وجود

(wujoud)

Resistance strategies in the Syrian genocide?

by

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Abstract

Since the start of the Syrian civil uprising of February 2011, I have become a trusted individual among an exiled community of Syrian civil society activists in the UK. As an Arabic speaker of Lebanese origin, I have continued to work with them as a filmmaker and advocate in various capacities. Stemming from this long-standing engagement, this practice-based research draws from a combined lineage of Militant Film and Expanded Cinema, questioning how this hybrid practice is capable of resisting what I refer to as the "narrative component" of genocide in Syria. "Genocide" here refers to the term used by Syrian activists to describe what they see as a campaign of extermination targeting their friends, families and compatriots, and which they regard as being instigated and carried out by the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad and his international allies; and "narrative component" refers to what I and Syrian activists view to be a propaganda narrative that the Assad regime and its allies have disseminated internationally in order to justify their campaign of extermination targeting that segment of the Syrian population in opposition to its rule.

My experimentation in this cross-disciplinary arts practice—conducted in a co-authorship with Syrian civil society activists—is informed by my concept (and claim to new knowledge) of wujoud (Arabic: وجود | lit: presence/existence): an ethos and philosophy of resistance that I argue emerges in the context of the Syrian genocide.

Engaging eclectic audience demographics through multiple strategies of wujoud, my practice endeavours to stimulate audience activism in solidarity with the Syrian democratic-humanitarian cause. This project therefore makes use of a variety of audio-visual art forms that include film, video and found-footage, stills photography, sound recording and its manipulation, stroboscopic lighting, and experiments situated at the

intersection of protest and conceptual art. Some of these forms are also deployed as installations that make specific use of the space and surfaces in which they are exhibited, producing immersive spatial environments that play upon an experiencer's (audience) physical and emotional senses.

This research is situated in the field of political audio-visual arts practice and theories of "affect" and "embodiment", with an emphasis on revolutionary and anti-regime audio-visual material in the Syrian context.

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Acknowledgements

Finally, to my parents, who patiently lived the ups and downs of this journey with me, giving their unwavering support. It is to them that I dedicate the other part of this research.

Introduction

On the morning of Saturday 30th November 2013, I stood outside a Stop the War Coalition conference on a quiet side street in central London. I was there as part of a picket—a small crowd of exiled Syrian activists and British-born supporters who had gathered to protest the pro-Assad leanings of this supposedly anti-war organisation. Stop the War had invited a Damascus-based Lebanese nun named Mother Agnes to speak at the conference on the subject of conflict in Syria. She had been in the midst of the British leg of her global speaking tour, funded by a pro-Assad organisation that went by the name of the Syria Solidarity Movement.[1] It was assumed that her participation in the conference was to be used as a platform to promote her theory—the purpose of her tour—that the Assad regime had *not* gassed 1,400 people to death in the suburb of Eastern Ghouta that August, but had instead—as she claimed—been framed by the Syrian opposition who wanted to provoke a military response by Western powers to topple Assad's regime. Syrian democrats regarded her as a propagandist, as did I. And aside from the suspicious invitation, what had made Stop the War's stance especially dubious was that they had conspicuously *not* invited any Syrians to be part of their conference's Syria-focused panel. It was there, on Marsham street, outside the steps of the Emmanuel Centre, that I handed a leaflet to Jeremy Corbyn. I had no idea who he was. But whoever he was, I handed him that sheet of paper hoping he would take a moment to read it and sign the online Avaaz petition we had set up, calling for the UK to end its dealings with the Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport.[2]

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[1] In July 2019, the Syria Solidarity Movement website went offline. I found an archived version of it, which is provided here via the following link, revealing the organisation's launch and support of Mother Agnes's speaking tour: https://web.archive.org/web/20181206161829/http://www.syriasolidaritymovement.org/about/origins-of-the-syria-solidarity-movement/ [Accessed Jul 31. 2019]. The site later came back online, and can be accessed via the following url: https://www.syriasolidaritymovement.org [Accessed 16 September 2019].

[2] The following url links to the online petition: https://secure.avaaz.org/en/community_petitions/David_Cameron_PM_Hon_Phillip_Hammond_Defense_Minister_Boycott_Assads_Russian_arms_supplier_Rosoboronexport/ [Accessed 16 September 2019].

