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The Virtuous Massacre: A Practice Account of Atrocities Under the Assad Regime

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The Virtuous Massacre

A Practice Account of Atrocities Under the Assad Regime



Painting by Syrian Artist Khalid al-Khani depicting the horror he witnessed as a child during the Hama massacre in 1982.

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Abstract

This study seeks to account for the atrocious violence perpetrated by the Assad regime in response to the Syrian uprising that erupted in 2011. Academic scholarship, media reports, and public opinion tend to understand the state's violence against its civilians as a resort to exceptional means under exceptional circumstances. This study, in contrast, contends that atrocious violence constitutes a well-established practice, core to this regime's modus operandi. The study's objective is to substantiate, illustrate, and critically assess the proposition that atrocious violence perpetrated by the Assad regime is best understood not as a series of incidental exceptional 'events' but as a core practice, consisting of a set of sub-practices. The thesis analyzes a selection of primary and secondary sources in answering the research question '*How to account for the Assad regime's atrociously violent response to the popular uprising in 2011?*'. Primary sources include leaked government documents, legal testimonies, speeches, and memoirs, operationalized with the help of the praxeology research method and a single case-study design. The massacre in Houla in 2012 serves as a primary case study, a narrative anchor from which to assess the strength of the proposition that the regime's response to the 2011 popular uprising is best understood as the manifestation of a long-standing practice of atrocious state violence sustained by a set of sub-practices that effectively make it virtuous across time and space. Specifically, the study identifies the sub-practices of legalizing atrocious violence, narrativizing reality, and consolidating the perpetrator elite.

Keywords: Syria, Atrocities, Violence, Practices

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List of Abbreviations

ASV	Atrocious State Violence
CJA	Centre for Justice and Accountability
DDS	Damascus Domestic Service
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service
FSA	Free Syrian Army
IR	International Relations
HRW	Human Rights Watch
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
SAJ	Syrian Anonymous Journalist
SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SCJA	Syrian Centre for Justice and Accountability
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SSSC	Supreme State Security Court
UAR	United Arab Republic

Introduction

In 2013, Syrian Armed Forces crammed a group of blindfolded civilians into the corner of an abandoned building near the suburbs of Damascus.¹ The soldiers soon drew their knives and began carving on the bodies of civilians for several minutes before stabbing them to death, all the while chatting and smiling.² This massacre was not an isolated incident. Several other massacres were similarly committed in 2012 alone, in cold blood with knives and bayonets.³ These atrocity crimes shocked observers, and begged the question: How could atrocious violence become a typical feature of the Assad regime's response to the 2011 uprising?⁴

Syria had experienced multiple episodes of rebellions and massacres under the Assad regime.⁵ While varying in magnitude, atrocity crimes against civilians were not limited to periods of upheaval or existential threats to the regime.⁶ Periods of relative stability exhibited their share of regime violence committed by the regime's forces against civilians in reaction to expressions of dissatisfaction, prison strikes, or even non-political matters as when, for example, an influential regime member shot live ammunition at fans randomly because his football team lost the match.⁷ Behind walls, in prisons and detention centers, daily 'torture festivals' and summary executions of civilians, often without hearings or trials, became a regular feature of Syrian politics under the Assads.⁸

This feature, argues political scientist Nazih Ayubi, makes the violence of the Assad regime rather exceptional in the regional landscape of authoritarian states.⁹ The value of his argument culminates in that he understands state violence to be a permanent feature of the Syrian regime, deployed during war and peace alike.¹⁰ He sees a connection among diverse forms of state

¹ Dar'a and Hawran News, "Leaked: al-Shabbiha Slaughter Civilians with Knives +18" (مسرب الشبيحة تقوم بذبح المدنيين) (بالسكاكين +18), YouTube Video, 5:50, 2013, [YouTube](#).

² Ibid.

³ Orient TV, "Killed His Victims and Forbade Them from Screaming.. Who is This Assad Militia Henchman known as 'the bat'?" (قتل ضحاياه ومنعهم حتى من الصراخ ألماً.. من هو مجرم ميليشيا أسد الملقب بـ "الخفاش"), YouTube Video, 3:15, 2022, [Orient TV](#).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sam Dagher, *Assad, or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*, 1st Edition. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁷ Omar Abu Khalil, "Fawwaz al-Assad Dies After Decades of Terrorizing Latakia" (وفاة فواز الأسد بعد عقود من الترهيب) (باللاذقية), *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2015, [Al Jazeera](#).

⁸ Mustafa Khalifa, *The Shell: Memories of A Hidden Observer*, 1st Edition. (Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2017).

⁹ Nazih Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, 1st Edition. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995).

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

violence (atrocities, torture, rape, or bombardment), understanding them all as symptoms of the regime's "fierce" mode of government.¹¹ Insightful as it is, Ayubi's analysis falls short of accounting for the mechanisms by which this mode of government is sustained and reproduced. The exceptional violence of the Syrian regime, he argues, is due to the weakness of the state, which lacks the legitimacy to accomplish its objectives through peaceful means.¹² State violence, in other words, is functional; an efficient means for the state to accomplish its objectives. But should extreme state violence be taken for granted as an effective means to control society? An alternative argument can be made, that violence is rather costly and inefficient, especially in cases of state weakness.¹³ It is this phenomenon that Ayubi's argument left unexplained: how 'fierce' states can maintain exceptional levels of violence without succumbing to burdening costs.

This research project can be seen as an attempt to pick up where Ayubi left off, by suggesting mechanisms that account for the making of atrocious violence a prominent feature of Syria under the Assad regime. Thematically, the focus is placed on the atrociously violent response unleashed by the Assad regime following the 2011 uprising.¹⁴ This study challenges the notion that Atrocious State Violence (ASV) committed by the regime after 2011 was an exceptional series of incidental 'events'.¹⁵ Instead, it advances the argument that ASV constitutes a long-standing core practice for this regime, sustained by a set of sub-practices that make ASV 'virtuous' from the perspective of perpetrators. In this way, the argument can account for how ASV against civilians in Syria became efficient and permanent, producing torture festivals in prisons, murder of protestors, and arbitrary bombardment of densely populated cities.¹⁶

After World War II, scholars grew increasingly interested in studying atrocity crimes committed by states.¹⁷ The umbrella term 'atrocity crimes' was first introduced by legal scholar David Scheffer in 2006 encompassing exceptional forms of collective violence.¹⁸ These forms of

¹¹ Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State*, 1995, 332.

¹² *Ibid.*, 447-448.

¹³ Maurice Punch, *State Violence, Collusion, and the Troubles: Counter Insurgency, Government Deviance and Northern Ireland*, 1st Edition. (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁴ Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of The Syrian Tragedy*, 1st Edition. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 97.

¹⁵ Anthony Cordesman, "Assad: The Real "Butcher's Bill" in Syria," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 3, 2017, [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#).

¹⁶ Khalifa, *The Shell*, 2017.

¹⁷ Alette Smeulers, "Individuals as Perpetrators of Atrocity Crimes," In *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes*, ed. Barbara Holá, Maartje Weerdesteijn, Hollie Nyseth Brehm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 282.

¹⁸ David Scheffer, "Genocide and Atrocity Crimes," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* Volume 1, no. 3 (2006): 230, [Available Online](#).

collective violence, are united by ‘the atrocious character’, defined as the moral shock that they create among the observers.¹⁹ In addition, cases of ASV are characterized by processes of ‘collectivization’ whereby the violence emerges as a result of what the group of perpetrators comes to consider ordinary and normal.²⁰ Effectively, ASV became an ‘analytical category’ employed to study various forms of collective violence perpetrated by states against civilians.²¹ Literature on ASV can be grouped into two related approaches or topics of interest, that mirror Aristotle’s distinction between ‘efficient’ and ‘material’ causes.²² The first approach, this study observes, focuses on ASV as the result of changes independent of the political system that perpetuates them [e.g., foreign politics or war dynamics], while the second approach focuses on ASV as the result of structural characteristics of that political system [e.g., ideology]. Needless to say, both approaches are ideal types that seldom appear on their own in academic sources.²³ The distinction highlighted in this study, nevertheless, captures scholars’ tendency to focus on one approach over the other.

This categorization applies to the scholarship on the Assad regime’s ASV. One group of studies accounts for the ‘external’ reasons that compelled the regime to resort to ASV.²⁴ Notwithstanding the variety of arguments offered by this group, the Assad regime’s apparent intention to hold onto power against all odds remains the core assumption.²⁵ For this group, ASV tends to be viewed as an instrument or as a means to an end, offering a ‘functional’ approach to the subject. Alternatively, another group of studies seeks to investigate how the regime’s ‘internal’ characteristics contribute to ASV.²⁶ The literature shows that sectarianism remains the most cited

¹⁹ Thomas Brudholm and Thomas Cushman, "Introduction," In *The Religious in Responses to Mass Atrocity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Thomas Brudholm and Thomas Cushman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6.

²⁰ Mark Drumbl, "Atrocity Crimes as a Different Type of Crime?" In *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes*, ed. Barbora Holá, Maartje Weerdesteijn, Hollie Nyseth Brehm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 76.

²¹ Brudholm & Cushman, "Introduction," 2009, 2-3.

²² John Parker, "Structuration Theories," In *Historical Development and Theoretical Approaches in Sociology*, ed. Charles Crothers (Abu Dhabi: EOLSS Publications, 2010), 46.

²³ Ingo Schröder & Bettina Schmidt, "Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices," In *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, ed. Ingo Schröder & Bettina Schmidt (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 2.

²⁴ George Gause, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2011, [Foreign Affairs](#).

²⁵ David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of The House of Assad*, 1st Edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

²⁶ Robin Yassin-Kassab & Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 1st Edition. (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

characteristic in relation to ASV.²⁷ For the second group, ASV is seen as inherent to the regime's fabric, offering a 'structural' approach to the subject.

This research project leans towards the second group of studies, building on the notion than in understanding the how we may come to better understand the why.²⁸ The following research question guides the analysis: *How to account for the Assad regime's atrociously violent response to the popular uprising in 2011?* To answer that question, the research draws on practice theory. It employs the praxeology research method and a single case-study design. Specifically, the massacre which occurred in a peripheral town near the suburbs of Homs in May 2012. Houla was the site of the most atrocious massacre up to that point in the conflict, as part of the regime's effort to put down the city's rebellion.²⁹ Fourteen hours of arbitrary bombardment were concluded by a ground assault where armed men went on a spree of random killings using cold weapons.³⁰ More than a hundred civilians lost their lives, the majority of which were children executed with knives.³¹

The Houla massacre, this research proposes, forms part of a long-standing pattern of ASV against civilians. More than twenty documented massacres similar to Houla's occurred throughout Syria between the beginning of 2012 and the end of 2013, excluding atrocities committed with arbitrary bombing or chemical weapons.³² In the twenty massacres, an estimated two thousand civilians perished due to summary executions and gruesome killings.³³ Recently, evidence on similar massacres that occurred during, before, and after that period came out.³⁴ The most famous examples are those of the 'grave digger', a defector who was ordered to move large number of corpses from *Mukhabarat* (intelligence bureau) facilities to mass graves, 'Caesar', another defector who was ordered by regime agencies to photograph thousands of victims, and al-Tadamon

²⁷ Joseph Daher, *Syria After the Uprising: The Political Economy of State Resilience*, 1st Edition. (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 1.

²⁸ Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 182.

²⁹ Al Hurra, "al-Houla.. 8 Years Since the Most Barbaric Massacre Committed by the Syrian Forces" (الحولة.. 8 سنوات (على أكثر مجزرة وحشية ارتكبتها القوات السورية), *Al Hurra*, May 26, 2020, [Al Hurra - Dubai](#).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Noun Post, "With Knives, A Report on Massacres with Cold Weapons in Syria," *Noun Post*, December 10, 2013, [Noun Post](#).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Martin Chulov, "Massacre in Tadamon: How Two Academics Hunted Down a Syrian War Criminal," *The Guardian*, April 27, 2022, [The Guardian](#).

massacre, in which civilians were blindfolded and shot in the head.³⁵ In other words, this study highlights ASV as a core regime practice that is enabled and sustained by a set of sub-practices that ensures its recurrence across time and space.

Thesis Outline

The research is divided into seven chapters that flesh out the argument and provide a complete answer to the research question. Chapter one offers a discussion on the existing literature that deals with the Assad regime's ASV after 2011 positioned within the broader scholarship on ASV. Chapter two discusses practice theory and its applicability to this subject as a theoretical framework. Chapter three outlines the methodological foundation of this inquiry, based on insights from case study design and practice-based research, as well as the collection and utilization of sources. Empirical chapters four, five, and six trace how ASV in Assad's Syria has been established as virtuous through the sub-practices of legalizing, narrativizing, and consolidating, and through using the Houla massacre as a narrative anchor. Before concluding the research, chapter seven critically assesses the validity of the proposed practice interpretation by examining counter arguments, based on evidence that suggests the regime's atrocious violence was perhaps rather exceptional.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This chapter examines different scholarly perspectives on the Assad regime's ASV inflicted on the Syrian people in response to the 2011 uprising. The concept of ASV, serves as an umbrella for a variety of broadly similar concepts found in secondary sources. Such concepts include mass violence, indiscriminate violence, or arbitrary violence, in addition to massacres, atrocities, and terror. The section arranges sources into four categories that map out the major themes discussed by the literature. First among the four categories outlines the literature discussing *the role of foreign politics* that allowed the regime's ASV to occur. The second category, *regime maneuvers and conflict dynamics*, offers sources that account for ASV as the result of the regime's strategic calculation to win the war. The third category exhibits several sources discussing the role that *the*

³⁵ Chulov, "Massacre in Tadamon," 2022.

Christophe Ayad and Madjid Zerrouky, "My Brain Shut Down So I Could Work: The Confession of the Assad Regime's Gravediggers," *Le Monde*, July 27, 2022, [Le Monde](#).

sectarian element in Syria played in ASV. The fourth category focuses on *the impact of regime structures* as enablers of ASV. The first three categories lean on the spectrum toward perceiving ASV as ‘functional’ or incidental. The fourth category, alternatively, understands ASV to be systematic, sustained by the regime’s structural features. The objective of this critical literature review is to outline and navigate through both perspectives on the regime’s ASV, to demonstrate the academic gap that this research aims to fill.

1.1. The Role of Foreign Politics

The puzzle at the heart of the debate in this category is whether foreign politics could have played a productive role in the Syrian conflict to limit the regime’s atrocious response to the 2011 uprising. Thus far, the consensus according to this perspective holds that foreign intervention by regional and international actors intensified the regime’s violence against civilians.³⁶ The type of decisions that foreign powers could have pursued with the regime and the opposition to reduce the level of violence remains, therefore, contested.³⁷ International politics scholar, Alex Bellamy, sees the regime’s ASV partially as a result of the international community’s failure to prioritize the safety of civilians over other considerations and interests.³⁸ "False assumptions" about the possibility of negotiating with the regime, he adds, emboldened the latter to commit ASV.³⁹

Alternatively, legal scholars Asli Bâli & Aziz Rana disagree, arguing that the failure to pursue a full diplomatic approach with the Assad regime contributed to the ASV that the regime used without hesitation.⁴⁰ Instead, the international community provided armed assistance to opposition forces which further escalated the conflict.⁴¹ The ‘neglected’ alternative was seeking a settlement to the conflict through peaceful means.⁴² As the scholar and head of the Dutch Special Envoy to Syria Nikolaos van Dam noted, using "foreign pressure to stop the violence reflected naivety in ‘Western thinking’ because it created the opposite effect."⁴³ Similarly, Former British

³⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch & Omar Imady, "Conclusion: The Early Trajectory of the Syrian Uprising," In *The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch & Omar Imady (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 331.

³⁷ Alex Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed: Atrocities, War, and the Failure of International Diplomacy*, 1st Edition. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁰ Asli Bâli & Aziz Rana, "Why There is no Military Solution to the Syrian Conflict," In *The Syria Dilemma*, ed. Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013), 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴² Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, 1st Edition. (London: Verso, 2016), 28.

⁴³ Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, 1st Edition. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 85.

Ambassador to Syria Henry Hogger contends that unlike with other Arab regimes, the Assad regime had powerful and willing backers.⁴⁴ Allies of the opposition, on the other hand, were motivated by nothing more than their desire to topple the Assad regime.⁴⁵ This perspective is particularly relevant coming from expert insiders to the policy making of Western governments.

However, this 'one-size-fits-all' commitment to negotiations, this study observes, conceals the implicit assumption that political regimes are homogeneous, minimizing thereby the unique attributes of political actors. When seen from a perspective sensitive to the particularities of Syria, the history of the regime's foreign policy reveals that the regime uses negotiations only to buy time until the various parties are worn out and a new, more advantageous situation arises.⁴⁶ David Lesch, a Middle-East history scholar, contends, for example, that the regime's repression intended to make negotiations impossible and foster international condemnation, hence perpetuating the "self-fulfilling prophecy" that regards the uprising as a global conspiracy.⁴⁷ Seen through that prism, before crushing the protest movement the regime was neither capable of negotiating nor would it concede to foreign pressure, which made the uprising only more popular.⁴⁸

Other opinions, including those of International Relations (IR) scholar Christopher Phillips, claim that conflicting interests took precedence over negotiations.⁴⁹ Regional and international tensions, coupled with Syria's topography and the regime's lean towards prioritizing violence, meant that a constructive role for outside forces was improbable.⁵⁰ These factors combined to produce a reliable coalition composed of Russian air force and Iranian-backed militias which emboldened the Assad regime.⁵¹ Even if Russia expressed initial hesitance about the regime's approach to the crisis, the Kremlin saw the conflict primarily through the context of its rivalry with the West.⁵² On Iran's side, the threat posed to its only ally in the Arab world led to the

⁴⁴ Henry Hogger, "Syria: Hope or Despair?," *Asian Affairs* Volume 45, no. 1, (February 14, 2014): 5, (London: Taylor & Francis Group).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ Bente Scheller, *The Wisdom of Syria's Waiting Game: Foreign Policy Under the Assads*, 1st Edition. (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 9.

⁴⁷ Lesch, *Syria*, 2012, 213.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁹ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, 1st Edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, 1st Edition. (Washington: Public Affairs, 2017).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵² Ohannes Geukjian, *The Russian Military Intervention in Syria*, 1st Edition. (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 107.

escalation of geopolitical tensions, and accordingly, of the regime's ASV.⁵³ Against this background, Western concerns about direct intervention in the conflict were fueled by the looming threat that Syria would plunge into post-conflict chaos, similar to Iraq and Libya.⁵⁴ Combined with the willingness of the Assad regime to escalate, Western inaction, as well as complicity and support from Russia and Iran contributed to the outbreak of ASV.⁵⁵ In a nutshell, as political scientist Marc Lynch argues, the misfortune of revolutions in Libya and Syria is that they had to contend with ongoing cold wars between different regional and international actors.⁵⁶

To summarize, this perspective highlights different dynamics of regional and international politics that allowed the Assad regime to use ASV after 2011. A critique of this viewpoint highlights its treatment of the domestic dynamics that makes Syria's tragedy exceptional as secondary to the role played by foreign powers. Said differently, this perspective overlooks how different political regimes can react differently to similar circumstances in international politics. Therefore, it views the regime's domestic maneuvers after 2011 which furnished the road for ASV against civilians as secondary. These maneuvers constitute another theme in the scholarship highlighting the regime's interests and the dynamics of the civil war.

