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How the Syrian Conflict Shaped Mass Violence Research

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Introduction

Political scientist and Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin opened his book with the epigraph of a reader's letter from 1992, who wrote him that he “painted a very ugly picture of the situation in Afghanistan”, but that it was a true one. Rubin responded to the letter by writing: “If the situation in Afghanistan is ugly today, it is not because the people of Afghanistan are ugly. Afghanistan is not only the mirror of the Afghans; it is the mirror of the world.”² This exchange could have occurred in 2012 about Syria. The conflict has had profound and far-reaching implications that have reverberated beyond the borders of the country and have significantly altered the global geopolitical landscape. The conflict has changed the world in at least five ways: the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Middle East and the transforming of regional power dynamics; the rise of extremist Islamist groups such as ISIS; the unprecedented humanitarian fallout of the conflict; the international community's inability to reach a consensus on meaningful intervention that has highlighted the weaknesses of

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² Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p.vi.

international institutions in preventing and resolving crises; and the fueling of debates on immigration policies in various countries, contributing to political shifts and shaping public opinion beyond Syria and the Middle East.

The tectonic shifts caused by the Syrian conflict have impacted academic scholarship on these topics. As a profoundly destructive conflict, one major impact was obviously in the field of conflict studies and violence research. The dynamic of the repression and subsequent civil war brought opportunities for research as well as new challenges to how scholars research conflict. Trying to overcome these challenges opened new horizons for research. In particular, the conflict generated substantial and methodological innovation in at least three areas: oral history, perpetrator research, and digital research.

Oral History

For all its tragedies, the Syrian conflict has one, thin, silver lining: never have so many Syrians been able to express themselves and their experiences with repression as they have after 2011. As refugees fled the country en masse, Syria's human stories poured out with them in memoirs, interviews, blogs, social media posts, public discussions, television items, theatrical performances, music, and many more cultural forms. Since the beginning of the crisis, I began interviewing Syrians about their experiences with violence. In 2016, this initiative became formalized in the Syria Oral History Project at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) Institute in Amsterdam, for which a broad cross-section of perpetrators, victims, survivors, and third parties were interviewed, with a particular focus on detainees³. These interviews render a complex, rich, and colorful picture of the violence from various

³ Daniela Blei, 'We Can't Save Syrians Anymore, But We Can Save the Truth', *Foreign Policy*, 27 December 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/27/ugur-umit-ungor-syria-oral-history-project/>

actors in the conflict. To gather as many different vantage points on the civil war as possible, I contacted Syrians from different backgrounds, classes, neighborhoods, and political persuasions in various countries and had several long interview sessions with them. Whereas some interviewees were relatively young and well-educated oppositionists, some were fence-sitters, while others were solidly pro-Assad. My interviewees were mostly born and raised in Syria, or had migrated to the Gulf, Lebanon, or Europe as children, and had returned and experienced the uprising. Most were city-dwellers, but some were from the countryside's many small towns or villages. What is relevant is that all of them were direct victims and survivors of violence. Others were eyewitnesses to acts of violence because they had known one or more perpetrators personally; either they grew up with them, went to school with them, or knew them as neighbors or family members.⁴

Most researchers of Syria and its conflict have conducted interviews with eyewitnesses, and there are also several focused oral history projects of the Syrian catastrophe. Pearlman conducted impressive oral history fieldwork, and her thematically structured interviews offer a rich, visceral feel of the lived experiences of Syrians affected by the crisis⁵. In addition, several other oral history projects were launched and conducted, for example by Sites of Conscience, Badael, The Day After, the Association of Detainees and Missing Persons in Saydnaya Prison, and others⁶. Some of these interviews have been published online, while others are not accessible to the public. Some critical media platforms also conducted oral

⁴ See for a similar ethnographic methodology of the 2002 Gujarat massacre: Ward Berenschot, *Riot Politics: India's Communal Violence and the Everyday Mediation of the State* (London: Hurst, 2011).

⁵ Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria* (New York: Custom House, 2017).

⁶ 'Syrian Oral History Project', Sites of Conscience, 2014, <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/what-we-do/connecting/special-projects/syrian-oral-history-project/>; 'Syrian Women Oral History Project', Badael, 2019, <https://badael.org/syrian-women-oral-history-project/>

history interviews, such as the captivating Syria TV series ‘Oh Freedom’ (يا حرية), in which each episode focuses on an individual former detainee and her/his testimony and paints a complex picture of the prison experience⁷. These projects and interviews would not have been possible without the conflict having victimized and uprooted Syrians. Paradoxically, their experiences emboldened and enabled them to speak.

