Syria Studies

Untold Stories
Gender-sensitive readings of the Syrian Uprising

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Preface
Omar Imady

In this new issue of *Syria Studies*, entitled "Untold Stories – Gender-sensitive readings of the Syrian Uprising," we are pleased to share two samples of a new and promising approach to analysing and interpreting the narrative of war. It is an approach that is not only preoccupied with the human dimension of political conflict, but also one that seeks to shed light on the gender-specific nuances that permeate such dynamics. Indeed, it is now widely accepted that ideas of masculinity have had a significant impact on the way in which politics is understood and analysed, often skewing our perspective of what exactly is taking place. When applied to the realm of Syria studies, employing a more gender-sensitive approach can help us capture the stories that are often untold, or brushed aside; stories of women and men attempting to assert their identity in a political context that is often adamant at denying them this right.

In "Coercive Control in Conflict: Implications for Syria," Joanne Hopkins explores how the concept of coercive control can be used to help us understand the continuum of violence experienced by men and women in the Syrian conflict. Hopkins moves beyond what most similar studies focus on, "… the use of physical violence by the state …." and "… the state's systematic use of torture, imprisonment and rape …" and focuses instead on the "… need to understand the way that the state and other actors have employed a strategy of creating an atmosphere of fear alongside the physical acts of violence."

In "Framing Disaster, Performativity & Desire in the Writings of Syrians in Diaspora," Nusaiba Joan Imady examines the ways in which "… Syrians in diaspora have explored and redefined meaning in tradition and culture, specifically in relation to sexual violence, Syrian identity, and the validity of queer desire." She seeks to capture the responses that are in danger of being lost in this now almost eight-year conflict, responses that collectively constitute a narrative that explains how people 'surpass' destruction of this magnitude and provides significant insights on the type of Syria that will eventually emerge from this ongoing tragedy.

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Coercive Control in Conflict: Implications for Syria

Joanne Hopkins[1]

> Today the phone threats start up again in the most awful way. I am terrified to be so closely monitored … a single nod makes me shut my Facebook account … less than fifteen minutes after posting a comment I get a phone call from him … all these thoughts make me an even more nervous creature. So they will not come into contact with my extreme anxiety, I steer clear of my friends …[1]

This quote is from Samar Yazbek and it describes her experience of living and working in Syria as a journalist in 2011. The actor exercising this form of coercive control is not an intimate partner, but an agency of the state. Yet this quote could be just as easily attributable to many of the descriptions given by survivors of domestic abuse of their relationships; where the abusive partners exerts power and control over the other, dictating how they might live their life, and ensuring subservience through fear. In many cases this abuse is psychological, and many victims do not see themselves as such. They either normalise this behaviour or simply do not recognise it. The violence they experience is intertwined with physical violence: isola-

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[1] Joanne Hopkins is a part time PhD candidate at Aberystwyth University in the International Politics Department. Her research focuses on the fear of sexual violence in conflict and the impact on Syrian Refugees. She is a full time Senior Civil Servant in the UK government and has extensive experience in immigration policy and process. This paper is written in her personal, academic capacity. The views expressed here are her own and should not be interpreted as reflecting those of the UK government or any organisations she may be associated with employment as a Civil Servant.

tion, degradation, mind-games, micro–regulation, monitoring and checking against an unpredictable and ever changing 'rule book.'[2] Yazbek's description fits the scenario of someone in a controlling relationship with an abusive intimate partner, where the abuse takes the form of psychological bullying, which, is recognised as within the continuum of violence of domestic abuse. In fact, it is about life in Syria.

This paper will explore how the concept of coercive control, which has been recognised in UK legislation as a criminal offence since 2015 and is currently used exclusively to describe a form of abuse within intimate partner relations, can be extended to help us understand the continuum of violence experienced by men and women in the Syrian conflict. The use of physical violence by the state in this conflict is well documented, as well as the state's systematic use of torture, imprisonment and rape. However, for post 2015 Syria, there is also a need to understand the way that the state and other actors have employed a strategy of creating an atmosphere of fear alongside the physical acts of violence. This fear has formed part of the authoritarian regime's mechanism of rule for decades and has been reinforced by the violent suppression of any dissent, but since the Syrian conflict erupted it has been used by the regime as a strategy of war. This paper therefore argues that the international can learn from the local in this particular context.

The term 'coercive control' was developed by Evan Stark in his work *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women*, first published in 2007. In December 2015, it became a criminal offence in UK law. Coercive control is currently, first and foremost, a 'domestic' crime in 'domestic' legislation. But while Stark developed this concept to describe dynamics in intimate partner relationships and he himself is skeptical about its wider utility, in his own work, he talks about the concept being one of 'entrapment' and deprivation of liberty. He also compares the experience of coercive control to the experience of 'capture crimes' or of being held hostage and draws parallels with the experience of prisoners of war (POWs), both in terms of the behaviour itself and the impact it has on the victim. So, within the existing concept as framed by its creator there are indications of synergies between the 'domestic' in a non-conflict situation and the

behaviours of actors in war and the potential to stretch the definition beyond intimate partner violence. I want to explore the ways in which this can be applied to the experiences of those in the current Syrian conflict and how this concept can be used to help academics and policy makers to improve our understanding of the impact of conflict on people who are currently displaced or resettled, but also on those seeking to return to Syria in the future to rebuild the country.

I will begin by setting out my own positionality and placing this paper in the context of my ongoing research. This is followed by a discussion of Stark's definition of coercive control and the process by which it became a criminal offence in the UK. The rational for employing this concept in the discipline of International Relations is emphasized, particularly as a way of improving our understanding of the experience of war. The discussion subsequently moves to an examination of what international law says regarding 'controlling behaviour' and the sorts of psychological violence that Stark describes and the difficulties of interpretation and enforcement. Finally, I apply this conceptual framework on the Syrian conflict to illustrate how the definition can be stretched, before bringing us back to the domestic environment to make a link between the two through the 'Reclaim the Night' movement.

My primary concern is to explore the impact of the 'fear' of sexual violence in the Syrian conflict. Here, I share the view of Stark, that by focusing on other forms of violence, we are not seeking to diminish the importance or deny the fact of physical violence. Instead, I intend to make the case that, in both the domestic and international arenas of conflict, the fear of violence is a specific psychological weapon that is being deployed by agents and alongside a range of other physical tactics. The fear thus generated in this continuum of violence is so extreme that it prevents the individual from escaping from the relationship they have with their perpetrator and therefore they are trapped. This makes the behaviour they experience a crime of entrapment or liberty. A question asked of many survivors of domestic abuse, and of those claiming asylum, is 'why did you not leave'? The point at which a person can flee from this violence, or the reason why they do not, can be entirely understood by the psy-

chological grip they are trapped in, often unknowingly, and the culmination of years of controlling behaviour which is normalised. The point where this becomes intolerable is the point when the survivor chooses to leave; often harm against children or other parties provides the tipping point. The murder of children who had put anti Bashar slogans on the city walls of Daara in March 2011 is widely regarded as having acted as a similar catalyst for protest in Syria.

The importance of understanding this element of the continuum of violence, is around the impact on liberty and freedom. The generation of the fear of an act of physical violence may have the same impact on a victim as if the physical act did occur. The effect of this on human behaviour, movement and decisions to flee or fight, is important in understanding what has happened to people in Syria. The sociologist Liz Kelly has studied the impact of sexual violence on survivors and concluded that a victim's level of fear derives as much from her perception of what could happen based on past experience as from the immediate threat of the perpetrator.[3] Stark similarly states that in coercive control, the idea of physical harm planted in the victims' mind can have more devastating effect than actual violence.'[4]

It also helps to explain what people would need to see happen before Syria can be reconstructed and peace built. Miriam Cooke in her 2017 book *Dancing in Damascus* describes meeting a leading Syrian intellectual:

> Like all Syrians I have met….[he]…is committed to imagining a new political system that will give each individual freedom, dignity and a clear understanding of what it means to be a real citizen.[5]

Compare this to what a domestic abuse survivor says when questioned about what she wanted from her future: "A future free from fear, not having to look over my shoulder all the time, to be mentally and financially independent but most of all to stop feeling ashamed of who I am."[6] In understanding what is needed to support this ambition, there is scope to put in place the structures and strategies that allow this to be realised. What can be learnt from the domestic experience to help us to do this in a future Syria?

The objective here is to demonstrate how coercive control is used to achieve the same outcomes as physical violence in conflict: sectarian violence, displacement of certain peoples and the restoration of authoritarianism in the face of uprising. And therefore, show how the psychological violence in conflict is like coercive control in that it is part of the weaponry at the disposal of the perpetrator, whether that is a husband or a boyfriend or an agent of the state or non-state actor, the outcome is the same. They achieve domination and control. The victim does what the perpetrator intends.