1.2. Regime Maneuvers and Conflict Dynamics

Sources in this category focus on the domestic circumstances that made the response of the Assad regime to the 2011 uprising atrocious. The main question concerns how the regime was able to maneuver through these exceptional circumstances, use ASV, and remain in power. Van Dam, for instance, notes that the national scale of the protest movement, which is unprecedented throughout the regime's history, contributed to the use of ASV in the face of what the regime experienced as an existential threat.⁵⁷ In response to this unusual circumstance, the regime's maneuvers capitalized on the experience of other autocrats who were facing similar upheaval, argues Syrian

⁵³ Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy During Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*, 1st Edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 124.

⁵⁴ Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*, 2017.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁷ van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, 2017, 1.

authors Robin Yassin-Kassab & Leila al-Shami.⁵⁸ The lesson that the Assad regime drew from Arab uprisings is that it must contain the early protest movement through violence.⁵⁹

However, and to avoid the fate of Qaddafi, the regime adopted a gradual approach to repression, argues political scientist Reinoud Leenders.⁶⁰ Starting with a disproportionate response against unarmed protestors, triggered a ripple effect that made violence unstoppable.⁶¹ The other side of the coin, adds Leenders, is that even when repression failed to stop the uprising, it led to the militarization of the protest movement, to the regime's convenience.⁶² The rationale behind militarizing the opposition is that it would allow the regime to wager on its comparative advantage in military strength to stay in power.⁶³ Political scientist Philippe Droz-Vincent agrees with that assessment arguing that as a result of the regime's violent practices the militant opposition was born allowing the regime to justify its intense crackdown.⁶⁴ The rise of the Islamic State, for instance, is an example of why the regime's violent strategy succeeded, argues experts on violent extremism Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg.⁶⁵ Jihadist currents, which emerged in response to the regime's escalation, allowed the regime to reinforce its, otherwise fabricated, narrative of the opposition being co-opted by Islamists.⁶⁶ In this sense, "the logic of war has been an essential way for the Assad regime to resist the rise of mass politics, to contain popular demands and social movements, to fracture the militarized opposition, and to reassert a level of control over a restive society by escalating violence and letting the country plunge into civil war."⁶⁷

In short, this category, diverse as the opinions reflected are, is united by viewing the regime's interest in escalating the conflict as the main reason for the occurrence of ASV. Therefore, understanding how the Assad regime functions as a 'civil war regime' is essential to

⁵⁸ Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 2016, 67.

⁵⁹ Reinoud Leenders, "How the Syrian Regime Outsmarted Its Enemies," *Current History* Volume 112, no. 758 (December 2013): 332, (California: University of California Press).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁶¹ Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 2016, 116.

⁶² Leenders, "How the Syrian Regime Outsmarted Its Enemies," 2013, 332.

⁶³ Philippe Droz-Vincent, "State of Barbary (take two): From the Arab Spring to the Return of Violence in Syria," *The Middle East Journal* Volume 68, no. 1, (2014): 51, (Washington: Middle East Institute).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁵ Anne Speckhard & Molly Ellenberg, "The Effects of Assad's Atrocities and the Call to Foreign Fighters to Come to Syria on the Rise and Fall of the ISIS Caliphate," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* Volume 14, no. 2, (October 15, 2020): 2, (London: Taylor & Francis Group).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁶⁷ Droz-Vincent, "State of Barbary," 2014, 53.

comprehending ASV after 2011.⁶⁸ However, this category offers a temporal perspective of ASV by prioritizing the regime's maneuvers in the face of exceptional circumstances. Said differently, this approach overlooks the historicity of violence, the way certain historical trends and characteristics in Syria might have contributed to the escalation. One of the most academically renowned trends, and the subject of the next section, is Syria's sectarian makeup.

1.3. The Sectarian Element in Syria

In this category, the discussion focuses on the ways in which sectarianism contributed to the regime's ASV in response to the 2011 uprising. As shown by the seminal writings of journalist Patrick Seale and IR scholar Raymond Hinnebusch, sectarianism occupies a prominent position in academic debates on Syrian history and politics.⁶⁹ The range of scholarly perspectives reveals the numerous ways in which sectarianism's impact on the regime's ASV after 2011 is understood. Syrian political activist Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, for instance, sees the regime's reliance on sectarianism as part of a global shift towards governance based on "genopolitics."⁷⁰ Genopolitics refers to the international community's shift towards prioritizing the war on terror which permits countries to revert to national or ethnic bases of authority, where states can reassert their dominance.⁷¹ In such a system, he adds, Assad blended sectarian identities with the discourse of fighting terrorism to justify and sustain ASV.⁷²

The majority of sources, however, portray sectarianism as a characteristic of Syrian society without going into specifics regarding its concrete material manifestations that affect the regime's ASV. Political scientist Stéphane Valter for example blames "the sectarian nature of the regime" for perpetuating ASV without expanding on what that 'nature' means in practice, or how it came to be.⁷³ In an attempt to overcome this limitation, some literature see the sectarian factor to be part of the regime's plan that allows it to plant fears, and harvest minority participation in ASV.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 55.

⁶⁹ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, 1st Edition. (California: The University of California Press, 1989).

Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 2001.

⁷⁰ Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, "Terror, Genocide, and the Genocratic Turn," *Al Jumhuriya*, September 19, 2019, [Al Jumhuriya](#).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Stéphane Valter, "The Dynamics of Power in Syria," In *The Syrian Uprising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch & Omar Imady (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 51.

⁷⁴ Daher, *Syria After the Uprising*, 2019.

Syrian scholar Joseph Daher argues that the regime's repression after 2011 was a strategic calculation aimed at 'sectarianizing' the conflict which in turn intensified ASV.⁷⁵ Similarly, the regime, as Hinnebusch and Syrian novelist Omar Imady argue, actively promoted 'minority insecurity' to redefine the fault lines of the conflict to its advantage.⁷⁶ This strategy, argues Saleh, allowed the regime to rely on a "low-cost and easy-to-mobilize" pool of potential militant recruits.⁷⁷

In summary, this category explores the relationship between sectarian identities and ASV. However, the link between the existence of many confessional communities in Syria on the one hand and the intensity of the Assad regime's use of violence after 2011 on the other, despite the multitude of sources that reference sectarianism, remains unclear. In part, this is because sectarian-based assessments of the regime's violence after 2011 assume a 'direct causal relation' between identities and actions.⁷⁸ Offering an avenue to move beyond primordial accounts of the regime's violence, the fourth category focuses instead on how domestic structural elements may have contributed to ASV after 2011.

1.4. The Impact of Regime Structures

Thus far, previous categories offered a perspective that leans towards understanding ASV as exceptional, incidental, or primordial. These understandings of ASV, however, fall short from explaining its endurance and recurrence across the decades. Theories discussed in this category, differently, contemplate a range of structural factors that contribute to the durability of ASV, of which this research aims to contribute. The section begins by outlining a number of ideational and material structures, then it reviews perspectives that deal with the practices and institutions that prevail within the Assad regime.

A group of experts, like Saleh and Syrian academic Rahaf Aldoughli, argue that the regime's response to the 2011 uprising had to do with the ideologies that the regime cultivated in Syria. Saleh sees a form of "absolute Arabism" as an ideology which facilitated the militarization

⁷⁵ Daher, *Syria After the Uprising*, 2019, 135.

⁷⁶ Hinnebusch & Imady, "Conclusion," 2018, 142.

⁷⁷ Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 2017, 20.

⁷⁸ Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 2007, 13.

of society leading to the erosion of civil rights.⁷⁹ Aldoughli, on the other hand, sees a form of "emotional nationalism" or what she calls "Assadism" as the ideology that the regime used to justify ASV.⁸⁰ From the regime's perspective, this worldview entails that devotion to the leader came to substitute "identification with civic institutions."⁸¹ In effect, amongst the functions of this ideology is that it allows the leader to re-establish the meaning of Syrian identity, defined as 'anti-jihadist' after 2011, to justify ASV.⁸²

Beyond ideational structures, the characteristics of material structures has been the subject of inquiry for another body of literature trying to grapple with the regime's ASV. "The army, the intelligence, the special forces, and the militias," Holocaust and genocide studies scholar Uğur Üngör argues, are the "four major pillars" that constitute the regime's ASV.⁸³ As the Assad regime "deliberately and indiscriminately destroyed entire communities under rebel control," Üngör writes, "the workings of these components combined produced a genocidal dynamic."⁸⁴ IR scholar James Worrall and Middle-East historian Victoria Hightower argue, in addition, that the regime's decades of experience in torture methods allowed for its use in a systematic way and on a mass scale after 2011.⁸⁵ Moreover, the composition of the regime elite and the lack of a centralized state structure, argues IR scholar Joshua Stacher, left the regime with no option but opening the door to ASV.⁸⁶ Bashar al-Assad, according to this perspective, was nothing but a 'CEO' whose main function is to facilitate relationships between different organs and branches within the regime.⁸⁷ These perspectives emphasize institutional power structures of the regime as material artifacts, but they do not describe the ideational elements embodied in these institutions, the binding forces between them, or how they have been sustained and mobilized over the course of the regime's history.

⁷⁹ Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 2007.

⁸⁰ Rahaf Aldoughli, "Five decades of Baathism survived because of nationalism," *The Atlantic Council*, December 23, 2020, [Atlantic Council](#).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Uğur Üngör, "Forum: Mass Violence in Syria," *Journal of Genocide Research* Volume 25, no. 1, (October 4, 2021): 84, DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2021.1979907.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 84-6.

⁸⁵ James Worrall & Victoria Hightower, "Methods in the madness? Exploring the logics of torture in Syrian counterinsurgency practices," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* Volume. 49, no. 3, (April 16, 2021): 423, (London: Taylor & Francis Group).

⁸⁶ Joshua Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria*, 1st Edition. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 17.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 18.

Syria experts Lisa Wedeen and Salwa Ismail, on the other hand, understand the ideas which facilitated ASV after 2011 as extraneous to the regime's political intentions or active policies.⁸⁸ Wedeen, for instance, explores how the Assad regime's ASV is linked to the notion of obedience through symbolic performances.⁸⁹ Obedience in Syria, she argues, is based on acting 'as if' the regime's narrative is the only truth regardless of what the people actually believe.⁹⁰ This dynamic, according to her, creates fervent loyalty and a sense of shared devotion among perpetrators of ASV through the regime's fictional narratives.⁹¹ Therefore, performative obedience, amongst other factors, allowed the regime to reenact violence with the same intensity as in previous massacres partially through fabricating a narrative around a fictitious enemy.⁹²

Alternatively, Ismail shows how the structure and function of the Mukhabarat state offered a reminder to society "that violence is the primary and organizing modality of action."⁹³ She suggests that because violence was ingrained in the Assad regime's institutional framework, it acted as a type of communication that shaped the interaction between the regime and citizens.⁹⁴ She proposes studying the prison and the massacre as "the two main apparatuses of governmental violence," to understand how violence becomes a modality.⁹⁵ While the spectacular violence of the massacre establishes violence as a modality, the routine violence of the prison functions as a reminder to society that violence is the modality.⁹⁶ Collective memory, she adds, plays an important role in allowing the regime to make the link between the spectacular violence of the massacre and the routine violence of the prison evident to civilians.⁹⁷ Ismail's prioritization of studying the victims, is both a strength because it explores how violence impacts society and a weakness because it leaves out how violence impacts the regime's institutions.

However, as political scientist Mehran Kamrava proposes, it is 'institutional adaptations' that maintain not only the collective memory, but also the practices that make the violence

⁸⁸ Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgement, and Mourning in Syria*, 1st Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 202.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁹¹ Ibid., 202.

⁹² Ibid., 180.

⁹³ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 1.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 2.

possible.⁹⁸ States, he argues, experience three stages, namely, "political institutionalization; a subsequent phase of political consolidation; and a third phase of corrective actions, precipitated by crises or a simple desire to enhance political efficacy."⁹⁹ In a way, Mehran takes the implications of Ismail's argument to the institutional realm by arguing that the first act of ASV becomes more than remembered; it becomes institutionalized.¹⁰⁰ After the second stage of political consolidation, regimes come to command an institutional apparatus of violence that is always ready to replicate the first act of ASV.¹⁰¹

To sum up, besides the sources discussed in this category, attempts to offer complete accounts of the structural continuities that makes the regime's ASV durable, remained rather marginal. Van Dam, for example, points out that after years of acting independently, the regime's elite were destined to act violently after 2011.¹⁰² Hinnebusch and political scientist Tina Zintl point at the 'security culture' that prevailed within the regime's elite who were accustomed to meeting any dissent with violence.¹⁰³ These perspectives hint at the possibility that the regime's atrocious response to the 2011 uprising is enabled by the structures that the regime created and maintained, but their investigations leaves out the details on how perpetrators became accustomed to acting independently, or on how that security culture came to be. The next section builds on the wealth of ideas offered by these sources in order to justify the presence of a research gap and propose a way forward.

1.5. The Missing Link

This chapter critically reviewed topics, methodologies, and debates prevalent in the scholarship on the politics of modern Syria. In so doing it recognizes that ASV is a complex social phenomenon requiring a multi-factor account and inviting a diversity of analytical perspectives. Indeed, beyond the four categories highlighted in this chapter, further explanations exist for the regime ASV after 2011. These include, for example, socioeconomic factors, as Daher's work illustrates; paramilitary

⁹⁸ Mehran Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, 1st Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, 2017, 46.

¹⁰³ Raymond Hinnebusch & Tina Zintl, "The Syrian Uprising and Bashar al-Assad's First Decade in Power," In *Syria: From Reform to Revolt*, ed. Raymond Hinnebusch & Tina Zintl (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 297.

violence, as shown by Üngör; and other accounts that place emphasis on the leader's psychology and upbringing.¹⁰⁴

Overall, the distinction between the first three categories and the fourth, demonstrates among many things, diverging epistemological approaches to the subject of ASV. The first three categories paint a Weberian picture of violence, following the functionalist tradition of Sociologist Max Weber.¹⁰⁵ What this entails, is that violence comes to be seen as an instrument, a tool in the hand of the state whose deployment and justification for certain ends can be studied through investigating interests, reasons, and circumstances. Whether it is foreign pressure, conflict dynamics, or sectarian motivations, therefore, the regime's ASV is understood to be an exception to the rule. The fourth category, differently, opts to move beyond the conventional Weberian idea of violence as an instrument monopolized by the state. Instead, the objective for sources in this category, is to consider how ASV persists by becoming systematic, despite changing circumstances.

Viewing violence as an instrument can be challenged on multiple grounds of which two are the most relevant for this research. First, the (ir)rationality paradigm that governs the debate on the regime's ASV assumes that political regimes make decisions as unitary entities. Regimes, however, are conceptual categories that represent multiple branches and factions, and hence different practices and rationalities.¹⁰⁶ Second, a circumstantial perspective of ASV overlooks structural factors that enable the violence without which the role of circumstances remains marginal.

By studying ASV as systematic, sources in the fourth category furnished a new road to approach the subject of inquiry. This research proposes, however, that focusing on ideational or material structures, as well as narratives, memories, and institutions, must be supplanted by studying the practices of the Assad regime in order to account for how ASV is reproduced across time and space. Ismail's work which comes closest to fulfilling this task understood practices as

¹⁰⁴ Daher, *Syria After the Uprising*, 2019.

Üğür Üngör, "Shabbiha: Paramilitary groups, mass violence and social polarization in Homs," *Violence: An International Journal* Volume 1, no. 11, (April 2020), (London: Sage Publications).

Kathryn Selfert, "How Bashar al-Assad Became A Brutal Dictator," *Psychology Today*, September 16, 2013, [Psychology Today](#).

¹⁰⁵ Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004).

¹⁰⁶ Philippe Schmitter & Guillermo O'Donnell, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies*, 1st Edition. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 73.

mere repetition, without further analyzing the ‘shared understanding’ that the practice of ASV fosters among perpetrators.¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, by studying that shared understanding as an essential element of what keeps practices afloat, this study accounts for how ASV results from what perpetrators come to consider as ‘the right thing to do’.¹⁰⁸

In many ways, this gap is inspired by the literature that dwelled on cases of massacres and atrocities in the 20th century. Inaugurated with the genocide against the Armenians, the 20th century saw the enhanced capacity of states to commit massacres against civilians within their borders.¹⁰⁹ While research focused mainly on the victims, more sources emphasize looking into dynamics among perpetrators.¹¹⁰ Philosopher David Smith argues, for example, that dehumanization and ‘Othering’ harbor the seeds of mass murder by making the killing of civilians psychologically easier for perpetrators.¹¹¹ The historian Eelco van der Maat, in addition, focuses on the social dimension of atrocity crimes wherein competition and careerism among perpetrator factions can increase the intensity of the violence.¹¹² Alternatively, books like *The Warriors* by World War II veteran Sol Yurick paved the way for understanding atrocities as the result of what perpetrators come to perceive as normal, directly inspiring the political philosopher Hannah Arendt.¹¹³ Building on Arendt’s work, historian Daniel Chirot and psychologist Clark McCauley propose accounting for notions of ‘virtue’ and ‘morality’ as contributors to ASV.¹¹⁴ From their perspective, perpetrators come to develop a shared understanding of atrocities not only as normal, but also as virtuous.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Chirot & Clark McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder*, 1st Edition. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.

¹⁰⁹ Stefan Ihrig, *Justifying Genocide: Germany and the Armenians from Bismarck to Hitler*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 15.

¹¹⁰ Daniel Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina’s Military Juntas*, 2nd Edition. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 12.

¹¹¹ David Smith, *Less Than a Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others?*, 1st Edition. (New York: ST. Martin Press, 2011), 122.

¹¹² Eelco van der Maat, "A Typology of Mass Political Violence," *Peace Economics, Peace Science, and Public Policy* Volume 20, no. 4, (October 10, 2014): 686, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/peps-2014-0041>. 685–695.

¹¹³ Sol Yurick, *The Warriors*, 1st Edition. (Boston: E.P. Dutton, 1965).

¹¹⁴ Chirot & McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All?*, 2006, 5.

¹¹⁵ Alan Fiske & Tage Rai, *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 144.

Conclusively, as this chapter demonstrates, the majority of scholars and observers interpreted Syria as an example of a civil war in which civilian deaths are regarded as collateral damage.¹¹⁶ Focused on the conflict's unraveling, sources overlooked how ASV was historically often "veiled under the cover of war," as journalist Samantha Power argues.¹¹⁷ Nonetheless, even when the scholarship focused on the systematic character of ASV, the role that perpetrators play in sustaining that violence across time and space was relatively overlooked. As a result, critical research tasks persist to account for the regime's atrocious response to the 2011 uprising. Practice theory, as the next chapter will demonstrate, assists filling a small part of these gaps by proposing a theoretical account of how the regime's practices established ASV as a virtue among perpetrators. To tackle this gap, this inquiry seeks to address the following research question: *How to account for the Assad regime's atrociously violent response to the popular uprising in 2011?*

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Debates about theories of action in social science gave rise to competing worldviews.¹¹⁸ Different ontological and epistemological presuppositions led to perspectives that, however simplistically, could be classified into theories based on agency as opposed to structure.¹¹⁹ Various attempts have been made to provide a nuanced view of reality that bridges the gap between agents and structures, as evidenced by the theories of functionalism, the linguistic or cultural turns.¹²⁰ Practice theory, whose roots originate in anthropology, is one such endeavor aimed at transcending the division between agents and structures.¹²¹

Practice theory regards the concept of practice as the essential building block of reality, implying that reality is made up of practices and their constituent sub-practices.¹²² The emergence of practice theory occurred partially as a result of the growing gap between what theorists conclude

¹¹⁶ Martin van Creveld, "A Thirty Years' War?," *Martin van Creveld Website*, April 13, 2018, [Available Online](#).

