British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbjm20

Methods in the madness? Exploring the logics of torture in Syrian counterinsurgency practices

James Worrall & Victoria Penziner Hightower

To cite this article: James Worrall & Victoria Penziner Hightower (2022) Methods in the madness? Exploring the logics of torture in Syrian counterinsurgency practices, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 49:3, 418-432, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2021.1916154

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1916154

Published online: 16 Apr 2021.

BRITISH JOURNAL OF MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES
2022, VOL. 49, NO. 3, 418–432
https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1916154

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Methods in the madness? Exploring the logics of torture in Syrian counterinsurgency practices

James Worrall [a] and Victoria Penziner Hightower [b]

[a]School of Politics & International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [b]Department of History, Anthropology and Philosophy, University of North Georgia, Dahlonega, USA

ABSTRACT

While the administrations of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad employed torture regularly as a tool of authoritarian governance, this usage changed dramatically in nature as the revolution moved from protests to insurgency, which posed an increasingly significant threat to the regime's survival. In the counterinsurgency literature, torture's function is generally tied to intelligence gathering. In the context of Syria's post-2011 Counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign, torture functioned more as a way to intimidate the population, forcing them to explicitly choose a side—especially in contested zones. The threat posed by the uprising amplified the scale, form, targeting, and purpose of torture, expanding it significantly. This article traces these dynamics, not only to explain the changing logics and practices of torture in Syria, but also to identify key actors, structures, and sites of analysis. It attempts to avoid falling into the normative trap of simply condemning torture, by moving its examination into a more analytical space, thereby demonstrating how torture can perform a critical function beyond intelligence gathering within an authoritarian COIN campaign.

Introduction

In 2011, protesters advocated for greater rights, fewer restrictions, better economic conditions, and a transparent justice system that disincentivised corruption. They were met by Bashar al-Assad's security forces and escalating regime violence, which included the use of extrajudicial arrests, torture, and even the use of chemical weapons.[1] Torture and forced disappearances have long been a signature practice of the Assad dynasty. As in many of the Middle East's Republican Regimes,[2] torture was largely conducted out of sight, if not completely out of mind, and remained a distant possibility for Syrians who played by the rules of the game.[3] There is little surprise that when faced with the most

CONTACT James Worrall j.e.worrall@leeds.ac.uk School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS2 9JT

[1]Arms Control Association, 'Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012–2020, *Arms Control Association*, May 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity.

[2]Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23–38, 178–200.

[3]Amnesty International, 'Syria: Torture by the Security Forces', *Amnesty International*, October 1987, https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/200000/mde240091987en.pdf. See also Deborah Campbell, *A Disappearance in Damascus: Friendship and Survival in the Shadow of War* (New York: Picador, 2016). A compelling narrative of one particular abduction.

significant challenge to its survival, the Assad regimes employed the most extreme forms of violence to defeat the revolution.[4] Initially, the regime resorted to traditional measures of torture and disappearance, but found these means somewhat insufficient. The Syrian regime's approach to torture thus expanded in scale, form and targeting over the course of the conflict within its counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign.

The regimes of both Hafez and Bashar were undoubtedly brutal when required, but they largely relied upon a system of domination upheld by symbols and a public performance of loyalty to the regime that ensured challenges did not express themselves in the public sphere and remained in private. As Lisa Wedeen argues: 'Beyond the barrel of the gun and the confines of the torture chamber, Assad's personality cult served "as a disciplinary device".'[5] The effectiveness of this device also relied upon the presence of a wide network of intelligence gathering and torture sites that pre-dated the uprising. Torture often amounted to exemplary punishment before 2011, designed to underline power dynamics and deter others from participating in protests against the regime. However, the regime's logics of domination began to shift as the population became more publicly vocal in their dissent and the uprising presented a greater threat to the regime.[6] The 'ambiguities of domination' became increasingly less ambiguous, as the regime faced a growing insurgency.[7]

As the war proceeded, the regime's use of torture transformed from targeting known opponents to more wide-scale and haphazard methods. The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that 1.2 million people have been arrested, with 130,000 people detained or forcibly disappeared.[8] Disappearances were often not permanent and were used to coerce neighbourhoods or groups to ally with the regime or to show the price of collaborating with the regime's opponents. This was increasingly used along with the targeting of particular neighbourhoods and the transformation of hospitals into torture centres. This shift towards collective intimidation exemplifies a wider change in approach, forcing individuals and groups to make a choice between the two sides, demonstrating how the regime values torture in COIN beyond intelligence gathering alone.[9]

This article focuses on the regime's instrumental use of torture to maintain its authority. It attempts to avoid falling into the normative trap of simply condemning torture, by moving its examination into a more analytical space. We highlight the methodological and philosophical problem of torture in much of the COIN literature, which tends to conflate the macro- and micro-level study of the application of torture in counterinsurgencies. We argue that the horrifying scale and brutality of torture that unfolded in the Syrian counterinsurgency campaign was underpinned by clear logics at multiple levels of

[4]See Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (London: Hurst, 2013). Previous challenges such as the Brotherhood rising of the early 1980s were crushed in places such as Hama.
[5]Lisa Wedeen, 'Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria', *Critical Inquiry* 39, no 4 (2013): 849.
[6]Jose Martínez and Brent Eng, 'Stifling Stateness: The Assad Regime's Campaign Against Rebel Governance', *Security Dialogue* 49, No 4 (2018): 235–53. On the targeted campaign against rebel groups' attempts at governance.
[7]Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999).
[8]Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'Documentation of 72 Torture Methods the Syrian Regime Continues to Practice in Its Detention Centers and Military Hospitals', *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, 21 October 2019, http://sn4hr.org/blog/2019/10/21/54362/.
[9]Emile Hokayem, '"Assad Or We Burn The Country": Misreading Sectarianism and the Regime in Syria', *War on the Rocks*, 24 August 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/assad-or-we-burn-the-country-misreading-sectarianism-and-the-regime-in-syria/.

analysis, compounded by more random elements driven by far less (obviously) rational and calculated dimensions, all linked to the nature of both the regime and of the conflict itself.