My academic pursuits are only part of my 'position'. In addition to being a PhD student, I am a Senior Civil Servant in the Home Office in the UK and I have 17 years' experience of work in Immigration, Crime and Policing. Of relevance to this work, I was responsible for the UK Government's 2010 strategy to end violence against women and girls and have recently supporting the work to resettle Syrian families in the UK as well as broader priorities around asylum support and integration. I am now Director of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Hub in Wales looking at how we support organisations to understand the impact of trauma in childhood and increase awareness of how to prevent it.

A better understanding of the different experiences of violence in war will support the development of academic research and provide some challenge to existing literature about how 'psychological' violence and the provocation of an emotional response has a place in International Relations (IR). This work will also contribute to a new developing strand of research in feminist IR that considers emotion and war. By including the voices of artists, authors and poets, I hope to demonstrate the importance of their work in helping us to understand what it feels like to experience conflict, and to push against the perception that fiction, for example, can be a source for IR theorists to examine. I hope that my research will also support those of us working on UK government policies to better support the integration of Refugees from conflict zones, in this case Syria. It will help us to ensure the right 'domestic' services are available to those who want or need them, but also build on our improved understanding of how coercive control impacts on people in the domestic sphere to support

those we seek to help be part of our society. Drawing out the parallels of what the victims and survivors experience, may help us to do so.

So, what exactly is 'Coercive Control'? According to Stark, it may be defined as follows:

> … an ongoing pattern of domination by which male abusive partners primarily interweave repeated physical and sexual violence with intimidation, sexual degradation, isolation and control. The primary outcome of coercive control is a condition of *entrapment* that can be hostage-like in the harms it inflicts on dignity, liberty, autonomy and personhood as well as to physical and psychological integrity.[7]

An important aspect of coercive control is its gendered nature. Stark is clear that coercive control is gendered because:

> … it is used to secure male privilege, and its regime of domination/subordination is constructed around the enforcement of stereotypes. 'Domination' here refers to both the power/privilege exerted through coercive control in individual relations and to the political power created when men as a group use their oppressive tactics to reinforce persistent sexual inequalities in the larger society.[8]

In 2015, eight years after his work on coercive control was published, Stark was appointed as an expert advisor to the UK Government as it decided to make coercive control a criminal offence. This represented a fundamental shift in UK policy. In 2010, the publication of the strategy to end violence against women and girls in the UK was celebrated by the leading organisations which campaign for the rights of women, victims and survivors of domestic abuse, for bringing together all forms of gender-based violence in a single strategy; something they had been demanding for 30 years. Significantly, this strategy barely mentions coercive control. This situation has changed over the preceding years, and changes of government. And

as the focus changed to become more criminal justice orientated, there was a move by the sector to push for a specific offence to recognise coercive control as a form of violence within the continuum of violence in the domestic space. It recognises the harm caused by coercion or control, and that the cumulative impact on the victim and a repeated pattern of abuse can be more injurious and harmful than a single incident of violence.[9] This is an important context to understand for this paper, as although the UK government has recognised domestic violence and all forms of violence against women and girls for many years, the criminal offence of coercive control is relatively new and somewhat controversial. The difficulty prosecutors and the police face in getting convictions for this form of violence even where there is physical evidence has brought into question whether convictions could be secured for something that is even more difficult to 'prove'. Despite this concern, however, what the offence has done is helped highlight the fact that abuse is not just a physical attack, and the impact of these other forms of violence are part of the whole picture of abuse. If we understand this, we can provide the right support. This is a similar situation to the international setting, where it is clearly difficult to get justice at the state level for physical acts of violence let alone psychological. Nevertheless, it can and should be done.

In December 2015, the new offence came into force in the UK. The accompanying statutory guidance provides the UK cross-government definition on which the offence is based as:

> Controlling behaviour is: a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

> Coercive behaviour is: a continuing act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.[10]

Taken on its own, without an accompanying explanation around this being in the context of 'intimate partner' violence or what we understand as the domestic setting, it seems as though that this definition could also describe the experience of those living in the shadow of the *shabbiha* or secret police in Syria, as described by Yazbek at the start of this paper (further explored below). The statutory guidance also sets out a set of 'behaviours' that one might expect to see demonstrated in a case of coercive control.

Types of Behaviour

The types of behaviour associated with coercion or control may or may not constitute a criminal offence in their own right. It is important to remember that the presence of controlling or coercive behaviour does not mean that no other offence has been committed or cannot be charged. However, the perpetrator may limit space for action and exhibit a story of ownership and entitlement over the victim. Such behaviours might include:

- isolating a person from their friends and family;
- depriving them of their basic needs;
- monitoring their time;
- monitoring a person via online communication tools or using spyware;
- taking control over aspects of their everyday life, such as where they can go, who they can see, what to wear and when they can sleep;
- depriving them of access to support services, such as specialist support or medical services;
- repeatedly putting them down such as telling them they are worthless;
- enforcing rules and activity which humiliate, degrade or dehumanise the victim;
- forcing the victim to take part in criminal activity such as shoplifting, neglect or abuse of children to encourage self-blame and prevent disclosure to authorities;
- financial abuse including control of finances, such as only allowing a person a punitive allowance;
- threats to hurt or kill;
- threats to a child;
- threats to reveal or publish private information (e.g. threatening to 'out' someone).
- assault;
- criminal damage (such as destruction of household goods);
- rape;
- preventing a person from having access to transport or from working

This is not an exhaustive list.

Figure 1.

Coercive Control and 'capture crimes' – there is already a link
One of the central positions of the concept of coercive control is its clearly articulated link to other capture or 'liberty crimes' where a person experiences a deprivation of his/her liberty, such as those detained as hostages, prisoners of war and torture victims. Stark argues that coercive control resembles the violence used in capture crimes in three main ways: it is designed to punish, hurt or control a victim; its effects are cumulative rather than incident specific; and it frequently results in severe injury or death.[11] From the perspective of a victim of coercive control, Linda Gordon describes her 'capture' as being a 'battered woman's socially constructed inability to escape.'[12] Or that it is the 'victim's agency that is the principal target.'[13] The whole idea of coercive control is to create an environment similar to that experienced by prisoners of war, but instead of a generic conformity to authority as might be expected from a hostage, prisoners or those detained under the mental health act, it is destined to enforce a person's obedience, where an individual exerts power that forces another to conform to what they want them to do.[14]

The World Organisation Against Torture draws a parallel between the context of a victim of torture by a state official, and a domestic victim of coercive control. The torture by a state official typically takes place when the victim is in incommunicado detention, at the unsupervised mercy of his interrogators or captors and without access to the outside world. Battered women, because of their domestic situation live isolated of family and friends and others who might support them. [15]Victims of coercive control are effectively 'hostages at home' suggesting abuse is a political crime like terrorism.[16] In his work, Stark also considers the terms used by other sociologists to try to categorise this sort of violence. They are an interesting mix of words that bring together the 'domestic' and what we might term more 'international' phraseology, particularly in the current uses of the word. Stark describes how we have moved, in the domestic sphere, from an emphasis on 'repeated assault' to an understanding that abuse is a continuous process that includes structural elements and has cumulative effects. He gives an example of this work in the shift made by sociologist Michael Johnson, who in recognition of this relationship, renamed his categories of violence to 'situational violence' and 'intimate terrorism.'[17]

This signals not only a shift to the structural understanding, but also an example of how definitional stretching can be achieved; and a clear link to what we are seeing in modern conflicts such as Syria where there are many actors ranging from the state, to individual military leaders, opposition fighters and actors such as Daesh (whom we would term commonly as terrorists). The distinction between 'situational violence' i.e. conflict where violence is used, and intimate terrorism is helpful as it brings into scope the possibility of discussing the coercive and controlling tactics used that are not covered by 'fighting' for example.

I had the privilege to spend some time with Stark during his recent visit to the UK and took the opportunity to ask him directly what he thought about the concept of definitional stretching to include the behaviour of actors in conflict, particularly around the threat of sexual violence. His response was cautious, but he did offer, in a similar way to the shift that is mentioned by Michael Johnson, that perhaps what I was describing was 'sexual terrorism.' Where he thought there was a difference, however, was in the impact on and coping strategies employed by victims. In his view, refugees are more resilient, and their main concern is not whether they themselves will be assaulted but rather with keeping their children safe from the 'situational' violence and finding a way to make new lives for them.

This is not a mistaken conclusion; but Stark admits to not having interviewed asylum seekers or refugees; I would suggest that this assumption is based on what others have related to him. Having interviewed many people in this situation, I have observed that they will say to officials that the safety and education of their children is the most important aspect for them; but they are often hiding the impact their experience has had on their own health or their own needs. It is often further down the line, when safety and education is secured, that the wider impact of their experience is realised. And even then, through reasons of fear, or from the normalising of their experience, they are unable to articulate what has happened to them. For example, the inherent fear and distrust of authority, is a barrier to discussing anything that may appear critical of their political experience for fear of informants. So much so that often refugees prefer to

use Arabic speaking, rather than Syrian, translators. Also, it may only be after living outside of the geographical region and having an experience of different societal or cultural norms that refugees from Syria realise that behaviour that they have taken for granted is not 'normal'. The impact of this realisation may manifest in mental health or behavioural problems which carry a stigma in all societies; the challenges of asking for this help already exists and to link cause and effect perhaps years later.

I asked the same question about the potential for definitional stretch relating to coercive control of Gill Hague, at Bristol University, who set up the Violence Against Women Research Group. She saw scope in looking at definitional stretching, but urged caution, stating that we should be looking at this in 'baby-steps'. The time it has taken to get an understanding of coercive control, and what it means in a very limited number of Western schools of thought will mean that the challenge of broadening it may be a step too far too quickly. She felt that there was much more to do to improve understanding of Violence Against Women and also felt that it may not be the right time to introduce something else into the conversation. Although her concern was more from an activist point of view rather than whether this is something that should be looked at academically, which she supported. Nazand Begikhani, who is an expert of violence against women in Kurdish Iraq, signaled that she thought that this type of violence (psychological, mental) was already in international law, and that it had been recognised at an international level. She was unsure what more was required.

There has been some work in recent years that does already make the connection between 'negative experiences' and the impact on children, that does explore the impact of psychological violence. In Wales and Scotland, there has been more of a public health focus on 'adverse childhood experiences' (ACES). By framing the issue of the impact of negative experience, whether that be of conflict and living in a war zone and all that is witnessed there, as a health issue there is scope to explore the psychological impact of coercively controlling behaviours in conflict as part of the wider understanding of conflict. Public Health Wales recently published 'Preventing Violence, Promoting Peace – A policy tool kit for addressing interper-

sonal, collective and extremist violence'. The report talks about the impact of distinct forms of violence but also introduces the concept of 'life course' violence:

'Acute impacts of violence (i.e. in the immediate aftermath of victimisation) include significant physical injury, disability and death. Globally, interpersonal and collective violence are estimated to have caused around 580,000 deaths and more than 33 million years of healthy life lost in 2015. From a life course perspective, violence and other adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can impair social and emotional development, limit individuals' life opportunities and result in early death …'[18]

There is clearly an interest and scope to include coercive control in conflict as a form of violence, and ACE, that could fall into further research in the public health space. This is also supported by the report by Save the Children in its 2017 report 'Invisible Wounds' where the impact of the experience of war manifests itself as 'toxic stress. These experiences include the daily fear of death in conflict but also the impact of witnessing and experiencing a combination of things such as loss of education or feelings of grief. At six years old, this is the only life many of these children have experienced,

I will now turn to the question posed by Dr Begikhani; what is there in International Law and international statutes and conventions that supports the assertion that coercive control, or at least recognised elements of it, are already 'offences'?

What does International Law state?
In seeking to understand the extent to which the ideas contained within coercive control are already incorporated within international law, it is useful to start with the Geneva Convention, particularly the fourth Convention (1949) which includes:

> *(a) violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture;*
> *(b) taking of hostages*
> *(c) outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment*

Although the Convention references torture and degrading treatment, it is not explicit that this should include coercive control. In many cases the victim does not see themselves as such, until it is too late and other forms of physical violence have caused physical harm or even death. If a behaviour is not yet recognised for the harm it causes, then it is unlikely to be picked up in such a broad definition. For example, in domestic legislation the reason it is an explicit offence is to ensure that we understand that this behaviour is not acceptable. Without it, it is unclear whether it would be considered and what threshold would need to be reached.

For more recent developments, I have looked in detail at the 'International Protocol on the Documentation and investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict', which came out of the 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. The Protocol itself includes reference to the psychological repercussions of sexual violence for survivors and witnesses, and a reference to the gender-based nature of it and the prevalence against children. Similar to the argument that Stark makes about the structural nature of coercive control, the protocol makes clear that "historical and structural inequalities that exist between men and women, and the different forms of gender-based discrimination that women are subjected to all over the world, contribute to the women and girls being disproportionately affected by sexual violence in conflict setting."[19] The protocol helpfully goes on to recognise that sexual violence as a crime under international law is often committed as part of a broad pattern of violations against individuals and communities, that includes sexual and non-sexual crimes.[20] So here we have a recognition, in addition to what we know is a crime under international law, that there is a broader set of 'behaviours' that seem to reflect at least in part the definition of coercive control as an 'ongoing pattern'. What needs to be explored further, however, is what is included in this list of 'violations', and how does it compare to the language used in the coercive control descriptions and types of behaviour.

The protocol is cautious when discussing what may already be in statute and states that in certain circumstances, sexual violence constitutes a crime under international law; a war crime, a crime

against humanity and /or an act of genocide and can be investigated and prosecuted at both the national and international levels. There-fore, we need to look at the interpretation of international law and how it is enforced to see where these circumstances are, and where in these 'crimes' there is scope to include the 'broader pattern.' First there is the context of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and ad hoc tribunals. This was then codified and advanced in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and then advanced again by the Special Court for Sierra Leo-ne (SCSL).

The protocol makes clear that although it has a focus on the provisions set out in the Rome Statute, many of them have not yet been litigated or resolved. It points out that jurisprudence of the ad hoc and hybrid tribunals, such as the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia and the SCSL may provide the only available guidance.[21] However, what is of interest here is whether there is any-thing in existing international law that reflects the coercive control concept, so the Rome statute seems a sensible place to start. If we consider what is contained under the heading of War Crimes (article 8.2), Crimes Against Humanity (Article 7) and Genocide (article 6) there are some elements that may be useful. Under Article 8.2 (B and c), there is specific reference to 'Committing outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment' in 8.2 (c-e) there is also 'Violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture, and intentional star-vation and deprivation of objects indispensable to survival.' Crimes against humanity (Article 7) lists four areas of specific interest: Im-prisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law, torture, and enforced dis-appearance of persons and 'other inhumane acts of a similar charac-ter intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.'[22]

A thorough examination of the details of the Rome Statute and its interpretation are outside the scope of this study. An examination of interpretation of guidelines, however, is needed to determine where there may be opportunities to use this legislation to include

psychological violence. At a high level, it appears that there is reference to the sorts of behaviours that are synonymous with some of those identified in domestic legislation. What is important about the Rome Statute is that it covers individuals acting within the state, not just the state itself. And, crimes against humanity can apply in the absence of a formal conflict. But initial work of the ICC, established by the Rome Statute has shown that it is easier to prosecute under some categories than it is others, for example, in terms of the evidence that might be available and whether the acts committed were behind closed doors or a mass publicly witnessed atrocity classified as genocide. In the case of the more public events it is still difficult, but perhaps less difficult to prosecute them for the activity that takes place out of the public space. The evidence point is helpful; and one faced in the enforcement of the domestic legislation on coercive control. But there are instances where victims of this form of abuse have been able to provide evidence, most famously on one of Stark's cases, keeping a notebook of daily tasks, which was compelling evidence of the domination and control that the victim was being subjected to. But leaving the difficulty of evidencing the crime to one side for the moment, it is instructive to return to the argument put forward by the World Organisation Against Torture. Because in our attempt to find something applicable in international law, it is important to consider what the Rome statute gives us in terms of torture, even if trying to prosecute for this may be a more difficult route.

The United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984) defines torture as:

> For the purposes of this Convention, the term "torture" means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquies-

cence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.[23]

What is interesting about this definition is that it clearly identifies that perpetrators of torture are either a public official or conducting their activity with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or someone acting in that capacity. That would not necessarily cover the range of actors in conflict who may be perpetrators of behaviour that an international definition of coercive control might apply to. For example, in the Syrian conflict it would cover the state actors and secret police and the tactics they employ; it would not pick up those labelled 'rebels' or actors such as Daesh, or indeed groups or gangs who do not wear any identifying insignia. Turning again to the Rome Statute, the definition of torture in Article 7.2(e) says:

"Torture" means the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, upon a person in the custody or under the control of the accused; except that torture shall not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions;[24]

This seems to provide a more encompassing definition that may be helpful to try to make a comparison on the behaviours listed in domestic legislation. However, to be able to take any action under Article 7 or where torture is listed as a war crime of genocide, the perpetrator must be a national of a state party to the Rome Statute, the alleged crime took place on the territory of a state party, or a situation is referred to the court by the United Nations Security Council. In the case of Syria, it seems very unlikely that this would happen under any route.

International law at the moment does recognise, at a high level, the impact of psychological torture and whilst this is helpful, what it does not do is recognise the cumulative effect of controlling or coercive behaviour or provide clarity to those who enforce it, as to what behaviours constitute an offence. The testing of the existing law is

essential to understanding what is needed, and it is still easier to do this through publicly witnessed acts of physical violence.

Coercive Control in the Syrian Conflict
The conflict in Syria provides a very current example of an international application for the concept of coercive control. Stark describes coercive control as being so extensive and penetrating that there is a sense of 'omnipresence.'[25] He also refers to the 'injection of high levels of fear into the ordinary round of everyday life'[26] and the devastating psychological effects of isolation; the incapacity to 'not know what you know' or what he terms as 'perspecticide'[27] where the perspective of what is right or wrong is taken away. All this is recognisable in the documented experiences of Syrians as the Arab Spring took place in 2011, and the country descended into war. But elements of it can also be found prior to that.

Three examples of literature that illustrate these very aspects in relation to Syria are examined here. The first example is the work of Nihad Sirees who describes in his 'semi fictional' book 'The Silence and the Roar' the sense of an 'all seeing' omnipresent government, which forces all citizens to carry identification and does spot checks, and coerces the people (described as masses) to take part in marches to celebrate their leader. He describes in detail the sense of fear and his isolation as a journalist. His experience at the hands of the secret police, whom he describes as 'military security goons', and the time he spends dodging them, demonstrates the power that they wield. Power in this case is created by the threat of physical violence if he failed to comply with their demands to work for them in the propaganda machine. He does not experience any physical violence until later in the book, but his understanding that physical violence will be a consequence of an arrest is clear. He describes the actions of the secret police towards a man in charge of the photocopying of posters of the leader, which became spoiled and resulted in six months torture. And lastly the marriage of his mother, under duress to a prominent minister, to force him to comply with the request to work in the communications department rather than continue as a journalist.[28] But most interesting of all is the author's description of the society in which he lives, which echoes the language in Stark's description of the domestic perpetrator of coercive control:

> … People must not think about the leader and how he
> runs the country; they must simply adore him, want to
> die for him in their adoration of him, Therefore the
> leader creates a roar all around him, forcing people to
> celebrate him, to roar … people are coerced into the
> streets in order to chant … the leader seeking to cove
> himself with a roaring halo….as a means of covering up
> and suppressing any other sound. With this roar, he aims
> to cover up violent crimes he unleashed against his ri-
> vals in the underground dungeons of the security appa-
> ratus, those places located far out of sight but which
> everyone knows about.[29]

The other two examples can be found is the works of two fe-
male journalists in Syria, both now resident in France: Janine Di
Giovanni and Samar Yazbek. Notwithstanding the risks associated
with journalism in a conflict zone anyway, both describe life in Syria
as one as predicated on fear, dominance and control. Janine Di Gio-
vanni describes instances of psychological pressure, where there is a
fear of a family member being raped. This concurs with a recognition
in the statement ahead of the 2014 Global Summit on Sexual Vio-
lence which called for recognition for such acts as psychological tor-
ture, stating, '…we must also recognise that men and boys are
victims of this crime, as are those who are forced to witness or perpe-
trate this violence against their family or community members.'[30] In
Dispatches From Syria: the Morning they Came For Us, Di Giovan-
ni provides a voice for Syrian women in particular. One describes the
specific tactics of the *Shabbiha,* or secret police acting for the regime
(which translates as ghosts).

> Their tactics were largely to incite fear within communi-
> ties; to enter towns and villages after the government
> troops had been fighting nearby, and spread the word
> that that they would rape the women… daughters,
> mothers, cousin, nieces. It's a convenient way to ethni-
> cally cleanse an entire region. Fear can be generated so
> easily.[31]

In 'A woman in the Cross Fire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution', Samar Yazbek describes, in similar terms again to Stark's description of how a perpetrator creates 'the injection of fear into everyday life', and how it has become normalised. She describes how "…without realising it people subsist on fear, which has become as automatic as breathing."[32] She describes the omnipresence of the security forces who are described as "sprouted out of the ground" and how the 'earth split open with [them].'[33] Stark also talks about surveillance and monitoring as being a key part of the continuum of violence and likens it to tactics used to intimidate Prisoners of War or hostages, but in Yazbek's work we can similarly see a comparison to her situation as a journalist being controlled by the secret police. In the same way, the intention is to ensure omnipresence and enforcing behaviours; as Stark describes it, letting the victim know she is being watched or overheard, which cause isolation both of the victim and by the victim. Yazbek endures cycles of violence, detention, intimidation, threats both physical and sexual, and threats against her daughter. She turns to Xanax to cope.

Conclusions
My objective was to demonstrate a need to better understand the impact of coercive control in the international space, not only as a weapon or war, but also as a means to govern a nation, or to incite violence or behaviours that are desired to further the aims of those in, or exercising power over others. If we understand that connection between acts of violence associated with the domestic space, and how those same behaviours form part of a continuum of violence in conflict that is more than the 'situational violence' that Johnson describes.

Syrian writers often talk about the fabric of Syrian society, and how that has been destroyed; I do not think that Stark's offer of 'sexual terrorism' as a descriptor for this is the right terminology; but the use of the word terrorism does describe the impact of this violence. It is intimate; there is a relationship between the perpetrator and the victim that is different to that of a perpetrator of random acts of violence. There is also a continuum, and I would argue a mechanism that held the fabric of society together when required, but also when

a tipping point is reached, provokes an action and reaction that has destroyed a country. In intimate partner violence, the relationship can continue for years, until something happens; sadly, in many cases resulting in extreme violence and death. Having looked at both 'situations', what differentiates the two is less clear to me at this stage than it was when I started.

However, in discussing the 'sexual terrorism' concept, Ann Flitcraft offered another insight which I will conclude this paper with. I talked about women in conflict living in constant fear; she reminded me of the reason behind the formation of the 'Reclaim the Night' movement in the UK. Liz Kelly visited Leeds at the time when the Yorkshire Ripper was committing his crimes against women in the city. She describes how she 'sensed an atmosphere of fear amongst women…83 percent of women restricted their movements'[34]. For her, this increased her awareness of how strong the fear of attack can be and the enormous effect it has on freedom.'[35] The Reclaim the Night marches were a response to that loss of freedom, and anger at the seemingly slow response of the police, and differential treatment of the female student victims over the prostitutes. The result was a series of coordinated marches across the UK in opposition to the police advice of the time that women should stay indoors and not go out at night unless accompanied by a man. Women took to the streets en masse with flaming torches. We see this act of defiance when women are able to leave abusive relationships, or even when they are forced to kill their abuser. We also saw it in the defiance and protest marches against the regime in Syria in the spring of 2011 and the foundation of movements like 'Syrian Women in Support of the Uprising'. Time will tell whether Syrian women will be able to reclaim their lives, not just the night, and whether a specific offence of coercive control will ensure women in the domestic sphere can do the same. If they can, then those principles of freedom, dignity and a sense of identity are the cornerstones of a society, including post conflict Syria, that must be in place for the future.

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Figures
Figure 1. Types of Behaviour as set out in Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship Statutory Guidance Framework (2015) p4

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482528/Controlling_or_coercive_behaviour_-_statutory_guidance.pdf

2

Framing Disaster:
Performativity & Desire in the Writings
of Syrians in Diaspora

Nusaiba Joan Imady[2]

In his articulation on disaster Jalal Toufic says "The surpassing disaster leads to the withdrawal not of everything, but of tradition, and touches not everyone, but a community[36]" it is in this surpassing disaster that Syrians are left with a tradition that has been withdrawn from and a community in-flux. Under decades of totalitarian rule that reached its breaking point in a now six-year civil war, Syrian tradition and culture has had its meaning and holiness become an empty glass. This research focuses on how Syrians writing in diaspora have articulated and recreated tradition and culture in the aftermath of the surpassing disaster, specifically as it relates to gender and identity.

The experience of what it means to be Syrian has dramatically shifted in the last few years; adopting titles of refugee[37], terrorist[38] and burden on neighboring countries[39], creating with it a vacancy for writers and thinkers to attempt to refill the glass of tradition. Under this complexity of identity reformation and in examining the writings of Syrians in diaspora, this research will seek to find the aspects of culture that have been resurrected and chosen to become monuments of culture.

Utilizing the theoretical frameworks articulated by Jalal Toufic in *Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*[40] and aspects of

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performativity found in Judith Butler's Gender Trouble[41] as well as theories on identity and totalitarianism, I will showcase how surpassing disaster connects to performativity, specifically in relation to the Syrian crisis. My lens will recognize the ways in which writers and thinkers are articulating and creating change and how it is interconnected with gender and identity.