¹¹⁷ Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, 1st Edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 504.

¹¹⁸ Martin Griffiths, *International Relations Theory for the Twenty-First Century: An Introduction*, 1st Edition. (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹¹⁹ Alice Vadrot, "Knowledge, International Relations and the Structure-Agency Debate," *The European Journal of Social Science Research* Volume 30, no. 1, (September 16, 2016): 63, DOI: 10.1080/13511610.2016.122678.

¹²⁰ Griffiths, *International Relations*, 2007.

¹²¹ Sherry Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Volume 26, no. 1, (January 1984), [JSTOR](#).

¹²² Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, 1st Edition. (Berkeley: University of California press, 1984).

and how politics unfold.¹²³ Practice theorists sought to address this issue by locating the origin of social inquiry in the tangible material actions of political actors, and the ‘shared knowledge’ that underlies those actions.¹²⁴ A practice-based approach, according to Theodore Schatzki, a leading proponent of practice theory, places the emphasis on the level of intersection between agents and structures, or the conduct of actors understood within their relevant social order.¹²⁵ What emerged as ‘the practice turn’, became an umbrella term that describes multiple approaches and methodologies that seek to apply the analytical framework of social practice.¹²⁶ It is the consensus among these theories that serves as the foundation for the theoretical approach followed in this study.

Marlies Glasius, an IR scholar who uses practice theory to study authoritarian regimes, contends that all practice theories are united by two key assumptions.¹²⁷ The first holds that practices are patterned actions that occur on the level where individuals and structures meet.¹²⁸ These actions must be repeated across several domains and be shared by a group of individuals in order to be regarded as a practice.¹²⁹ The second assumption contends that practices are grounded in a specific social setting maintained by an implicit knowledge or a shared understanding that actors or entities have in common.¹³⁰ She argues that in order to properly understand authoritarianism, one must account for the relationship between the recurrent actions of regime members and their shared ideals or beliefs.¹³¹

While the materiality of patterned actions is visible to the naked eye, practice theorists engaged in extensive epistemological reflection to capture the contentious concept of shared knowledge which has also been referred to by practice theorists as shared understanding, and

¹²³ Alena Drieschova, Ted Hopf & Christian Bueger, *Conceptualizing International Practices: Directions for the Practice Turn in International Relations*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹²⁴ Christian Bueger & Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theory: New Perspectives*, 1st Edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 22.

¹²⁵ Theodore Schatzki, *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹²⁶ Bueger & Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, 2014, 3.

¹²⁷ Marlies Glasius, "What Authoritarianism Is ... and Is Not: A Practice Perspective," *International Affairs (London)* Volume 94, no. 3, (May 1, 2018): 523, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy060>.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 523.

¹²⁹ Stephen Turner, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge and Presuppositions*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³¹ Glasius, "What Authoritarianism Is," 2018.

implicit or tacit knowledge.¹³² The philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, coined the term "habitus" to describe systems of enduring assumptions that uphold or modify behaviors and structures without requiring actors to adhere to explicit rules or directives.¹³³ For actors, these presumptions—or "doxa," as Bourdieu calls them—or "the things which go without saying," in the words of literary critic Terry Eagleton—appear as normal or common sense.¹³⁴ French sociologist Laurent Thévenot, differently, points at Foucault's "disciplinary arrangements" as another expression of the shared knowledge embodied by actors and institutions.¹³⁵ Foucault's notion of power and knowledge as dispersed and interlinked draws attention to the role of 'processes', rather than agencies, in shaping the knowledge that actors come to share within a social setting.¹³⁶ He argues that political institutions can reproduce that knowledge by validating and encouraging certain practices among actors as normal or virtuous.¹³⁷

Bourdieu insists, however, that there can be no exclusive solution to this issue since he recognizes the problematic nature of claiming to uncover an implicit knowledge that is otherwise hidden.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, notwithstanding the diversity of approaches to the concept of shared knowledge, practice theorists are united by an epistemology that seeks to move beyond dichotomies and locate the social at the intersection of doing and knowing, as a critique, for example, of primordialist or actor-based theories of action.¹³⁹ For all practice theorists, therefore, innovative theoretical lenses, methodologies, and critical assessments became a crucial requirement for contemplating politics through that lens.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, the approach followed in this research is grounded in practice theory's assumption that the shared knowledge makes patterns

¹³² Friedrich Kratochwil, "Making Sense of International Practices," In *International Practices*, ed. Emanuel Adler & Vincent Pouliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51.

¹³³ Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 2nd Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 1st Edition. (London [etc.]: Verso, 1991), 59.

Peter Jackson, "Pierre Bourdieu, the 'cultural Turn' and the Practice of International History," *Review of International Studies* Volume 34, no. 1, (2008), [JSTOR](#).

¹³⁵ Laurent Thévenot, "Pragmatic Regimes Governing Engagement with the World," In *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Theodore Schatzki, Karin Cetina, and Elke Von Savigny (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 66.

¹³⁶ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 37.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹³⁸ Bourdieu and Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977, 20.

¹³⁹ Schatzki, *Social Practices*, 1996, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, 2018.

of actions, which are otherwise individualized habits, into practices carried out collectively.¹⁴¹ The forms through which that shared knowledge is constituted can be rules (implicit or explicit), norms, discourses and narratives, institutions, or habits.¹⁴²

For Bourdieu, shared knowledge emerges from patterned activities because practices are constituted by positional and dispositional ‘logics’ whose dialectic relationship gives practices their meaning and durability.¹⁴³ While positional logic refers to how individual actors perceive and act upon the world, dispositional logic refers to structures of meaning that shape the actors’ perception.¹⁴⁴ Political entities, hence, can perpetuate the dispositional logic by fostering an ‘objectivist’ type of knowledge among actors that defines their values and common sense.¹⁴⁵ By responding and acting upon the world with these values, positional logics can in turn reinforce dispositional logics.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, practice theory upholds the constructivist assumption that reality is based on what actors make of it and how they act upon it.¹⁴⁷ The Assad regime, this research argues, built dispositional infrastructures, legal and narrative, through which ASV is established among perpetrators as virtuous.

Virtue, in this research, refers to what Foucault recognizes as the quality that the institutions of a police state opt to see in the practices of its members, so long as these practices reproduce that state.¹⁴⁸ The relationship between virtue, practice, and institutions, however, goes much further back than Foucault’s work, to Aristotle’s writings, in which he moved away from Plato’s exclusive idealism to emphasize that a deed becomes virtuous through practice; ‘doing’ and thinking about that ‘doing’.¹⁴⁹ Since Aristotle, the concept of virtue has taken on a new meaning beyond the sphere of ethics, as Foucault’s work exemplifies.¹⁵⁰ For lack of a better term,

¹⁴¹ Janice Stein, "Background Knowledge in the Foreground," In *International Practices*, ed. Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 89.

¹⁴² Silviya Lechner and Mervyn Frost, *Practice Theory and International Relations*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁴³ Bourdieu and Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Vincent Pouliot, "Methodology," In *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking key concepts in IR*, ed. Rebecca Adler-Nissen (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 45.

¹⁴⁵ Bourdieu and Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Introduction," In *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking key concepts in IR*, ed. Rebecca Adler-Nissen (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 4. 45-58.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 9th Edition. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 417.

¹⁴⁹ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics Book II*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 23.

¹⁵⁰ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 2007.

what this study understands as ‘institutional virtues’ reflect that new meaning, in which virtues are described not just in ethical but also secular, patriotic, or ideological terms. Historian Timothy Snyder, for example, observes a strong relationship of interdependence between the secular institutions of the state and what its members come to perceive as good or as virtuous.¹⁵¹ He says: "If institutions are to flourish, they need virtues; if virtues are to be cultivated, they need institutions."¹⁵² Contrary to Foucault, however, he contends that virtues are ‘objective’ in the sense that they can be universally identified and agreed upon by different human communities.¹⁵³ Alternatively, Foucault’s notion of virtue, on which this work is based, regards human values as products of subjective experiences in reality, which can be sustained, mediated, or made ‘objective’ by the practices of institutions and other political forces.¹⁵⁴

Notwithstanding, Chirot and McCauley recognize the dynamic between virtue, institutions, and practices as one of the driving forces of ASV throughout history.¹⁵⁵ Practices, they argue, can make atrocities virtuous when perpetrators and institutions pass ‘the first hurdle’, defined as the first perpetrated massacre.¹⁵⁶ In psychology, argues McCauley, passing the first hurdle arises from the human need among perpetrators to overcome their ‘cognitive dissonance’, which refers to the ‘irksome’ feeling humans can experience as the result of participating in atrocious deeds that do not align with their values.¹⁵⁷ To do that, perpetrators, aided by institutions, develop an understanding of their deeds as virtuous which in turn can help overcome the reluctance to kill.¹⁵⁸ An empirical example is torture festivals inside Syrian prisons, which initially frighten new loyalist recruits, but gradually turn them into experienced supervisors of death.¹⁵⁹ To that end, institutions offer perpetrators frameworks that encourage ASV before its occurrence, and that justify ASV after its occurrence, which results in perpetrators gradually internalizing the shared understanding that ASV is a virtue.¹⁶⁰ To create that shared perception, ASV requires organizational power [dispositional logic of legalizing], emotional explanations [dispositional logic of narrativizing],

¹⁵¹ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, 1st Edition. (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1977, 92.

¹⁵⁵ Chirot & McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All?*, 2006, 53.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁹ Khalifa, *The Shell*, 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Jonathan Maynard, "Studying Perpetrator Ideologies in Atrocity Crimes," In *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. Alette Smeulers et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 179.

and group cohesion [positional logic of consolidating], the three of which constitute the set of sub-practices discussed in three empirical chapters.¹⁶¹

Furthermore, the cumulative and broad application of practice theory's epistemologies resulted in the utilization of that theoretical framework to study subjects as diverse as diplomacy, nutritional habits, and most relevant to this research atrocious and collective violence.¹⁶² In his conceptualization of *Genocide as Social Practice*, the sociologist Daniel Feierstein criticizes the literature on the subject that portrays ASV as an abnormal incident or a novel event by asking "when does genocide actually begin?"¹⁶³ He proposes instead, based partially on the theories of Foucault and Arendt, that cases of ASV must be analyzed "not as isolated occurrences, but as instances of a technology of power whose causes, effects, and specific consequences can be identified and described."¹⁶⁴ What he calls "genocidal practices" refer to technologies of power that constitute the facets shared in various cases of ASV.¹⁶⁵

In a slightly similar vein, Ismail proposes the detention camp and the massacre as technologies of power that shape regime-society relations.¹⁶⁶ She builds on Foucault's work to argue that episodes of violence against civilians in the city of Hama in 1982, which came to be known as the Hama Massacre, constitutes a disciplinary arrangement, a modality or a case of exemplary violence, that allows the Assad regime to perpetuate itself.¹⁶⁷ Feierstein's interpretation of Foucault towards which this research leans, however, entails that the distinction made by Ismail between the spectacular and the routine fades as ASV comes to be seen as virtuous from the perspective of perpetrators.¹⁶⁸ By utilizing the theoretical framework of practice theory, Feierstein's understanding of practices as constituting ASV, and Ismail's notion of the massacre as a technology of power, this study works to answer the research question.

¹⁶¹ Maynard, "Studying Perpetrator Ideologies in Atrocity Crimes," 2019, 57-58-65.

¹⁶² Alan Warde, *The Practice of Eating*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

Keith Hamilton and Richard Langhorne, *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory and Administration*, 1st Edition. (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁶³ Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice*, 2014, 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁶⁶ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 110.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

2.1. Analytical Framework: Operationalizing Practice Theory

Three specific sub-practices were selected for closer analysis following Bourdieu's proposition that "practices are, at once, positional [the configuration of agents entering into relations, or history incarnated in bodies] and dispositional [the rules structuring agents' relations, or history objectified in structures and mechanisms]", and the understanding that it is this duality of social spaces "that give [practices] their shape, meanings and social efficacy."¹⁶⁹ First among the three sub-practices selected is legalizing ASV that makes atrocities virtuous by providing perpetrators the dispositional rule structure of unconditional backing for violence carried out in the name of the state. Second, the sub-practice of narrativizing reality that makes atrocities virtuous by providing perpetrators the dispositional narrative that justifies violence against an imagined enemy. Third, the sub-practice of consolidating the perpetrator elite through blood, which recreates the social space where ASV is deemed a virtue. Despite not being the only sub-practices through which ASV is constituted, as the breadth of factors in the literature review demonstrates, the value of these three sub-practices is that they prominently inhibit both positional and dispositional spaces of activity from the perspective of the social practitioner, i.e., the perpetrators. In that sense, this research is part of a wider shift in the state-violence scholarship that seeks to understand the generative dynamics among perpetrators, not only the effects on victims and audience.¹⁷⁰

Analyzing ASV in Syria's case, however, raises the question of "how can we study something that does not want to be studied?" as Üngör highlights.¹⁷¹ Accounting for what perpetrators consider as a virtue, has to come to terms, methodologically, with the regime's censorship which makes obtaining the right data for this research a crucial challenge. In other case studies, researching how perpetrators made sense of their massacres and genocides happened mostly after the demise of these regimes.¹⁷² Arendt, for example, built on a wealth of multidisciplinary research on the Nazi regime to reflect on how the state of normality characterized perpetrators' perception of the Holocaust.¹⁷³ The decision to explore the manifestation of three constitutive sub-practices in a specific case study, can therefore be seen as a methodological proposal which hopes to overcome above limitations.

¹⁶⁹ Pouliot, "Methodology," 2013, 45-48-55.

¹⁷⁰ Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice*, 2014, 12.

¹⁷¹ Uğur Üngör, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State*, 1st Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 17.

¹⁷² Feierstein, *Genocide as Social Practice*, 2014.

¹⁷³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd Edition. (California: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

There are two motivations for evaluating the ASV of the Assad regime via the lens of practice theory. First, practice theory enables this research to grasp the dynamism of the regime and the interdependence of all its components rather than reduce the phenomena to either structures or individuals. Second, practice theory allows the research to furnish an account of what might be a core theme of the regime's modus operandi, especially in light of its resilience which carries consequences for the availability and utility of data. Nevertheless, by prioritizing the focus on continuities, practice theory risks overlooking crucial differences between various cases of the regime's ASV. This echoes the debate among practice theorists who highlight the tension between continuities sustained by practices and the occurrence of change in social reality.¹⁷⁴ Political economist Thomas Pepinsky cites the dynamics of social change as one weakness of practice theory and highlights how 'innovations' in practices might alter the essence of a regime.¹⁷⁵

In an attempt to deal with that critique, political scientists Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger argue that actors' varying interpretations of certain actions or ideas can explain how regimes change and endure.¹⁷⁶ Diverging interpretations among actors who sustain a practice, and whose 'feeling for the game', may have been altered, can result in changing the characteristics and conduct of political entities.¹⁷⁷ To put it another way, one method to explain change, according to practice theory, is to consider how individuals or groups may come to different conclusions regarding the best course of action at a given time. Taking that limitation into account, this research proposes therefore an exploratory approach to applying practice theory.

In short, this chapter tried to demonstrate that the merit of practice theories lies in their attempt to recognize actors as part of the activity, and to move beyond reducing the meaning of social phenomena to the domain of materiality.¹⁷⁸ An actor's interests, for example, cannot be accounted for solely through analytical assessment that identifies the appropriate course of action to achieve those interests.¹⁷⁹ It is equally necessary to account for how an actor comes to perceive what their interests are and what they consider as a virtuous trajectory towards accomplishing their

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Pepinsky, "Authoritarian Innovations: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications," *Democratization* Volume 27, no. 6, (June 16, 2020): 1094. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1775589>.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1094.

¹⁷⁶ Bueger and Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, 2018.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷⁸ Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties," 1984, 151-152.

¹⁷⁹ Schatzki, *Social Practices*, 1996, 107.

objective.¹⁸⁰ Precisely due to the regime's secrecy regarding what actions it deems appropriate in a specific context, hence, that practice theory can prove to be a valuable theoretical tool. Therefore, practice theory offers the scholarship a path to move beyond the 'realist' and 'functionalist' assessments of the regime's ASV that prioritizes interests and strategies at the expense of processes and practices. For that purpose, the next chapter offers a reflection on the methodology of this study which assists the consistent application of practice theory as well as the systematic selection and analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodological debate among practice theory raises the question as to whether existing social science methodologies are adequate for the study of practices or whether methodological innovation is necessary.¹⁸¹ The practice turn, hence, does not propose a practical approach to methodologies in the social sciences. For some theorists, like Bourdieu, the diversity that this creates is part of an intentional effort to overcome the firm subservience to methodologies.¹⁸² He argues that combining various methods is necessary to capture the dynamism of social phenomena.¹⁸³ Therefore, as political sociologist David Mccourt proposes, new constructivist theories in IR, among them is practice theory, must develop new methodological perspectives to do research.¹⁸⁴ These methodologies would be based on cross-fertilization of pre-existing methods in a way that tailors them to the object of study and the research question.¹⁸⁵ Based on this assessment, the approach chosen for this research combines insights from praxeology and single case-study analysis.

3.1. Methods: Praxeology and Single Case-Study Analysis

Praxeology is a qualitative method that seeks to 'reconstruct meaning' from patterns of activity and the knowledge shared among actors, the two key components whose occurrence determines

¹⁸⁰ Schatzki, *Social Practices*, 1996, 107.

¹⁸¹ Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices," *European Journal of Social Theory* Volume 5, no. 2, (May 2002): 246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431022225432>.

¹⁸² Pouliot, "Methodology," 2013, 45.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 45.

Bourdieu and Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977, 72.

¹⁸⁴ David Mccourt, *The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, 1st Edition. (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), 100.

¹⁸⁵ Bueger & Gadinger, *International Practice Theory*, 2014, 79.

whether a certain phenomenon is a practice.¹⁸⁶ Key to praxeology is the assumption made first by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that the rules and norms underpinning certain actions are "interpreted and enacted situationally."¹⁸⁷ To account for these two elements, this method advocates the utilization of a wide variety of primary sources, such as legislations, speeches, and leaked government documents.¹⁸⁸ Praxeology, moreover, calls for a reflective approach to research that seeks to account for and describe, rather than explain, the practices that underpin social phenomena.¹⁸⁹

A case-study design, according to social scientist Robert Yin, is particularly suitable for research projects that ask 'how' and 'why' contemporary social phenomena work: questions calling for thick descriptions of the elements that constitute social phenomena, such as practices.¹⁹⁰ This method entails selecting a case study and drafting questions that guide the process of data collection and analysis.¹⁹¹ Accordingly, this research takes the Houla massacre that occurred in 2012 as its case study, used as a narrative anchor to illustrate the practice of ASV at work under the Assad regime. By using the Houla massacre as a narrative anchor, the study highlights how observers make sense of ASV. The research is thus able to restate some of the key questions concerning the regime's ASV; questions that empirical chapters will tackle.¹⁹² Analysis starts by selecting three among many sub-practices, discussed in three empirical chapters, that may answer these questions and contribute to an account of the regime's ASV. The arrangement of empirical chapters follows the methodological approach of practice theorist Vincent Pouliot, who argues that doing practice theory requires "first, getting access to practices; second, reconstructing dispositional logics; and third, constructing positional logics."¹⁹³

Similarly, the choice of the three sub-practices is inspired by the two-fold methodological approach used by organizational studies scholar Davide Nicolini, common as well in the literature

¹⁸⁶ Christian Bueger, "Pathways to Practice: Praxiography and International Politics." *European Political Science Review* Volume 6, no. 3, (August 2014): 387. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773913000167>.