My own oral history data consists of about 100 in-depth interviews with 50 people who I regularly interviewed over a period of four years, and another list of shorter interviews with 80 others. These long interviews were conducted in person with Syrians mostly outside of the country (Turkey, Germany, Netherlands, France, Belgium, Armenia, Malaysia, Canada, the US, the UK), and via Skype, WhatsApp, or Facebook with Syrians inside the country (mostly among the paramilitaries themselves). The interviews were predominantly in Arabic, some in English, and very few in Turkish, German, French, or Dutch. Several clear issues emerged between me and my interviewees that reflected the power dynamic between us. These included issues of trust, truth, and authority in testimony. Some asked for favors in return for an interview, others volunteered their support in an attempt to steer the project. I always asked Syrians for input on the project without surrendering to their moral or political agendas. It was in this way that I managed to maintain the relative autonomy of the oral history project. In the long run, this garnered the respect of as wide a spectrum as possible within the Syrian-Dutch and Syrian-German diaspora. With many Syrians now having acquired citizenship in various European countries, oral history is even more possible due to the increased feeling of safety many of these people now sense.

⁷ See the whole series at: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLe-Mwite1QcQ3JIAdAEsJ_8ySjbjf0weai.

Perpetrator Research

Perpetrator studies emerged from the shadows of Holocaust and genocide research, driven by a recognition of the need to understand the individuals and systems responsible for perpetrating mass atrocities. This field seeks to delve deeper into the psychology, sociology, and political dynamics underlying such egregious acts. Initially, focus primarily centered on understanding the motivations and ideologies driving perpetrators, examining factors such as obedience to authority, group dynamics, and societal structures that facilitate violence. Over time, the field expanded to encompass a broader range of contexts beyond genocides, including war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and systemic human rights abuses. The *Journal of Perpetrator Research* stands as a testament to the field's maturation, providing a platform for rigorous academic inquiry into the complexities of perpetration. Today, perpetrator studies seek not only to understand the individual perpetrators but also to analyze the broader societal, cultural, and institutional frameworks that enable and sustain mass violence. If the Syrian conflict has transformed and continues to influence one major research field, it is that of perpetrator research. Never were the possibilities of researching perpetrators in real time so diverse and broad, especially regarding the regime itself.

The Assad regime is structured around an extensive and very well-equipped coercive apparatus consisting of four major pillars: the army, the intelligence (*mukhabarat*), the special forces, and the militias. The standing army is the institution least associated with regime, evidenced by the frequent desertions of conscript soldiers and even occasionally (high-ranking) officers. Even so, certain army divisions and especially loyalist air force pilots have committed deliberate violence against civilian targets on a massive scale. Therefore, much like the myth of the clean Wehrmacht in World War II, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces are in no way irreproachable when it comes to the destruction of

civilian lives⁸. Still, the perpetrator groups more centrally and effectively involved in the targeting of civilians were the other three groups.

A key, prime responsible among those other groups is the *mukhabarat*, a general catchword in the Arab world for the secret police or the intelligence agencies. Under this abstract umbrella term lurk various intelligence services that cover partially overlapping and often conflicting powers, areas, and jurisdictions, as they often also spy and act against each other. Since 1970, Hafez al-Assad built his intelligence empire with four main services: State Security, Political Security, Military Security, and the Air Force Intelligence. All of them operate nationwide prisons and detention centres where torture is routinely applied against detainees. The Syrian intelligence services are distinguished from many of their counterparts elsewhere primarily by their broad powers to use force against Syrian citizens. Like others, they are allowed to wiretap and spy on citizens, but they also threaten, manipulate, arrest, and imprison citizens, often without warrants or due process. Their prisons are characterized by systematic, extensive, and brutal torture conducted by professional torturers, and the *mukhabarat* has tortured detainees to death on a large scale in its gulag⁹. Since research on the regime was traditionally constrained by strict limitations on sources and access, historically we knew very little about the workings of these intelligence agencies. An encyclopedia on Middle Eastern intelligence, published right before the Arab Spring, admits about Syria that “it is impossible to precisely analyze the exact structure of the country’s

⁸ *Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring* (Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2018); Philippe Droz-Vincent, *Military Politics of the Contemporary Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 235–246.