The episode surrounding that 2013 conference serves as an emblematic example of what I had then observed to be a political climate dominated by attitudes and discourse that seemed to belittle and ignore the Syrian struggle for democracy and human rights. When I applied for a place to study a research degree at University of the Arts London, I came driven by an intention to play my part in ending that pervasive attitude that was by then being expressed by many political commentators. These were commentators who were using their public platforms to promote geo-political theories of events surrounding Syria without factoring into their analyses the Syrian civil uprising, nor the Syrians that had started the civil uprising in the first place. For some, like documentarian Dan Snow, the Syrian conflict was primarily about a centuries-old rivalry between Sunnis and Shiaa that had now turned into a war between radical Islam and secularism, with secularism being represented by the Assad regime.[3] For others, such as journalist Patrick Cockburn and commentator Alistair Crooke, the Syrian uprising was a Saudi-US conspiracy that had been instigated in order to weaken and isolate Iran. When MPs defeated, by vote, David Cameron's parliamentary motion to carry out punitive strikes against Bashar al-Assad's regime following its gassing to death of civilians in Ghouta in summer 2013, I watched footage on TV of cross-party parliamentarians congratulating one another with celebratory glee. For them it seemed it mattered less that Assad had now been granted a green light to continue bombarding civilians with a variety of explosives in the face of international inaction. What mattered to them, by the looks of it, was that they had won a victory against the Prime Minister. It was as if the Assad regime's propaganda and PR effort had now begun to affect the foreign policy directions of global powers.

Despite the significant body of audio-visual efforts by Syrian activists to evidence and broadcast the regime's atrocities to global audiences, the Assad dictatorship's own

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[3] *A History of Syria with Dan Snow* (2013) promoted the idea that Assad's downfall would endanger the lives of Syria's minorities who, as the story went, enjoyed protection under the regime's rule.

narrative of events still seemed to hold a position of prevalence among the Syria-focused discourse of commentators, journalists, news outlets and political groupings in the UK and elsewhere in the Western world. What were the reasons for this, and how was it that a toleration of the Assad regime and its version of events—including its narrative dehumanisation of the Syrian opposition—had become a commonly-held and readily expressed viewpoint in these circles of analysis? How was it that the Orientalist tropes and dismissive generalisations that branded the Syrian opposition as being dominated by Al Qaeda-like Islamists—as expressed by journalists and commentators such as Patrick Cockburn, Seymour Hersh, George Galloway, Alastair Crooke, or documentarian Dan Snow—had become so repeated in the daily political discourse surrounding Syria? How did the situation arrive at a point where a supposedly anti-war organisation (Stop the War Coalition) felt it acceptable to invite as a speaker to its 2013 conference a Damascus-based nun believed by Syrian revolutionary activists to be working for the Assad regime, whilst conspicuously *not* inviting any Syrians to the same event?

These are the questions I address in this thesis. In addressing them, I analyse the strategies the regime has been using in order to disseminate its propaganda narrative so effectively, and consider the avenues it has taken and the platforms it has utilised. I also identify what the exact narratives are that the regime has pushed since the beginning of its propaganda campaign. In late 2013, I was already of the opinion that the regime's violent actions against its opponents constituted genocide, for the atrocities it had carried out were of a scale that had affected a significant portion of the country's population. Genocide was also the term that was beginning to be used by some Syrian activists at the time. It was this consideration of genocide that drove me to analyse the regime's propaganda and the narratives it used to justify its war. In this thesis therefore, I also consider how genocide is to be understood both legally and conceptually, and I draw from

the perspectives of genocide scholars, legal experts and Syrian activists in concluding that genocide is indeed an appropriate term to describe the Assad regime's war. In analysing the specificities of genocide pertaining to Syria, I highlight that genocide requires a narrative component. I argue that the Assad regime's narrative of events—a crucial component of its genocide campaign—has been so successfully implanted into the collective subconscious of swathes of people around the world that it has facilitated the internationalisation and legitimisation of Assad's campaign of extermination, and has allowed it to become a campaign that continues unimpeded.

Having established these queries, my further investigation revolves around questioning what form, or through what practice, am I able to resist the regime's narrative component of genocide, and dismantle and debunk the myths and disinformation it pushes? It has been these questions, and the investigations I conducted in order to address them, that have informed the output of my audio-visual practice. The audio-visual and intermedial experiments I have undertaken as part of that practice have therefore been, in part, attempts to draw attention to some of these enquiries.