In order to maintain intelligibility throughout, I will provide working definitions for the key terms used in this research. However, this does not assume a monolithic unchanging definition for these terms, nor does it assume a universality for their usage.

Surpassing Disaster[42], a term coined by Jalal Toufic in order to denote a disaster that "is measured not by the impact of loss of life, but rather on the withdrawal from tradition that can be measured in its aftermath[43]." Hence the term - surpassing disaster – is specifically related to the divesting of cultural and human practices, rather than the more common, and more visual, death and destruction. This will be important as we investigate the rebuilding of these traditions, in response to the surpassing disaster, by Syrians in diaspora.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity defines gender as that which is performative, as in that which relies on a collection of speech acts, linguistic and otherwise, in order to reiterate itself. This research specifically relies on the linguistic articulation that reiterates performativity[44].

The Syrian disaster, here denotes both the ongoing Syrian civil war[45] as well as the forty-seven-year reign of the totalitarian Ba'athist 'Asadist' regime[46].

Queer is used in dual ways throughout this research, to denote that which is subversive and outside the norm as well as an articulation of non-normative sexualities and genders. The varied usages are made clear contextually.

My research is divided into two sections, the first section will provide a theoretical and historical overview to contextualize the research. Bringing together theories on identity, desire, and disaster,

and laying out the ways in which I have placed their intersections to bring them together into a cohesive theoretical framework. Section two provides a close reading of primary literary texts, all written by Syrians in diaspora, resurrecting specific aspects of culture and creating new monuments of existence, and how they relate to the aforementioned theories.

Finding Disaster: A Theoretical and Historical Overview
The importance of a gendered theoretical approach to the configuration of identity and disaster in Syria, relies foremost on witnessing how power dynamics are constructed and shifted under a gendered lens. The formation of gender within Syrian society is influenced by a totalitarian regime, religious discourse, and social policing, yet the scope of this research cannot extrapolate heavily on all of these aspects and so will focus primarily on the influence of the totalitarian regime. Gender, in its various manifestations, is constructed and formed by a collective of speech acts, that are both placed on the gendered body and performed by the gendered body[47]. This gender formation, defined as gender performativity as articulated by Judith Butler[48] in *Gender Trouble[49]* , provides an entire life fantasy that is placed upon the newborn in accordance to their perceived gender and the power dynamics that they will navigate. This newborn's life fantasy embodies the gender norms that the child, and all children, are expected to emulate, and enact.[50] The recognition that gender norms and the power dynamics they navigate becomes vital to the formation of culture and tradition, and is a central point within this research: to recognize that performativity is a form of tradition that is central to cultural formation. Gender and complying to its regulations and norms is so central to the formation of society, much like tradition, it becomes that which is policed, expected and normalized, while any outliers to the preservation of its existence are treated with resistance and often violence. Treating gender as part of tradition allows this research to consider how the effect of disaster on tradition influences and interacts with performativity.

Performativity and Surpassing Disaster
Performativity relies on aspects of linguistic phenomena that are used to express and create gender, and as gender is a central aspect to tradition and cultural formation it would be impossible to separate per-

formative aspects of gender from culture and tradition. In addition, the function and consequence of surpassing disaster, expanded and articulated by Jalal Toufic in his work *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster[51],* demonstrates that a surpassing disaster results in the withdrawal of meaning from tradition and culture[52]. Therefore, in order to recognize and understand the ways in which tradition, and therefore performativity, have been withdrawn from and subsequently resurrected by writers, and thinkers[53] we must first explore the functionality of both within Syrian society. The question then becomes what happens to performativity and tradition, when they are influenced by a surpassing disaster, that is, what occurs when the material withdrawing becomes part of its reconfiguration.

Within a surpassing disaster aspects of the culture that were not demolished, therefore aspects that maintain a form of existence in some manner; are immaterially withdrawn from by the surpassing disaster[54]. These aspects of culture, can only then be resurrected by writers, thinkers and artists[55]. Toufic argues that it is in the act of resurrection that one can truly explore what has become central to culture: "…while many buildings that were considered monuments of the culture in question are revealed by their availability, without resurrection, past the surpassing disaster as not monuments at all of that culture, other buildings, generally viewed as indifferent, are revealed by their withdrawal to be monuments of that culture.[56]" That is to say, Toufic explores how what could have been considered as benign could become one of the most vital aspects of tradition (or performativity) and that which was practically worship becomes without resurrection a hallowed out husks of attempted societal creation.

The structures of gender that are upheld through traditional practices, taboos, and binaries have notably shifted since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the militarization and violence that was to follow. This shift has not always meant a relaxing of binaries and gender norms, rather the shift in attitude has taken on a dichotomy of that which is an intensely rigid upholding of specific gendered norms on one hand, witnessed clearly in the gendered rhetoric of militia groups like Jebhat Al-Nusra[57] and Islamic State[58]. While on the other side of the spectrum, a more relaxed and fluid understanding and approach to gender norms and traditions has

grown, seen in the recent marriage of two Syrian men in Lebanon[59]. It is tempting to attribute these drastic changes to an outside force or intervention, or as an expected reaction to war and unrest. However, in utilizing the scholarship of Hannah Arendt, whose writing on totalitarianism[60] and political violence specifically looked at how totalitarian regimes come to power and how they enact violence, I would argue differently. Indeed, the so called Syrian Crisis is not a sudden eruption of a disaster but rather the culmination of events in Syria that began with the Corrective Movement and the rise of Hafez Al-Assad to power in 1970[61] which coincided with enacting social and political rigidity and violence that included the violent mascara of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982[62]. These major events began a surpassing disaster that would touch everything that was held sacred to the people residing within the constructed borders of Syria and culminate in the violent civil war currently raging in Syria.

Totalitarianism and the Ba'ath
In order to examine the trajectory of disaster, desire and performativity in Syria, we must first recognize how aspects of totalitarianism have influenced cultural meaning-making within the country. Scholarship on totalitarianism and the banality of evil specifically examine the rise of totalitarianism within Europe, however utilizing Arendt's theories in Syria allows for a better mapping of disaster. Arendt's book *On Totalitarianism*,[63] explored the rise of totalitarianism in Europe specifically in the aftermath of World War I and its relation to imperialism, anti-semitism and nation making. Importantly, she notes the ways in which a totalitarian regime's mission is to enter every crevice of the population it rules; that its mission is not just the seat of power, but to eradicate the ability to formulate any thought that could conceive of it as other than 'in power'. Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes rely on propaganda, the creation of terror, anti-semitism, or a racialized other, and huddled masses (or refugees), as scape-goats, as well as forms of super-nationalism[64]. In the aftermath of colonialism and within the constructed borders of Syria, it experienced a rise in super-nationalism that coincided with the rise of the Ba'athist[65] political party that would ultimately come to power via a military coup[66] and would lead to Hafez Al-Assad's rise to power[67]. The rise of the Ba'athist party also overlapped with the

eruption of an influx of refugees from the State of Israel and the Six Day War, which, as Arendt specifically noted, are necessary for totalitarianism. Indeed, the eruption of super-nationalism, anti-Semitism and refugees shapes the totalitarian state. In a post-colonial and post-war state of existence, Syria's super-nationalism. as well as its a flood of refugees and the eruption of anti-Semitism, following the formation of the state of Israel, all came together under the regime of Hafez Al-Assad to formulate a totalitarian state. It was under this totalitarian regime that violence meant to curb any whisper of defiance began, and remained.

The influence totalitarianism has on a nation is multi-leveled and often cannot be fully taken apart until years after its fall from power. However, most notably, totalitarian regimes are often equipped with an educational system whose job has "never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any."[68] The people are regulated under totalitarian rule to a mob of 'yes men'. The totalitarian regime also relies on the violence that is inevitable to maintain power. The aforementioned all coalesce into an apex wherein the pressure becomes unlivable and revolt or despondency become the only options.

The Ba'athist regime often found itself face to face with the impossibility of tradition under its reign. In order to maintain complete and utter power a totalitarian regime must straddle the line between that which suppresses tradition, therefore maintaining an anaesthetized populace that is more amenable to huddling into the mass it is meant to be, and allowing for the fantasy of plurality and individualism. In its influence on tradition, a totalitarian regime, becomes that which demands a withdrawal from tradition, but disallows any resurrection of the material, creating an ongoing surpassing disaster. The violence and loss a totalitarian government inflicts is a form of surpassing disaster that suffers for its inability to move past it, an act which only becomes possible with the eruption of revolution and war. This loss is in and of itself an exploration of the disappearance of that which was assumed to be constant and consistent, a loss of that which is unfathomable because what is lost was assumed to be a monument of that society or community.

Maurice Blanchot, a philosopher who in *On the Writing of the Disaster*, explored how the very nature of a disaster becomes a loss of meaning: "…the movement of Meaning was swallowed up, where the gift, which knows nothing of forgiveness or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied…[69]" In articulating the loss of meaning, Blanchot does not mean that there was meaning that was taken away and something replaced it as a placeholder, that somehow there was meaning or conviction behind the atrocities of the Shoah[70] and Porajmos[71], rather he conveys that meaning no longer existed; if nothing can be "affirmed"[72] or "denied" [73] there is nothing. Specifically, Blanchot explores how the meaning was taken away but nothing settled in its place. In order for totalitarian regimes to truly be in power, they must annihilate the need for meaning, creating a nation that lives under the Nuremberg defense. Toufic's expansion on Blanchot's writing is to locate how this loss of meaning continues as its own form of violence unless it is allowed to resurrect and re-formulate meaning. Totalitarianism strips meaning from the tradition of a people, and it is only when its writers and thinkers and artists find themselves capable of resurrecting it, that change is possible.

Construction of Desire and Identity
Within these borders of totalitarianism and disaster; desire with all its complexities is constructed and forged. Desire- celebrated, maligned and studied with an eye attempting to understand its patterns as affecting the gendered body - has long been written about. Lauren Berlant writes on desire in her book *Desire/Love*[74] and explores cultural artifacts: movies and books, to look into how desire and love are formed and expected and how they relate to identity and a sense of selfhood. "The objects to which desire becomes attached stabilize the subject and enable her to assume a stable-enough identity…. you know who you 'are' only by interpreting where your desire has already taken you"[75] so desire is a vital aspect to how selfhood and identity is located and defined, at least according to Berlant. Butler's theory of performativity pairs well with Berlant's theory of desire and identity, that is the construct of womanhood is understood through the mapping of desire that was done unto the infant that was gendered as a woman, and creating with it the heterosexual matrix[76]. That is to say, when a child is given a doll for her birthday or is taken

to a dance class there is an assumption of desire that is creating this identity and existence, all of which culminate into the heterosexual marriage plot that gives a meaning to identity. Berlant argues that the desire for this "love plot…then, represent[s] a desire for a life of unconflictedness.[sic][77]" Following the script of desire and gender with an expectancy of the life stability that has been promised cannot be sustained in instances of disaster as it finds itself often butting heads with the impossibility of stability. Furthermore, recognizing that the change in the meaning of the locality of this identity manifestation is bound to cause a disruption of desire and identity. That is to say, Berlant and Butler's theories on desire and performativity become disrupted in surpassing disaster as they rely on an "individuality…[as]… a cluster of qualities that do not express the totality of a person but rather her value as data to the reproduction of the normative world."[78] Therefore, Syrians living under a totalitarian regime cannot define their own identity making beyond what the totalitarian regime allows, or at least they cannot do so openly and without fear of annihilation. Hence their identity making relies not only the stability of the totalitarian regime, but also on their position within the hierarchal power structure it provides. Furthermore, as the civil war has allowed for a resurrection of some forms of meaning, the ways in which desire and gender are mapped and created have drastically shifted as they can no longer rely on the totalitarian regime to define desire and selfhood.

In examining and witnessing how gendered renderings have been impacted by the surpassing disaster, it is important to analyze the cultural artifacts that claim these renderings. In particular the following will utilize data from the writings of Syrian artists and activists in diaspora and how they apply literary prose to articulate loss and create meaning, specifically in relation to a gendered existence. The following will consider how the writings of Ahmad Danny Ramadan[79], Samar Yazbek[80], and Hiba Dlewati[81] have touched on and explored themes of disaster, gender, and desire in the aftermath of the surpassing disaster.

The Writings of Syrians in Diaspora; The Window on the Border
The censorship of sexual violence and rape within Syrian communities has been a longstanding tradition, so much so that the very lan-

guage used to describe and recognize rape existed only in hushed tones of warnings to control wayward girls. In the aftermath of the surpassing disaster of the violence of the totalitarian regime and the Syrian crisis, sexual violence has become so rampant, that the holiness of its censorship, an aspect that was by and large a pillar of society, has been withdrawn from and no longer capable of being sustained. In this void of language and culture, writers like Hiba Dlewati attempt to resurrect language that can allow space for survivors of sexual violence to exist.

In her short story *The Window on the Border*[82], Hiba Dlewati, a journalist and Syrian in exile explores the weight of story, and the words used to categorize specific narratives, that is she uses linguistic acts and choices to explore gender narratives. The story follows an unnamed Syrian interpreter at a hospital on the Syrian-Turkish border, attempting to gather survivor statements along with a journalist and aid worker[83]. The translator, is capable of connecting with the various survivors by providing them with her own experience of sexual violence at the hands of the regime, however, even as the narrator seems self-possessed and capable of handling these statements, she is shaken by being so close to a place she called home[84]. The language used by the narrator, by her own admission, is vital to the stories she is attempting to gather, "No one really likes to talk about rape… So we called it 'women's experiences' during the war…tracking activists, aid workers, refugees and health facilities to talk about 'women's experiences during the conflict.'[85]" There are two vital aspects to this language usage, on the one hand an acknowledgement of a not so distant past that held the censorship of the very words of sexual violence as taboo, on the other there is a moving beyond that censorship and demanding a vocalization of sexual violence. Even if *rape* as a word is not used, the use of the new terminology '*women's experience*' no longer responds to the aforementioned sacredness of censorship. While a visceral reaction occurs in the hospital room where the narrator is translating upon the mention of rape or harassment, specifically when the narrator provides her own experience, with "generations of fear of shame and honor etched onto their faces[86]"due to the traumatic nature of the subject, they still do give statements on the subject. Dlewati, constructs this story recognizing the traditions and culture that had once been material to the narrator's

existence, and then acknowledges the impossibility of adhering to them as though they have not been withdrawn from. In the reverberation of disaster Dlewati, chooses to have women's hushed stories of violence, be spoken; for their voices that had been shrouded in shame to be resurrected.

Dlewati's story explores how aspects of culture can be resurrected in lieu of others, specifically the taboo of sexual violence. However it also showcases how performativity is that which is not only performed onto the gendered body, but also performed by the gendered body. That even in the surpassing disaster where Dlewati notes how aspects of performativity can shift and change, in ways that allow for a broadening sense of its manifestation the ways in which it operates on the gendered body remain consistent, in that it is performed by and onto the gendered body. The story also explores the function of the love plot, which Berlant defines as the manifestation of stability[87]. In talking openly about sexual violence the narrator is challenging the notion that sexual violence removes the possibility to exist within the love plot. Therefore, while the story pushes back against the creation of sexual taboos and attempts to resurrect women's experiences and voices, it does so by relying on normative aspects of performativity and desire[88].

The Crossing
Under totalitarianism diversity of any kind existed as an anathema, that which was not only discouraged and maligned, but also created as an impossibility, to be Syrian was to be what the Ba'athist regime defined as Syrian. Thus, totalitarianism created a multiplicity of impossible subjects[89] under its rule, including ethnic and religious minorities as well as gender and sexual minorities. In her book Yazbek seeks to resurrect the definition of Syrian that is not beholden to an ethnicity, religion, gender or way of existence. In order to redefine and create a non-monolithic Syrian, Yazbek gathers stories from a diverse set of characters to narrate their stories all under the banner of Syrian stories. Significantly, while Yazbek does not include stories of gender and sexual minorities, she takes it upon herself to gender-queer her own narrative. She redefines Syrian to include all ethnic and religious minorities, and the very narrative she uses to do

so, is a queering of the rigidity identity allowing for a gender, ethnic and religious queer Syria.

Totalitarianism relies on identity making that eradicates difference. Indeed it creates impossible subjects[90] of any and all those who upset the enforced monolithic normative landscape. In many ways, the totalitarian regime's ideologies continue with violent sectarian or separatist rhetoric, enforcing a 'one way' of existing. Within this harsh background of enforced sameness Samar Yazbek, a Syrian activist and writer, traverses into an inquiry on how to resurrect a Syrian identity that recognizes the diversified canvas that has been forcefully eradicated; *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria[91]* (hereafter *The Crossing*) is Yazbek's cataloguing of her repeated excursions into Northern Syria in late 2012 to mid 2013. Her treks which began as a women's organizing project in combatant areas, evolved into her recording the varied narratives of the Syrians she encounters, a difficulty as Northern Syria becomes increasingly fundamentalist and sectarian.