¹⁸⁷ Silvia Gherardi, *How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study: Problems and Methods*, 2nd Edition. (Camberley: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 105.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 1st Edition. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 21.

¹⁸⁸ Bueger, "Pathways to Practice," 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Schmidt, "Sociology of Social Practices," In *Methodological Reflections on Practice Oriented Theories*, ed. Michael Jonas, Beate Littig, and Angela Wroblewski (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 8.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th Edition. (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), 32.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁹³ Pouliot, "Methodology," 2013, 46.

on ASV.¹⁹⁴ Nicolini argues that a practice methodology requires a process of ‘zooming in’ on a specific sub-practice to account for its characteristics or ‘accomplishment’, on the one hand.¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, a practice methodology must ‘zoom out’ to see the connection between the present and the past, and between various cases.¹⁹⁶ In the words of criminal law scholar Alette Smeulers, ASV must be accounted for "not just from the micro-level (incident), but also from the meso-level (group, organization) and macro-level (state)."¹⁹⁷

3.2. Sources

This research interrogates data from primary and secondary sources to account for the extent to which the designated sub-practices can be thought of as constituting the practice of ASV. The study’s objective is to substantiate, illustrate, and critically assess the proposition that the Assad regime’s ASV is best understood as a practice, rendered virtuous by a set of sub-practices. According to journalist Cristina Roca, the Syrian conflict produced a wealth of evidence on ASV, being one of the most documented conflicts in modern times.¹⁹⁸ The challenge, therefore, is to devise a consistent methodological approach to process primary sources.

In this study, the organization of sources corresponds with historian Anthony Brundage’s classification of primary sources into those not meant for publication and those meant for publication.¹⁹⁹ Examples of sources not intended for publication are the correspondences between Mukhabarat and military agencies during the Homs 2012 offensive, and examples of sources intended for publication include the autobiography of Former Minister of Defense, Mustafa Tlass, who recalls episodes of ASV and the subsequent fratricide during the 1980s.²⁰⁰ The pools from which both types of sources are collected include visual and written material. With regards to visual material, documentaries produced for example by Al Jazeera, Syria TV, or Deutsche Welle, offer a generous number of unwritten testimonies regarding ASV. These sources are particularly

¹⁹⁴ Davide Nicolini, "Zooming in and Out," *Organization Studies* Volume 30, no. 12, (2009): 1392. DOI: 10.1177/0170840609349875.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Smeulers, "Individuals as Perpetrators," 2022, 285.

¹⁹⁸ Cristina Roca, "How the Syrian War Changed How War Crimes Are Documented," *The New Humanitarian*, January 1, 2017, [The New Humanitarian](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2017/1/1/syria-war-crimes).

¹⁹⁹ Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, 5th Edition. (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2013), 21.

²⁰⁰ Mustafa Tlass, *A Mirror of My Life* (مرآة حياتي), 1st Edition. (Damascus: Tlass Centre for Studies and Publications, 2002).

valuable in the context of Syria, where written testimonials are fewer and far between. With regards to written material, this study utilizes reports published by international organizations, such as the United Nations, and legal reports published for example by the Syrian Centre for Justice and Accountability (SCJA). These reports currently serve as the backbone of international legal investigations into the perpetrators of ASV in Syria.

To summarize, the combination of both methods, single case-study design, and praxeology, shapes the mode of data analysis. Case study methodologies focus on exploring the elements making up the selected case in order to appreciate the similarities and differences in relation to other cases. Praxeology focuses on identifying whether the elements present in a specific case recur in other cases. Hence, in the following empirical chapters which cover three sub-practices that underpin the Houla massacre, the aim is to allow the data to speak in order to identify similarities between various cases of ASV. One critique of this methodology, common among studies that focus on the causes of ASV, is that coherence and similarity might be dictated on the observed pattern which is otherwise accidental.²⁰¹ Said differently, this critique highlights the subjective understanding of the similarities that underpin practices, fostering a confirmation bias. The critique of this research proposition, advanced in the fourth chapter of this research, aims to deal with this methodological limitation by exploring alternative accounts of ASV that the data enables.

Chapter 4: Legalizing ASV: Acting Through the Law

"The state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule."

— Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*.²⁰²

As this study observes, the Houla massacre occurred during a period of relative legal ambiguity, on the part of the regime, over what constitutes a legitimate use of violence. Previously, emergency laws offered the legal framework that incentivized ASV through reference to the state of

²⁰¹ Catrien Bijleveld, "On the Empirical Study of Atrocity Crimes," In *The Oxford Handbook on Atrocity Crimes*, ed. Barbora Holá, Maartje Weerdesteijn, Hollie Nyseth Brehm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 63.

²⁰² Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 392.

emergency.²⁰³ However, the Houla massacre took place months after the regime repealed emergency laws to show good will in the face of popular demands.²⁰⁴ Despite that, ASV continued unhindered throughout all of Syria, and specifically in the city of Homs which was dubbed the capital of the rebellion.²⁰⁵ What perplexed observers is the regime's drafting of counter-terrorism laws in late 2012 which seemed unnecessary considering that ASV did not require a legal framework to occur.²⁰⁶ This raises the question of how do the perpetrators of ASV conceive of the relationship between the law and their practices? The purpose of this chapter is to try to answer that question by proposing that the regime's legal practices established a disposition that perpetuates ASV as a virtue. This will be accomplished by examining the history of key laws and courts, as well as constitutional reforms that are relevant to the topic of this research, covering the 1960s, the 1980s, and the aftermath of the 2011 uprising.

Central to this chapter is the relationship between the law, the perpetrators, and the regime, to which the insight of practice theory proves valuable. In contrast to realist approaches, for example, the practice turn advocates accounting for the interdependence between making the law and applying it.²⁰⁷ Instead of understanding the law strictly in structural terms, the law can therefore be contemplated as part of an interlinked cycle that includes the regime and the perpetrators of violence.²⁰⁸ Making the law and applying it, hence, cease to be properties exclusive to one political entity and became rather the consequence of collective effort.²⁰⁹ The regime, according to this research, becomes as dependent on legalizing the practices of perpetrators, as perpetrators are dependent on the regime's legalization of their practices.

Empirically, depicting perpetrators of violence as being 'above the law' is common in Syria scholarship.²¹⁰ In effect, the consensus within the scholarship, as this research observes, deems the law to be of little relevance to the perpetrators of ASV, who seem to act regardless of it. What this perspective overlooks, however, is the way in which the law can serve a crucial legitimating

²⁰³ Al Arabiya, "Emergency Law in Syria" (قانون الطوارئ في سوريا), *Al Arabiya*, March 16, 2011, [Available Online](#).

²⁰⁴ Al Hurra, "al-Houla," 2020.

²⁰⁵ Jonathan Littell, *Syrian Notebooks: Inside the Homs Uprising*, 1st Edition. (New York: Verso, 2015), 16.

²⁰⁶ MENA Rights Group, "Three Laws to Counter Terrorism in Syria" (ثلاثة قوانين لمكافحة الإرهاب في سوريا), MENA Rights Group, 2012, [Available Online](#).

²⁰⁷ Nora Stappert, "Practice theory and change in international law," *International Theory* Volume 12, no. 1, (October 19, 2019): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971919000150>.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰⁹ Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 61.

²¹⁰ Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 2017, 49.

purpose that justifies various forms of violence, making the perpetrators of ASV act not above, but through the law. Leenders' use of practice theory to study the relationship between repression and the law in the Middle-East, and particularly in Syria, remains therefore exceptional.²¹¹ He questions the meaning of judicializing repression from the perspective of authoritarian regimes by investigating the regime's technologies of power deployed between 1963 and 2011.²¹² His research concludes that the origins of judicializing repression result from legal practices that emerged in response to and alongside foreign and domestic struggles for power within Syria.²¹³ This chapter builds on some of Leenders' assumptions, but leaves out the discussion on foreign politics focusing instead on the relationship between legal practices and ASV.

Accordingly, the case of the Houla massacre is relevant for understanding how the law in Syria and ASV become part of a cycle. In other words, this reflects an attempt at accounting for the diffusion between what Kamrava calls *formal* institutions and the *informal* practices that keep these institutions afloat.²¹⁴ For that purpose, three legal developments following the 2011 uprising are of concern to this chapter because they illustrate the legal framework against which ASV occurred after 2011. Namely, the repeal of emergency laws, the redrafting of the Syrian constitution, and the implementation of the counter-terrorism laws.²¹⁵

4.1. Who Needs a State of Emergency?

As part of a reform plan to limit the protest movement after 2011, the regime lifted the state of emergency.²¹⁶ Drafted in 1962, emergency laws granted the regime the power to declare a state of emergency if "the security or the general system of the republic is endangered."²¹⁷ This is what military factions of the *Ba' th* party did in 1963 upon their rise to power.²¹⁸ In addition, the *Ba' th* regime established the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) in 1966 and abolished exceptional

²¹¹ Reinoud Leenders, "Prosecuting Political Dissent," In *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, ed. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2013).

²¹² *Ibid.*, 169.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 185.

²¹⁴ Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, 2018, 13.

²¹⁵ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 2019.

²¹⁶ Al Arabiya, "Emergency Law in Syria," 2011.

²¹⁷ Al Jazeera, "Script of the Syrian Emergency Law of 1962," (نص قانون الطوارئ في سوريا), *Al Jazeera*, August 11, 2011, [Al Jazeera](#).

²¹⁸ Lesch, *Syria*, 2012, 71.

military courts that were founded in 1965.²¹⁹ With roots that date back to the United Arab Republic (UAR) period (1958 – 1961), the SSSC was founded as a substitute to exceptional military courts but with greater freedom to act against civilians.²²⁰ While previously the Ba‘th government acknowledged the temporary character or exceptionality of military courts, as Ba‘thist President Amin al-Hafez decreed, the SSSC abolished the state of exceptionality only rhetorically.²²¹ One of the SSSC’s first acts was the execution of communist activists in 1975 charged with instigating terrorism.²²² The way the court works is that Mukhabarat agencies pass the verdict behind closed doors, then the president has to approve those verdicts, and the head judge only reads them out during trials that can last as little as five minutes.²²³

Under the Assad regime, which inherited the country’s political system during the early 1970s, the twin practices of making laws and establishing courts in the spirit of the state of emergency was reinforced.²²⁴ These practices, according to the testimony of the former member of the Special Forces who participated in ASV between 1980 and 1982, Abd al-Ghani Sbahi, gave perpetrators on the ground equally as much freedom of action and freedom from accountability as it did give participating Colonels and Generals, like Rif‘at al-Assad or Ali Haydar.²²⁵ In effect, legal impunity set the standard among perpetrators during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when militant factions within the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) took up arms against the regime.²²⁶

The regime responded by implementing laws on the security of the Ba‘th party and laws that accord capital punishment to all members of the MB.²²⁷ These laws offered the pretext for ASV against civilians, particularly in the city of Hama, where perpetrators accused civilians at random of being members of the MB and killed them on the spot, often for voicing their opposition

²¹⁹ Al Jazeera, "The Supreme State Security Court in Syria" (محكمة أمن الدولة العليا في سوريا), *Al Jazeera*, April 21, 2011, [Al Jazeera](#).

²²⁰ Syria TV, "State Security Court" (محكمة أمن الدولة), YouTube Video, 1:03:20, [YouTube](#), 2023.

²²¹ Amin al-Hafez, "Decree Establishing Military Courts in Syria in 1965" (مرسوم إحداث محاكم عسكرية في سوريا) (1965), *Syrian Modern History*, 1965, [Syrian Modern History](#).

²²² Syria TV, "State Security Court," 2023.

²²³ Syria TV, "State Security Court," 2023.

²²⁴ Seale, *Asad*, 1989.

²²⁵ Abd al-Ghani Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (2)" (شهادة أحد (2) أفراد القوات الخاصة على مجزرة حماة), YouTube Video, 1:00:05, [YouTube](#).

²²⁶ Mahmoud Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria* (حوار حول سوريا), 1st Edition. (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 1993), 144.

²²⁷ Syrian Lawyers Forum, "Law on the Security of the Ba‘th Party" (قانون أمن حزب البعث), *Damascus Bar*, 1979, [Damascus Bar](#).

The People’s Assembly, "The 49th Law of the year 1980 concerning the Muslim Brotherhood" (القانون 49 لعام 1980 (المتعلق بالإخوان المسلمين), accessed 27th March 2023 ([Syrian Parliament](#), 1980).

to looting and plunder.²²⁸ The loose range of interpretive possibilities opened up by these laws, moreover, fostered an inquisitional dynamic that characterized the ASV of the early 1980s, as perpetrators randomly accused people, including Christians, of active membership in the MB.²²⁹ The violence that soon became ordinary and normal among perpetrators, as survivors recall, was encouraged and reinforced by the regime's establishment of field courts.²³⁰ Founded between 1980 and 1981, field courts gave majors in the armed forces the authority to initiate military courts on the ground and issue immediate verdicts.²³¹ In retrospect, the SSSC as well as field courts shared similar dispositional logics that made the state of emergency permanent.²³²

The state of emergency that sanctioned ASV, established among military institutions and Mukhabarat agencies, the shared understanding that the law will always be on their side.²³³ This shared understanding, born out of and in response to exceptional circumstances, became further entrenched in the everyday experience of civilians, after the coup of Rif'at, Hafez's younger brother, was aborted in the mid-1980s.²³⁴ Rif'at leveraged the upheaval between 1978 & 1982 in Syria to enhance the power of his forces, which became the most powerful military faction within the regime, as Former Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlass recalls.²³⁵ When he launched the coup, therefore, Hafez had no choice but to amplify the power and influence of other military factions, at the expense of civilian administration, to curb his brother's influence.²³⁶ Neither the civil administration nor Hafez himself could act with greater autonomy against military institutions as had been prior to Rif'at's coup attempt.²³⁷

As a result, military institutions and Mukhabarat agencies dominated all societal sectors and substituted their practices with civil governmental practices.²³⁸ Civil bodies, such as the legal system, became little but vehicles through which these institutions and agencies can arrest, torture,

²²⁸ Sharif al-Ras, *Hama: The Tragedy of the Era* (حماة: مأساة العصر), 1st Edition. (Available Online, 1983), 20.

²²⁹ Pierre Guingamp, *Hafez al-Assad, and the Syrian Ba' th Part (Hafez el Assad et le Parti Baath en Syrie)*, 1st Edition. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 258.

²³⁰ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 144.

²³¹ Ibid., 144.

²³² Enab Baladi, "The Exceptional Justice System in Syria" (القضاء الاستثنائي في سوريا), *Enab Baladi*, July 11, 2012, [Enab Baladi](#).

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Guingamp, *Hafez al-Assad*, 1996, 290.

²³⁵ Tlass, *A Mirror of My Life*, 2002.

²³⁶ Bashir Zain al-Abdeen, *The Army and Politics of Syria 1918-2000: A Critical Study* (سوريا: دراسة الجيش والسياسة في سورية: دراسة 1918-2000), 1st Edition. (Beirut: Dar al-Jabiyah, 2008).

²³⁷ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 221.

²³⁸ Ibid., 221.

and kill civilians at will, without trials and for no apparent reasons apart from those defined by the perpetrators.²³⁹ In Syria's notorious Tadmor prison, for example, a military doctor from an elite force killed his former classmates who were detained in that prison for taunting him during his years back at the University of Damascus.²⁴⁰ Evoking the law's criminalization of the MB became enough to grant the practices of these institutions and agencies legality.²⁴¹ In other words, the ASV of the early 1980s allowed these institutions to reference the state of exceptionality to reenact the virtuous character of their violent practices.²⁴²

In fact, most Mukhabarat agencies were born in the aftermath and as a consequence to the state of emergency declared in 1963.²⁴³ The state of exceptionality embedded in emergency laws, therefore, was the *raison d'être* of Mukhabarat agencies who reproduced their shared understanding through various forms of violence.²⁴⁴ In that way, the state of emergency founded upon the principle of exceptionality resulted in making the regime's practices with regards to all violence permanent and virtuous.²⁴⁵

Therefore, the repeal of the state of emergency after 2011, much like laws passed in 2005 that limit the power of the Mukhabarat or laws on the prohibition of torture passed in 2022, produced little tangible change in the perpetrators' practices in reality.²⁴⁶ The repeal of emergency laws gave observers the impression that legal reforms are merely symbolic as they appeared in tandem with the familiar repressive practices across all of Syria.²⁴⁷ Violence against civilians continued uninterrupted and went unpunished until the redrafting of the constitution, the second legal development after 2011, offered a framework to rejuvenate and re-empower the practices of military institutions and Mukhabarat agencies, as this chapter argues. As a leaked brochure

²³⁹ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 146.

²⁴⁰ Khalifa, *The Shell*, 2017.

²⁴¹ al-Ras, *Hama*, 1983, 20.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴³ Ibrahim al-Qasem, "Security Apparatuses and Their Role in All Aspects of Life in Syria" (الأجهزة الأمنية و دورها في سوريا (مفاصل الحياة في سوريا), *Syria Untold*, January 11, 2022, [Syria Untold](#).

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Haitham al-Maleh, "The State of Emergency and Its Consequences to Human Rights" (حالة الطوارئ و أثرها على حقوق الإنسان), *Resala Post*, September 27, 2020, [Resala Post](#).

²⁴⁶ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 2019, 41.

Muhammad al-Abdallah, *Walls Have Ears: Analyzing Documents from Syrian Security Branches* (للجدران آذان: تحليل وثائق سرية من أجهزة الأمن السورية), 1st Edition. [SCJA](#), 2019, 1.

²⁴⁷ Tareq Subh, "From Parliamentary Monarchy to Presidential Totalitarianism" (من الملكي النيابي إلى الرئاسي الشمولي), *Syria TV*, October, 13, 2021, [Syria TV](#).

published to regime fighters explicitly pledged: "lifting the state of emergency will result in reinforcing security in Syria."²⁴⁸

4.2. Rejuvenating the Regime-Perpetrators Covenant

The new constitution began with a historical introduction containing narrative themes of how foreign conspiracies are attempting to undermine the Arab nation and Syria's regional influence.²⁴⁹ The role of the Armed Forces was notably redefined away from Ba'athist party objectives and toward the protection of national security.²⁵⁰ The constitution included a new article encouraging martyrdom for the homeland and emphasizing the state's role in preserving national unity.²⁵¹ This constitutional change became the foundation for upgrading the regime's narrative, and awarding, therefore, violence against civilians a new veneer of legality.²⁵²

The persistence of practices despite legal changes, exemplified by the continuation of violence against civilians, poses the question of "why authoritarian regimes bother to erect a façade of judicial process in the first place."²⁵³ This question embodies elements of the broader subject on the relationship between practices and change, a topic of much debate among practice theorists.²⁵⁴ The debate specifically raises the question of how regimes can reproduce themselves whilst their dispositional infrastructures change.²⁵⁵ In Syria's case, argues legal scholar Fa'q Hwajja, that legal changes, of which the 2012 constitution was one, function to reproduce the authoritarian state, and ensure perpetrators of violence that their practices will not be hindered or punished.²⁵⁶ Therefore, much like the constitution after the Ba'athist takeover in 1963, the 2012 constitution must be seen as a 'document of consensus' between different regime institutions and agencies.²⁵⁷ Constitutional and legal reforms, in other words, are not symbolic from the perspective of perpetrators because they reinforce ASV as a virtuous deed in the service of the homeland.²⁵⁸

²⁴⁸ The Centre for Justice and Accountability (CJA), *Ewan Brown Exhibits: Exhibit C Vol 1*, CJA, 2018, [CJA](#).