⁹ Jaber Baker & Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Syrian Gulag: Inside Assad’s Prison System* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023).

intelligence apparatus”¹⁰. The conflict has shifted these limitations significantly and created new ways of accessing research about the *mukhabarat*.

The different elite forces and shock troops that are highly trained and equipped and that form the core of the regime’s assault capacity are the third major pillar of the regime’s coercive apparatus. The Republican Guard is a praetorian guard charged with protecting the capital Damascus and is composed of approximately 25,000 men. Under the leadership of officers such as Ali Khizam (1966-2012) or Issam Zahreddin (1961-2017), the Republican Guard rampaged through Syria and committed atrocities, including mass executions¹¹. The Syrian army’s Fourth Armored Division is a similar elite formation that was under the command of Bashar’s younger brother Maher al-Assad. This tightly knit brigade has been responsible for many arrests and executions since March 2011. They are also responsible for the use of chemical weapons against civilian areas, such as the August 2013 attacks on Eastern Ghouta. Another unit are the Special Mission Forces that operate under the Interior Ministry and has played a vital role in repression protests in the major cities. Finally, the Tiger Forces are a highly capable militia affiliated with the Air Force Intelligence and led by Major General Suheil al-Hassan. It has offensive infantry units as well as artillery regiments and strong support from the Russian military.¹²

The fourth pillar are those paramilitary forces generically called ‘*shabbiha*,’ a catch-all category for irregular militias linked organically to the regime. From March 2011 on, they carried out storming of neighbourhoods, dispersion of demonstrations, as well as property crimes, torture, kidnapping,

¹⁰ Ephraim Kahana and Muhammad Suwaed, eds., *The A to Z of Middle Eastern Intelligence* (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 295.

¹¹ Gregory Waters, *Syria’s Republican Guard: Growth and Fragmentation* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2018).

¹² Gregory Waters, *The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2018).

assassination, and massacres. The highest ranks of the regime stubbornly (but implausibly) washed their hands in innocence by claiming that the militias allegedly acted on their own volition and the government ostensibly did not direct or empower them. These forms of moral distancing and plausible deniability were deliberately planted so that the violence could not be traced back to the official authorities. But it was clear that the Assad regime was firmly in charge of the *shabbiha* and remote-controlled them through its extensive patronage system¹³. Due to the informal nature of their organization and the ease with which *shabih* (sing.) could enter and exit *shabiha* networks, I was able to investigate the *shabbiha* relatively easily for my forthcoming book *Assad's Militias and Mass Violence in Syria*.

These structures of violence indicate that the Assad regime commands a security apparatus with extraordinary destructive potential. In the scholarship on Syria and the Middle East more broadly, none of these perpetrators have ever been studied in any way except for in passing reference. But due to defections of security forces personnel, survivor testimony, and leaked materials, significant levels of information on perpetrators is now available. We now have access to resources detailing the structures and methods of the *mukhabarat* and biographies of its officials at various levels. Access to this material has facilitated strictly empirical contributions to understanding the *mukhabarat*. We now know, for example, that sectarianization obviously plays a role in the conflict but is not in any way mentioned in the regime's own *mukhabarat* files¹⁴. Yet, the research opportunities created by the conflict also have broader, theoretical implications for how intelligence agencies in authoritarian regimes operate, or how groups of perpetrators

¹³ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); "Shabbiha: Paramilitary Groups, Mass Violence and Social Polarization in Homs," *Violence* 1, no. 1 (2020): 59–79.

¹⁴ See the CIJA websites: <https://cija-syria-regime.org/> and <https://cija-syria-homs.org/>

within such a regime cooperate, compete, and clash. The destructive and fragmented nature of the conflict has thus, paradoxically, made resources about the inner workings of the state's coercive apparatus more accessible.

Digital Research

The turn of the millennium has ushered in an era in which the rise and widespread availability of digital technology has made a profound impact on contemporary conflicts. Digital cameras and especially smartphones with built-in cameras have changed and continue to change the way that wars and genocides are being experienced, represented, and even conducted¹⁵. Reporters, human rights workers, and ordinary citizens have access to smartphones and are recording acts of violence to document, advocate, and report them. Indeed, there are digital applications, like *eyeWitness to Atrocities*, that allow individuals to upload video evidence of human rights abuses even while they are happening. The effects of the smartphone on conflicts have been studied fairly extensively¹⁶ and we know that fighters often use these devices for much more than posting on social media. However, both soldiers in combat and perpetrators of massacres use smartphones typically as cameras to record themselves. In these contemporary conflicts, the smartphone is not only a documentation device, but also can be considered a weapon, given its triple use for communication, coordination of violence, and publication of propaganda.¹⁷

¹⁵ See the contributions in: Mette Mortensen & Ally McCrow-Young (eds.), *Social Media Images and Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2022).