As an Alawite in a Sunni majority area experiencing high sectarian tensions, Yazbek's position is often that of anxiety for herself, and her surrounding combatants. While she chooses not to disclose her religious affiliation, it is at times revealed by others, specifically when other combatants begin slurring Alawites in her presence. In one such instance where a younger combatant has gone on a tirade against Alawites, he is informed that Yazbek herself is an Alawite, he moves to beg forgiveness from Yazbek who answers with "'I'm not an Alawite,' I told him, before we set off. 'And you're not a Sunni. I'm Syrian and you're Syrian.' He looked at me in astonishment. 'It's true,' I said. 'We're *just* Syrians.'[92]" (emphasis my own). Yazbek's use of Syrian as an identity that can bridge what has been shattered is a curious act, for increasingly Syrian as an identity has been withdrawn from, and the emphasis of Syrian essentialism seems more of an approach that the totalitarian regime has employed. After decades, a totalitarian regime imposed a monolithic 'Syrian' that was forcibly Arab, and relied on an Arab essentialism as the Ba'athist rhetoric often imposed a Pan-Arab rhetoric and identity[93]. Yazbek, however, chooses to emphasize 'Syrian' as an identity that does not reiterate the same rhetoric of the Ba'athist regime, but rather moves

to an exploration of how 'Syrian' can be an encapsulation of all the sects, tribes and identities existing within constructed borders. Therefore, while at first glance it seems that Yazbek is reverting back to a totalitarian oriented identity making, she is in fact seeking ways to resurrect an identity that existed before an enforced pan-Arab identity that was enforced by the Ba'athist regime.

The influx of foreign militants coming into Syria to join either the Jabhat al-Nusra or The Islamic State (IS), seems to add to this narrative of a Syrian collective identity, understandably as that which is juxtaposed to another becomes more prominent in a narrative. Yazbek's frustration with foreign militants is echoed by others she encounters, however unlike Yazbek who is trying to resurrect an identity that goes beyond the rigidity of the traditional, the frustration with foreigners comes in a very particularly gendered way. The foreign militants are a source of shame for the men who were not able to stop the incoming influx of foreign militants "'…you men of Saraqeb, why have you handed our city over to foreigners?[94]'" While the realistic elements of this call out are non-existent, as the incoming militias are well funded and well-armed, especially in relation to the inhabitants of the Saraqeb, it is still a compounded shame. This woman calling out the men around her is using a very traditional shaming mechanism, in utilizing traditional gender roles and shaming the men who could not live up to the gendered role of protector. An important element of this narrative is that these foreigners are predominantly other Arabs "-from Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia….[95]", people who under the rhetoric of the totalitarian Ba'athist regime would have been part of the formulation of the Pan-Arab identity. While the woman is relying on traditional gendered honor and shame rhetoric, she is also moving into the wider scope of what it means to be Syrian, something completely divorced from the Ba'ath and taking in the various elements of what it means to exist together in constructed borders.

While Yazbek's work on formulating and resurrecting a Syrian identity that is capable of encapsulating all identities that exist within the Syrian borders is a vital aspect of her narrative, it is not as prominent as the narrative of reporting or witnessing. Storytelling, is a recurring theme throughout *The Crossing*[96], not merely due to the

memoirist nature of the prose which is in many ways a recording of the Yazbek journey as well as and the stories of those she meets, but also the act of storytelling in itself takes on a vital thematic role. Yazbek makes no secret of her secondary mission in collecting the stories of those she encounters, and the ways in which this is met is often with skepticism or mistrust at Yazbek taking down an honest account without an agenda. A refugee from a neighboring village agrees to tell Yazbek her story only after she confronts her: "'Do you swear by God that you'll tell the world what I have to say?' she asked. 'I swear.' 'Swear by the thing you hold most dearly deep in your heart.'[97]" This confrontation is not unique to this one situation, the disbelief that Yazbek wants to hear people's stories and that she will record and tell these stories as they were told to her reoccurs throughout the memoir. However, Yazbek assures her storytellers that she wants to hear them, and that she is faithfully recording their stories. Oum Fadi, a woman whose village is on the frontlines, grasps Yazbek's hand "Do you really want to tell people what happened to us?[98]" she questions her and again Yazbek assures her she does want to hear. Yazbek has cast herself in a subversive role as a woman in asking for and hearing these stories; stories not only from women, but also from militia men. These are not cleaned up stories, fit for her hearing; these are stories about rape, murder, and the gruesome realities of war. It is when she is asking stories from the militia, when her subversive role is given a name "…Come on, Shahryar, back to the story,' I said to him. He laughed at my calling him the name of the king from One Thousand and One Nights. 'No – we've swapped roles: you're Scheherazade, the storyteller…'I added.[99]" Yazbek's choice of casting herself as a gender-bent Shahryar, as well as casting her storytellers, many of whom are men, as Scheherazade, is an important aspect to this narrative; specifically in queering the narrative, both by redefining the story and creating a gender queer character. Yazbek does not only seek to resurrect a newfound connection to a folklore figure, but also Scheherazade's resurrection is queered. The witnessing and storytelling that Scheherazade performs as entertainment to Shahryar in order to save her life is a vital piece of the 1001 Nights[100], however the recasting of this story in a way that allows the narration and gender to be queered allows it to be resurrected in an entirely different light. Furthering the queering of Scheherazade and Shahryar, is Yazbek herself, who takes on the role of Shahryar in

receiving these stories, but then in retelling them she is Scheheraza-de. She becomes a "dual-gendered Shahryar, with a dual role: I would listen, then go back and assume the identity of Scheherazade as I passed on the narrative in turn.[101]" Utilizing classical literary fig-ures Yazbek challenges a normative approach to gender roles; she queers herself and her role in her own story, she both lives and rec-ords her own existence, she is entertained and listens to the stories of others, and then records their stories. Even in attempting to parse out where her role as' Scheherazade' or 'Shahryar' begins or ends is a futile exercise: she is both living and telling the story. In resurrecting the importance of identity and story and then turning around and casting doubt on the validity of the traditional roles that have not on-ly remained rigid but due to IS and Jebhat Al-Nusra have become even more rigid and unbending, Yazbek is able to queer the very core of her story, the narrative itself.

   In *Queering Migration Discourse Differentiating Racism and Migratism in Postcolonial Europe[102]*, Alyosxa Tudor purposes "…that in the idea of "impossible subjects" could lie a promise of queerness.[103]" While Tudor's specifically explores the impossible subjects of Migratism and the creation of European identity, it can extrapolated on to explore how Yazbek begins her memoirs by rely-ing on this "promise of queerness[104]" to locate a new Syrian identity; one that can exist outside of a totalitarian regime. In doing so she opens the door for herself to queer gender and narrative. In giving herself a non-binaristic gender identity within her narrative, she pushes back against the necessity of the gender binary which per-formativity relies on so heavily, and that changes her desire formula-tion as she can no longer fit neatly into a heterosexual matrix[105] or a love plot[106]. Yazbek thrives on this "promise of queerness[107]", de-manding a resurrection of Syrian identity that must refuse the notions of a huddled mass of oneness, and defines itself by its queerness.

The Clothesline Swing
The construction of sexuality as violence has a long history in Syrian myth-making, where predominant so-called love stories are often those of sexless love stories such as Qais and Layla, Rumi and Shams and Antra and Ablah. Sexual relationships between men are established as only possible through violence in Syrian imaginings.

This creation of a violent men's homosexuality is given credence under anti-sodomy laws still on the books in Syria as well as religious rhetoric that denotes capital punishment as the absolvent for the violence of men's homosexuality[108]. Ahmad Danny Ramadan, moves particularly against this rhetoric of violence, and attempts to resurrect and establish a cultural monument of consummated love and desire, specifically in relation to homosexuality. Ramadan's desire to claim love as part and parcel of his character's sexuality leaves him in many ways linguistically barren, which ends up with him utilizing foreign words to redefine sexuality within the opportunity generated by the surpassing disaster which resulted in the possibility of new terminology that in themselves allow for a different experience. Importantly Ramadan's usage of foreign words does not detract from the importance of his resurrection, in fact it is in naming that which was only nameable through aspersions that he allows for a reclaiming of identity. Interestingly, he relies on aspects of linguistic performativity[109], which Butler connects to sexuality and gender identity, that are foreign to him, and in doing so incorporates a foreign gender performativity into his own articulation, creating and resurrecting a way to love and live that is unique to both.

In *The Clotheslines Swing*[110], a novel by Syrian refugee and activist Ahmad Danny Ramadan, the narrator's search for meaning seems to demand the corporeal, even as the novel is entrenched with magical realism the narrator's articulation of the disaster is how it manifests on the bodies of Syrians, how Syrians as individuals, not as a collective entity, have gone through a multiplicity of disasters and how they shaped their desire and gendered existence. The novel follows the story of the narrator as he attempts to comes to terms with his lover's looming death due to age and illness[111]. The narrator tells his lover endless stories from their life together, his life before his lover, and the life of where they came from (Syria), as though in telling enough stories his lover would continue to live. All the while Death, as a physically embodied character, lives with them and is friends with the narrator[112]. The novel concludes with a final narration of a memory that may or may not be true, of the narrator and his lover as young children playing in a park in Damascus. When the narrator's story ends, his lover passes away in his arms, while he sobs at this heartbreaking inevitability[113].

