Sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War
Radwan Ziadeh

In all civil wars in which large-scale massacres have taken place on ethnic or sectarian levels, or those where widespread rape has been practiced, this is accompanied by a well-intended demographic shift. Sectarian or ethnic massacres similar to rape aim at spreading terror and fear amongst civilians i.e. the other- here the one belonging to the opposing sect or ethnicity is not immune from murder, defilement or physical elimination simply because he or she belongs to a wholly different sect of ethnicity, which is in itself a sufficient justification for killing or physically elimination or "shame" men through sexual abuse of their wives, daughters or children.

These practices and direct relationships have been studied largely at the level of civil wars in Africa, or the Balkan War, where ethnic or sectarian massacres have been transformed as a justification and a single entry point for ethnic cleansing\(^1\), Salzmann states that there are more than 20,000 cases of sexual assault in the Balkans during the war period committed by all parties involved; however, the largest and the incomparable proportion was carried out by the Serbs against the Muslim Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Catholic Croat women. In the past, rape was seen as a product of war; however, reports in Balkan War show that such type of attack does not aim at "inhumanizing" the opponent alone, it is a "voluntary act" that aims at achieving future political objectives through ethnic cleansing and claiming ownership of the land by clearing it from the other, and thus the Serbian political and military commanders have been planning this type of crime in advance to support Bosnian Serbs to build a pure cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnical Serbia\(^2\). This was reiterated by the Serbs during the Kosovo war broken out in 1999, where rape and other forms of sexual violence were employed by all parties to the conflict in Kosovo in 1998 and continued to be employed throughout the 1999 refugee crisis. Serbs used this tactic by a much higher proportion. Rape and other forms of violence have turned during the war as weapons and tools of systematic "ethnic cleansing". Rape was not a rare and isolated act committed by both Serbian and Yugoslav forces, but was deliberately employed as a tool to terrorize the civilians, extort money from


families and drive people to flee their homes. Rape reinforced the goal of forcing Albanians (Kosovo residents belonging to the Albanian minority) to flee Kosovo.\(^3\)

As for the civil wars in Africa, Turchyn asserts that militias and regular armies employed rape in civil wars "systematically to strip women of their economic and political sovereignty, as women's assets are primarily in their productivity, labor and secondly in their possessions and their access to the value of assets such as land and livestock.\(^4\) In a field study of the civil wars in Mozambique and Rwanda, it was concluded that systematic rape as he calls it is a socially constructed experience, which is produced through a series of political decisions.\(^5\) He reaches the same conclusion that rape is essentially a political decision and not just one of the symptoms of the war. As rape has political goals to achieve and at the top of these goals is the collective fear that leads to emigration, exodus or collective displacement of the enemy.\(^6\)

The crimes based on sectarian and ethnic grounds may have been the most prevalent in the Syrian war more than rape, but may have brought about the very political goal of cleansing or "homogenization", according to the expression that Assad has repeatedly used, as conveyed by Jamil Hassan the Chief of Military Intelligence.\(^"\)The huge number of the wanted people will not make it difficult to complete the plan (which aims at arresting more than 3 million Syrians, both internally and externally, wanted by Air Force Intelligence Directorate), because Syria that has 10 million

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\(^5\) Meredeth Turshen, The Political Economy of Rape: An Analysis of Systematic Rape and Sexual Abuse of Women During Armed Conflict in Africa, P.56.

honest, obedient to leadership is definitely way better than Syria with 30 million vandals”.

This reveals that there is a political decision to eliminate this huge number of activists and political detainees by killing them under torture or by physical elimination inside prisons in order to push the largest number of their families and relatives to leave and flee fearing arrest and then elimination.

It was clear that the regime’s aims (especially the security bodies and the intelligence services, according to Khader Khdour) “were to ensure full loyalty of the people of Homs who are seen as a controlled institution dominated by coastal Alawites, Despite the fact that the Alawites of Homs are civilians, most of their family members or neighbors work for the army or in the intelligence services, which contributed early to the early "militarization" of the Alawite community, which explains the very high percentage of volunteers from Homs-Alawites in early stages, especially from The

7 Jameel Alhassan. Elimination shall be the fate of those, who spoke, participated and kept silent ... Syrian Reporter website, check the following link: https://syrian-reporter.net/%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%83%D9%84-%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88/
Regardless the validity or the invalidity of such statement, live interviews with Jameel Alassan indicated his use of the same terms and adoption of the same dogma. Check Alhassan's interviews with Robert Fisk, the British journalist, in which the former stated that the implementation of more violent measures from the very beginning could have saved Syria long years of war; check: Robert Fisk, Tougher tactics would have ended Syrian war, claims the country's top intelligence general, The Independent, 27 November 2016, see the link at https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-war-aleppo-exclusive-top-syrian-general-robert-fisk-tougher-tacts-a7442161.html

8 Ahmed Rahal, the head of the civil registry, in Syria declared that 100000 deaths were recorded as from the early days of 2017 to August 2018. He indicated that such records didn't include the cause of death as such were approved official death certificates sent by the regime to the civil registry departments regarding detainees who died from torture inside prisons without indicating the cause of death. Rahal also told “Alwattan” Newspaper- the pro-Assad newspaper owned by Rami Makhlouf- that on Thursday 9/8/2018, the civil registry recorded the death of 32000 people during 2018, in addition to 68000 during 2017 without indicating the causes of death. He added that the civil registry records the deaths under any document issued by the regime-affiliated departments. He stated that on recording such cases, no mention was made if the deceased was missing or else” in a rare confession of eliminating 100000 political detainees under torture. Check the transcript of the interview in “Alwattan” Newspaper using the following link: http://alwatan.sy/archives/162101

area of Zahra in the so-called “Shabiha”, which the regime calls the "national defense". These militias represent a paramilitary force with an organizational structure, tactics, training, sub-culture, and function (often similar to that of a professional army), but it is not included as part of the official armed forces of the state. Specifically, these militias commit the most horrifying and brutal sectarian massacres, such as the massacre of Karam Al-Zaitoun and Houla, both of which took place back in 2012 and played a major role in the demographic displacement and change of social features of the city of Homs.

What matters is that we follow the sequence of massacres committed on a sectarian basis while relying on three main criteria:

**First:** To determine the extent of the number of victims belonging to a particular sect during the war period in Syria.

**Second:** It relates to the first exclusively, and may not be separated, using sectarian slogans (signs – clothing – symbols and others that are used to glorify the particular sect and sanctify its victims) before, during and after the massacre.

**Third:** Identification of the perpetrators of the massacre and whether they belonged to a different sect from the victims' sect during the massacre.

In light of these three criteria, a number of massacres committed during the Syrian revolution can be identified either by the regime or by armed factions, namely Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS:

The report will provide a detailed analysis of these massacres in the order of their occurrence and the role they had specifically in relation to the displacement and demographic shift in Syria, according to the three criteria that will determine what a

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12 The Syrian Network for Human Rights define the sectarian massacres as “massacres of a unique pattern that can be revealed in the killings committed; as the attacking contradictory forces don’t only shoot their victim to death; however, they tend to carry out other practices and behaviours such as slaughtering whole families including women, men and children, burning and mutilating bodies, rapes and sexual assaults, looting and house burning. These are crimes that have a sectarian or an ethnic background”. The Syrian Network for Human Rights: Holocaust Community: The most hideous massacres that hold sectarian or ethnic patterns in Syria, June 2015, check the full report via: [http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Holocaust_community.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Holocaust_community.pdf). I think that such definition focuses on the “hideousness” of the act more than the identity of the doer and his motives.
sectarian massacre is, the direct relationship between these sectarian massacres and the waves of displacement or migration proves the motive behind the perpetration of such massacres in these areas.

And that's what we're going to try to prove here about Homs. This can be generalized to other areas, where sectarian massacres have taken place at the sectarian “cross-lines” in Homs (22 massacres), Hama (8 massacres), Rif Dimashq (5 massacres) and Tartous (two massacres), according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.

With the rise of peaceful protests in Homs, the largest numbers reached more than 10,000 participants in the so-called big sit-in in the square on 18th April 2011. The Syrian security services quickly mobilized Alawite men to respond to the anti-government protests, sending them in counter-protests within Sunni neighborhoods encouraging sectarian discourse. Al-Zahra area, the largest Alawite gathering in Homs, became the focus of the pro-government “Shabiha” militias. That initially drove security forces vehicles to the neighborhoods where the protests were held to open their fire on protesters then became a majority of snipers, who spread across all the high buildings in different areas of Homs.