¹⁶ Markus Rohde et al., 'Out of Syria: Mobile Media in Use at the Time of Civil War', *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 32:7 (2016), 515-531; Jacob Shapiro & Nils Weidmann, 'Is the Phone Mightier Than the Sword? Cellphones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq', *International Organization* 69:2 (2015), 247-274.

¹⁷ Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), pp.133-4.

The conflict in Syria is the quintessential war of digital technology. These technologies serve to propagate atrocities and therefore serve as an excellent platform to research questions relating to digital technology use (such as smartphones) and violence. Not only are smartphones widely accessible, but the conflicts are also fought by a generation of millennials and Gen-Z fighters who grew up with them and are familiar with their use. There are, to date, an unknown number (but certainly numbering in the millions) of videos related to the Syrian conflict. Syria is indeed a war of images. Perpetrators create hours of video content, often in the form of ‘trophy videos,’ or livestreamed violence designed to spread terror. Indeed, video is changing the nature of violence in the modern era in myriad ways that scholars are still trying to understand. One method of sorting through Syria’s vast digital archive is to research one massacre or case of mass violence, and search for how videos have been used before, during, and after the event.

Several scholars have detailed the pivotal role that media and digital technologies have played in our understanding of the Syrian conflict. Donatella Della Ratta reviews the aesthetics of the content produced by video activists and argues that all parties turned their smartphones into weapons from the onset of the conflict, since the “mobile phone camera is indeed a gun, the only tool an unarmed protester has to shoot back at his killers.”¹⁸ She then distinguishes the videos shot by the victims versus those shot by the killers:

Only those who commit a crime, in fact, have the time to look for the most spectacular angle, fix the camera, and finally render their violence into an aesthetic performance that can be reproduced and re-enacted for the sake of the camera-eye. The protester, the tortured, the victim, must run away in

¹⁸ Donatella Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 131.

an attempt to escape death; their cameras are shaky, their images blurry. It's the 'cinema of the murdered' versus the 'cinema of the murderer' – ultimately, the luxury of a static shot belongs to those who perform violence, not to those who risk their lives to document it.¹⁹

Watching violent footage, whether shot by victims or by perpetrators, is a productive method of conducting academic research into conflict. From a media studies perspective, the focus of analysis is on the staging, dramatization, and other filmic elements of such footage. For perpetrator research, however, this type of footage is highly relevant to understand the dynamic and logic of the violence. By studying this kind of footage we can chart how individual perpetrators operate and understand how a process of mass violence functions and unfolds in practice. Detached observation is one significant method to better understand perpetrators, because, for most cases of genocide, we hardly have any footage. For example, we have no footage of the genocides in Cambodia, Guatemala and Darfur. There is only one proper video of the genocide in Rwanda, and only several dozens of recordings of the wars in Yugoslavia. In other words, since there is scant material in general, we should appreciate that there is so much available on Syria and try to understand what this vastness means for conducting research into perpetrators of violence. Any selection of useful materials for viewing, showing, and analyzing must be based on at least three criteria: the footage should not contain unnecessary graphic scenes, the source must be relatively trustworthy, and the recordings must be instructive and informative.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Uğur Ümit Üngör, "The Tadamon Massacre: Archiving Violence through the Perpetrators' Gaze", in: *Visual Anthropology*, vol.37, no.1 (2024), pp.56-73.

Beyond grabbing video footage from websites like YouTube, digital technology has also facilitated research on social networks by harvesting profiles of particular fighters and mapping relationships via Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. For example, the research of the Observatory of Political and Economic Networks has conducted some fascinating innovative research on the Assad regime's networks of illicit economic activities, such as sanction-busting, smuggling, and drug production²¹. Furthermore, messaging apps such as Skype, WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, Vyber, and others have made interviews less intrusive for the interviewee. Whereas walking into a neighborhood or village and asking questions invariably draws attention and potentially makes an interviewee vulnerable in the broader community, interviews conducted through digital methods are secure and discreet. All these avenues of research were made possible through new digital technologies, which not only have shaped the research on Syria, but their collective experiences of research on Syria continue to shape how these digital technologies are being used today and in the future.

²¹ <https://opensyr.com/>