



In the frame

Photojournalist Ammar Abd Rabbo gives us an alternative look at a mixed bag of the world's leaders

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EXHIBITING UNTIL JULY 12, Ayyam Gallery DIFC presents a new series of works by photojournalist, Ammar Abd Rabbo entitled 'Follow the Leader'.

The exhibition aims to portray the humanity of various past and current rulers including Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Charles, Bashar El Assad and his wife, Saudi Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, and the fallen heads of Iraq and Libya.

Born in Damascus in 1966, Ammar lived in Libya and Lebanon prior to ultimately residing in France in 1978. As one of the Arab world's most important photojournalists, his work has been published in the world's most widely circulated publications, from *Time Magazine* to *Paris Match*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, and *Asharq Al Awsat*, where he signed more than 60 magazine covers, and his virtual exhibition on the photo-sharing website Flickr has had more than two and a half million visitors.

From a twenty-year career, his portfolio has amassed intimate portraits of head of states, war coverage in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya, world-renowned celebrities like the late Michael Jackson, as well as high society events such as the Cannes Film Festival and Paris Fashion Week.

Here we speak to Ammar about his work and the exhibition.

Why did you choose these particular examples to form the exhibition?

We had to choose between 15 and 20. We chose photos with real graphic value and "sense," rather than photos of characters we would like or not like. That was our main drive. The result is quite different, from people like Stephen Hawking, a "leader" in his own way, to Elizabeth II, to Muammar Gaddafi.



Queen Elizabeth II



A giant poster of Gaddafi in Tripoli



A worker cleans a giant poster of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad

Given the atrocities committed by some of the subjects, were you tempted to leave any out, or does that contribute to the overall message of the collection?

I focused more on these questions, "is this an interesting photo" or "is this a beautiful photo?" Of course, it was tempting to take out "losers" such as Gaddafi or

Ben Ali but, whether we like them or not, they do belong to their country's history, so we could not take them out. The message of the collection could be: despite our thoughts on them, these leaders are fascinating. We relate to them in one way or another, be it love, hate or admiration. They are human like all of us.

Barring a notable few who can no longer comment, have you received any feedback from your subjects? Would you like to hear from any of them and what would be your response to any positivity or negativity?

I've had some comments both negative and positive. Some of the leaders I shot requested posters, used my images in

books or press releases. Some others never wanted me to shoot them again. Leaders are humans, with the same qualities and problems as everybody else. Some are very much in control of their image while others don't care that much.

How do the world leaders differ as subjects to the celebrities you have photographed?

Some are obsessed with their image. Others, once they trust you, allow you to do many things and very few ask for a written agreement. A star like Michael Jackson or a top model might send you an army of assistants, producers, PR managers, and ask you to sign pages and pages of agreements before you push on the camera button.

Have you ever faced intimidation from any concerned party whilst putting this exhibition together?

Not in any way. I had some messages from Syrians worried that I'd show a photo of Syrian president Bashar El

Assad while Syrians are dying everyday. The question is, if I remove his picture, will the killing stop? Of course not.

With the recent uprisings in the region and your heritage being based here, what are your thoughts on the changes that are occurring? What would you like to see as an outcome and in terms of your work, how did you feel about the work you produced?

The place where I've been most involved in the recent revolutions is Libya. I was at the fall of Tripoli and spent many weeks there in those that followed. It was exciting and clearly a historical moment. I was quite moved as I grew up in Tripoli, where Gaddafi was already ruling. At 45, I only knew Libya with Gaddafi, so it was quite an amazing moment to see Libya and Libyans freed from this weird leader. In my work, I wish this would mean more freedom and not less freedom. In some countries today this expo is not possible, or authorities would try to censor and choose my works to exhibit. I hope this will end soon.



Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud