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# **Notes from the Field: Methodological Opportunities and Constraints on Research Inside Syria**

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### ***Introduction***

More than 13 years since the onset of the Syrian conflict has led to the collapse of the lira, impoverished conditions, and political instability for the Syrian people. As researchers, these conditions also make it difficult to conduct fieldwork or produce findings without the risk of harm to research participants, local interlocutors, and our own personal welfare. Despite these difficulties, fieldwork, interviews, and other epistemological approaches that allow researchers to physically keep in touch with the places they study are critical to maintain in social sciences. Increasing reflexivity to understand these challenges in hard-to-reach contexts such as Syria requires greater consideration when conducting research; however, these difficulties should not exclude these important cases from study. For current or future graduate students, thinking through these difficulties can help both with research design and perseverance around a meaningful research agenda.

Although there is still a need to generate evidence and conduct studies on insecure contexts, social science tends to produce research after the end of conflict due to the difficult conditions that conflict situations present to researchers

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(Theidon, 2001; Ahram, 2013). A “difficult” environment refers to the complex and coerced political environment (Heathershaw, 2009). Remote options became especially prevalent to reach these difficult contexts, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. Although remote methods have been critical in maintaining research agendas, this research in Syria still has obstacles to ensuring an inclusive and participatory environment (Douedari et. al., 2021). The Syrian regime has signaled since 2017 that it has entered “the start of reconstruction” and is “open for business” (Heydemann, 2018). However, Syria’s ongoing conflict reconstruction is occurring concurrently with an insecure political environment (Jabareen, 2013). Several factors create a multifaceted and complex research case: the persistence of political conflict even in a “post-war” era; failed state conditions; a general understanding of regime victory and state reclamation of most territories from a scattered and weakened opposition; and the competing political projects in the Northwest and Northeast of the country.

As a doctoral student in Political Science working on Syria, I have several conflicting demands on my research agenda. Debates surrounding the generalizability of findings from single-N or small-N studies, the need to uphold rigorous methodological standards, and my personal desire to conduct meaningful research presents a difficult balancing act. Additionally, disciplinary standards also emphasize the importance of data access and research transparency (DA-RT), which can create challenges in hard-to-reach areas and, without an understanding of methodological approaches that can be applicable to difficult research contexts, can discourage research projects in hard-to-reach areas for some younger scholars. My recent venture into the field reinforced the significant opportunities and fascinating puzzles that are relevant to continue working on. Hopefully, my insights from my time in Syria can help other scholars think about how they navigate similar challenges and opportunities.

Some of these issues that I will discuss include managing and overcoming the difficulties of conducting fieldwork, as well as the politics of suspicion – a concern that scholars of authoritarianism are familiar with which is still relevant today. I will also discuss research ethics of interviews with vulnerable populations and the epistemological challenges and considerations of data collection from individuals under the stress of authoritarian rule and low state capacity. Finally, I will address why standards of DA-RT are difficult to apply to research on places as sensitive as Syria and offer my thoughts on the importance of cultural competence around the social and political contexts of hard-to-reach areas.

### ***The Politics of Suspicion: Complications Surrounding Field Research***

A persistent struggle in conducting field work in Syria is the political minefields and dangers one can confront as a researcher. Any researcher who has conducted fieldwork in authoritarian states or conflict zones can attest to their need to be creative and flexible when designing their research projects (Ahram 2013; El-Kurd 2022). The deep sense of interpersonal suspicion pervasive in Syrian society makes conducting research difficult if one is not aware of these dynamics. The ‘politics of suspicion’ refers to an underlying logic that the state is constantly surveying its population and that there is a lack of clear boundaries about what exact discourse could get you in trouble. Fear of what consequences will get administered to anyone traversing these boundaries leads to deep-seated societal suspicion. Syrian citizens might be able to share their personal views interpersonally even if they are oppositional to the government and remain safe from state punishment – but only in limited, well-known spaces. The Syrian state’s discursive control shapes what are permissible or impermissible topics of public discussion (Wedeen, 1998). These boundaries are communicated formally through state or party media, while

informal boundaries are found in what a Syrian can consider a trustworthy network. The politics of suspicion means that people are not sure if their anti-government opinions will be exposed to the state when engaging with anyone outside of their pre-existing networks. This environment typically presents researchers with issues of preference falsification (Kuran, 1998) or social desirability bias, both of which obscure the true sentiments of the population and hinder meaningful findings of the truth.

However, there are opportunities to circumvent these challenges and conduct meaningful fieldwork. Doing so requires both an intimate understanding of Syrian history, political culture, and social dynamics, but also a delicate approach by the researcher. Discussions of politics, economics, reconstruction, and foreign policy are not fully off-limits. Depending on tone, diction, and position of power and privilege, researchers can navigate this gray zone of what is acceptable to ask about and what is not, especially by leveraging variation across time and space. For instance, urban centers or colleges present different approaches than a more rural setting, especially in previously held opposition areas. Timing can also lead to the need for varied strategies if research is conducted around major events or in the wake of repression or protest movements. In the current period focused on reconstruction, there is a shift in focus that allows researchers interested in political economy and post-conflict environments new opportunities. By demonstrating extensive background work and expertise on the subject and political context, researchers will be able to leverage networks and build trust and confidence in their research participants. Moreover, understanding one's own positionality as a researcher will also provide opportunities to build networks or manage risk with regards to the research question.

Considerations of how positionality and identity politics shape research design and methodology and affect data, analyses, and conclusions has become more popular in social science research (Holmes 2020; Berger 2015; England 1993).

Interpretivists highlight how social actions are observed, interpreted, and constituted into data through the researcher's cultural and personal position (Schwartz-Shea 2012). Ignoring the effects of identity has become less common now, while concerns over removing bias and subjectivity have come to be understood as somewhat overblown, especially in difficult contexts. Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of the researcher's identity and how to leverage insider or outsider status is a valuable tool to maintain personal safety while also accessing specific spaces and interesting questions. Although the boundaries of insider and outsider are more fluid than previously conceptualized (Merriam et. al., 2001), establishing trust and rapport by utilizing researcher positionality can help access previously hard-to-reach contexts to study (Htong, 2024).

The multiple positionalities I hold shaped my research in Syria. When conducting fieldwork, I found that the insider and outsider elements of my identity both facilitated and hindered the research process and my ability to conduct interviews and navigate the field. As a woman, I was able to access female-only religious spaces and investigate practices of civil society organizations. However, this positionality also excluded me from accessing male-only religious or social spaces due to cultural practices of gender segregation. Additionally, my outsider identity as both an American and an individual studying at a Western institution allowed my research participants to open up and explain nuanced political and social phenomena. I found that their assumption of my sympathy combined with my lack of familiarity with the day-to-day lived realities of living in Syria gave me access to rich descriptions within the interviews. Researchers who approach their participants with humility to prevent a large researcher-participant divide while leveraging their identity can gain different insights from participants that others might not be able to access. Positionality was also important when navigating politically sensitive issue areas. The politics of suspicion interplays differently when conducting interviews from the perspective of an insider versus an outsider.

Interviewing within one's own cultural community can create a degree of close social proximity that heightens suspicion (Ganga and Scott, 2006), while outsider status can emphasize power imbalances or ulterior motives. In the case of Syria, either instance might result in your research participants' suspicions of the researcher being an agent of the regime or a foreign state. Researcher discretion is required to navigate more politically sensitive research. When conducting fieldwork, I found that using my outsider identity enabled my discussions with shop owners, drivers, or bureaucrats. However, my shared Syrian identity did make me stop short during my investigations due to the assumption that I am aware of any potential legal ramifications for this research and what would be deemed too suspicious to ask. Regardless, the researcher bears a greater burden in convincing participants that the data and research will be handled responsibly. Therefore, research in authoritarian contexts like Syria are not exclusive for researchers that share a national, ethnic, or religious identity, but political and social competence of the issue area is critical to engage respectfully with research participants, gain meaningful insight for your research, and ensure everyone's safety.

### ***Research Ethics in Difficult Contexts***

A looming concern of conducting research in Syria, as well as any authoritarian or post-conflict context, is the ethical challenge of ensuring both the physical and psychological safety of participants. Avoiding re-traumatization of participants is a critical aspect of conducting social science research on sensitive topics (Fujii 2012; Weiss 2023). Not only is it critical to consider the isolated effects of our research on participants, but there is also the general effect of the authoritarian environment on our participants that must be kept in mind (Green and Cohen 2021; Gordon 2021; Roll and Swenson 2019). Researchers should do no harm to the participants, and failing to account for participant distress can produce significant biases in the data collected.

Exposure to authoritarian attitudes and environments can lead to emotional dysregulation in individuals (Lepage et. al., 2022). Interviews with individuals who have left authoritarian contexts demonstrate that their consistent trauma due to inhabiting that environment mostly ends, and healing can begin (Douedari et. al., 2013). However, there is a consistent level of trauma for those that still live in insecure political and economic contexts, which are especially prevalent in authoritarian regimes. These forms of "slow-burn" trauma—such as chronic economic hardship or prolonged political instability—often lead to heightened psychological symptoms like anxiety, hypervigilance, and altered worldviews (Kahraman, 2024). These conditions have been observed to shape responses in ways that may prioritize self-protection or reflect heightened sensitivity to perceived threats.

The collapse of the Syrian economy is also relevant when conducting interviews. Even when investigating questions that are unrelated to the economy, participants' responses reflected the trauma of their consistent financial burdens. This is because individuals facing long-term economic insecurity are likely to experience elevated psychological distress, which can subtly affect interview data. People in insecure socioeconomic positions may respond to questions with heightened expressions of frustration or distrust, often grounded in their need to validate experiences that are typically undervalued or overlooked in stable economic contexts (Lerner, 2019). I found this to be a consistent dynamic to confront when conducting fieldwork, and in my interactions with participants, I had to be sure to try to mitigate any re-traumatization for the participants. I also had to account for trauma-informed responses; a consideration that added to pre-existing concerns with data quality. Given the authoritarian environment, I had to enter a given interaction with the knowledge that participant accounts may be heavily impacted by lived trauma, which is still ongoing in the current context. In addition to concerns on re-traumatization, considering participant wellbeing and measurement accuracy are

important considerations when conducting trauma-informed social science research.

### ***Navigating Disciplinary Standards***

Various disciplinary practices which are meant to promote certain standards of research can often privilege certain types of contexts and make others increasingly onerous. Other than the challenges posed by challenging contexts like Syria for fieldwork, new disciplinary standards can deter qualitative fieldwork and innovation in studying authoritarianism (Goode, 2016). Literature taught to graduate students on the disciplinary standards of social science research emphasize DA-RT (King et al 1994; Gerring 2012). This approach tends to treat all data and every field equally no matter the context. However, in the case of authoritarian regimes, which are deliberately opaque and oppressive, ensuring replicability by putting raw data that can potentially incriminate participants online can put the researcher, local interlocutors, and participants in danger. In contrast to less difficult contexts, confidentiality is often crucial in hard-to-reach areas such as Syria. The discipline's emphasis on DA-RT pays little attention to how specific research questions and methods are constrained even by the anticipation of authoritarian control and scrutiny (Ahram and Goode, 2016), and, through its insistence on replicability, can disadvantage rich qualitative research and discourage research in contexts other than advanced industrialized democracies. Requiring research to generate reproducible results is not always necessary to ensure valid and robust scholarship. Proponents of DA-RT claim that these standards professionalize the field and allow for critical policy engagement. However, DA-RT standards can hinder the implementation of critical research strategies such as asking relevant policy questions, generating novel insights, presenting robust and compelling evidence, and communicating those insights and evidence efficiently (Lynch, 2016). Research on Syria can make critical contributions to social sciences,



including work on policy considering reconstruction efforts and controversial UN procurement practices (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Certain disciplinary standards, however, make it exceedingly difficult to carry out research that helps solve crucial issues such as these.

Despite these challenges, there are many standards that certainly should be emphasized in difficult contexts like modern-day Syria. With greater interest in researching authoritarianism both empirically and analytically, meaningfully approaching issues related to data access, transparency, and research ethics will allow a new generation of researchers to maintain robust scholarship. Scholars working on authoritarianism have emphasized the importance of protecting human subjects, building networks of trust, protecting confidentiality, providing precise contextual meaning, and specifying their positionality in generating data while maintaining research ethics in challenging contexts (Bellin et. al., 2018). I found that prioritizing the meaning and benefits of research transparency is the optimal approach to ensure that I am explaining why my data and findings are valid. This includes transparency of method where I explicitly document my research process with extensive field notes, including pictures and a diary to document the difficulties and challenges I faced. I also included transparency in my contextual knowledge. In Syria, there are subtle and nuanced social and cultural differences in specific spaces, dynamics, and even types of speech. This is especially useful to understand when humor is used to convey a sensitive view. Finally, I found that selective transparency in conveying research intentions was the least dangerous form of collecting data. This allows for plausible deniability and overall comfort for research participants when being interviewed. These steps allow for an ethical approach while also maintaining valid and robust research.

## Conclusion

Overall, there is no one single way of conducting fieldwork in hard-to-reach contexts with challenging research environments. However, sharing methodological perspectives will allow us to improve our capacity and experiences in conducting research in Syria, other authoritarian contexts, and areas that have either recently experienced conflict or are actively in a state of conflict during the research process. There are many challenges that are necessary to keep in mind as a researcher, including positionality, participant trauma, issues related to replicability standards, and an overall climate of fear that permeates essentially every interaction. However, with the proper preparation, care, and caution, these concerns can be mitigated. Differing methodological approaches are useful and justified when attempting research projects in hard-to-reach contexts such as Syria, and while these contexts may present unique challenges and difficulties for researchers, they nonetheless present important areas for research, both for the benefit of the discipline and, hopefully, for the benefit of the area itself.

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