But this research journey has primarily been driven by the underlying question of how I am able to counter the regime's narrative component of genocide. My aim has therefore been to conceive a philosophy of resistance—one that resists the Assad dictatorship's propaganda narrative, as well as one that can be applied to, or manifested in, the different strategies of resistance intended through my audio-visual practice. Although the objective of my audio-visual works was initially intended to counter the regime's propaganda narrative, they have equally facilitated the conceptualisation and refinement of my resistance philosophy itself. This philosophy is therefore one that has been developed through the audio-visual experimentation I have undertaken as much as it has in turn been

a driver of the audio-visual experimentation—a symbiosis of theory and practice that has turned into a philosophy of resistance I have termed وجود (wujoud).

The greater part of my enquiry is therefore encapsulated by my concept of "wujoud". Conceptualised in my second year of study, "wujoud" evolved as a reconsideration of my initial proposal of Physical Cinema—a rudimentary idea I had envisaged of a documentary-fiction hybrid of filmmaking with elements of physical theatre, featuring real Syrian refugees playing themselves.   It had been the form in which I thought my initial intention to counter the Orientialist attitudes I had encountered would be realised. I had even planned to attend some physical theatre classes and receive training in the discipline, with the intention of then providing such training to Syrian activists, with the ultimate objective of applying these performance techniques in the Physical Cinema film. But things changed. My initial interest in incorporating elements of physical theatre into a form of filmmaking was based on the idea of physicality. It was the physical presence of Syrians, and their bodies, that put their uprising into practice when they made their physical presence, as a potential democratic corpus, known in the streets of Syria. Conceptually, I felt that the idea of manifesting the physical presence of Syrian democrats had the potential to counter the discourse that rendered their physical presence as irrelevant. But on further research in the terrain of theatre theory, my concept of Physical Cinema underwent transformation. Of particular significance in this process was Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Opressed* and the Forum Theatre idea, whereby the cast develop improvisational sketches out of their own lived-experiences. I was then introduced to a weekly theatre group—named Implicated Theatre—by my supervisor Dr. Brad Butler, who had been co-organising the weekly sessions. The group had been experimenting in Augusto Boal's concept of Forum Theatre as a mode of generating performative spontaneity and audience-interaction through participation. Inspired by the experience, I

later brought what I had learnt from those sessions and the culminating performance we gave, to a series of theatre workshops I set-up for Syrian activists and refugees. Reading Boal's theories alongside the dramaturgical and performance-based exercises I had learnt from the previous troupe, I led those weekly sessions with the intention of the Syrian group putting on a series of improvised sketches that were to be performed on the street and on certain university campuses.   Inconsistencies in the workshops' attendance however resulted in no plays being fully developed or performed. But photographs taken by myself and other workshop attendees on one particular session were eventually used to compose my short film *A Friend Recently Told Me* (2016), which is one of several audio-visual experiments created as part of this research.   A further significant contributor to the transformation of my initial idea was Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, which focused on the idea of bringing audiences into a state of discomfort. I was also equally drawn to Josephine Machon's theory of (Syn)aesthetics, which revolved around the idea of performance art as inducing primarily visceral, embodied reactions from its audience, before the intellectual or critical thought processes would kick in. I then came across Vivian Sobchack's essay on *Documentary Consciousness*, and with everything mixed together, I began to conceptualise a more refined version of my methodology that was based on the hunch that in order to alter the perceptions of people coming to the Syrian situation, it would perhaps require putting into practice the concepts of embodied awareness and visceral responses that had been theorised and expounded in the combined literature of these practitioners and theorists. Performing theatre then started to recede into the background. It was not the performance of theatre that influenced me any longer but rather the theories expressed by these performance theorists and practitioners, such as those to do with "embodiment" and "participation".

