizations that seem to control life. Ordinary men and women need only agree for a moment or two on the nobility of the human enterprise and the sacredness of human life. Then we can move forward, in unity, to heal our sorrow and loss and to create a solid and true world for our children. As we march, it would be fitting if our banners displayed images by Ali Farzat.

### Comedy

By Brooke Anderson

Ali Farzat gracefully goes about his job in a newsroom that has no obvious signs of organization or efficiency. He greets guests in his office, answers a phone call with his left hand while using a pen in his right hand to touch up a drawing—all the while looking at his guests reassuringly

with wide blue eyes and a sweet smile, as if to say, "I'll be with you in a moment."

Farzat's news office is the size of a convenience store. It's located in an alley in central Damascus off Pakistan Street. From this headquarters, Farzat manages to spin out a newspaper every week with caricatures and articles that routinely mock bureaucracy, secret police, soldiers, corruption, waste, and inefficiency.\*

Ali Farzat is the most successful cartoonist in the Middle East. His subject is humanity. His beat is off the news, not events but the dynamics behind events. Farzat rarely uses words, and never draws pictures indicating specific people or places. Farzat holds the viewer's interest with clever lines and depictions, yet his work is also universal. Although he has received death threats, he has never suffered an assassination attempt (unlike his friend, the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali who was shot to death in London in 1987). He has been producing art at a high level for many years. His work is distinctive and is used as a model by the younger generation of Arab caricaturists. What is perhaps more important as an example to young artists is Ali Farzat's pioneering effort to create art, to get his message out, while living in a security state and contending with censorship.

Ali Farzat began drawing at the age of five. As a child in Hama he dreamed of becoming a professional cartoonist. One childhood memory: his father hired men to repaint their family home. Before applying the final coat of paint, these men drew pictures on the wall—simply for their own amusement. Later they painted over their artistic expression with the uniform color that their commercial contract required. Young Ali made sketches of their pictures and preserved them in his sketch pads. At the same time he absorbed a lesson in fitting art to the necessities of the world.

Farzat's father was a director of the state office of housing and registration who processed stacks of paperwork, signing and stamping documents, then filing them. A mild and indulgent man, he never punished young Ali for drawing on the reverse side of these official documents. Perhaps he saw the child's drawings as welcome relief to

\*Farzat's newspaper was shut down in July 2003.

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his important yet tedious work.

In primary school, Farzat drew caricatures of teachers. When his teachers discovered these drawings, they kicked him out of school. He could only return after standing in front of teachers, administrators, and his father and saying, "I will never again draw caricatures of teachers." Ali was an honest and sincere child, but his teachers were both strict and foolish, targets that he simply could not ignore. His father made many trips to school to hear his son's promise of good behavior.

At age 12 (when he was in the sixth grade) Farzat published his first drawing in a Damascus-based newspaper, Al-Ayyam (The Days). His art ran on the front page under a headline about the Algerian war of independence. He had submitted his drawing from his home in Hama. Later, the owner of the newspaper wrote Farzat a letter, asking him to come to Damascus to draw caricatures for the publication. "He had no idea I was only twelve years old—a sixth grader," recalls Farzat. "In the letter, he addressed me in the formal second person plural!"

In 1969 at age 18, Ali Farzat moved to Damascus to look for work as a caricaturist. Syria's independent newspapers had been closed down in 1963 when the Baath Party took power. (For that matter, Farzat's first published cartoon appeared in the newspaper Al-Ayyam (The Days) in 1963, apparently during the last weeks of its publication.) Work was hard to find. With no job and no money, Farzat survived on dwindling savings while living in a small room with a school friend from Hama. The room was barely large enough to hold a bed, so he and his friend slept in shifts. His friend worked during the day and slept at night, whereas Ali worked at night and slept during the day. This is the origin of Farzat's nocturnal work habits. Farzat's friends critiqued and admired his drawings. Eventually these caricatures began to win admission to exhibitions. And after six months of this regimen, Farzat landed a job at the Baath newspaper Al-Thawra (The Revolution).