In response, the so-called "security of protests" arose as the number of Syrian army defectors increased after they refused to shoot protesters. With the increase in the number of people killed as a result of peaceful protests, the number of armed men within these protests has increased in order to protect them and to return the fire, At the beginning of 2012, the number of militants increased significantly in Bab Amr area in Homs and they established weapons training camps. They subsequently liberated a number of checkpoints, at the beginning of February 2012, the regime began preparing for a large-scale military campaign to invade and control the neighborhood. For the first time, the regime used heavy military vehicles in the attack,

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13 The Syrian Network for Human Rights: Holocaust Community: The most hideous massacres that hold sectarian or ethnic patterns in Syria, June 2015


15 No Return to Homs: A case study on demographic engineering in Syria, PAX, The Syria Institute, February 2017, P16


17 Waleed Alfares: Homs: The big siege: Documentation of 700 days of siege, page 42
especially T72 tanks, as well as reconnaissance aircraft\textsuperscript{18}. In the end, after 28 days of resistance, the regime succeeded in breaking into the neighborhood and the fighters withdrew to the southern countryside in order to reduce the number of civilian casualties\textsuperscript{19}. Then it can be said that the Syrian Revolution entered into a whole new phase with regard to armaments and at the same time the regime realized that it would not be able to kill peaceful protestors as easily as it did over the previous 11 months and it would face a new kind of armed resistance. The regime therefore developed its principle with regard to ignoring international criticism, no matter how severe it might be, focusing on the principle of absolute military power and, more importantly, ensuring full loyalty within the army units or security patrols sent by military or air force intelligence. This principle of loyalty has been defined by belonging to the "Alawite sect" where the conflict in Homs has been altered totally by the question of why things have evolved so sharply into militarization and who is responsible for employing this type of heavy weapon to suppress a group of peaceful protestors, into a military conflict between the "Sunnis", who form the opposition versus the "Alawites", who defend the government narrative and form the backbone of the security bodies and must "stand in solidarity" with each other to the limit to defend their "power", "state" and "presence".

Then we find a recurring pattern; a sectarian massacre is committed by Shabiha in the cross-lines in Homs followed by a wave of mass displacement from the same area by evacuating it. The first major sectarian massacres took place in Homs in the Karam Al-Zaitoun on 9\textsuperscript{th} -11\textsuperscript{th} March 2012, preceded by several sectarian incidents that occurred prior to the massacre where gunmen targeted displaced civilians in Al-Zahraa, an Alawite neighborhood, on 26\textsuperscript{th} January 2012, killing four people. Armed pro-government Shabiha militants responded by killing 14 people, including eight

\textsuperscript{18} Waleed Alfares: Homs: The big siege: Documentation of 700 days of siege, page 43

\textsuperscript{19} The analysis of HRW described the severe attacks that targeted the residential areas in Baba Amr as well as the government's refusal to grant civilians safe exit from the area as most of the suburb buildings were turned into ruins by March 2012. Later, sieging, targeting civilians and destroying infrastructures have become the three main mechanisms applied by the government to force civilians to exit Homs and the remaining areas falling under the control of the rebellions during the siege and the destruction of Baba Amr and thus displacing approximately 50000-60000 of its residents. Check Human Rights Watch, Razed to the Ground: Syria's Unlawful Neighborhood Demolitions in 2012-2013, New York, January 30, 2014. Reports state that the number of victims has reached more than 200m who were killed due to the employment of shells targeting the area. Check Matthew Weaver, Battle for Baba Amr – timeline: Key dates in the fight between the Syrian regime and rebel forces for the Baba Amr district of Homs, The Guardian, March 1, 2012, see the link at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/01/battle-baba-amr-timeline-syria
children from the Bhadur family in Karam al-Zaitoun neighborhood\textsuperscript{20}. After the army ended military operation in the neighborhood, the militias, most of them from the "Hallool" family, which live in the Alawite neighborhood of Akrama, killed 47 people, the majority of whom were children and women, and mutilated their bodies. The mutilation of dead bodies and the employment of blunt instruments reflects a criminal dimension against a sectarian background. Although the witnesses form the neighborhood knew the names of those, who committed the massacre, the government refused even to summon them or bring them for investigation\textsuperscript{21}. These "sectarian massacres" were pursued in "Sunni" neighborhoods of Homs where al-Rifai neighborhood witnessed a similar massacre on 12\textsuperscript{th} March 2012, where 39 corpses had mutilated faces and bodies in general\textsuperscript{22}. Human Rights Watch quoted a description from a witness of the massacre as follows: "When I arrived at Bab al-Drib, there were 16 bodies, all belong to women and children. Some children were struck in the head with blunt instruments, and you could see the brain outside the skull. Some of them have traces of gunshot wounds to the head and sensitive areas. Some women are naked, almost completely."\textsuperscript{23}

On the same date, the \textit{Shabiha} collected Sunni families from the Adawiya region, including a large number of women and children, and slaughtered them with knives\textsuperscript{24}. The massacre was described by Human Rights watch as follows: "They entered Karam al-Zaitoun, Al-Adawiya and Al-Rifai neighborhoods on 11\textsuperscript{th} March. One eyewitness said that the residents, who escaped the al-Adaweya neighborhood told him that \textit{Shabiha} had entered the area at around 3 pm. Residents told him that some women were raped and some families were killed in their homes. He said that Free

\textsuperscript{20} Azmi Besharah: Syria: A Way of Suffering to Freedom: A current attempt (Doha: Arabic Center for Research and Political Studies, 2013) page 335

\textsuperscript{21} Azmi Besharah: Syria: A Way of Suffering to Freedom: A current attempt (Doha: Arabic Center for Research and Political Studies, 2013) page 335


Syrian Army personnel were able to enter some houses on the outskirts of the Karam al-Zaitoun and extracted 47 bodies from six separate families. They found the bodies in five houses.