The Syrian conflict and the regime's use of torture reveals a clear gap within the literature on torture and COIN, which brings specific focus onto a particular form of authoritarian COIN as an important area of study. Within this context, any approach to understanding the relationship between COIN and torture in Syria needs to consider the blurred lines between the state and security forces, between formal and pragmatic sites and differing practices and purposes, of torture. As the uprising developed, the practices became less structured or formulaic and more haphazard as their purposes began to shift.[10] By 2013, it seemed that the days of the 'ambiguities of domination' highlighted by Lisa Wedeen were long gone, replaced by the unambiguous penetration of state violence into the daily lives of Syrians.[11]

Torture in Counterinsurgency

Diana Taylor states, torture is about 'deliberately inflicting physical or psychological pain on one's enemies for information, coercion, or intimidation'.[12] Within the modern COIN literature, torture's utility tends to be framed as a tool of intelligence gathering or discussed in terms of ethics. The post-9/11 alignment of COIN with counterterrorism stimulated much discussion on the ethics of the use of torture, with these debates ranging, as Roger Beaumont puts it, from 'unqualified condemnation to qualified acceptance'.[13] In literature on authoritarianism and that on Third World States the discussion of torture shifts to individual repression or collective punishment. Within the context of a given COIN campaign, the scholarly conversation shifts to the question of torture's use as a tactic that enables ethnic cleansing.[14] Our analysis demonstrates how torture functions in Syria, refocusing the emphasis away from the COIN literature's obsession with torture for intelligence purposes and towards a more well-rounded analysis.

Torture is not an inherent feature of a COIN campaign, but regimes and opponents can often find it useful. Indeed, torture and counterinsurgency often seem to go hand in hand because, in this kind of conflict, fear, hatred, power and domination generate atrocities. Its use becomes more salient for authoritarian regimes facing an insurgency on home soil that threatens their survival. Unlike coalition partners in Iraq and Afghanistan—voluntarily ducking out of distant conflicts when they become untenable—for the existing regime

[10]Ian Black, 'Syrian Regime Document Trove Shows Evidence of "Industrial Scale" Killing of Detainees', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/20/evidence-industrial-scale-killing-syria-war-crimes.
[11]Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*.
[12]Diana Taylor, 'Double-Blind: The Torture Case', *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 733.
[13]Roger Beaumont, 'Thinking the Unspeakable: On Cruelty in Small Wars', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 1, no. 1, (1990): 55. For aspects of the debate on the ethics of torture, see Maureen Ramsey, 'Can The Torture of Terrorist Suspects Be Justified?', *The International Journal of Human Rights* 10, no. 2 (2006): 103–119; Alan M. Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). On COIN, see Brian Crozier, *A Theory of Conflict* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), 159; Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2006), 16-25. Unlike in Syria, Trinquier developed a clear set of rules governing torture and a moral underpinning was developed within the context of an insurgent conflict.
[14]Daniel Byman, 'Death Solves All Problems: The Authoritarian Model of Counterinsurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 1 (2016): 62–93; John Mueller, 'The Banality of "Ethnic War"', *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 42–70.

there is no chance of withdrawal. It is important to note that not all authoritarian regimes resort to torture while fighting a counterinsurgency.[15] For instance, in the Dhofar War in Oman in the 1970s, a counterinsurgency on home soil employed virtually no torture whatsoever,[16] whereas in Sri Lanka, there was torture, but until the very end of the campaign in 2007–09 it was not necessarily as routine or systematized as we have seen in Syria.[17]

It is therefore not simply the presence of an authoritarian regime or the placement of the conflict on home soil that necessitates a regime's use of torture. Rather, the decision to use torture is a matter specific to the regime itself, the country's phase of state formation, and both the state's and society's historical relationship to political violence. Torture is designed to express dominance, to break the spirit and to demonstrate absolute forms of power. Not only is torture used for intelligence gathering, but also for revenge and to sow terror. It is driven by structural factors and dynamics of agency—from boredom, frustration and fear on the personal level, to dehumanization, exploitation and bureaucratized structures of violence at the state level.[18]

Torture has been used extensively in Syria for decades. Regimes that are weak in other assets, such as ideology, service provision or representation, are much more likely to choose to torture in order to retain control. As Daniel Neep notes with regard to the earliest days of Syria under the French Mandate, force and coercion were regularly employed to hold together a fractured polity.[19] Syria remains a significantly divided country, fractured along the lines of religion, class, ethnicity, and region.[20] The specific nature/dynamic of the state and the society, as well as how much violence is accepted by the society, are of crucial importance to understanding the logic of a state's decision of how to use torture during a COIN campaign.