²⁴⁹ "The Syrian Constitution Published in 2012," *constituteproject.org*, 2012, [Constitute](#).

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Muhammad Sayed et al, "The Syrian 2012 Constitution and the Developments in Syria" (دستور الجمهورية العربية), *Arab Democratic Centre*, January, 20, 2018, [Democraticac](#).

²⁵³ Leenders, "Prosecuting Political Dissent," 2013, 170.

²⁵⁴ Pepinsky, "Authoritarian Innovations," 2020.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1094.

²⁵⁶ Fa'q Hwajja, "The Rule of Law in the Syrian Constitution" (دولة القانون في الدستور السوري) *Tabayyun* Volume 1, no. 4, (2013): 1, [Tabayyun](#).

²⁵⁷ Syrian Anonymous Journalist (SAJ), "The Provisional Constitution of 1964," *SAJ*, 2021, [SAJ](#).

²⁵⁸ Sayed et al, "The Syrian 2012 Constitution", 2018.

From the regime's perspective, on the other hand, legal and constitutional reforms reduce the possibility that perpetrators will be alienated, for fear of legal accountability.²⁵⁹

4.3. Counter-Terrorism Act: Guilty Until Proven Innocent

In July 2012, Bashar issued decree number 19 that includes "a definition of a terrorist act, organization, funding, and the appropriate punishment for committing or promoting terrorist acts."²⁶⁰ The law's loose definition of terrorism replicated the effects of emergency laws, which facilitated labeling any opposition to the regime as terrorists and heretofore members of the MB and foreign stooges.²⁶¹ Towards the end of that month, the regime founded a new court that specializes in terrorist cases.²⁶² This court substituted the SSSC which was the backbone of the state of emergency.²⁶³ The continuity between the state of emergence and the war on terror is, therefore, based on the 'exceptionality' principle that justifies otherwise 'abnormal' measures since the country continues to face chronic threats.²⁶⁴

Gradually, counter-terrorism laws provided a similar framework to the one offered by emergency laws defining ASV as a virtuous practice in the face of terrorist threat.²⁶⁵ In a report based on the testimonies of former detainees, published by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), fourteen practices were highlighted that make counter-terrorism courts similar to the SSSC and the field courts of the early 1980s.²⁶⁶ The effect of these fourteen practices is the near total deprivation of the accused from any civil or legal rights, forced confessions through torture and violence, and the complete immunity of any Mukhabarat agents or other loyalist perpetrators from being implicated in any crime.²⁶⁷ Accusations of supporting and harboring terrorists became commonplace among the perpetrators of ASV who used it to justify detention of human rights activists, suppression of protestors on the street, torture, as well as massacres.²⁶⁸ General Naim

²⁵⁹ SAJ, "The Provisional Constitution of 1964," 2020, 196.

²⁶⁰ MENA Rights Group, "Three Laws to Counter Terrorism in Syria," 2012.

²⁶¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Syria - Using the Counter-Terrorism Court to Choke the Opposition" (سوريا - استخدام محكمة مكافحة الإرهاب لخنق المعارضة في سوريا), *HRW*, June 25, 2013, [HRW](#).

²⁶² The People's Assembly, "The Law 22 of 2012 Establishing a Court to Investigate Terrorist Cases" (القانون 22 لعام 2012), July 26, 2012, [Syrian Parliament](#).

²⁶³ HRW, "Far from Justice: The Supreme State Security Court in Syria" (بعيدا عن العدالة: محكمة أمن الدولة العليا في سوريا), *HRW*, February 24, 2009, [HRW](#).

²⁶⁴ Enab Baladi, "From State Security to Terror" (من أمن الدولة إلى الإرهاب), *Enab Baladi*, April 19, 2012, [Enab Baladi](#).

²⁶⁵ HRW, "Syria," 2013.

²⁶⁶ SNHR, "A Report on the Counter-Terrorism Courts," *SNHR*, 2023, [SNHR](#), 5.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶⁸ CJA, *Ewan Brown Exhibits: Exhibit C Vol 3*, CJA, 2018, [CJA](#).

Suleiman, the head of the Third Brigade, which played a key role in the triumph of Hafez over his brother in the mid-1980s, justified in a leaked document the attack on Houla through references to armed gangs and terrorists active in the region.²⁶⁹

What the three legal developments demonstrate is that perpetrators were accustomed to the law being on their side, as the law in return celebrates their practices as virtuous. The events in the city of Dar‘a that sparked the 2011 uprising are evidence of this. The Mukhabarat apparatus arrested and tortured children who scribbled anti-regime slogans on the walls, failing to recognize that their practice might be counterproductive in the context of the Arab Spring’s rising tide.²⁷⁰ From the perspective of the tortures, their deeds did not deviate from what the law deemed as a virtue within these institutions, reproducing their usual response to dissent, namely with detention and torture.²⁷¹ Another example is of a child who died under torture a month after the Dar‘a events, 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib, who was accused by regime militias of being a terrorist who sneaked into military barracks to rape army officers’ wives.²⁷²

4.4. Who Makes the Law?

The three developments analyzed in this chapter, in effect, reflect how the regime’s violence against civilians, often portrayed as being above the law, exists interdependently with the judicial framework. A report released by the SCJA, which specializes in collecting primary sources to hold regime perpetrators of violence accountable, makes a case for how the interdependence between the law and violence manifests itself.²⁷³ Containing documents from all across the country that belong to military institutions and Mukhabarat agencies, the report highlights the absence of any reference to laws in these documents used to justify or legitimate violence.²⁷⁴ This does not reflect an intentional disregard for laws as much as it reflects how it was obvious for perpetrators that they can act without legal restrictions because the law will always be on their side.²⁷⁵ In a way, through their practices the regime’s perpetrators became the law-makers, or in their words, as their

²⁶⁹ CJA, *Exhibit C Vol 3*, 2018, 7.

²⁷⁰ Yassin-Kassab & al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 2016, 49.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁷² Orient Net, "On the Anniversary of His Martyrdom" (في ذكرى استشهاده), *Orient Net*, May 25, 2017, [Orient Net](#).

²⁷³ al-Abdallah, *Walls Have Ears*, 2019, 1.

²⁷⁴ Al Jumhuriya, "A Look Inside the Syrian Mukhabarat" (نظرة من داخل المخابرات السورية), *Al Jumhuriya*, 2019, [Al Jumhuriya](#).

²⁷⁵ al-Abdallah, *Walls Have Ears*, 2019, 1.

favorite motto goes "we are the state."²⁷⁶ These documents, the report notes, reflect an open-ended use of language that neglects the distinction between terrorists, armed gangs, or civilians.²⁷⁷ The only document that discusses the Houla massacre, drafted by the head of the political security bureau, fits that pattern as it emphasizes doing whatever is 'necessary' without employing specific language.²⁷⁸

For military institutions or Mukhabarat agencies, therefore, the distinction between applying the law and inventing it is 'suspended', as philosopher Walter Benjamin argues.²⁷⁹ In turn, the ends of the law are defined simultaneously by the perpetrators of ASV who retain "the right of decree," as military field courts during the 1980s established.²⁸⁰ This conclusion aligns, therefore, with the critique that practice theorists uphold against realist conceptions of laws as structures.²⁸¹ According to practice theory, using the law to justify violence involves interpretive processes by the perpetrators.²⁸² Existing practices that can be sustained by unwritten norms, prior experiences, or the shared knowledge can lay the groundwork for the emergence of new laws.²⁸³ The law, in other words, "does no more than symbolically consecrate," the practices that constitute institutions of ASV and the mechanisms that shape relations between them.²⁸⁴ Mehran argues that "formal institutions are often reinforced and complemented by informal ones, in terms of socially shared rules that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels."²⁸⁵ Contemplating the regime's ASV, therefore, requires appreciating the interdependence between the practices of formal institutions such as the law, and the practices of informal institutions such as the Mukhabarat.²⁸⁶

One function of laws passed after 2011, Kamrava argues, revolves around repackaging the institutional practices that enable ASV.²⁸⁷ This development must be seen in light of what Bashar

²⁷⁶ Üngör, *Paramilitarism*, 2020, 138.

²⁷⁷ al-Abdallah, *Walls Have Ears*, 2019.

²⁷⁸ CJA, *Exhibit C Vol 3*, 2018.

²⁷⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," In *On Violence: A Reader*, ed. Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 275.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 275.

²⁸¹ Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions*, 1989.

²⁸² Silvia, *How to Conduct a Practice-Based Study*, 2019, 106.

²⁸³ Stappert, "Practice theory and change in international law," 2019, 34.

²⁸⁴ Pierre Bourdieu & Richard Nice, *The Logic of Practice*, 1st Edition. (California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 132.

²⁸⁵ Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, 2018, 80.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸⁷ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 78.

emphasizes as the requirements and specificities of ‘the new stage’ that Syria is entering.²⁸⁸ Prior to the adoption of that constitution, Bashar argued that the new stage, started by the 2011 uprising, does not require "a new Syria" as much as it requires "a rejuvenated Syria."²⁸⁹ In that same speech, he began emphasizing the role of terrorism in undermining stability in the country, which signaled that a rejuvenated Syria is old practices repackaged in a new narrative.²⁹⁰ This fits a pattern within the regime of reenacting the legitimacy of its practices by aligning their motives to the prevailing mood internationally, as Leenders’ argument indicates.²⁹¹ The double function of that practice is that it can award the regime a degree of legitimacy internationally, while it reassures perpetrators of violence domestically that the law will always be on their side.²⁹² Examples of that is Bashar’s unorthodox justification of emergency laws, prior to 2011, through reference to terrorism as part of the regime’s attempt at legitimating its practices by associating it with the post-9/11 agenda of combating terrorism all the while facilitating the influx of terrorist groups to Iraq.²⁹³ Therefore, after 2011, subsequent implementation of laws and creation of courts that specialize in counter-terrorism had the effect of propelling the practices of military institutions and Mukhabarat agencies forward into what Bashar calls the new stage.²⁹⁴

In sum, this chapter demonstrates the relationship that developed between the law and perpetrators, and which contributed to the regime’s atrocious response to the 2011 uprising. Legal practices after the upheaval of the 1980s were geared towards reassuring perpetrators that any action they take is a virtue in the service of the homeland, so long as that action furthers the regime’s objectives, as political activist and former juvenile inmate in Tadmor prison Muhammad Burro argues.²⁹⁵ This autonomy awarded to perpetrators encourages participation in ASV not only through promising legal impunity, but through providing a framework that makes ASV a virtue in the face of what the regime deems an existential threat.²⁹⁶ The next chapter, differently, focuses

²⁸⁸ al-Assad, The January 2012 Speech, 2012.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Leenders, "Prosecuting Political Dissent," 2013.

²⁹² Ibid., 171.

²⁹³ David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: Bashar al-Asad and modern Syria*, 1st Edition. (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 89.

²⁹⁴ al-Assad, The January 2012 Speech, 2012.

²⁹⁵ Syria TV, "Syrian Mukhabarat.. History of the Kingdom of Fear," (المخابرات السورية.. تاريخ مملكة الرعب), YouTube Video, 49:11, 2023, [YouTube](#).

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

on how the regime's narrativizing of reality allows perpetrators to make sense of massacres after their occurrence.

Chapter 5: Narrativizing Reality: The Virtue of Falsehood

"When there is no enemy, we have to invent one"

— Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy*.²⁹⁷

Every Friday after 2011, it became routine for Syrians to take to the street en masse to protest against the Assad regime.²⁹⁸ One Friday, on the 25th of May in 2012, anti-regime protests held in Houla escalated into a limited armed confrontation between rebels and the army.²⁹⁹ The latter responded with artillery bombardment followed by two waves of ground assault where civilians were handcuffed and slaughtered with machetes, knives and bayonets.³⁰⁰ The regime denied its responsibility and blamed rebels for committing the massacre to frame the regime and encourage foreign intervention.³⁰¹ In fact, claiming plausible deniability and blaming rebels remained the regime's consistent strategy in response to cases of ASV after 2011, even though most massacres occurred in areas known to oppose the Assad regime.³⁰² Simultaneously, some of the Houla perpetrators tried to create the impression that the rebels were responsible for the killings.³⁰³ Rebels, according to that narrative, dressed up in army uniforms in order to implicate the regime.³⁰⁴ Even the Colonel who oversaw the regime's campaign in Homs, and was likely aware of what perpetrators did in Houla, adhered to fictional narratives of events by denying responsibility and blaming the rebels.³⁰⁵ Figures such as these confirmed popular opinions among Arab and

²⁹⁷ Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy*, 1st Edition. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 9.

²⁹⁸ Martin Chulov & Mona Mahmood, "The Houla massacre: reconstructing the events of 25 May," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2012, [The Guardian](#).

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Jihad al-Maqdisi, "The Syrian Foreign Office: We Did Not Commit al-Houla Massacre" (الخارجية السورية: لم نرتكب مجزرة الحولة), *Sky News*, May 17, 2012, [Sky News](#).

³⁰² Al Jazeera, "The Revolution's Conversation | al-Houla Massacre and International Responses" (حديث الثورة | مجزرة الحولة و ردود الأفعال الدولية), YouTube Video, 47:55, 2013, [Al Jazeera](#).

³⁰³ Chulov & Mahmood, "The Houla massacre," 2012.

³⁰⁴ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 180.

³⁰⁵ CJA, *Exhibit C Vol 3*, 2018.

international media outlets that the regime is delusional, that it lost touch with reality, and that its lies cannot continue indefinitely.³⁰⁶

On the scholarly side, the majority of which focused on the ir(rationality) of decisions, fictional narratives were effectively seen as a deliberate attempt by the regime to justify its violence.³⁰⁷ Leenders, for example, penned an article to explore the rationalities behind the regime's maneuvers, in contrast to popular opinion during the early stage of the conflict who viewed the violence of the regime as irrational and futile.³⁰⁸ Narratives, he argues, can be seen as part of the regime's rational calculation to win the war.³⁰⁹ Syrian activists, in addition, were quick to denounce those narratives as lies but beyond that a crucial question remains unanswered. Namely, how do perpetrators of ASV maintain the apparent conviction that their deeds are virtuous despite those lies? This chapter aims to answer this question by highlighting practices of 'Othering' and fictionalizing, as part of the regime's narrative infrastructure that contributes to making ASV virtuous.

5.1. Collateral Damage or Deliberate Killing?

This research observes that part of what makes violence under the Assad regime atrocious is the perpetrators' slow and deliberate killing of civilians. Whether during the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990), the upheaval between 1978 and 1982, or after 2011, violence against civilians entailed the use of sharp weapons including knives, shaving blades, and axes.³¹⁰ Survivors of ASV in Hama 1982 speak of perpetrators raiding religious schools of blind elderly people to burn students with gasoline after subjecting them to emotional and physical humiliation.³¹¹ Children too were not spared the violence between 1978 and 1982 and sometimes they were deliberately

³⁰⁶ Al Jazeera, "The Delusions of Bashar al-Assad," Al Jazeera, April 3, 2011, [Al Jazeera](#).
Omar al-Khatib, "Baathist Rambling and the Truth of Resistance" (خز عبلات البعث و حقائق الممانعة), *Orient*, November 11, 2013, [Orient](#).

Jaber al-Harmi, "The Syrian Regime Cannot Block the Sun With a Sieve" (النظام السوري لن يستطيع أن يحجب الشمس) (بغريال), *al Sharq*, February 6, 2012, [al Sharq](#).

³⁰⁷ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 2019, 34.

³⁰⁸ Reinoud Leenders, "Repression is not a Stupid Thing," In *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith, Politics in the Levant*, ed. Michael Kerr & Craig Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

³¹⁰ Al Safir Newspaper, "Wireless Press Conference with the Fighters in Tal al-Zaatar" (مؤتمر صحفي لاسلكي لمقاتلي تل) (الزعر), *Al Safir*, 1976, [Al Safir Archives](#).

³¹¹ Yazan Shahdawi, "The Memory of the 1982 Massacre Reminds Hama of Its Renewed Tragedies" (ذكرى مذبحه) (تذكر حما بمناسبة المتجددة 1982), *Al Jazeera*, February 3, 2014, [Al Jazeera](#).

Ahmad al-Naser, "On Its 39th Anniversary... The Hama Massacre Which Exhausted Syrians' Memory" (في ذكراها الـ 39) (مجزرة حما التي أنهكت ذاكرة السوريين), *Syria TV*, February 2, 2012, [Syria TV](#).

signaled out for slow killing, much like the Houla survivors recalled.³¹² If this is contrasted to violence that results from indiscriminate bombardment, where civilians, from the perpetrators' perspective, become an invisible collateral damage, then it becomes evident that ASV is sustained by a distinct shared understanding that sets it apart from other forms of violence. As this chapter highlights, narrativizing reality plays a role in strengthening that shared understanding which renders ASV atrocious to observers and virtuous to perpetrators.

5.2. When the Exceptional Becomes Ordinary

During a meeting held for the Graduates Federation in 1979, Rif'at al-Assad took the liberty to discuss foreign conspiracies and how their domestic agents are working to undermine Syria.³¹³ His narrative interpretation of the upheaval, being the leader of the forces that committed ASV in Hama, centered around how "imperialism and Zionism mobilized their military capabilities and their local agents of the MB who agreed to represent the Zionist enemy camp inside the Arab homeland" to undermine Syria.³¹⁴ Rif'at asserted, a year after, during a conference of the Ba'ath party that Syria must learn the example of "Germany's fanatical devotion to its ideology."³¹⁵ There is no middle ground between being with the party or being against it, he added, and just as Stalin and Mao "sacrificed millions out of fanatical devotion to the party and ideology," Syria must be prepared to follow suit.³¹⁶

The narrative, as Rif'at's example shows, moved beyond conspiratorial allegations to establish 'Othering' as core criteria of loyalty which divides society into two camps, a loyalist camp defined by "their cohesion with President Hafez al-Assad's leadership," and an enemy camp where all opposition to the regime is working together to undermine Syria.³¹⁷ This development in the narrative laid the foundation for the ASV that would follow, using the existential threat posed by Islamists to persecute all opposition, and collectively punish civilians.³¹⁸ Six months after the

³¹² Arabi Post, "To the Barbarity of the Assad Family Chapters that Proceeded Bashar's Crimes.. Eyewitness Narrate to Arabi Post the Monstrosities in Hama" (لوحشية عائلة الأسد فصول سبقت جرائم بشار.. شهود عيان يروون للعربي بوست فظائع حماة), *Arabi Post*, February 3, 2019, [Arabi Post](#).