These massacres were repeated almost in the same way in Deir Baalbah in April 2012 and in Al-Shamas neighborhood in May 2012, concluding with the Houla massacre on 25th May 2012, on which more than 107 people were killed. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which opened a special investigation of the massacre on the basis of a resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva stated the following:

"The evidence gathered by the Commission of Inquiry indicates that, during a 24-hour period beginning on the afternoon of 25th May 2012, at least 100 people were killed in the town of Tel Taldo. Shortly after the Friday prayer, a protest took place near the city center. It appears that the government security forces opened fire on the protestors or bombed them. Then the shelling continued by government forces all day, The Commission of inquiry was able to verify damage caused by shelling of the buildings by comparing satellite imagery on the morning of 25th May and the morning of 26th May. Many of the damage appeared to have been caused by mortar shells, including large-caliber mortar shells, heavy machine guns or light artillery. The report adds "most of the victims were women and children, most of whom appear to have been killed while in their homes. The evidence indicates that they were shot dead at close range on the upper part of the body. The killings took place in at least two locations."

The report described what can be seen as the signs or evidence of a sectarian massacre. The report described testimonies collected from those, who told the Commission of inquiry that they were among the first to arrive at the scene. These witnesses described the use of sharp tools to kill Abdul Razzaq’s family. Many interviewees described the stab wounds and the apparent use of the machetes and the


26 Martin Chulov and Mona Mahmood, The Houla massacre: reconstructing the events of 25 May, Interviews with survivors reveal the full story of the bloody horror that left more than 100 Syrians dead, The Guardian, June 1, 2012, see the link at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/01/houla-massacre-reconstructing-25-may

like. Another person claimed that he found many knives, and that he found one of them with the inscription "We Sacrifice ourselves for Hussein" – which is the slogan of Shiites. The Commission saw a videotape of a knife with a pattern like this.

In fact, it is possible to count more than 9 sectarian massacres that took place in Homs alone throughout the period extending from February 2012 to June 2012. More than 593 civilians were killed in these massacres, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights. But the sectarian massacres do not really aim at killing the largest number of the other sect, but to "terrorize" and intimidate them in order to encourage them to flee and emigrate. What matters here is the "brutality" of the crime, its horror, being swamped in the "impossible to imagine" and the absence of a legal, moral or humanitarian justification for its perpetration, that it is only a collective punitive act carried out against the other sect.

The perpetuation of these horrific sectarian massacres was accompanied by the practice of rape, but not by the same prevalence; however, rape remained a common practice within Assad regime's secret detention camps and within the security bodies for a way to humiliate detainees and to exercise maximum psychological harm to their families, especially if these detainees were taken hostage to force their husbands, children or siblings to surrender. So, harassment, sexual assault and rapes have become more common in Syrian jails as part of repressive practices. Unfortunately, sexual violence committed by pro-regime forces has been slightly documented for a number of reasons, because few survivors dare to speak, and reporting sexual violence is a very sensitive issue to tackle within Syrian conservative society and carries risks for the victim. The honor of the family is closely linked to women as sexual abuse of women brings shame to all family members.

Therefore, many former detainees, whether or not they are raped, refuse to say so and prefer to live in a long-term psychological conflict or with a stigma of fear of retaliation or expression of what happened to them.

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30 Marie Forestier, “YOU WANT FREEDOM? THIS IS YOUR FREEDOM”: RAPE AS A TACTIC OF THE ASSAD REGIME, Center of Women, Peace and Security, March 2017, see the link at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69475/1/Forestier_You_want_freedom_this_is_your_freedom_WP3_2017.pdf
The report conveys that “rape is practiced as a powerful tool to terrorize people. Rumors quickly spread early in the revolution that women in detention would be at risk of being sexually abused. This has deterred activists from playing an increasing role in the opposition. The Syrian government has also sought through the practice of rape to increase antagonism between different sects, not only to mobilize and consolidate support from minorities, but also to frame the conflict as a battle between Alawites and Sunnis rather than a struggle for democracy. The prevalence of sexual violence was targeted at those belonging to the Sunni community”\textsuperscript{31}