It was through the making and exhibition of my first work of practice—an attempt to apply those theories into a work of provocation and resistance—that triggered my conceptualisation of "wujoud". Wujoud, in this thesis, refers to an ethos and praxis of resistance. Its conceptualisation and development have been the result of my attempt to make sense of how Syrians could, through their own existence, resist the narrative component of genocide. Through that principle, wujoud is my attempt to make sense of how every audio-visual experiment that I execute as a co-authorship with Syrian activists, is able to resist the narrative component of genocide. It was my early experimentation in the intermedial practices conducted as part of this research that informed the initial conceptualisation of wujoud. Later however, wujoud itself emerged as a methodology for the rest of my practice. It is from this development that I have come to the conclusion that the task of assessing whether or not my work—or other Syrian activist-made video—has been successful in exposing the regime's lies and furthering the Syrian revolutionary cause, seems to have no definite metric or standard of measurement. This thesis therefore does not attempt to measure success. Rather, it proposes and develops the idea of wujoud as a framework of interpretation, or, as a means of making sense of the differing modes of resistance that I conceptualise and develop through my practice. To be specific, the resistance strategies I speak of are attempts to resist the Assad regime's narrative component of genocide. Wujoud—as a mode of interpretation, and as an ethos that informs acts of resistance to the narrative component of genocide—is the contribution to new knowledge that I propose in this thesis.

chapter breakdown

As a guide to the reader, what follows is a breakdown of this thesis' chapters. Each chapter's content is summarised, and each is headed by a title analogous and

corresponding to those found at the top of each of the actual chapters within the body of this thesis.

A Personal Reflection

This thesis came about from a profound and long-standing feeling of injustice. I write about the origins of this feeling in this first chapter, where I recount moments of my childhood and coming of age, revealing how my recent and current political convictions came to be formed. In it, I reveal snapshots of family experiences during Lebanon's civil war; historic crimes committed by the Syrian regime; and holidaying in a post-civil-war Lebanon under occupation by that very same regime. My support for the Syrian people's cause for freedom, dignity and justice against tyranny—the driver of this thesis—is a subject that is intimately tied to my personal history, and it is for that reason that I use the first chapter of this thesis to introduce my backstory of how I came to oppose Syria's Assad regime, and my decision to participate in activism for democracy and human rights for the Syrian people following the first stirrings of their civil uprising.

The Syrian civil uprising and the regime's early response

This chapter summarises the events that constituted the initial stirrings of pro-democracy protests in Syria, including the manner in which the Assad regime responded. The chapter serves to elucidate the level of paranoia and severity the regime manifested in the very first actions it took as part of its crackdown on the first dissenters. The intention of this chapter is to provide, from an activist's perspective, a summary of the early stage of the Syrian civil uprising, to those unfamiliar with it.

Conspiracy? a political introduction

This chapter introduces the political context to which my research responds. It summarises the Assad regime's official narrative of events of early 2011—a narrative that

was designed to discredit and delegitimise the civil uprising against its rule. Highlighted in this section is a report on how the regime's conspiracy theory was successfully promoted into the realms of widely-held belief among populist groups, political commentators and some policy makers by virtue of two early articles that were published in the Guardian and Independent newspapers in October and November 2011—by Alistair Crooke and Patrick Cockburn respectively. Whilst also acknowledging that there exists a battle of narratives surrounding the Syrian conflict, this chapter concludes by recognising that the conspiracy theory commonly used to justify the Assad regime's military crackdown on dissent has become a commonly-held belief that has affected global attitudes towards the Syrian conflict.

Genocide

Following the personal and political introductions, this chapter defines what I mean by the term genocide when used in this thesis. It also clarifies how the term genocide is to be understood in the Syrian context and why it is an appropriate term of reference to describe the Assad regime's campaign against part of the Syrian population. This analysis is made in order to later contextualise the terrain in which wujoud (my conceptualisation of a resistance philosophy) emerges, and which will be elaborated upon in a later chapter.

This *Genocide* chapter is composed of two parts. Part 1, entitled *Is it Genocide? A legal definition,* begins with a review of how genocide has been defined and interpreted by scholars in the field of genocide studies from both a legal and conceptual approach, as well as including how the term has been understood and applied by Syrian democracy activists to describe their perception of the Assad regime's war campaign. The purpose of this first section is to ascertain whether or not the term genocide has legal and conceptual grounding when used to describe the Assad regime's campaign.

