

Msheireb Museums Hosts Emotional Syrian Photo Exhibit by Anas Khalaf



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RKI attends opening and interviews key figures behind the moving exhibition

Doha, Qatar – In collaboration with the French Embassy in Qatar, Msheireb Museums unveiled

DEPARTURES: A Journey Back into Syria, a poignant photography exhibition by Syrian-French

artist Anas Khalaf. Hosted at Bin Jelmood House, Msheireb Downtown Doha, the exhibition features 73 raw and reflective photographs capturing Khalaf's return to Damascus after 13 years of exile. These stunning images depict not only the physical remnants of a war-torn country but also the emotional weight of a homeland that has faced profound destruction and displacement.

The exhibition takes viewers on a deeply personal journey, inviting them to experience Khalaf's reconnection with his roots. Curated by Bachir Mohamed, the exhibit also showcases Khalaf's artistic journey, framed by memory, loss, and rediscovery. In his photographs, viewers find an intimate portrayal of the resilience of the Syrian people, telling the stories of individuals and places with honesty and sensitivity. The exhibition represents not just the artist's return to a country, but a return to his own soul, as he documents the struggle and endurance of a war-torn nation.

The opening of the exhibition was a highly anticipated event, attended by art lovers, diplomats, cultural officials, and media personalities. Among the attendees were members of the diplomatic community, who showed their strong support for this powerful display of art and humanity. RKI attended the event and had the opportunity to conduct exclusive interviews with two of the key figures behind the exhibition—the General Manager of Msheireb Museums, Abdulla Al Naama, and the renowned artist and photographer, Anas Khalaf.

“We Tell Stories, Not Just Display Objects” – Abdulla Al Naama, GM, Msheireb Museums

Haroon: Could you please introduce yourself to our readers?

Al Naama: Certainly. My name is Abdulla Al Naama, and I’m the General Manager of Msheireb Museums. We oversee four distinct museums in Msheireb Downtown. Bin Jelmood House, which examines the legacy of slavery in the Arab world; Company House, which tells the story of Qatar’s oil pioneers; Mohammed Bin Jassim House, which showcases the evolution of Msheireb; and Radwani House, which portrays Qatari domestic life before and after the oil era. Each of these museums has been designed to bring Qatar’s rich cultural history to life and connect it to the present.

Haroon: How often do you host exhibitions at Msheireb Museums?

Al Naama: Each of our museums has a permanent exhibition that offers visitors an in-depth understanding of various aspects of Qatari history and culture. In addition to the permanent exhibits, we organize four to six temporary exhibitions each year. These exhibitions are designed to offer new perspectives and narratives, often showcasing international artists, photography, and cultural themes that resonate with a global audience.

Haroon: Who makes up your primary audience?

Al Naama: We welcome a wide range of visitors. Locals, tourists, students, and scholars all find something of value in our museums. We also partner with schools and universities to offer educational programs and workshops, encouraging young people to engage with Qatar's heritage and the wider world of art and culture. In fact, Msheireb Museums has become a cultural hub for Qatar, and this effort has been widely recognized. We won the Qatar Tourism Award twice in a row for Best Cultural Experience and Best Heritage Site.

Haroon: What inspired you to work here?

Al Naama: I've always believed in the power of storytelling. Museums, at their core, are about telling stories—whether it's about a country's history, a personal journey, or an event that changed the course of time. At Msheireb Museums, we focus on narratives that are not only informative but also deeply emotional and personal. Our exhibitions go beyond merely displaying objects. They are designed to create an emotional connection with the visitors and invite them to reflect on their own experiences and the world around them.

Haroon: What sets Msheireb Museums apart from others in Qatar?

Al Naama: Many museums are collection-based, focusing on artifacts and objects. We take a different approach. We are narrative-driven, which means that our focus is on telling stories

through various media—whether that’s through photographs, interactive installations, or live exhibitions. Our aim is to engage the audience on a deeper level, allowing them to connect emotionally with the content. This makes our museums particularly appealing to younger generations, as we incorporate technology and interactive displays that enhance the experience. Additionally, our central location in downtown Doha makes us easily accessible to both locals and visitors alike.

Haroon: Is the museum accessible to all?

Al Naama: Absolutely. Our museums are located in the heart of Doha, which makes them easy to reach for residents and tourists alike. We’ve also seen a significant increase in visitors over the years—just in January 2025, we welcomed over 79,000 visitors. We have also developed an app that offers audio tours in nine languages, and this feature has been very popular with both locals and expatriates who want to learn more about Qatar’s history and culture. Accessibility is something we take very seriously, and we continue to improve our offerings to ensure that everyone, regardless of age or background, feels welcome at our museums.

Haroon: Any message for expatriates living in Qatar?

Al Naama: I encourage expatriates to visit our museums and learn more about Qatar’s rich history and heritage. Understanding the culture here is a vital part of building a sense of connection and

respect between all communities. Qatar is a multicultural society, and the more we learn about each other, the better we can live and work together. Our museums offer a unique opportunity to explore the deep history of Qatar and the Gulf region, and we hope that everyone, whether local or expatriate, can find something that resonates with them.

“Each Photo is a Testimony to Resilience” – Anas Khalaf, Syrian-French Photographer

Haroon: Welcome, Anas. Could you introduce yourself to our readers and share a little about your background?

Anas Khalaf: Thank you for having me. I’m a Syrian-French filmmaker, writer, director, and photographer. I’ve been living in Qatar since 2015. This exhibition marks my first solo photography showcase, where I document my return to Syria after being in exile for 13 years. It’s a deeply personal project, capturing moments that reflect the resilience of my homeland and the people who continue to rebuild despite the devastation they have faced.

Haroon: How did the idea for this project come to life?

Khalaf: This project started as a personal journey. I left Syria in 2012, and a few years later, after losing my mother, I felt the need to go back to Damascus and document what remained. I wanted to

see for myself how the city had changed and, more importantly, to capture the spirit of resilience that still exists in its people. I used my iPhone to photograph the streets and the people, capturing candid moments that tell a story of survival and hope. These photos became a form of visual testimony, something I felt compelled to share with the world.

Haroon: What kind of response have you received from viewers?

Khalaf: The response has been overwhelming. Many people have expressed appreciation for the rawness and honesty of the images. There's nothing staged or retouched in my photos—what people see is real and unfiltered. I used my iPhone to capture everything on the streets of Damascus because it allowed me to be discreet and true to the moment. There's a certain honesty in street photography, and I think that's what resonates with people.

Haroon: What does photography mean to you on a personal level?

Khalaf: For me, photography is timeless. It's about capturing truth in a single moment. There's a quote I've carried with me since childhood, from Jean-Luc Godard: "Photography is the truth. Cinema is truth 24 times per second." This is how I approach my work. Every photograph is a piece of truth—whether it's a moment of beauty, pain, or resilience. I believe photography holds the power to freeze a moment that can speak volumes about a story.

Haroon: Did you take all of the photographs yourself?

Khalaf: Yes, every single photograph in this exhibition was taken by me. It was a deeply personal project, and I wanted to ensure that every image captured my own experience, my own perspective. This is not just an exhibition of Syria, but an exhibition of my own journey as someone who has witnessed both the destruction and the rebuilding of a country.

Haroon: What message do you hope to convey through this exhibition?

Khalaf: I hope to convey a message of hope. Despite everything that Syria has endured, the country is rebuilding. Damascus, one of the world's oldest cities, still stands with pride. My photos honor its spirit, its people, and its resilience. I want the world to see that, even amidst the pain and loss, there is a future worth investing in. Syria will rise again, and its future will be brighter because of the strength of its people.