The regime had a complex security apparatus; its reach was vast in both breadth and depth even before the 2011 uprisings began, making it extremely difficult to identify dividing lines between maximalist (whole state) and minimalist (military) interpretations of COIN in Syria. The high degree of centralization within the Syrian regime prior to 2011 also made it easier for Assad to mobilize an effective counterinsurgency operation.[21] This created a climate of fear, forcing a terrorized population to submit to the state's will of by creating such an unambiguous situation that people dare not resist and instead perform

[15]David Ucko, '"The People are Revolting": An Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, No 1 (2016): 29–61. As David Ucko points out, there is a strong tendency to lump together all forms of Authoritarian COIN an approach which obscures a great diversity of practices. This is also clearly true of torture practices in these campaigns.

[16]James Worrall, *Statebuilding and Counterinsurgency in Oman: Political, Military and Diplomatic Relations at the End of Empire* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

[17]Jamal Barnes, 'Making Torture Possible: The Sri Lankan Conflict, 2006–2009 , *Journal of South Asian Development* 8, no. 3 (2013): 333–358.

[18]See Clyde H. Farnsworth, 'Torture by Army Peacekeepers in Somalia Shocks Canada', *New York Times*, 27 November 1994, https://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/27/world/torture-by-army-peacekeepers-in-somalia-shocks-canada.html. Even troops from liberal-democratic human rights focused Canada have been implicated in acts of torture; Omar Sabry, 'Torture of Afghan Detainees Canada's Alleged Complicity and the Need for a Public Inquiry', *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, 23 September 2015, https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/torture-afghan-detainees.

[19]Daniel Neep, *Occupying Syria under the French Mandate: Insurgency, Space and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[20]Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict, 1946–1970* (Ithaca, NY: Yale University Press, 1999).

[21]Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (London: Routledge, 1999); Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London: IB Tauris, 2011).

obedience. However, in 2011, the scale and volume of dissent increased to such a public level that the government felt existentially threatened and thus resorted to extreme, increasingly public and more randomly deployed coercive instruments.

Torture in the Syrian Context

In Syria, the nature of the conflict and a complete mobilization of the governmental institutions for the purposes of counterinsurgency is demonstrated in the government's use of, and innovations with regard to, torture. The Syrian state interweaves lines of authority. As in other parts of the government, the lines between military and the state are already blurred, with the military playing roles in parts of the state and wider public life even before 2011.[22] Hafez and Bashar al-Assad have constructed a complex security regime in Syria, using the Emergency Law of 1962, the State of Emergency from 8 March 1963, the constitution and subsequent constitutional amendments—especially the premise included in the Constitution—in effect between 1973–2012, which declared the Syrian Army guarantor of sovereignty, security, and stability.[23] Prior to 2011, the Syrian government used torture on two interdependent levels: standard police brutality and political torture.

Police brutality was common practice, but not necessarily directly encouraged by the regime—perhaps, in part, because of the multiplicity of intelligence services that could do it better. Prior to the revolution, the regime had four key intelligence agencies: the Department of Military Intelligence, the Political Security Directorate, the General Intelligence Directorate, and the Air Force Intelligence Directorate, each with their own branches and detention facilities in virtually every city in the country. In addition to this intelligence apparatus, there were also elite units within the military and political realm.[24] Each was tasked with informing on not only the civilian population, but also on each other and the military, in order to ensure regime stability.

The variety of security forces was specifically encouraged by both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad in order to increase their presidential authority and to limit, or provide a way to eliminate, rivals.[25] Since 2011, this system has further expanded with the addition of militias and the co-optation of criminal gangs.[26] The intra-office reporting created a system in which even the security officials became paranoid. The system's incoherence and opacity aimed at rendering Syrian society acquiescent and ensuring swift punishment in the case of public dissent.[27] The scale, form, and targets of the security forces shifted

[22]Gary C. Gambill, *The Military-Intelligence Shakeup in Syria* (February 2002), Available at: https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0202_s1.htm; Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama*; Brooks, *Political-Military Relations*; Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*.

[23]Maen Tallaa, 'The Syrian Security Services and the Need for Structural and Functional Change', *Omran Centre For Strategic Studies*, 18 November 2016, https://omranstudies.org/publications/papers/the-syrian-security-services-and-the-need-for-structural-and-functional-change.html; Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (UNFAO), Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic (1973), *UNFAO*, http://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC128748.

[24]James T. Quinlivan, 'Coup-Proofing, Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 142; Talaa, 'The Syrian Security Services', 15–17, 20–24.

[25]Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy in Syria: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East* (London: IB Tauris, 2012).

[26]Charles Lister and Dominic Nelson, 'All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria', *Middle East Institute*, 14 December 2017, https://www.mei.edu/publications/all-presidents-militias-assads-militiafication-syria.

[27]Tallaa, 'The Syrian Security Services', 10.

after 2011. Torture, alongside other totemic tools such as chemical weapons and barrel bombs, paradoxically acted as both a sign of desperation and weakness, and an expression of naked power and domination.[28]

The Syrian regime's regular use of torture prior to 2011 meant that they had the capacity to expand upon existing structures of torture quickly and systematically following the revolution. Many in the population had at least tacitly accepted localized beatings for criminality along with some of the more politically motivated torture. Political dissidents were often subjected to torture in centres such as Saydnaya and held as a way for the regime to maintain power and silence dissent.[29] Dissidents fundamentally unsettled the status quo and therefore detention or even torture was a terrifying, but somewhat justifiable action in the general public's eyes. As the regime lost territory, torture became its most important weapon in controlling the spread of the insurgency, especially within contested zones. This was achieved by heightening the randomness of the experience of violence and torture so that the level of fear could be rapidly intensified.[30] The presence of the existing military-security apparatus enabled the regime to quickly mobilize and respond violently to these challenges.