Part 2 of the chapter then starts with confirming that genocide is an appropriate term to describe the Assad regime's campaign—as already used by Syrian activists as well as myself—based on the analysis provided in part 1.   What follows is an analysis on what I term to be the "narrative component of genocide", and how this specific component of genocide has functioned in the Syrian context.   The concepts I elaborate on in this section—such as denial and imposed invisibility; the absent image and the imagined event—act as a collective trigger that provokes and rationalises my concept of *wujoud*, which I formulate in the next chapter.   These concepts also serve as the motivating rationale that underpins my audio-visual output, which is also analysed in the next chapter.   At one point in this section, it is suggested that the reader may wish to jump ahead to the practice review section of the thesis to the sections entitled Testimony of a former detainee, The Propagandist, and A Reasonable Argument, all of which provide conceptual explanations of three audio-visual works of the same respective titles, that play with the concepts of the "absent image", the "imagined event" and "dehumanisation" respectively, as elaborated on in this latter part of the genocide chapter.   Here it might even be useful to watch each of the films prior to reading each of the sections that explain them.

وجود

With the *Genocide* chapter having both defined how genocide is to be understood in the Syrian context, and elucidating my concept of the "narrative component of genocide", this chapter introduces my concept of *wujoud* as an ethos of resistance that emerges specifically in the context of genocide. Through an analysis of the Assad regime's crack-down on early pro-democracy protests—including an analysis of the observing of video footage that captured the regime's torture of democracy activists and civilians—wujoud is interpreted as a condition in which the state of "being" defaults to that of "resistance through being". The chapter therefore proposes wujoud as a framework through which

resistance to the narrative component of genocide may be interpreted.   In doing so, it goes through the varying ways wujoud can be understood, providing a contextualised case study for each interpretation.   It concludes that, as much as it is a framework of interpretation, wujoud is also a form of resistance with a variety of strategies that can be conceptually applied as actions and processes of audio-visual and intermedial activist practice—such as the works I have executed as part of this project.   At the end of this chapter, it is suggested that the reader may wish to jump ahead to the section entitled (im)position—situated in the practice review chapter—for an account and conceptual explanation of an audio-visual installation—also entitled *(im)position*—I produced that applies the concept of a "hard wujoud" as proposed towards the end of this wujoud chapter.   Similarly, the same suggestion is made for another film I made with Syrian activists entitled *Statues*.   Readers are invited to jump ahead to the practice review and locate the section of the same title, that elaborates on the film and its intention as being an installation that applies the concept of a "soft wujoud" that I reference in the latter part of this وجود chapter.

Practice review

This chapter situates my practice within a lineage of militant and expanded film by other practitioners, as well as recent work by Syrian video activists and those making films about the Syrian conflict.   The chapter also provides analytical descriptions and conceptual readings of wujoud into my own work under various sub-conceptualisations of wujoud.   These conceptualisations of wujoud can be considered to be strategies of resistance that differ in form and technique from one film to another.   These conceptualisations/strategies include wujoud as participation, drawing from ideas around Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*; as well as wujoud as embodied awareness and as an imposition, in which I combine ideas from Vivian Sobchack's idea of a documentary consciousness with that of Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty,* as a means of impacting

upon the experiencer of the audio-visual material. The strategies of wujoud analysed in this section are also questioned from an ethical basis. Naturally, it would be most appropriate for the reader of this thesis to view the audio-visual works just before, during, or after the reading of this practice review chapter.

Conclusion

I conclude this thesis with a reflection on the audio-visual and intermedial works I have produced as part of this project from an ethical perspective, as well as from that of an activist angle. A film I made in 2016, entitled *A Friend Recently Told Me*, serves as a case study in this analysis, alongside a mention of *The Propagandist*, which serves as an analysis on the subject of distribution of my audio-visual works.

Instructions:

When to view the films

At various points in this thesis, it will be suggested that the reader may like to watch the audio-visual works that pertain to the writing. All these films are viewable online via the following urls. I have provided passwords where necessary. A website devoted to one of the installations is included at the bottom of the list:

- The film that was used for my first attempt at an audio—visual installation in December 2015: https://vimeo.com/168085103 (password: wujoud)

- *A Friend Recently Told Me* (07:51 minutes)
  https://vimeo.com/276079463 (password: recently)

- *Testimony of a former detainee* (08:06 minutes)
  https://vimeo.com/338679895

- *The Propagandist* (26:05 minutes)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfY1Ga4oHUc

- *A Reasonable Argument* (01:48 minutes)
  https://vimeo.com/431250363

- *Statues* (03:49)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4dmJLJDWaQ