Since then, Ali Farzat's drawings have been featured in 28 exhibitions. For ten years beginning in 1990, his cartoons appeared six days per week on the editorial page of Tishreen, the largest Syrian newspaper. According to Syria-online.com, Farzat's "black humor" enjoys "extraordinary" appeal among Syrians. "By the late seventies, his caricatures became a daily ritual of Syrian cultural life: an

angry, yet funny, outcry expressing all the frustrations and disappointments of the personal, national, and pan-Arab present-time problems."

### Wisdom

By Bassem Taleb

I first met Ali Farzat in 1970 in Syria during our mandatory military service. We were assigned to work together on a conservative military magazine, The People's Army. Ali, the artist of the magazine, suggested to me, the editor, that he draw a caricature for the cover of the magazine. When I proposed the idea to our boss, however, he refused. "This is a serious publication," he said. At that point, I decided to quit.

Ali was born to draw. He has a gift, a presence, a magical touch. He is capable of drawing any time and any place—in the street, in a car, or at home.

One day in the early 1970s in Damascus, during our military service, we were listening to a lecture from a profusely-decorated high-ranking officer who talked about what it took to become a successful military leader. As you can guess, his performance was pro forma. We had heard all of this self-congratulatory talk before, and our minds were wandering. Some of those in the audience stifled yawns, others doodled on their note pads. Ali took a paper napkin and drew two separate pictures, side by side, of the lecturer. In one of these, the lecturer was a highly confident man wearing a crisp uniform with medals, his chest puffed up as he spoke to an attentive audience. In the second picture the lecturer is at home in his underwear—no medals—his shoulders sagging, afraid and weak as he stands in front of his wife.

Ali's themes are far-reaching. When he draws a simple country girl, he could be referring to corruption, war, the environment, globalization, or discrimination. His drawings typically have no captions. This invites the viewer to participate. A single drawing will mean different things to different people. The lines of Ali's drawings, both supple and strong—touch the soul of the viewer.

Ali's ideas are simple and are comprehensible to the man or woman on the street. Yet his ideas are also profound and appeal to the highly-educated art critic. His themes are universal. He is sensitive to the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. As a man, Ali is unpretentious and down to earth. He hates injustice, arrogance, and materialism. To Ali Farzat, art and life are sacred.

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### On Titles & Notes

By the editors.

Ali Farzat prefers to present his images to the world without labels, notes, captions, or commentary. In his commercially published work, Farzat occasionally scribbles notes on his figures but almost never provides captions. Farzat's figures are not normally identified with actual people—they depict types, not personalities. At his best, Farzat creates haunting images that give rise to multiple interpretations. Taken without labels, his work has the ambiguity and power that marks it as art.

Caricature, however, is parody. And parody does not succeed unless the viewer understands the object of the artist's attention. A retrospective collection such as the one in this book is difficult for readers (especially American readers) who may have a hard time grasping the context for individual drawings—a context that is clear to Farzat's Arab readers who open a newspaper on a given day to view Farzat's biting and often humorous commentary on the week's events.

As a practical help, we've grouped Farzat's drawings, given them chapter and section titles, and supplied occasional notes (and traditional sayings) that suggest some of the ways Farzat's drawings have affected those of us who have worked to pull this collection together. Several of us are Arabs, one is an Arab-American, and two are Americans with experience in the Middle East. These labels and notes are ours, not Farzat's.

There are two exceptions. In 1989 Ali Farzat was accused by Saddam Hussein of parodying him. Saddam barred Farzat from Iraq and threatened his life. Since then, Farzat has advocated Saddam's overthrow and has energetically depicted Saddam Hussein and his governance of Iraq in a number of unflattering caricatures. Following September 11th, Farzat produced a number of cartoons that referred to the terrorist attacks. Two have been included as illustrations in this introduction. Others are included in our chapter on 9-11.