Al Arabi, "I Was There" (كنت هناك), YouTube Video, 24:47, 2017, [YouTube](#).

³¹³ Rif'at al-Assad, A Speech Delivered to the Graduates Federation Meeting in 1979, *Damascus Domestic Service (DDS)*, 1979, [Foreign Broadcast Information Service \(FBIS\)](#).

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Rif'at al-Assad, A Speech Delivered During the Ba'ath Party's Seventh Regional Conference, *DDS*, 1980, [SHRC](#).

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Rif'at al-Assad, The 1979 Speech, 1979.

³¹⁸ Al Arabi, "The Hama Massacre 1982" (مجزرة حماة 1982), YouTube Video, 26:28, 2022, [YouTube](#).

1980 speech, on the first day of Eid al-Fitr, Special Forces Lieutenant Hashem M'alla raided al-Masharqa neighborhood in Aleppo.³¹⁹ More than a hundred unsuspecting and randomly chosen men between the age of 12 and 72 were first detained and tortured, then lined up against a wall and executed with machine guns.³²⁰ The next day, the regime's newspaper celebrated the army's liquidation of a secret Islamist cell in al-Masharqa neighborhood.³²¹ As a result, whereas the regime's narrative was centered on 'Othering' prior to the massacre, the regime's narrative after the massacre was focused on divorcing reality and truth. Both 'Othering' and fictionalizing, became key characteristics of the regime's narrative account, as Hafez's speech in 1981 demonstrates.³²² Hafez gave a public speech to students who graduated from the military summer school in which he highlighted the same narrative elements voiced by his brother, and included another call for action against the MB.³²³ "These gangs must be continuously hunted down," he said, "we must continue to hunt them down in all walks of life [...] the chase must continue so as to eliminate any trace of this gang."³²⁴

Coupled with the legal impunity that came to shape the expectations among perpetrators, this research observes, the narrative sustained by this speech had a direct impact on episodes of ASV in Hama 1982. The brother of Hashem M'alla, who had committed the massacre in Aleppo, Mahmoud M'allah, working under the command of Rif'at al-Assad and Ali Haydar declared that all of Hama is MB.³²⁵ In light of the law that punishes membership in the MB by death, this was de facto a death sentence to the city's inhabitants.³²⁶ As Hama was besieged and closed off in 1982, identities no longer mattered because there were only two camps in society, the regime and Hama, as a city, being the 'Other'.³²⁷ Anyone who happened to be in the city, including officers from the military and Mukhabarat, Alawites or Ba'th party members became free for perpetrators to torture and execute.³²⁸ "We have not encountered even one of the 150 Islamist insurgents we were

³¹⁹ Zaman al Wasl, "35 Years After It Was Committed" (بعد 35 سنة من ارتكابها), *Zaman al Wasl*, August 13, 2015, [Zaman al Wasl](#).

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Hafez al-Assad, A Speech Delivered During Student Graduation from Military Summer Camps, *DDS*, 1981, [FBIS](#).

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (2)," 2012.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (2)," 2012.

³²⁸ Abd al-Ghani Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (1)" (شهادة أحد (1) أفراد القوات الخاصة على مجزرة حماة), YouTube Video, 1:00:07, 2012, [YouTube](#).

dispatched to neutralize," recalls a former soldier of the Special Forces, "but a third of the city's inhabitants perished during the 1980s [...] in slow and gruesome manner."³²⁹ These killings, encouraged through 'Othering' and fictionalizing, are portrayed as a virtue in light of the permanent state of exceptionality that justifies all measures in the name of the homeland.³³⁰ The dependence of ASV on the exceptional becoming permanent is captured best by Rif'at's speech who noted that "sacrifices will continue as long as we have a cause to work for."³³¹

5.3. 'Othering' and The Frankness of Fiction

Despite encouraging ASV as a virtue in the face of exceptional circumstances, the regime continued to deny responsibility for massacres between 1978 and 1982, blaming MB insurgents instead, as the work of regime-sympathetic historians shows.³³² This evokes similarities with the aftermath of 2011, where the regime employed two strategies; 'Othering' and fictionalizing reality to re-legitimate exceptional measures, while consistently claiming plausible deniability.³³³ Wedeen demonstrates the logic behind this dual strategy, arguing that through the practice of blurring the lines between fiction and reality, the regime is able to generate loyalty through subscribing to its fictional stories.³³⁴ That way, the regime's plausible deniability becomes a covert validation of ASV among perpetrators who see adherence to the regime's fictional narrative as virtuous.³³⁵

Thus, it becomes crucial to understand how the Assad regime repackaged its narrative after 2011 to reproduce ASV.³³⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the redrafting of the constitution in 2012 offers a prime example of how laws and fictional narratives work together to reinforce the shared understanding among perpetrators that massacres are virtuous. Bashar's regime, like his father's, redrew the fault lines of the conflict by dividing society into the reform camp led by Bashar, and the other camp led by terrorist jihadists and their foreign backers.³³⁷ Bashar's first

³²⁹ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (1)," 2012.

³³⁰ Hafez al-Assad, The 1981 Speech, 1981.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Hashem Uthman, *Modern Syrian History: The Era of Hafez al-Assad 1971-2000* (حافظ الأسد تاريخ سوريا الحديث: عهد 1971-2000), 1st Edition. (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes lil-Kutub, 2014).

³³³ Dina Matar, "The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication: Practices and Ideology," *International Journal of Communication* Volume 13, (2019): 2408, [International Journal of Communication](#).

³³⁴ Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, 2019, 114.

³³⁵ Matar, "The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication," 2019, 2409.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 2410.

speech after the upheaval in 2011 highlighted "the exceptional times" that Syria is living through.³³⁸ He proceeded by asserting that "the threads of conspiracy stretch inside the country," and indicated that his opponents are terrorists and "germs" who must be dealt with decisively.³³⁹ The central impact of fictional narratives on the regime's response to the 2011 uprising, is verified by some of Bashar's private emails leaked in 2012.³⁴⁰ In the email, a loyalist media expert advises Bashar not to blame attacks on terrorists too quickly and without any prior investigation lest he appear on the side of the United States.³⁴¹ In turn, the regime's narratives were reproduced by loyalist media outlets through airing programs dedicated to exposing the media's disinformation.³⁴² The programs included both staged scenes and fake videos attributed, ludicrously, to the opposition's media campaign against the regime.³⁴³

Recognizable to the Syrian audience, these narratives fall under the regime's practice of 'shuffling cards' which accounts for how reality and fiction become synonymous.³⁴⁴ Nearly in all massacres recorded on video, for example, including the one introduced at the beginning of this research, bizarre accusations were leveled against randomly chosen victims who were smeared for being terrorists and jihadists before being executed.³⁴⁵ Similarly, after carrying out systematic executions of randomly chosen men in Hama 1982, weapons were laid next to their corpses for military photographers to document evidence that the victims were militant insurgents, according to the testimony of a former soldier who witnessed that phenomena.³⁴⁶ Other cases include the story of Hamza al-Khatib from Dar'a, whose torture and murder was justified through false accusations of attempted rape, or the story of Zaynab al-Hosni during the assault on Homs in 2012.³⁴⁷ For opposing the regime, Zaynab was tortured to death and handed over to her parents only to have a fabricated doppelganger appear on national TV to discredit the opposition's plight

³³⁸ Bashar al-Assad, A Speech Delivered in March 2011, *Voltaire Network*, 2011, [Shabakat Voltaire](#).

³³⁹ Bashar al-Assad, A Speech Delivered in June 2011, YouTube Video, 43:45, 2011, [YouTube](#).

³⁴⁰ Al Arabiya, "Al Arabiya reveals the story behind Assad's leaked emails and what they mean for Syria," *Al Arabiya*, March 15, 2012, [Al Arabiya](#).

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Muhammad al-Qadi, "Journalist Youth During Their Solidarity Vigil" (الإعلاميون الشباب في وقتهم التضامنية), *Shahba News*, October 2, 2011, [Shahba News](#).

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Abir Nasr, "The Syrian Master of Treachery and the Game of Shuffling Cards" (سيد الخداع السوري ولعبة خلط الأوراق), *Al Arabi Al Jadid*, March 15, 2022, [Al Arabi Al Jadid](#).

³⁴⁵ Dar'a and Hawran News, "Leaked," 2013.

³⁴⁶ Al Arabi, "The Hama Massacre," 2022.

³⁴⁷ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 162.

for justice.³⁴⁸ International media outlets ridiculed these programs and failed to appreciate how their monotonous and staged character speaks for the consistency of the regime's 'Othering' and fictionalizing which produce tangible loyalties.³⁴⁹

What these practices perpetuate among perpetrators is a 'delusional rationality' that allows them to draw the fault lines of the conflict and to determine autonomously the appropriate course of action.³⁵⁰ As Arendt shows, this function of ideology awards individual perpetrators the power to further develop the logical implications of certain narratives encouraging, in effect, the same set of activities across different contexts.³⁵¹ To paraphrase Bourdieu, a reinforcement of an existing disposition allows perpetrators to develop a similar position that sustains the practice of ASV.³⁵² Similar to the legal reforms, the regime's fictional narratives must be equally assessed as a medium of communication between the regime and perpetrators that reinforces their shared understanding of ASV as virtuous.³⁵³

Part of what reflects the continuity of that shared understanding is the fact that many perpetrators of ASV back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, became the commanders of ASV after 2011.³⁵⁴ Major Generals Rafiq Shihadeh and Jamil al-Hasan, who supervised the Homs campaign in 2012, were at the forefront of massacres three decades earlier with al-Hasan participating personally in 'slaughter festivals'.³⁵⁵ M'alla, who committed the massacre back in 1980 in Aleppo, became a commander in *al-Firqa al-Rab' a* (the Fourth Brigade), the elite force responsible for the Houla massacre.³⁵⁶ For these perpetrators Homs in 2012, like Hama in 1982, became effectively a field wherein 'Othering' is perpetuated and reality is fictionalized.³⁵⁷ Or in Wedeen's words, what unites both regime attitudes to the massacre in Houla and Hama are narratives that demarcate the

³⁴⁸ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 162.

³⁴⁹ Yasmin Hussein, "Investigation: The Syrian Television Airs Confessions That Are Not Believed By Many" (تحقيق: التلفزيون السوري يبث اعترافات لا تتطلي على الكثيرين), *Reuters*, May 17, 2012, [Reuters](#).

Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, 2019.

³⁵⁰ Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 2007, 46.

³⁵¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1973, 472.

³⁵² Bourdieu and Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977, 3.

Jackson, "Pierre Bourdieu," 2008, 165.

³⁵³ Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 2007, 294.

³⁵⁴ Matar, "The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication," 2019.

³⁵⁵ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (1)," 2012.

Muhammad Imam, "The War Criminal Rafiq Shihadeh" (مجرم الحرب رفيق شحادة), *Rabitat Udaba al Sham*, October 1, 2022, [Rabitat Udaba al-Sham](#).

³⁵⁶ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (2)," 2012.

³⁵⁷ Martin Chulov, "Houla Massacre: UN Resolution Condemns Syria," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2012, [The Guardian](#).

lines between loyalists and rebels, or in the regime's discourse 'patriot' and 'traitor'.³⁵⁸ Hence, the narrative around Houla is faithful to the pattern that emerged after 2011 and which allowed the regime to claim plausible deniability while evoking "the threat of terrorism to unleash the terror of the security forces," as Kamrava says.³⁵⁹ Internal communication between the various branches who perpetuated ASV in Homs, for example, employed loose and slur-like use of the term terrorist which manifests how the regime's 'Othering' and fiction are received by perpetrators.³⁶⁰

In other words, 'Othering' and fictional narratives for authoritarian regimes, argues Snyder, can become part of the 'bureaucratic reality', offering perpetrators ready justifications for their crimes.³⁶¹ An example of that, he argues, is the great famine in Ukraine during the early 1930s under Stalin which began with imagining foreign conspiracies as the enemy responsible for the failure of Soviet land reforms.³⁶² These 'fantasies', much like the fictional narrative of the Assad regime after 2011, sustained a shared understanding of 'us versus them' among perpetrators who translated that narrative to the 'national terror'.³⁶³ This arrangement gives rise to what Arendt observed and Semelin summarized as the dialectics of terror and ideology.³⁶⁴ Whereas ideology repeatedly reimposes itself on society through terror, terror continuously derives its justification from ideology.³⁶⁵ Within that dialectic, practices of 'Othering' and fictionalizing create a sense of an immortal enemy against which all measures are justified.³⁶⁶ Hence, argues Arendt, ASV is liberated from the ends-means paradigm, becoming instead perceived by perpetrators as a virtue in pursuit of reproducing that arrangement.³⁶⁷

In short, this chapter analyzed the way in which the regime's narrativizing of reality is constituted by practices that make ASV virtuous. The main findings illustrate how narratives, through dividing society into two camps and through making fiction and reality synonymous, fostered a recurring

³⁵⁸ Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, 2019, 34.

al-Assad, A Speech Given in January 2012, 2012.

³⁵⁹ Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, 2018, 89.

³⁶⁰ CJA, *Ewan Brown Exhibits: Exhibit C Vol 2*, CJA, 2018, [CJA](#).

³⁶¹ Timothy Snyder, "The Making of Modern Ukraine," YouTube Video, 48:40, 2022, [YouTube](#).

³⁶² Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, 1st Edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 43.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 112.

Matar, "The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication," 2019, 2409.

³⁶⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1973.

Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 2007, 32.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁶⁶ Matar, "The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication," 2019, 2410.

³⁶⁷ Arendt, *On Violence*, 1969, 54.

sense of an immortal enemy, however differently it was defined during different periods. The Assad regime realized, in other words, that if it succeeds in portraying any circumstance as a nail, then it can use its hammer indefinitely.³⁶⁸ The purpose of the next chapter is to investigate how ASV contributed to the reproduction of the regime's dispositions by consolidating the perpetrator elite.

Chapter 6: Consolidating the Perpetrator Elite: Covenant of Blood

"To be sure, in all illegal enterprises, criminal or political, the group, for the sake of its own safety, will require that each individual perform an irrevocable action in order to burn his bridges to respectable society before he is admitted into the community of violence."

— Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*.³⁶⁹

After the bombardment of Houla, as investigations conducted by several international organizations concluded, troops from al-Firqa al-Rab'a as well as local paramilitaries known in Syrian dialect as *Shabbiha* invaded the neighborhood and went on a spree of killing and looting.³⁷⁰ Syrian and international observers highlighted the sectarian nature of the massacre as the *Shabbiha* who descended from Alawite villages displayed an array of sectarian symbolism while killing Sunni civilians.³⁷¹ Activists warned that through such massacres the regime is slowly transforming the 2011 uprising into a sectarian civil war.³⁷² While it is undeniable that sectarianism has always been a crucial source of political mobilization in Syria, interpreting the Houla massacre through sectarian lenses ignores the multifaceted ways in which perpetrators understand the meaning of their activities. This chapter offers an alternative interpretation of ASV by asking the following question: How do perpetrators of ASV perceive the value of their deeds as a positive contribution to the regime? The argument advances that the regime's socialization practices created an

³⁶⁸ David McRaney, "Maslow's Hammer: Are We Entering a New Phase in Anthropology?," *Psychology Today*, March 27, 2012, [Psychology Today](#).

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷⁰ SHRC, "al-Houla Massacre in Homs Year 2012" (مجزرة الحولة في حمص عام 2012), *SNHC*, 2022, [SHRC](#). Chulov, "Houla Massacre," 2012.

³⁷¹ Khawla al-Hadid, "Documenting al-Houla Massacre" (توثيق مجزرة الحولة), *Al Hadara*, May 29, 2012, [Al Hadara](#).

³⁷² *Ibid.*

‘apprenticeship of violence’ among perpetrators who come to see ASV as a virtuous practice that displays their loyalist credentials.³⁷³

According to political scientist Jeffery Checkel, socialization refers to the "processes of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community."³⁷⁴ The type of socialization practices that produce ASV, he argues, exist on a spectrum between hesitant conformity with the group’s practices, and full internalization of those practices as virtuous.³⁷⁵ In Syria’s case, Hinnebusch applied the framework of socialization to explore the ideological integration of new recruits into the regime’s structures, but his analysis only covered the period of the late 1970s.³⁷⁶ This chapter focuses mostly on the 1980s and 1990s, when the generation that committed ASV after 2011 were socialized into the regime.

6.1. Who Are the Perpetrator Elite?

The term ‘power elite’ remains one of the most controversial concepts in sociology due to disagreements on the criteria of inclusion, the basis and type of power, or the backgrounds of its members.³⁷⁷ Syrian scholars include relatives of the Assads, Sunni bourgeoisie, military Generals, or government ministers in the definition.³⁷⁸ Building on that concept, in this research, the network of individuals deemed vital to the persistence of ASV is referred to as the ‘perpetrator elite’. As Syrian author Mahmoud Sadeq demonstrates, the perpetrator elite is composed of powerful actors in the ‘invisible authority’ whose loyalty is exclusively geared towards the regime.³⁷⁹ These authorities include mostly the Mukhabarat and special military units, founded not as institutions of the state but as bodies concerned with the protection of the regime.³⁸⁰ ASV became one of the key mechanisms of keeping this elite system functional, not only to terrorize civilians into

³⁷³ Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 2007, 186.

Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*, 1st Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 36.

³⁷⁴ Jeffrey Checkel, "Socialization and Violence: Introduction and Framework," *Journal of Peace Research* Volume 54, no. 5, (2017): 594, (London: SAGE Publications).

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 597.

³⁷⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch, "Political Recruitment and Socialization in Syria: The Case of the Revolutionary Youth Federation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Volume 11, no. 2, (1980), [JSTOR](#).

³⁷⁷ Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, 1st Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 20.

³⁷⁸ Daher, *Syria After the Uprising*, 2019.

Andrew Tabler, "All the Tyrant’s Men: Chipping Away at the Assad Regime’s Core," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy*, August 23, 2013, [The Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#).

³⁷⁹ Al Jazeera, "Without Borders" (بلا حدود), YouTube Video, 47:33, 2012, [YouTube](#).

Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993.

³⁸⁰ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993.

submission but to secure loyalty through implicating each other as well as new generations of recruits.³⁸¹

6.2. Aborted Republic: ASV, Accountability, and Coups

After gaining independence in 1946, Syria's military was quickly drawn into the political fray of opposing ideologies and parties.³⁸² However, military coups soon came to dominate political life in the nation, heralding the end of civil politics.³⁸³ Each faction, reflecting different ideological bent, came to rely on its own networks of loyalties within society, maintain its own detention centers, create its own parallel institutions, and develop techniques to stay in power.³⁸⁴ Ideological orientations, such as Nasserism, Ba'athism, or Islamism, became the defining factor of loyalties within the army.³⁸⁵ One result of that ideological competition between various factions is that Syria came to witness the birth of its notorious prisons and Mukhabarat agencies, used initially to jail political rivals and spy on other factions.³⁸⁶

Due to the military's dominance in politics, issues that were beforehand handled by the civil government were now managed within the framework of military practices, introducing state violence as a solution to social problems.³⁸⁷ Pre-existing hostilities between civilian government and certain communities escalated under military factions into armed conflict and collective punishment.³⁸⁸ General Adib al-Shishakli's destruction of Jabal al-Druze (Druze Mountain) in 1954, the terror campaigns during the UAR between 1958 and 1961, and Hama's first massacre under the Ba'athists in 1964, are cases in point.³⁸⁹ Shishakli's massacre against the Druze, however, can be seen as the turning moment in Syria's relationship with ASV because it furnished the groundwork for a complex relationship between loyalty and blood.³⁹⁰ Came to power in a coup,

³⁸¹ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 124.