Torture in the early days of the Syrian Civil War attempted to police the public discourse and contain individual dissidents. As the war proceeded, this purpose shifted and the regime's use of torture became more focused on structuring the conflict. One effective way they did this was by no longer simply targeting the individual who was specifically known as a regime opponent, but by targeting a specific location and randomizing the seizure of an individual. This individual would disappear for a while, experience a level of torture, and then be returned as a message to the neighbourhood or district. The targeting of particular neighbourhoods in this manner was increasingly designed to send a message of power but also to begin to force individuals and groups to make explicit decisions about which side they were on—particularly in contested areas. The rallying cry of regime troops, 'Assad or we burn the country', signifies this change in approach—to people having to make a partisan choice, and that the space for ambiguity was rapidly fading.[31]

This is exemplified in the event which precipitated the mass protests in Syria. In February 2011, fifteen Syrian school children (ages 10–15) in the town of Dara'a on the border with Jordan painted anti-government slogans in various places and set fire to a police kiosk.[32] For this, they were rounded up and held for weeks while being tortured. The regime used standard torture practices on these children, beatings, fingernail extraction, and burning with cigarettes.[33] One young man, who was 14 at the time of his arrest, recalled being forced to sleep naked on a freezing, wet mattress, being left in stress positions, and being electrocuted in order to confess his

[28]Ingrid Elliott, '"A Meaningful Step towards Accountability?" A View from the Field on the United Nations International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 15, no. 2 (2017): 240.
[29]Oliver Wainwright, '"The Worst Place on Earth": Inside Assad's Brutal Saydnaya Prison', *The Guardian*, 18 August 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/18/saydnaya-prison-syria-assad-amnesty-reconstruction.
[30]Alexander Downes, 'Draining the Sea by Filling the Graves: Investigating the Effectiveness of Indiscriminate Violence as a Counterinsurgency Strategy', *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 420–444.
[31]Hokayem, 'Assad Or We Burn The Country'.
[32]Hugh Macleod, 'How Schoolboys Began the Syrian Revolution', *CBS News*, 26 April 2011, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-schoolboys-began-the-syrian-revolution/.
[33]Jamie Tarabay, 'For Many Syrians, the Story of the War Began with Graffiti in Dara'a', *CNN*, 15 March 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/15/middleeast/daraa-syria-seven-years-on-intl/index.html.

crimes.[34] Whereas in the past, these standard torture tactics would have caused fear and acquiescence, this time they sparked protests which ultimately ignited the revolution, thus creating a surge of 'early risers' who used social networks to more effectively organize their opposition and overcome their fear of the regime.[35]

During 2011, the public's calculation about how much political violence was acceptable shifted. In the words of one Syrian:

> Before the uprising, fear was a pillar of the state's coercive authority … after 2011 popular demonstrations generated a new experience of fear as a personal barrier to be surmounted. As rebellion militarised into war, fear became a semi-normalised way of life.[36]

In response, the regime increased the scale of their fear operations, focusing on group level intimidation and developing new torture tactics. This explains, in part, why the severe overcrowding of Syrian prisons and detention facilities became part of the process of torture itself. As one victim of torture reported:

> I was placed in a small cell with no ventilation or light. There were about 60 people in there. The cell measured 3 x 4 meters. We took turns sleeping and we took turns taking our shirts off and waving them to move the air.[37]

This new attitude towards fear changed individual and collective risk assessments, and made the regime reconsider its use of fear in light of its population's new actions.

Form and Targeting: Practices of Torture in Syrian COIN

The shifting logics of domination stimulated innovation in the forms, messaging and target of torture. Indeed,

> since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, in an extension and intensification of the existing decade-long practice of systematic torture of political opponents, the Syrian government has resorted to torture on a massive scale as a counter insurgency strategy.[38]

The use of torture illustrates the delicacy of the relationship between COIN and torture. Although sometimes torture can spark further resistance, the Syria case shows the continuing effectiveness of the threat of torture for authoritarian regimes in suppressing resistance, especially when torture is widespread.

Prior to the revolution, the forms of torture used by the regime were difficult to classify, but fairly standard: burning, bodily mutilation, and beating. Since 2011 however, the Assad regime has used at least 72 different, documented practices in their torture

[34] Avi Ascher-Shapiro, 'The Young Men Who Started Syria's Revolution Speak About Daraa, Where It All Began', *Vice News*, 15 March 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qv5eqb/the-young-men-who-started-syrias-revolution-speak-about-daraa-where-it-all-began.

[35] Reinoud Leenders & Steven Heydemann, 'Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers', *Mediterranean Politics* 17, no. 2 (2012): 139–159. Leenders and Heydemann do not explicitly discuss torture, but it is implicit in their characterization. Given the regime's reputation however, it is logical to conclude that the very real threat of torture became insufficient in preventing the uprising.

[36] Wendy Pearlman, 'Narratives of Fear in Syria', *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016): 21–37.

[37] SITU Studio Research Fabrication, 'Syria: Torture Centers Revealed', *SITU Studio Research Fabrication*, 3 July 2012, https://situ.nyc/research/projects/syria-torture-centres-revealed.