- وجود (wujoud) collective blog
  https://wujoudcollective.tumblr.com/

- *(im)position*
  https://wujoudcollective.wixsite.com/action/exhibitions

Footnotes

Throughout this thesis, footnotes are provided at the bottom of pages for greater clarity and explanation of subjects that would otherwise digress from the argument of the main text. Oftentimes, these footnotes will contain links to videos, websites or other online content in order to illustrate phenomena or events referenced in the main body of the text. In order to further explore the events and topics referenced in this thesis, the reader is encouraged to click on the links provided in the footnotes, in their own time.
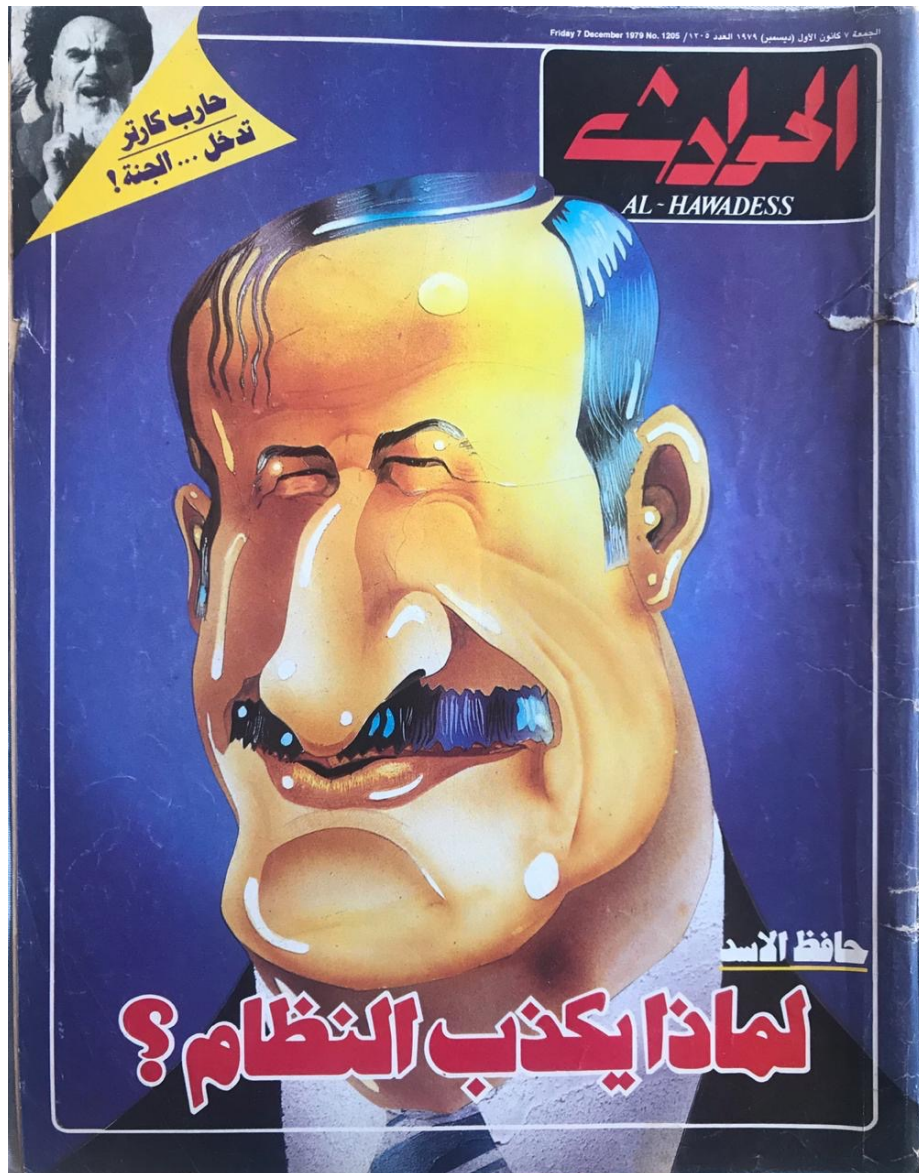
لماذا يكذب النظام؟
Why does the regime lie?
Front cover of Salim al Lawzi's Al-Hawadeth magazine from 7th December 1979.

1.   A personal reflection

Despite the warnings of those close to him—and of those emanating from anonymous others—Salim al-Lawzi had made up his mind.   He would return to Beirut.   A long-standing journalist of considerable repute in the world of the Lebanese press, al-Lawzi had headed his own pan-Arab weekly, Al Hawadeth (The Events)—a staple of political analysis covering current affairs in Lebanon, the Levant and the wider Arab world and Middle East—as editor-in-chief since its inception in the mid 1950s. Having relocated to London by 1976, both al-Lawzi and his magazine continued to publish and receive wide circulation in Lebanon throughout the years of civil war.   But al-Lawzi's prolonged absence from his native country finally came to an end that February in 1980, following the death of his mother and his subsequent decision to return back home for her funeral.

He returned, and, intending to stay for a short while, remained in Beirut for a few days following the ceremony, making his presence known despite the environment of armed conflict that characterised the city at the time.   It was on his car journey back to Beirut international airport on the 25th February, intending to catch a flight back to London, that his whereabouts became unknown.   His ride had been stopped by an armed unit manning a checkpoint. His wife, in the car beside him, was told to remain in the vehicle. She witnessed her husband being taken away. Attempts to reach him over the following few days confirmed that he had been kidnapped.   Nine days later, he was suddenly found. Now a lifeless corpse, forensic analysis of his body revealed that he had endured torture prior to a final assassination. Details confirmed a broken and dislocated right arm, along with severe disfiguring, discoloration and partial dissolving of his right hand (his writing hand) by what seemed to have been caused by highly-concentrated phosphoric acid.   Pens were also found planted in his intestines, evidently by way of stabbings through the abdomen and rectum. The rest of his body was bruised and burned.   Two bullets in his skull indicated the perpetrators' closing act in the session of abuse.

It was my parents who had told me about Salim al-Lawzi's story in my teenage years. Prior to that, I had visited Lebanon for the first time aged seven, witnessing an urban landscape of a bombed-out dystopia: crumbling slabs of charred concrete—the abandoned shells of what apparently used to be apartment blocks; the skeletal structures of burnt ironwork (a variant of the derelict once-inhabited buildings); deep craters in the ground that sped past the rear passenger windows of my uncle's car; and the abstracted information that I had received from my parents that this country had gone through a war. This post-Armageddon landscape, and the abstract awareness of "the war" and "bad stuff" happening somewhere in the background, was as much as I knew about Lebanon at the time. My father hadn't accompanied my mother and me on that trip. At the time, I never questioned why. It was a few years later that I learnt my father had chosen a temporary self-imposed exile. He had been a colleague of al-Lawzi's in London. Shortly after al-Lawzi's murder had become headline news, my Beirut-based Palestinian grandmother telephoned her son (my father) in London and told him not to come to Lebanon any time soon. "Your son has 'distorted' our leader", she had been told by a Syrian colleague. The comment had been in reference to a not particularly flattering caricature of Syrian President Hafez al Assad that my father had created for the front cover illustration of that final Al Hawadeth issue that was to be the last published under al-Lawzi's editorship (see p.21). Within the pages of that final issue, al-Lawzi had penned a highly critical article of the Assad regime. The title of that feature itself, *Why does the regime lie?,* seemed inflammatory enough at a time when the Syrian military maintained a deployment of armed units throughout swathes of Lebanese territory. Syrian military presence in Lebanon was socially regarded as a military occupation of the country by what many Lebanese citizens considered to be the "big brother" style regime of Hafez al Assad. This occupation, and the "peace-keeping" pretext that Assad's government had used in order to justify its presence, had been challenged by al-Lawzi's outspoken

criticism as a long-running feature of his journalism. His determination embodied a defiant tendency among free-thinking Lebanese to sustain his country's reputation as the Arab world's capital of free press and free expression: a pressman's throwing down the gauntlet for the prolonged showdown over the social and political direction Lebanon was to take; a direct challenge to the totalitarian security state that many Lebanese felt the Assad regime had sought to create out of that little Levantine republic. Copies printed for that particular issue proved to fall short in meeting demand. Vendors subsequently increased the sale price for every copy of that particular issue to 20 US dollars a piece—a hefty sum for a single magazine in Lebanon at the time.