³⁸² Fuad Matar, *Syria's Armies and Their Parties* (عسكر سوريا و أحزابها), 1st Edition. (Beirut: al-Dar al-'arabiyyah lil-'uloum, 2019), 239.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, 2017, 37.

³⁸⁵ Seale, *Asad*, 1989, 69.

³⁸⁶ Al Jazeera, "Assad's Prisons" (سجون الأسد), *Al Jazeera*, May 16, 2017, [Al Jazeera](#).

³⁸⁷ Elie Podeh, *The Decline of Arab Unity: The Rise and Fall of the United Arab Republic*, 1st Edition. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999).

³⁸⁸ Joshua Landis, "Shishakli and the Druzes," In *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation*, ed. Thomas Philipp & Birgit Schäbler (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998).

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

Matar, *Syria's Armies*, 2019, 239.

³⁹⁰ Landis, "Shishakli and the Druzes," 1998.

al-Shishakli, who belonged to the Syrian National Socialist Party, immediately moved to ban free press and crackdown on all political parties.³⁹¹ He not only perpetrated the first ASV against civilians after independence, but he was also the first to be deposed, in large part as a result of the resentment the atrocities caused among Durzi army officers.³⁹² The end of the French mandate (1920 – 1946) was a new beginning for military juntas, and Syrians experienced the gradual takeover of government by military loyalties as intellectuals warned against the pattern of rising ‘men of ambition’, who read Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, and Ataturk, and are heralding the age of party dictatorships and one man rule.³⁹³

When Syria seceded from the UAR in 1961, it quickly came under the monopoly of the Ba‘th party in 1963.³⁹⁴ Thanks in part to the apparatus of violence created during the UAR, little political forces were capable of challenging the Ba‘th, which meant that the struggle for power within the party became centerstage.³⁹⁵ The massacre of Hama in 1964 was one episode of that struggle, between civilians and Juntas, where military factions acted autonomously.³⁹⁶ Some Ba‘thist Durzi factions saw the 1964 assault on Hama as revenge against the hometown of al-Shishakli.³⁹⁷ Even though accountability for killing civilians was already difficult at that point because of the power of the military, according to Ba‘thist President at that time Amin al-Hafez, the fear of accountability became a crucial motivation for the coups that followed.³⁹⁸ The Generals who supported the 1964 massacre in Hama, for example, moved against other Ba‘thist factions signaling the victory of hardliners over moderates.³⁹⁹

Against this background, loyalty in the 1960s went through a crucial transformation as evidenced by the Ba‘th party’s recruitment practices.⁴⁰⁰ The rise of socialist and dictatorial elements of the Ba‘th under hardliner General Salah Jadid meant that adherence to Ba‘thist

³⁹¹ Sami Moubayed, *The Makers of Modern Syria: The Rise and Fall of Syrian Democracy 1918-1958*, 1st Edition. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 190.

³⁹² Landis, "Shishakli and the Druzes," 1998.

³⁹³ Adib Nassour, *Before It's Too Late: Studies and Observations Concerning the Developments in Syria 1948-1955* (دراسات ومطالعات حول الأحداث السورية) (Beirut: Dar al-'Im lil-Malaiyyin, 1955), 18.

³⁹⁴ Seale, *Asad*, 1989, 67.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁹⁷ Al Jazeera, "A Witness to the Era| Amin al-Hafez 12" (شاهد على العصر| أمين الحافظ), YouTube Video, 42:44, 2017, [Al Jazeera](#).

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ Samer Said, "Who is Salah Jadid, Syria's Uncrowned King?" (من هو صلاح جديد ملك سوريا غير المتوج), *Brazer*, 2022, [Brazer](#).

⁴⁰⁰ Hinnebusch, "Political Recruitment and Socialization in Syria," 1980, 145.

ideology was no longer enough to ensure loyalty.⁴⁰¹ Ideology had to be supplemented with belonging to certain socio-economic backgrounds as well as personalist loyalties within the party.⁴⁰² Jadid's regime was brief, as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and Jordan's civil war in 1970 contributed to the Minister of Defense's anxiety over being held accountable for his responsibility during both events.⁴⁰³ Hafez leveraged the power he had as Minister of Defense and led the fifty-fifth and last coup in modern Syrian history.⁴⁰⁴

6.3. The Lion's Cubs: Socializing a New Generation

Determined to stabilize the country, Hafez had to deal with the kaleidoscopic panorama within the army, which continued to harbor competing ideologies and conflicting loyalties.⁴⁰⁵ Hafez was not the first to deal with this problem.⁴⁰⁶ The Ba'ath in the 1960s tasked him with creating *al-Jaysh al-'aqa'idi*, which translates best to the ideological or doctrinal army, precisely in order to cleanse the army from Nasserism and Islamism.⁴⁰⁷ In practice, *al-Jaysh al-'aqa'idi* entailed the reorganizing of the army along the objectives of the Ba'ath party and the reinforcement of a strict hierarchy of unconditional obedience to leaders and orders.⁴⁰⁸ Along with the reorganization of the army, Hafez introduced a parallel army, or an army within the army, whose sole task is the protection of the regime and the advancement of its interests.⁴⁰⁹ Composed of various elite forces, the backbone of which was *Saraya al-Difa'* (Defense Companies), the faction led by his younger brother Rif'at.⁴¹⁰ In order to avoid relying on formal state structures, which acted as a breeding ground for instability and coups, the parallel army was part of the practice of creating institutions in a way that would guarantee a strong loyalist base for the regime.⁴¹¹

This was the structural and ideological context against which army recruits were socialized into the regime's conception of loyalty during the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴¹² The practices of

⁴⁰¹ Hinnebusch, "Political Recruitment and Socialization in Syria," 1980, 145.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁰³ Seale, *Asad*, 1989, 155.

⁴⁰⁴ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 2001.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-63.

⁴⁰⁶ Seale, *Asad*, 1989, 89.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁰⁹ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 49.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴¹¹ Radwan Ziadeh, *Power and Policy: Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East*, 1st Edition. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 19.

⁴¹² Hinnebusch, "Political Recruitment and Socialization in Syria," 1980, 150.

al-Jaysh al-‘aqa’idi such as obedience to superiors, organizational discipline, and absolute loyalty left an impression on newly-recruited young men who looked up to Special Forces and elite units as "beasts who have no fear."⁴¹³ These testimonies were given in a documentary film produced in 1979 by Syrian director Usama Muhammad.⁴¹⁴ In the film, a man newly recruited in the military discusses his ideological devotion by demonstrating how he would react if his own family fell out with the state.⁴¹⁵ "I will tell my family," he asserts, "orders will be implemented anyways, and if they object I simply cannot refuse an order from my superiors. In that case I would have to demolish the house [...] and if they still do not obey the state, they will all die."⁴¹⁶

6.4. Upheaval and Fratricide: Testing the Network of Loyalty

The loyalty of this generation would soon be put to the test as the regime faced two existential threats that were key to the practice of pledging loyalty through ASV.⁴¹⁷ The first was the upheaval between 1978 and 1982. The inquisitional dynamic with which the regime committed ASV in Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, created a system of reward and punishment where fighters can either shoot and be rewarded, or refuse orders and get shot.⁴¹⁸ Fighters like Jamil Hasan, Rustum Ghazaleh, or the M‘alla brothers who participated in the massacres in Aleppo 1980 and Hama 1982, were among that generation.⁴¹⁹ These fighters were effectively rewarded for their blood-based commitment to the regime during the upheaval, in which Hasan, for example, killed civilians with his own hands.⁴²⁰ They were elevated to critical positions of power within the regime and they would play significant roles in the regime’s violence after 2011.⁴²¹ The M‘allah brothers, for example, came to control critical positions in the Special Force, the elite unit responsible for many massacres in Aleppo and Idlib after 2011.⁴²²

Therefore, as evidenced by the 1982 executions of numerous party members in Hama, whose only mistake was being in the wrong place, the 1980s atrocities rendered party membership

⁴¹³ Usama Ahmad, "Step By Step Film" (فيلم خطوة بخطوة), YouTube Video, 22:45, 2013, [YouTube](#).

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Khulud Zghier, "The Institution of the Syrian Army" (مؤسسة الجيش السوري), *Al Jumhuriya*, December 14, 2012, [Al Jumhuriya](#).

⁴¹⁸ al-Ras, *Hama*, 1983.

⁴¹⁹ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (1)," 2012.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid.

or personalist networks insufficient as a criteria of loyalty to the regime.⁴²³ Instead, ‘allegiances through blood’ became the foundation of loyalty providing possibilities for career advancement inside the regime.⁴²⁴ Participation in ASV began increasingly to resemble a system of mutual benefit or a form of business as the analogy of Üngör goes.⁴²⁵ While participation in that system may reap benefits to the perpetrators, the other side of the coin is that failure to participate is met with executions.⁴²⁶

The second existential threat that the regime faced, and which further cemented the relationship between loyalty and ASV is the failed coup attempt of Rif‘at al-Assad. Rif‘at, who commanded the most powerful branch within the elite forces, Saraya al-Difa‘, became the threat that his forces were supposed to guard the regime against.⁴²⁷ If Rif‘at was willing to take advantage of the way al-Jaysh al-‘aqa’idi fosters blind loyalty to commanders to challenge his older brother, then familial ties no longer suffice as a reliable criterion of loyalty.⁴²⁸

At the same time, by tipping the military balance in favor of Hafez, established members of the perpetrator elite had the opportunity to enhance their power and influence.⁴²⁹ These elites included Generals such as Ali Haydar, Ali Duba, Ali Aslan, Shafiq Fayyad, and Hikmat al-Shihabi.⁴³⁰ All of them were involved in the regime’s ASV, in Lebanon, Syria, and internationally, by orchestrating assassinations against enemies of the Assad regime.⁴³¹ Siding with Hafez, during the fratricide, these generals were rewarded in two ways: rising influence within the regime in the form of promotions or allocating more power to their command, and *carte blanche* in society to build empires of wealth as they deem fit.⁴³² Cannibalizing Rif‘at force is a prime example of the

⁴²³ al-Ras, *Hama*, 1983, 279.

⁴²⁴ Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 2017, 190.

⁴²⁵ Üngör, *Paramilitarism*, 2020, 15.

⁴²⁶ al-Ras, *Hama*, 1983.

⁴²⁷ Guingamp, *Hafez el Assad*, 1996, 256.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴²⁹ Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 220.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴³¹ Guingamp, *Hafez el Assad*, 1996, 250.

Seale, *Asad*, 1989, 428-430.

Maurice Deeb, *Syria’s Terrorist War on Lebanon, and the Peace Process*, 1st Edition. (London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, 2003), 3.

Kassir, Samir. *Lebanon’s War: From National Conflict to Regional Rivalry* (حرب لبنان من الشقاق الوطني إلى النزاع الإقليمي), 1st Edition. Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1994, 44.

Yousef al-Ali, "‘Ali Aslan... A Syrian Military Commander Who Was Rewarded by Assad for His Massacres Against the People" (علي أصلان.. قائد عسكري سوري كافأه الأسد على مجازره بحق الشعب), *Sahifat al Istiklal*, June 29, 2021, [Sahifat al-Istiklal](#).

Kerr, *The Alawis of Syria*, 2015, 114.

⁴³² Sadeq, *A Discussion on Syria*, 1993, 221.

first type of reward, and the illegal wealth in Lebanon or the rise of Shabbiha in the 1990s is an example of the second.⁴³³

6.5. (In)human Conscience: Paramilitaries and Brigades

Since the 1990s, the Shabbiha engaged in a range of illicit socio-economic activities, primarily in the coastal region, which included drug trade, smuggling, and kidnapping.⁴³⁴ As the uprising in 2011 erupted, the Shabbiha were socialized into the regime ASV.⁴³⁵ One reason for that is because "these militias are more flexible than the regular security forces, and they often commit violence against civilian populations with greater impunity," as Kamrava states.⁴³⁶ The Shabbiha remained responsible for the lion's share of civilian deaths during ASV that involved slow and deliberate killings after 2011.⁴³⁷ Their motto, "Assad, or we burn the country," scribbled definitely on the walls of towns and neighborhoods they pillaged, summarizes their shared understanding that loyalty to the regime is cemented with civilian blood.⁴³⁸

In most massacres after 2011, much like the 1970s and the 1980s, the Shabbiha acted alongside conventional military units such as al-Firqa al-Rabi'a.⁴³⁹ Led by Bashar's brother, Maher al-Assad, the root of al-Firqa al-Rabi'a stretches back to Saraya al-Difa' after it was disbanded in 1984.⁴⁴⁰ Despite being a regular army unit, therefore, the raison d'etre of this institution is rooted in the culture of paramilitarism that Saraya al-Difa' exhibited.⁴⁴¹ Like Saraya al-Difa', al-Firqa al-Rabi'a became the main force of the regime's ASV under Bashar, committing massacres against Kurdish communities in 2004 and a massacre in Saydnaya prison in 2008.⁴⁴² After 2011, al-Firqa al-Rabi'a stood accused of committing a range of war crimes including the Houla massacre, the repeated use of chemical weapons, and systematic targeting of civilians.⁴⁴³

⁴³³ Deeb, *Syria's Terrorist War on Lebanon*, 2003, 3.

⁴³⁴ Üngör, "Forum," 2021, 85.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁴³⁶ Kamrava, *Inside the Arab State*, 2018, 92.

⁴³⁷ Peter Kellier, "Ghosts of Syria: Diehard Militias Who Kill in the Name of Assad," *The Guardian*, May 13, 2013, [The Guardian](#).

⁴³⁸ Faisal al-Kasem, "The Syrian People Between Burning, Starving, and Drowning to Death" (الشعب السوري بين الموت) (حرقاً أو جوعاً أو غرقاً), Al Quds Al Arabi, October 25, 2013, [Al Quds Al Arabi](#).

⁴³⁹ SHRC, "al-Houla Massacre in Homs Year 2012," 2022.

⁴⁴⁰ Joseph Holliday, *The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle*, 1st Edition. (US: Institute for the Study of War, 2013), 6.

⁴⁴¹ Holliday, *The Syrian Army*, 2013, 6.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 7.

⁴⁴³ Marlise Simons, "Criminal Inquiries Loom Over al-Assad's Use of Chemical Arms in Syria," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2021, [The New York Times](#).

As a result, when the 2011 uprising started, various forms of ASV simultaneously produced familiar flamboyant threats from the perpetrator elite as well as stories of soldiers being coerced to shoot and kill unarmed civilians.⁴⁴⁴ Jamil Hasan, for example, who killed civilians with his own gun back in the 1980s, pledged his willingness to kill a million Syrians and go on trial in The Hague, instead of Bashar, to put a swift end to the crisis.⁴⁴⁵ Acting autonomously in the name of ‘public good’, perpetrators were granted unlimited power over the life and death of civilians.⁴⁴⁶ Some perpetrators went as far as threatening civilians saying: "even if the state forgives you, we will not."⁴⁴⁷ While this seems to be an act of defiance against the regime, in reality it only reinforces the shared understanding that loyalty is cemented in blood which ultimately reproduces the regime. Activists involved in leaking the ‘Cesar’ files, which contain thousands of images of detainees who died as a result of torture at Mukhabarat institutions, say that regime-commissioned photographic evidence plays an important role in the blood covenant.⁴⁴⁸ Perpetrators produce records of slain captives to demonstrate their loyalist credentials, such as indicating that no inmate has been released in exchange for ransom money or other favors.⁴⁴⁹ Therefore, the ‘Cesar’ files, offer an example of how the blood of innocent Syrians, many of whom were children, contributes to the perpetrator elite’s consolidation through enhancing loyalty and trust.⁴⁵⁰

To summarize, this chapter highlights that the regime, through socialization and the incentivization of ASV, created the armed units that were responsible for ASV in response to the 2011 uprising. For these units, ASV was viewed as a virtue as it is not only defined in terms of the greater purpose, as the preceding chapter shows, but also in terms of individual gains. The practice of pledging loyalty through spilling blood, in turn, reproduces the regime’s dispositional logics, outlined in the two previous chapters. The next chapter, differently, proposes alternative perspectives that account for the regime’s atrocious response to the 2011 uprising as critiques of the argument that this study advances.

⁴⁴⁴ "By All Means Necessary," A Report By *The Human Rights Watch* (HRW), 2011, [HRW](#).

⁴⁴⁵ Sbahi, "The Testimony of One Member of the Special Forces on the Hama Massacre (1)," 2012.

⁴⁴⁶ Annsar Shahhoud, "Inside an Elite Syrian Military Unit’s Power Grab," *New Lines Magazine*, May 16, 2023, [New Lines Magazine](#).

⁴⁴⁷ Furat Post, "Who is Esam Zahr al-Deen Who Threatened Syrian Refugees to Not Come Back? " (من هو عصام زهر (؟) الذي هدد اللاجئين السوريين إن فكروا بالعودة), *The Euphrates Post*, September 12, 2017, [The Euphrates Post](#).

⁴⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, "Cesar Files – The Silent Witness to Assad’s Crimes" (ملفات قيصر - الشاهد الصامت على جرائم الأسد), YouTube Video, 1:30:36, 2023, [YouTube](#).

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 7: Alternative Perspectives: Bug or Feature?

After the 2011 uprising, the regime maintained a dual policy of acknowledging the need to reform while cracking down on the protest movement.⁴⁵¹ With regards to the crackdown, regime violence against civilians increased progressively as the political situation deteriorated.⁴⁵² Therefore, the Houla massacre can be seen as one consequence of that gradual deterioration, caused in part by escalation in international and domestic arenas.⁴⁵³ In response to these exceptional circumstances, the regime was left with little options but permitting perpetrators to commit ASV in a desperate attempt to win the war.⁴⁵⁴ This raises the question of whether the practice of ASV is core to the regime since it was used as a last resort and only in reaction to exceptional circumstances.⁴⁵⁵ The primary goal of this chapter is to flesh out this alternative account of the regime's ASV. To do this, the chapter examines how international and domestic dynamics of escalation influenced the regime's atrocious response to the 2011 uprising.

7.1. International Escalation: With Back Against the Wall

After the Arab uprisings which erupted in 2011, the Assad regime watched how autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, with decades of experience, were being overthrown.⁴⁵⁶ Foreign intervention in Libya, demonstrated to the regime that a similar scenario in Syria, coordinated by its international and regional enemies, is possible.⁴⁵⁷ Initial ambiguity by the regime's traditional allies and foes in the international arena, transformed within months to an uncompromising rivalry fought on Syria's soil.⁴⁵⁸ The Assad regime was ostracized by Western powers and regional enemies and the opposition were supplied with money and weapons.⁴⁵⁹ With Russia, China, and Iran siding with the regime, the prospects of a peaceful end to the conflict became bleak.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵¹ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 54-55.

⁴⁵² Lesch, *Syria*, 2012, 165.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁵⁴ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 57.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁵⁶ Daher, *Syria After the Uprising*, 2019, 109.