[38] Wolfgang Kaleck and Patrick Kroker, 'Syrian Torture Investigations in Germany and Beyond Breathing New Life Into Universal Jurisdiction in Europe?', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 16, no. 1 (2018): 166.

regimen.[39] The Syrian Network for Human Rights suggests there are six broad types of torture used by the regime currently: physical torture, health neglect, sexual violence, psychological torture and humiliation of human dignity, forced labour, torture in military hospitals, and separation.[40] Physical torture is most common and encompasses practices such as; burning with flame, chemical acids, gunpowder, insecticides, metal skewers, nylon sacks, as well as electrocution, suspension of the body, being forced to maintain uncomfortable positions for long periods, beating, crushing of body parts or their removal. Beyond physical torture, the regime uses psychological torture including; isolation, being forced to hear others being tortured, being forced to imitate animals, and threats to family and friends. The result of this torture is often bodily deformities, psychological trauma, and at times, intense amnesia or insanity. The variety of methods reflects the deliberate application of torture as part of their COIN campaign.

While the forms of torture became more varied, its purpose also shifted. The Syrian regime's torture practices were not limited to the bodies and minds of those tortured. These individuals or their corpses were used as messengers to the wider community. It was not about extracting information from these individuals as informants, but about using them as tools to communicate the state's power and ability to penetrate individuals' lives, at scale. Whether, when, or how the regime chooses to release the tortured individual demonstrates the purpose of the torture. While many are killed in custody, some survive and are released as warnings to the rest of the population, their presence, condition, and the, at times, banal method of their release serves as a message to highlight the regime's authority and control over individual Syrians' lives.[41] There are accounts of people who are held for a year or more, suddenly put into a van and left outside their house. In other instances, detainees are tried in mass trials and the judge acquits the individuals of wrongdoing and the group is released—even sometimes stating that the release is partly because of mistreatment.[42] Still others are released because they will, or will not, speak of their experiences to those around them—in both cases, this spreads fear through the rest of the population.

Some releases are more spectacular—the dumping of mutilated bodies in busy squares or the release of highly mutilated corpses to family members for burial. In one of the more disturbing examples, 13-year-old Hamza al Khateeb was detained along with 51 other individuals during a protest in Dara'a early in the uprising (April 2011). He was held for a month, brutally tortured by Air Force Intelligence, and his body was released to his family in May. It showed significant evidence of torture including amputations, swollen eyes, burn marks, and non-lethal bullet wounds.[43]

These types of releases were calculated to make an impression on the local population. However, in the case of Hamza, it had the opposite effect and served to mobilize his family, at least briefly. His father wanted to bring charges against the government and was himself detained by Syrian secret police. After just one afternoon in custody, Hamza's

[39]Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'Documentation of 72 Torture Methods'.
[40]Ibid.
[41]See Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians* (London, Hurst, 2007), 184. This fits with the ways in which wars change identities.
[42]Conclusions of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Point 54. https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/article/torture-in-the-detention-centres-of-the-syrian-regime-10-01-15.
[43]Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, 'Tortured and Killed: Hamza al-Khateeb, Age 13 , *Al Jazeera*, 31 May 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/05/201153185927813389.html.

father decided not to press charges.[44] This early example demonstrates the continued, albeit weakening, hold of the Syrian regime over the population. It also demonstrates the continuing utility of torture in the Syrian COIN campaign.

Bodies did not need to be released in order to transmit threats. Amnesty International reported that after being tortured, tried in a three-minute trial, and hanged *en masse*, corpses were then transferred to Tishreen Hospital in Damascus for 'registration' and subsequently buried in mass graves.[45] What the 'registration' process entails is not yet known, however, it seems to involve photographs. In the words of one Syrian processing the release of photographs that substantiated torture by the Syrian regime:

> The most difficult part of the torture pictures is not the decomposed flesh, the starved bodies, or even the knowledge that the torture is both widespread and systematic, these things have always been elements of our Syrian reality. What is so difficult, that I do not think we have the strength to overcome is the fear that some of these pictures might show us the body of someone we know and we hoped was still alive.[46]

As the COIN campaign wore on, the regime's decision to release photographs and to do so haphazardly suggests its unwillingness to directly address dissent, such as it faced from Hamza's father, while at the same time expanding the scope of trauma caused by the use of torture.

This quotation highlights yet another way in which the regime uses torture; the regime ordered the taking of these photographs and has kept records of the torture.[47] In these photographs, smuggled out of Syria by a defecting government photographer, the regime identified victims using numbers written on their bodies or on paper in the frame.[48] These numbers correspond to the branch of the intelligence services that carried out the torture, the detainee number assigned to the individual by the branch, and the examination/death number that registered the person as deceased.[49] The regime clearly views these records and photographs as integral to maintaining its power. Additionally, the practice of retaining photographic evidence demonstrates how effective torture is as a tool to spread fear which is not confined to the anxiety of your own torture but becomes more broadly construed to the fate of your loved ones. This demonstrates the regime's domination in opposition to its citizens' subjugation, as well as creating a powerful degree of uncertainty, further strengthening regime power.

As the insurgency became increasingly successful and more territory was lost, the regime shifted its focus from specific, high-value, high-threat targets of torture to the more randomized acquisition of individuals. The subject of torture thus also shifted its focus somewhat. Human Rights Watch confirmed the identities of some of those individuals whose torture was documented with detentions appearing more random. In one

[44]Macleod and Flamand, 'Tortured and Killed'.
[45]Amnesty International, 'Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Saydnaya Prison, Syria', *Amnesty International*, 7 February 2017, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/5415/2017/en/.
[46]Pearlman, 'Narratives of Fear in Syria', 30.
[47]See Garance Le Caisne, *Operation Cesar: At the Heart of the Syrian Death Machine* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018). The defection of a regime photographer who brought copies of the thousands of tortured corpses he had documented in his role laid bare in the West the true scale of torture in Assad's Syria.
[48]Human Rights Watch, 'If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities', *Human Rights Watch*, 16 December 2015, https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities.
[49]Human Rights Watch, 'If the Dead Could Speak'.

example, Osama Hussein Salim, an accountant at the University of Damascus, was taken as he tried to enter the Yarmouk refugee camp. His family worked to secure his release through intermediaries, but those intermediaries eventually noted the body could not be released. Seven months after his arrest, security officers stopped his brother and threatened to cut out his tongue if he did not end his investigation into Osama's disappearance. Photographs show Osama was killed within the month of his arrest.[50] Osama's connection to any opposition group seems tenuous at best.

These acts of power became less about punishing the most dangerous or threatening individuals by subjecting them to the most menacing or debilitating forms of torture, and more about instilling fear amongst specific groups and neighbourhoods by virtue of the randomness of the targeting. For example, fourteen-year-old Ahmad al-Musalmani was detained in August 2012 when he returned to attend his mother's funeral. He fled Syria a year earlier after his older brother was killed during the early Dara'a protests. At the al-Kiswa bridge checkpoint, a soldier confiscated his group's phones after he saw Ahmad crying. Ahmad's phone had an anti-Assad song on it. He was detained and the others permitted to proceed. His uncle worked for 950 days to secure his release, paying an intermediary a total of approximately US$22,000. When the cache of photographs was smuggled out, Ahmed was in five of them, identifying that he was also killed within a month of his detention.[51]

A further example is found in the case of Rehab al-Allawi, a 25 year old woman studying engineering at the University of Damascus. She worked with a local coordinating committee aiding internally displaced people from Homs. She was arrested in January 2013 by the Raids Brigade when they raided her house. Her family was initially told she was dead, but then told she was alive. They attempted to secure her release, paying an intermediary US$180,000. Her photographs were among those released in the cache, showing little trauma, but simply an IV in her arm.[52]

These two examples demonstrate how the forms of torture became so randomized that someone who simply criticized the regime publicly would be tortured at the same level of brutality as someone who physically fought against regime elements.[53] This is torture spreading into the creation of terror and as a pure expression of state power and dominance even in the face of battlefield losses. It becomes about the control of contested zones and the punishment and cowing of those who might join the opposition. This also indicates the regime's (in)ability to define targets and the increasing pressure on its resources.

Places of Torture: From Abstract to Local

These practice-based developments are mirrored in the evolution of the spatial patterning of torture as the conflict unfolded. Before 2011, the regime clearly engaged in torture and brutality, with beatings and abuse in police custody being relatively common and the

[50]Ibid.
[51]Ibid.
[52]Ibid.
[53]Louisa Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, 'The Hospitals Were Slaughterhouses: A Journey Into Syria's Secret Torture Wards', *Washington Post*, 2 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-hospitals-were-slaughterhouses-a-journey-intosyrias-secret-torture-wards/2017/04/02/90ccaa6e-0d61-11e7-b2bb-417e331877d9_story.html; See also Human Rights Watch, 'If the Dead Could Speak'.

presence of regime 'black sites' being universally known among the population. Torture centres such as Saydnaya Prison, deep in the countryside near Damascus, and Bab Touma, the Syrian Airforce Intelligence Centre near the old City in Damascus, had long held notoriety among Syrians as places of torture.[54] However, this torture was distant from most Syrians' daily experiences. In order to maximize the effect of their use of torture on the population, since 2011, the regime has increasingly used not only these distant centres, but also more local sites. Many of the older, larger sites in this next tier were located in larger cities. The Syrian Network for Human Rights identifies eleven of these sites in Damascus alone,[55] while other reports put the number of torture centres in the whole of Syria at just27.[56] These figures represent documented, formal, and large-scale sites. However, it is clear that after 2011, the Syrian regime diversified its sites in its attempt to maximize the effect of, and potential audience for, torture. This diversification of sites constructed an archipelago of formal and informal centres which were both permanent and semi-permanent.[57]

The Syrian regime used near-neighbourhood sites in order to localize torture and bring its horrific reality into people's daily lives. There appear to be two types, those run by police for deterrence or punishment and others run by intelligence outfits. The police sites are used to reinforce police domination within a neighbourhood. These sites seemingly occur in disused or abandoned buildings and often in larger cities.[58] Those neighbourhood sites run by the intelligence services utilize more professional forms of torture and they have broader strategic goals.

Many of these sites are on the peripheries of areas proving to be resistant to regime authority, many are in or near Damascus. For instance, in 2013 al-Hussayniya neighbourhood in the southern outskirts of Damascus was classified as contested.[59] Situated along a main road going into Damascus from the south, it reportedly had torture/detention centres extending towards the area of the Sayyida Zeinab mosque, an important Shi'a shrine.[60] Al-Hussayniya was not only to ensure the area's willingness to maintain the free traffic flows of Road 110 for transport, but also to assert regime rule in the area. Such sites often can handle perhaps a hundred people at a time and are relatively large compared to other more localized centres.