Ramadan does not provide the narrator a name beyond "Hakawati[114]" (story teller). He makes the novel an exposition of the disaster; the narrator both exists fundamentally, and can be forgotten easily. The choice Ramadan makes in leaving both his main characters unnamed is a poignant one. Within Syrian culture, naming things often resonates with a fear towards that which is named. Cancer, for instance, is often left unnamed and called *that disease*. Leaving the two most important people in the book unnamed, but naming everything else that happens to them is notable, the characters name themselves as gay, the narrator even goes so far as to call himself gay to his father. As the author names one thing after another, he does not name himself. In not choosing a name, the narrator goes unnamed and holds a position of control that is connected to a culture and tradition that personified him as violence. Instead of a name, he has his own identifications of himself ""I'm a fabulist, a writer, a hakawati.[115]" and "I'm Gay[116]". Importantly, by leaving these two main characters unnamed, they exist as a mirage: men who have been able to find love and desire in each other. However, being unnamed does not mean the narrator is invisible throughout the novel, in fact the narrator's connection with his mother and his sexuality takes up a significant part of the novel. The parallels between Hakawati and his mother in some ways allow for a showcasing of how totalitarianism reacts to those it cannot control. Hakawati, a gay man, cannot live under the regime and must become a refugee, while his mother sinks into an insanity that will eventually kill her[117].

The narrator goes further in this parallel, by providing the story of Samer, another gay man who remained under the totalitarian regime and it took his life[118], much like the Hakwatis' mother. Samer is the boy the narrator first fell in love with as a teenager; Samer commits suicide after he is brutalized, forced to marry his cousin, and inevitably is caught in the arms of another man. However, Samer's life is not only the narrative of a victim, in performing his defined role under the totalitarian regime, he becomes violent towards his wife; "She feared me; I knew it. I left the mark of my palm on her face once or twice before.[119]" It appears that in spite of, or perhaps because of, knowing firsthand the pain of violence for being perceived as weak, he continues to perform his role in the cycle of patriarchal pain. Furthermore, even in his death Samer is disruptive to the

norms, as though even in death he is unable to perform his role quite so well, "No one carried my dead body to one of Damascus's mosques. No one prays a death prayer for a man who killed himself…[120]" Samer's death, to the narrator, is a death crueler than that of his mother as it is so close to his own demise. It is a death that weighs heavily on him "his ending could have been prevented[121]" he says as Samer's story ends. It is the bitter reality that Samer's death is the death of hundreds and thousands whose story will never be told. Importantly, even though Samer's life is marked by violent acts, his own brutalization at the hands of his father, his brutalization of his wife and his violent suicide, his desire and sexuality is constantly denoted as loving and romantic. Even as he picks up guys on the street, he is longing for an emotional connection. "We didn't have conversations about kittens or comic books; we didn't exchange war stories about insane parents.[122]" he says as he remembers his short lived love with the narrator and holds it to himself like the sweetest of the bitter fruits, taken away from him and constantly looking for it. Ramadan actively places love as a marker for Samer's desire and ultimately that which he dies unable to reach, even as Samer inflicts violence, even as he himself receives violence, his sexuality is a victim to violence only from those who seek to change him, not from the violence of sexuality and desire itself. Ramadan refuses the narratives that homosexuality is constantly marked by violence[123], a prevailing narrative Syrian rhetoric, and he chooses instead to resurrect a view of homosexuality and queerness that is marked by love, a love that can be found in Syrian literature and media. Moreover, Ramadan does not only choose to place love as central to homosexuality, he also ensures that a narrative constantly marked by violence, as that of Samer, is separated from his sexuality.

Love, or the lack of it is also noted as that which is a contributor to the destruction of the narrator's mother. A woman who is continuously subjected to violence due to her position in the totalitarian hierarchy of power. To cope with this positioning she reconfigures her memories and places herself as the victor when she was constantly the one bullied, beaten, and crushed[124]. One such memory is her reaction to being slapped by a stranger who bumped into her and her child; in her retelling she punches the man and takes her child to get a new ice cream and replace the one the man had crushed[125]. This is

the memory she desires, it fits into her narrative, while the reality of her collapsing and the man looming as her child cries is too heavy for her to handle. Later on, she burns most of the photographs in the apartment. When she is discovered by the narrator, she is triumphant, this meant something to her, to the narrator it is a devastating loss of his memories[126], but to her it is the loss of a reality that continues to hurt her, continues to be the source of her trauma. The more she is able to let go of reality, the more she is able to survive. Unfortunately, as she loses her grasp on reality, she becomes increasingly paranoid and reclusive. Her life, which was never her own to begin with, becomes something she has completely disassociated from and thus fears. The parallels of life between the narrator's mother, himself and Samer are vitally important. They showcase one of the most vital aspects of what living under the totalitarian disaster causes for those who are unable to conform to the particularities of totalitarianism. Samer and the narrator's mother could not survive. She lost her grasp on reality and he lost his ability to exist in reality.

In constructing an identity that relies heavily on storytelling, it is no surprise that the narrator compares himself to Shahrazad, the fabled queen in *1001 Nights* [127]who ensures her continued survival from execution by telling the king, Shahryar, nightly stories. "I'm your Scheherazade.[128]" However, unlike Yazbek whose queering of Scheherazade and Shahryar relates specifically to gender and narrative[129], Ramadan's queering of Scheherazade and Shahryar is a queering of violence. Wherein the original telling of *1001 Nights*, Scheherazade entertains her king with her tales in order to keep herself alive[130], in the narrator's reconstruction, he is Scheherazade trying to keep Shahryar, his lover, alive.

Love is vitally important to the narrative of *The Clothesline Swing[131]*, even amidst the horrors of totalitarianism and disaster, when the writing of the disaster is the writing of the loss of meaning. Ramadan's focus is on love: "You whisper that love is what makes worlds real.[132]" A love that has placed itself as central to sexuality and desire when it has been consistently deemed an impossibility. Ramadan, claiming and taking hold of love, with all the linguistic weight of existing in queer love is this novel's narrative and the way he envisions a possibility of a future. Through reframing the narra-

tives of queer sexuality, he uses the surpassing disaster to reclaim the language surrounding it and to thus recreate what it means to be a gay man in Syria filled with desire.

Ramadan explores how performativity can be redefined not only by resurrecting aspects from its own formulation, but also by exploring foreign aspects of performativity to reach into a new queered resurrection that can create new ways of existence. He reformulates desire, specifically homosexual desire, as being inseparable from love. In doing so, he tells a story that relies on Syrian tradition, such as epic love stories for instance, but are retold to encompass a larger more inclusive narrative. Ramadan relies on a canonical positioning of his narrator. By calling him a Hakawati and attributing him to Shahrazad, and in that resurrection in the aftermath of the surpassing disaster, he not only explores new ways of gendered and sexual identity, but also assures the importance of continuous resurrection by writers finding new ways to tell stories and share narratives.

Conclusions

I have used the fiction and memoirist writings of Syrians in diaspora to give a cohesive image of how withdrawal from tradition and its subsequent resurrections has been shaped and influenced by Syrian writers in diaspora and what specifically they have chosen to resurrect and how that was influenced by expressions of desire, identity and gender. The writers specifically explored the ways in which language can be used to articulate and reclaim sexual violence, narrative can recreate identity, and linguistic choices and framing of accounts can reformulate sexuality.

In conceptualizing, what it means to exist as a Syrian it was important to contextualize Syrian existence, specifically in relation to the totalitarian regime. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Arendt on totalitarianism allowed for a further exploration of the loss of meaning and identity and how both are resurrected in the aftermath of disaster. Exploring how identity and gender, in reference to Butler[133] and Berlant[134], were severely impacted by the Syrian surpassing disaster, using the theory of Toufic[135], reiterated the necessity to explore where Syrian diasporic writers have chosen to find meaning.

This research has explored the ways in which Syrians in diaspora have explored and redefined meaning in tradition and culture, specifically in relation to sexual violence, Syrian identity, and the validity of queer desire. This research has generated a further understanding of what has been lost in the disaster, and what has been resurrected and chosen as new aspects of tradition and culture, specifically as it relates to desire and gender, both imperative aspects of the collective human imagining. Further research should allow for an expanded view into how writers thinkers and artists have chosen to move forward from the surpassing disaster.

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[82] Ibid

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[87] Berlant, Lauren. *Desire/love.* Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2012.

[88] *In this analysis, I recognize that sexual violence was heavily explored as a topic by reasserting sexual violence as a constant victimization of cis-women by cis-men, this was not done to reassert this as a notion but rather to follow the narrative provided by the author.*

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[95] Ibid. Location 3239

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