⁴⁵⁷ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 62.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁵⁹ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 91.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

In effect, this diplomatic failure to end the bloodshed further militarized the conflict.⁴⁶¹ The regime appointed a secret committee to study the appropriate response to the crisis which concluded that only a swift and uncompromising resort to violence can spare Syria the fate of Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya.⁴⁶² From that moment onwards the sense of an existential threat only grew stronger as the regime became a pariah internationally, and as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were accomplishing military victories domestically.⁴⁶³ When the regime found itself increasingly isolated and with its back against the wall, it resorted to ASV in an attempt to restore its power and enhance its credibility.⁴⁶⁴

Similarly, ASV which occurred between 1978 and 1982, remembers Hama's former Mayor As'ad Mustafa, was intended to 'strike' the city and all of Syria back into submission, as Rif'at told him.⁴⁶⁵ The uprising occurred during a critical moment for Syria regionally and internationally, which meant that the regime saw the uprising as an existential threat and a foreign conspiracy.⁴⁶⁶ Syria was virtually bogged down in the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990), and while Israel's eyes were fixated on Damascus, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and King Hussein of Jordan hoped for an opportunity to overthrow the Assad regime.⁴⁶⁷ Negotiations with the MB were doomed to fail, paving the way for ASV, since the regime saw no middle choice between winning and losing.⁴⁶⁸ It was either "us" or "them" as Former Director of Military Mukhabarat Ali Duba told the Mayor of Hama.⁴⁶⁹

In other words, if the regime had been operating under different international circumstances, ASV may not have occurred. This critique does not dispute the regime's possession of infrastructures geared towards the use of ASV; rather it criticizes the argument of this study which contends that ASV is default or core to the regime's modus operandi. The existence of certain governmental practices, said differently, does not necessarily imply that they are encouraged as a virtue in the face of all circumstances. Bashar's leaked emails, for example, show

⁴⁶¹ Al Arabi, "Could a Dialogue with the Regime Have Spared Syria from the Scourge of War?" (هل كان الحوار مع (؟) النظام ليجنب سوريا ويلات الحرب), *Al Arabi*, 2023, [Al Arabi](#).

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁶³ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 84.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

⁴⁶⁵ Al Arabiya, "Political Memory || Former Minister and Mayor of Hama" (الذاكرة السياسية || وزير ومحافظ حماة السابق), *Al Arabiya*, 2014, [Al Arabiya](#).

⁴⁶⁶ Uthman, *Modern Syrian History*, 2014, 200.

⁴⁶⁷ Hafez al-Assad, A Speech Given in July 1976, accessed 30th May 2023 ([Al Diyar](#), 2015).

Dara Conduit, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 36 & 61.

⁴⁶⁸ Al Arabiya, "Political Memory," 2014.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

a degree of presidential control over the set of sub-practices that constitute ASV.⁴⁷⁰ In the emails, an anonymous associate advises Bashar to leak information about the regime's military capabilities precisely to deter its opponents, avoid domestic escalation and ASV.⁴⁷¹

7.2. Domestic Escalation: Militarization and Revenge

An alternative perspective to the one advanced in this study, which maintains that ASV is a core practice to the regime, accounts for ASV as the outcome of escalating violence between the regime and the opposition.⁴⁷² Understanding the dynamics of that escalation holds the clue to understanding the occurrence of ASV, including the Houla massacre, in response to the 2011 uprising.⁴⁷³ The recipe of that escalation consists of failed negotiations with the opposition, on the one hand, and the victory of hardliners within the regime, on the other.⁴⁷⁴ The anxiety about the collapse of the 'wall of fear' caused hardliners within the regime to use ASV in a desperate attempt to restore its authority.⁴⁷⁵ Hence, as the first phase of the conflict was concluded with failed negotiations, the militarization phase began.⁴⁷⁶

Composed of army defectors and volunteers, the FSA was formed to protect the protests from regime violence, and later to engage regime forces and liberate areas from its control.⁴⁷⁷ Early 2012, Homs became the symbol of the Syrian uprising with a large presence of FSA insurgents, inciting the regime to launch the 2012 campaign.⁴⁷⁸ Multiple massacres occurred at the hands of the Assad regime, the most famous are the Baba 'Amr bombings and the Houla massacre.⁴⁷⁹ In Houla, communal hatred was mobilized through recruiting Shabbiha from neighboring villages who had a political feud that dates back to the early 1980s when Houla joined the rebellion against the Assad regime.⁴⁸⁰ The first three weeks of May 2012 the regime shot unarmed protestors in Houla, the FSA responded by attacking military posts, and the regime retaliated with bombings

⁴⁷⁰ Robert Booth, Mona Mahmood, and Luke Harding, "Exclusive: Secret Assad Emails Lift Lid On Life of Leader's Inner Circle," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2012, [The Guardian](#).

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Bellamy, *Syria Betrayed*, 2022, 10.

⁴⁷³ Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country*, 2019, 320.

⁴⁷⁴ Samer Abboud, *Syria*, 1st Edition. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 72.

⁴⁷⁵ Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, 1st Edition. (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2013), 30.

⁴⁷⁶ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 158.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁷⁸ Littell, *Syrian Notebooks*, 2015, 16.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸⁰ Ismail, *The Rule of Violence*, 2018, 179.

and massacres.⁴⁸¹ Cries for revenge gradually came to the forefront as one of the key factors stimulating the locked cycle of escalation between ASV and rebel violence.⁴⁸²

Correspondingly, the massacres between 1978 and 1982 can be accounted for as the result of failed negotiations and escalating episodes of violence and revenge between the regime and MB militants.⁴⁸³ In a similar sequence of events, the regime embarked on a process of negotiations with the MB which failed in part due to hardliners on both sides.⁴⁸⁴ Regime violence was met with Islamist violence and assassination attempts, such as the killing of tens of Alawite soldiers in the artillery school in Aleppo or the attempt on Hafez's life that he barely managed to survive.⁴⁸⁵ In response to these cases of escalation, the regime committed al-Masharqa massacre in Aleppo and the killing of hundreds of detainees in Tadmor prison to avenge Hafez a day after the assassination attempt.⁴⁸⁶ Years later, Rif'at dodged the questions on killing civilians but did not shy away from admitting the murder of political prisoners in Tadmor for having tried to kill the president.⁴⁸⁷ Instead of communal feuds like in Houla, however, Hama's staunch ideological opposition to Ba'athist rule, as evidenced by the 1964 massacre, fueled the escalation of violence.⁴⁸⁸

In other words, both after 2011 and before the 1982 massacre in Hama, ASV can seldom be understood without reference to the dynamics of domestic escalation between contending groups. ASV this critique contends, does not need to be core to the regime's modus operandi to recur; rather, it can emerge as the result of increasing intensity of violence between regime and rebels as the conflict drags on. Perpetrators of various massacres, for example, cited revenge to legitimate their actions in the name of their fallen comrades.⁴⁸⁹

In short, both critiques raise the question of whether viewing ASV as a perceived virtue among perpetrators is compatible with the regime using ASV as a last resort. Said differently, the ASV

⁴⁸¹ al-Hadid, "Documenting al-Houla Massacre," 2012.

⁴⁸² Diya Awdah, "al-Tadamon Massacre... Witnesses Narrate a Part of the Atrocity" (مجزرة التضامن.. شهود يروون جزءا) (من المأساة), *Al Hurra*, April 28, 2022, [Al Hurra](#).

⁴⁸³ Al Jazeera, "A Witness to the Era| Adnan Sa'd al-Deen" (شاهد على العصر | عدنان سعد الدين), *Al Jazeera*, 2013, [Al Jazeera](#).

⁴⁸⁴ Raphaël Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, 1st Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 166.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁸⁶ Al Arabiya, An Interview with Al Arabiya Channel, *Al Arabiya*, 25:52, 2012, [Al Arabiya](#).

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁸ al-Hafez, "A Witness to the Era," 2017.

⁴⁸⁹ Awdah, "al-Tadamon Massacre," 2022.

Dar'aa and Hawran News, "Leaked," 2013.

which occurred in response to the 2011 uprising was from the regime's perspective unimaginable prior to the domestic and international escalation of the conflict, as Phillips argues.⁴⁹⁰ According to this viewpoint, ASV is a weapon of last resort used by the state as an instrument to achieve its ends. The difference between viewing state violence as a bug [functionalist] as opposed to viewing it as a feature [systematic] is what sets apart both critiques from the argument that this study puts forward.

7.3. Instrumental or Systematic: Overcoming the Dichotomy?

Prioritizing the role of circumstances as enabling ASV, a view represented by both critiques, leaves out the role of the mechanisms unique to every political regime that contribute to ASV. This research argues, however, that viewing violence as an instrument with which to face exceptional circumstances obscures significant distinctions that make the Assad regime extraordinary. Nevertheless, the application of practice theory in this study aims to highlight that violence need not be either instrumental or systematic. Violence can be both instrumental, manifested in tactics, acts, plans, and motivations, and systematic, manifested in practices, processes, techniques, and procedures.⁴⁹¹

In fact, Weber, who is often remembered for establishing state violence as an instrument, was aware of the weakness of that dichotomy.⁴⁹² States and political regimes are abstract concepts, an ideal, that can only commit ASV through the authority awarded to specific individuals.⁴⁹³ The 'magic of the state' culminates in its ability to justify violence as a tool to outsiders while simultaneously perpetuating in a systematic manner the authority that commits the violence within its structures.⁴⁹⁴ Violence, as new interpretations of Weber propose, is not only a fire extinguisher to be used in case of emergency, but it is also a capacity or a property of political regimes that can reappear only if it is nurtured and maintained.⁴⁹⁵ In order to comprehend ASV after 2011, one must consequently understand not only political circumstances but also the processes and sub-practices that foster specific types of atrocious responses to exceptional circumstances.

⁴⁹⁰ Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 2016, 58.

⁴⁹¹ Arendt, *On Violence*, 1969, 55-79.

⁴⁹² Weber et al, *The Vocation Lectures*, 2004, 7.

⁴⁹³ Charles Lummis, *War Is Hell: Studies in the Right of Legitimate Violence*, 1st Edition. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 13-14.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁹⁵ Lummis, *War Is Hell*, 2023, 15.

Weber offers a glimpse on how these practices can make violence more than an instrument, but he leaves that argument undeveloped.⁴⁹⁶ He contends that, for the state, "customs [...] perpetuated by habit," "charismatic rule," and the concept of "legality" provide "internal justifications" of violence as being inherently legitimate.⁴⁹⁷ Arendt adds another layer of depth when she argues that violence becomes permanently justified when it becomes manifested in bureaucratic or administrative practices.⁴⁹⁸ To borrow her words, understanding why the Assad regime used ASV in response to the 2011 uprising is intricately tied, at the first place, to the question of "how such a fully developed police state is established and how it works."⁴⁹⁹

Without making instrumental and systematic views of violence complimentary, this research argues, the task of accounting for the Assad regime's ASV remains incomplete. In the Syria scholarship, as this study observes, viewing violence as an instrument at the expense of understanding how it became systematic, contributed to making the phenomenon elusive. This is best illustrated by the work of American journalist, Reese Erlich, who visited Syria during the conflict and interviewed people on both sides.⁵⁰⁰ Focusing on ASV as an instrument, he argues "that if something does not make sense politically, it does not make sense militarily."⁵⁰¹ This reasoning opened the door to Russian propaganda to deny Assad's use of chemical weapons, for example, on grounds that the victorious regime had no reason to do so.⁵⁰² To counter this argument, similar 'functionalist' reasoning was used, except this time to argue that the Assad regime had reasons to use chemical weapons and ASV.⁵⁰³ In both cases, crucial details are left out on the regime's unique structural characteristics without which exceptional circumstances might have produced different responses as evidenced by the experience of other Arab countries after 2011.

Conclusively, this chapter explores some of the criticism, inspired by the state of the art on the subject, that can be leveled against the argument advanced in this study. However, focusing on

⁴⁹⁶ Weber et al, *The Vocation Lectures*, 2004, 7.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁹⁸ Arendt, *On Violence*, 1969, 18, 52.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁰⁰ Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*, 1st Edition. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014).

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁰² Luke O'Brien & Aaron Stein, "The Military Logic Behind Assad's Use of Chemical Weapons," *War on Rocks*, June 15, 2018, [War on Rocks](#).

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

Leenders, "Repression is not a Stupid Thing," 2015.

exceptional circumstances, common in the Syria scholarship, overlooks how the regime's response to these circumstances can itself be the product of sub-practices. In this case, understanding ASV as an instrument embodies implicit 'one-size-fits-all' assumptions about political regimes. Alternatively, analyzing what makes the practice of ASV core to the Assad regime can illuminate the regime's unique structural characteristics. The next chapter offers the concluding remarks of this research by summarizing and restating the main ideas, as well as exploring the societal and academic implications of the argument put forward.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Atrocious or Virtuous?

When the uprising broke out in 2011, I remember Syrian youth telling a fable about revolutionary perseverance in the face of the regime's atrocious violence. The story is about a colorful butterfly that entered the house of a mad monster. His first instinct was to grab his giant hammer and chase the butterfly around the house trying to kill it. After hours had passed, the butterfly survived, and the monster's house was little but ruins.

This study accounts for the Assad regime's ASV in response to the popular uprising in 2011, building on the theoretical framework of practice theory. The study starts out by identifying a set of three sub-practices, that presumably work together to create the shared understanding among perpetrators that ASV is virtuous. As the critique chapter tried to show, however, a practice-based approach to the subject is not an alternative, but a necessary supplement to existing perspectives. Hence, along with an array of scholarly work, this research helps make sense of how atrocities occurred rapidly and repeatedly across all of Syria after 2011. The distinctive aspect of this investigation, however, is that it stresses how relationships between regime and perpetrators, constituted by practice, are key to comprehending ASV in Syria. Through various sub-practices, this research concludes, the regime commanded dispositional infrastructures that work to make ASV 'the right thing to do' from the standpoint of perpetrators. As a result, contrary to what spectators of the Syrian crisis saw as an unjustified resort to ASV, perpetrators saw it as justified

and virtuous. Similarly, the scholarship on atrocity crimes draws a link between atrocities and perpetrators' common conception of what constitutes a virtue.⁵⁰⁴

Arendt sees ASV becoming a virtue as the result of a terror regime destroying the state.⁵⁰⁵ Practices perpetuate that state of affairs, not only through the mere act of repetition, but through fostering a shared understanding of that state of affairs as virtuous.⁵⁰⁶ Effectively, statehood is reduced to a social contract between regime and perpetrators, wherein legal, narrative, and other infrastructures work to regulate relationships between them.⁵⁰⁷ In retrospect, hence, the Assad regime became the real danger it promised to safeguard the Syrian state against.⁵⁰⁸ To rescue the state from coups and plots, the Assad regime substituted the state with a type of power "detached from the world" governed by its own normative systems and values.⁵⁰⁹ This 'arrangement', as Arendt contends, requires that the practice of violence rules supreme over regime and society alike.⁵¹⁰ In other words, and in response to Ayubi's rich analysis, to speak of a 'fierce state', is an oxymoron, for the practices that made Syria's regime 'fierce' necessitated the destruction of the state.⁵¹¹

Interdisciplinary research remains necessary to explore the relationship between the concept of practice and the notion of virtue. Spearheading this effort in Syria's case are legal investigations conducted against the regime's henchmen in Europe.⁵¹² By researching the regime's weapons arsenal, for instance, these legal efforts implicate perpetrators in systematic ASV against civilians.⁵¹³ Reports produced by various legal bodies conclude that the regime frequently used cheap weapons designed to inflict maximum damage in densely populated areas.⁵¹⁴ An example of such a weapon is the notorious barrel bomb, produced by filling large cylinders with nails, sharp

⁵⁰⁴ Fiske & Rai, *Virtuous Violence*, 2015, 144.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1st Edition. (London: Penguin Classics, 2022), 271.

⁵⁰⁷ Burhan Ghalioun, "The Fate of Arab Modernity: From a State to a Gang" (مآل التحديث العربي.. من الدولة إلى العصابة), *Al Arabi Al Jadid*, October 15, 2018, [Al Arabi Al Jadid](#).

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁰ Arendt, *On Violence*, 1969, 56.

⁵¹¹ Burhan Ghalioun, "The Fate of Arab Modernity," 2018.

⁵¹² Yvonne Ridley, "Assad is in the Dock as His Henchmen Go on Trial for Torture," *Middle East Monitor*, April 23, 2020, [Middle East Monitor](#).

⁵¹³ "Destruction Like We Had Never Seen," *SJAC*, 2023, [SJAC](#).

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

objects, metal pieces, spikes, various explosives and chemical agents.⁵¹⁵ After dropping a barrel bomb on a designated area, civilians within a large radius can still get killed from injurious shrapnel or poisonous gas.⁵¹⁶ From a legal standpoint, the employment of these weapons necessitates collaboration at all levels of the regime, including economic, military, scientific, and executive forces who come to share a set of values that regard ASV as a virtue.⁵¹⁷

Despite its merits, the study's emphasis on virtue does not consider other factors that contribute to ASV, such as fear and revenge. Hence, this research asserts, perceptions of virtue among perpetrators are only one among many factors that contribute to ASV. Ideas for further research, inspired by the scholarship on atrocity crimes, can tie multiple factors together through the framework of practice theory to produce a fuller account of the phenomenon. Practice theory, on the other hand, has been criticized by various academics for failing to account for change and for failing to define how a practice emerges, both of which provide potential for future research.⁵¹⁸

On a societal level, if the argument is that prevailing sub-practices contributed to making ASV virtuous among perpetrators, it becomes hard to imagine how overthrowing Bashar might have spared Syria its horrifying fate. From the start, the backbone elite of the regime, who are ultimately the perpetrators of ASV, were willing to go all the way to survive.⁵¹⁹ The motto "Assad or we burn the country," hence, was as much about the perpetrators' devotion to the leader as it was a reinforcement of the social contract that keeps them together in power, to which the only alternative is a burned country. Syria's tragedy, however, is that the survival of the regime, portrayed as the antidote for chaos, could not have been accomplished without setting the country ablaze.⁵²⁰ To borrow the analogy from the fable, in order to protect the house from a butterfly, the mad monster destroyed it himself, killing the butterfly in the process. What is perhaps probable to suggest is that the regime's ability to restore legitimacy and power, which is currently underway

⁵¹⁵ Al Jazeera, "The Barrel Bombs of the Assad Regime" (براميل النظام السوري المتفجرة), YouTube Video, 2:41, 2013, [YouTube](#).

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Syria TV, "The Syrian Network: 82,000 Explosive Barrels the Regime Threw on Syria" (الشبكة السورية: 82 ألف (برميل متفجر ألغاهما نظام الأسد على سوريا), Syria TV, 2021, [Syria TV](#).

⁵¹⁸ Ted Hopf, "Critiques of the Practice Turn in IR Theory Some Responses," In *Conceptualizing International Practices: Directions for the Practice Turn in International Relations*, ed. Alena Drieschova et al (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 30.

⁵¹⁹ Lesch, *Syria*, 2012, 165.

⁵²⁰ Burhan Ghalioun, "Assad and We Burn the Country" (الأسد ونحرق البلد), *Al Arabi Al Jadid*, April 30, 2014, [Al Arabi Al Jadid](#).

as waves of regional normalization reflect, will likely rewind the time bomb that has the potential to set Syria on fire once more in the future.⁵²¹

⁵²¹ Patrick Wintour, "Bashar al-Assad Tells Arab League He Hopes His Return Marks New Era of Peace," *The Guardian*, May 19, 2023, [The Guardian](#).

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