In addition to the permanent torture sites, the regime developed semi-permanent locations as well. These are more invisible and may be used for a limited period, sometimes for hours or days, the longest perhaps being six months. They are usually only capable of detaining up to 50 people at a time. In these sites, simple torture is used to segregate those who represent a greater threat or have more information from those who are not. Those who are deemed of greater value move on to one of the larger centres and

[54]Amnesty International, 'Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings'.
[55]Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'Documentation of 72 Torture Methods', 37. https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago/arbitrary-arrests-torture-and-enforced-disappearances-syrias.
[56]Rym Momtaz, 'Syria Has 27 Torture Centers: Report', *ABC News*, 3 July 2012, https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/syria-27-torture-centres-report/story?id=16703453; Human Rights Watch, 'Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011 , *Human Rights Watch*, 3 July 2012,
[57]HRW calls this a 'torture archipelago' to explain both the insulated and connected nature of these sites.
[58]Author interview with a Syrian Human Rights Activist, Leeds, UK, 3 June 2017.
[59]See map of Damascus in Institute for the Study of War, 'Opposition Advances in Damascus', *Institute for the Study of War*, 9 August 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/opposition-advances-damascus.
[60]Mariam Karouny, 'Shi'ite Fighters Rally to Defend Damascus Shrine', *Reuters*, 3 March 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-shiites/shiite-fighters-rally-to-defend-damascus-shrine-idUSBRE92202X20130303.

the others are generally released. In some cases, these neighbourhood centres are used as deterrents with detainees brought in to listen to the torture of others, rather than experience direct torture themselves.[61]

These temporary flying sites emerged after 2013, almost always in a house, apartment or disused shop. Human Rights Watch found that the regime rented apartments in significant numbers from 2013–2015, which correlates with the regime's low point during the civil war.[62] The apartments used were occasionally deliberately chosen because they were owned by rebels or dissidents, to enable the regime to make a statement about its ability to fully take control of their property. In other cases, the regime rented the apartment legally from the owner, thus making the owner complicit in the torture and tying him to the regime. This is not meant to cause the maximum amount of damage, but rather to cause the maximum amount of terror. The torture reportedly often occurs late at night so that others in the building hear the screams and are deprived of sleep. These flying sites represent a significant innovation in the spatial organization of the torture archipelago and one of the more pragmatic reactions by the regime to the insurgency it faced.

Perhaps even more fear inducing and innovative in the context of the Syrian regime are the hospital torture sites. The shifting of the meaning of a hospital from a place of healing to one of recurring pain was calculated by the regime to instil a fear of medical professionals and make medical facilities unavailable to anyone fighting against the regime.[63] Doctors and those who work at regime hospitals are not permitted to treat dissident or rebel fighters, at least in these certified medical facilities. The regime used military hospitals initially, and then gradually took over parts of general hospitals to form torture centres, eventually commandeering entire wards of general hospitals for the practice. In the general hospitals, the regime required doctors employed there to treat those who were tortured, implicating those doctors in the violence of the state.[64]

The extensive utilization and innovation around torture in military hospitals ranges from the simple replacement of a person's name with a number to more insidious practices, including beating existing wounds or injuries, treating the wounded without sterilization or anaesthetics, tying the injured to the bed at the place of injury, and putting two to three injured people in a single bed.[65] Additionally, they practiced horrific forms of professionalized medical torture in which doctors inflicted wounds to cause maximum pain with minimum mortality.[66] The regime often gave hospitals numbers and hospital 601 became the most infamous in Damascus. In 2017, Louisa Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria reported that in this hospital, high value detainees or those warranting punishment would be tied to beds and used as training for medical students experiencing a cycle of torture and starvation to the brink of death, and then rehabilitation in order to repeat the process.[67] This marked a new innovation in sadism.

[61]Author interview with four Syrian dissidents from this area, London, UK, June 2018.
[62]Human Rights Watch, 'Torture Archipelago'.
[63]Physicians For Human Rights, '"My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor": How the Syrian Government Targets Health Workers for Arrest, Detention, and Torture', *Physicians for Human Rights*, 4 December 2019, https://phr.org/our-work/resources/my-only-crime-was-that-i-was-a-doctor/.
[64]The Lancet, 'Torture and Ill Treatment in Syria's Prisons', *The Lancet*, 27 August 2016, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(16)31477-5/fulltext.
[65]Amnesty International, 'Syria: Torture by the Security Forces', 18–36.
[66]Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'Documentation of 72 Torture Methods'.
[67]Loveluck and Zakaria, 'The Hospitals Were Slaughterhouses'.

There are reports that the regime targeted individuals with pre-existing injuries for torture in hospitals so that the regime's doctors could exploit these injuries and cause maximum physical and mental trauma.[68] One of the more disturbing reported elements put into place in the hospitals was the practice of former or current detainees broken by torture being forced to torture and keep up the pressure on other detainees, similar to the utilization of *Kapos* in Nazi concentration camps.[69] These individuals were given special uniforms and privileges, and were directed by both medical and security staff.[70]

Further, randomizing the sites of torture is the presence of battlefield torture sites. In these, soldiers tortured those captured immediately on site, either to extract information, for revenge, or for sadistic purposes before passing them to superiors. This begs the question of whether these soldiers are extrapolating from, or acting upon, their commanders' orders and whether the purpose of the torture is a punishment or being inflicted as a way of ethnically and religiously shaping the battlefield through a process of 'ethnic cleansing'.[71] There is little written about the battlefield torture inflicted upon both civilians and captured rebels, and in many ways, this is the missing dimension when attempting to truly understand the scale of torture in Syria and the ways in which it pervaded the war as a whole.

In 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, when speaking about Syria, noted that, 'Today in a sense the entire country has become a torture-chamber; a place of savage horror and absolute injustice.'[72] The sheer scale and number of sites of torture and their locations demonstrate this and highlight the indistinct boundaries between formal and pragmatic torture practices in the Syrian COIN campaign. The diversification of torture sites and their banality reveal the sophistication and adaptability of the Syrian torture apparatus and the ways in which the regime developed networks of collaborators to participate in its campaign.

Conclusion: Blurred Lines—COIN, Torture and Syria

Most human rights reports focus on the larger detention centres and on torture practices, while most COIN analyses focus on the value (or not) of information gained through torture in COIN more generally. This article has demonstrated that within Syria's COIN campaign, the regime leveraged existing structures for, and practices of, torture and expanded upon them in terms of both their form and location. The Syrian regime used these tactics as part of their COIN campaign to move torture into people's daily lives, as it strove to shift the 'ambiguities of domination' that held torture as a distant semi-imagined reality into unambiguous lived experience for Syrians accused of (or considering) dissent.

Torture is 'a practice resorted to by almost all conflicting parties as a means not only to punish opponents but also to terrorise the part of the civilian population

[68]Ibid.
[69]Orna Ben-Naftali and Yogev Tuval, 'Punishing International Crimes Committed by the Persecuted: The *Kapo* Trials in Israel (1950s–1960s)', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 4, no. 1 (2006): 128–178.
[70]Loveluck and Zakaria, 'The Hospitals Were Slaughterhouses'.
[71]Ruth Sherlock, 'Bashar al-Assad's Militias "Cleansing" Homs of Sunni Muslims', *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 2013, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10195849/Bashar-al-Assads-militias-cleansing-Homs-of-Sunni-Muslims.html.
[72]Stephanie Nebehay, 'Syria A "Torture-Chamber", U.N. Says in Call to Free Detainees', *Reuters*, 14 March 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/syria-a-torture-chamber-u-n-says-in-call-to-free-detainees-idUSKBN16L0SF.

that is perceived as being sympathetic to them [the opponents]'.[73] This applies to the frontlines, as well as to captured or held areas. Yet the problem of maximalist (whole state) versus minimalist (military) interpretations of COIN means that in the Syrian context, almost all focus has been on the archipelago of formal, recognized torture sites and not on the battlefields, the flying sites, nor on the expansion of the form, scale, and targets of torture.[74] Each of these elements are interlinked and need to be mapped in order to understand the whole picture of torture as a practice of COIN within Syria.

As Syria transitions from a full COIN campaign and attempts to reconsolidate the Assad regime's grip on power, the use of torture continues and the legacies of past practices are leveraged in new ways. The regime is now using a quasi-recognition of torture in order to reassert its legitimacy.[75] In 2018, the regime began issuing death certificates for some individuals killed in regime custody. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented a number of cases of death certificates being issued by the regime.[76] Undoubtedly killed by torture, the certificates suggest it was something more innocuous, such as a virulent disease. The regime's decision to issue death certificates reinforces its power over life and death by fabricating official cover for the extreme forms of state violence used during the height of the civil war. Additionally, as families accept these death certificates, they acknowledge the state's legitimacy by accepting the state's denial of torture. In this sense, we are witnessing the re-emergence of the 'ambiguity of domination', except that this time it is even more explicitly underlined by the logics of torture.

Further research is needed to draw out differences between the sites, practices and forms of torture enacted by different parts of the regime at different times during the uprising. This will further add detail to our understanding of how different components of the state's coercive apparatus, and a maximalist or minimalist definition of counterinsurgency, affect our understanding of the patterning of torture practices within the conflict. In addition, an investigation into who is doing the torture will help reveal different logics and practices. There has been no research conducted to explore differences within and between the units of the Syrian Arab Army, the police, Assad formed militias, such as the *Shabbiha*, semi-state militias such as the Tiger Force, and numerous foreign militias supported by Iran, or indeed those operations conducted by Hezbollah, whose entry into the conflict, especially from 2013, came before that of Iran in scale.[77] Militias as a strategic and operational tool of torture are often overlooked in favour of viewing them as a tool of simple brutality or intelligence gathering.[78]

The Syrian case compels us to examine the interconnectedness of the use of torture by the military, the intelligence services, and militias within a maximalist frame of counterinsurgency in order to understand and predict this, and other regimes' use of torture as part of their COIN campaigns. Uncovering the logics of torture, its multiple actors and spaces at different stages of a conflict can shed significant light on the methods used by

[73]Kaleck and Kroker, 'Syrian Torture Investigations in Germany and Beyond', 166.
[74]Human Rights Watch, 'Torture Archipelago'.
[75]Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'Documentation of 72 Torture Methods'.
[76]Lister and Nelson, 'All the President's Militias'.
[77]Ibid.
[78]Jason Lyall, 'Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War', *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010): 1–20.

regimes in their COIN campaigns to retain power amidst the madness of brutal conflicts such as the Syrian civil war.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments, as well as the editors of the special issue, Uğur Ümit Üngör and Roschanack Shaery-Yazdi, for their help and encouragement with the article and for hosting the workshop Political Violence in Syria: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives held between 13-14 September 2018 at Utrecht University. Helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper was provided by fellow workshop participants, especially Lisa Wedeen.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

James Worrall http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5229-5152
Victoria Penziner Hightower http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0644-0109