My second visit to Lebanon at the age of nine was a family holiday, this time with my father present too. We sat on a balcony of a friend's apartment one sunny morning in the hills of the Keserwan region, overlooking the Mediterranean; part of what we referred to as "Christian" Lebanon (the safe area). Overhearing the voices of people seated on the balcony in the next apartment, my father told me to stop talking. Straining his ears, he identified a Damascene dialect being used. For a while during the early 1990s, he had felt uneasy about stepping foot into so-called West Beirut—the "Muslim area"—without a local fixer. What had been his home turf and a hotbed of leftist intellectualism and pan-Arab and Palestinian activism throughout the 1960s and early 70s of his youth—a counterculture he was very much part of; an area that hosted local and international artists, filmmakers and those of the radical fringes, with the likes of Jean-Luc Godard, the Palestine Film Unit, and members of the Japanese Red Army—had by the early 1990s mutated into an outpost of Hafez al Assad's police state: an atmosphere that was constantly alluded to, as I observed as a child, through the behaviour of my parents, relatives and friends: the keeping of a low profile, and the total refrain from any political talk. Even uttering our first names whilst in public in this part of town had been discouraged, for it would give away our Christian background, placing us under

immediate suspicion of being of the "other side". By the end of the Lebanese civil war, Lebanon's largest Christian militias, the Lebanese Forces and the Kate'ib (Phalangists), along with a Lebanese army that had been revamped under a Christian army general named Michel Aoun, had been the last armed factions to battle against Syrian military units—units they viewed as occupation forces. Lebanese Christian areas, both in East Beirut and in other provincial capitals such as Zahle, came under prolonged sieges and artillery strikes by Syrian forces. Kidnappings of Lebanese youths by Syrian army intelligence had also become commonplace. By the close of the war, Lebanese Christians for the most part, whether of the nationalist Right, the pro-Palestinian Left, or those with no particular political allegiance, viewed the Syrian government as an enemy. This was the state of a varied assortment of communities that had come under a collective attack by virtue of their confessional identity as "Christians". Perhaps this was related to the fact that the two armed factions most hostile to the Syrian military presence in Lebanon were "Christian", who promoted their confessional background as part of their political identity, therefore placing the entirety of Lebanon's Christian population to be associated with a militant hostility to the Syrian regime's military occupation. For my family it was not only their Christian heritage that made them potential targets of Syrian forces. They had always been traditionally leftist, pan-Arabist and secular, which meant that there was a double threat posed by the Syrian military occupation. Syria's first victims in Lebanon in 1976 had been those Lebanese politically aligned to the so-called National Movement—an alliance of pro-PLO pan-Arab leftists seeking to bring down what they viewed as corrupt Arab regimes, abolish the Sykes-Picot borders and initiate a guerrilla war against Israel until a victory which would see the re-taking of Palestinian land and the abolishment of the state of Israel. The Syrian army entered Lebanon in 1976 under the pretext of acting as a peace-keeping force following the outbreak of armed conflict between this alliance of Lebanese leftists and Palestinian guerrillas of the PLO on

the one side, and on the other, Lebanese nationalists led by the Phalange party and a mobilisation of militants drawn predominantly from Lebanon's Christian communities. Instead of peace-keeping neutralisation, Syrian military action manifested itself in direct participation in conflict, first through the assassination of prominent Leftist figures such as Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, and then through a temporary alliance with the Phalange, in which Syrian army units lay siege to the Palestinian refugee camp Tel el Za'atar, and facilitated the entry of Phalangist militia into the camp, who proceeded to carry out a massacre of its inhabitants. The Syrian regime later co-opted a Palestinian armed faction that became known as the Sa'iqa, which was used to spy on prominent leftists and PLO members. In essence, the Syrian regime participated in the Lebanese war through the frequent switching of sides and the strategy of playing Lebanese and Palestinian armed factions against one another. As the war continued over the years, political idealism seemed to evaporate, and in its place came a heightened sectarianism. By the close of the war, the air of political paranoia and mistrust between Lebanese communities carried within its breeze urban myths designed to keep communities apart. One prominent myth was the idea that Lebanese Christians were against the Syrian presence in Lebanon, whilst Lebanese Muslims were in favour. This seemed plausible on the surface. Armed Syrian units in Christian areas seemed visibly absent, whereas images of Hafez al Assad seemed to be found all over "Muslim" West Beirut. In Christian areas, it was felt that the Syrian regime's secret police were present yet hidden from immediate recognition due to their plain-clothed attire. This caused Lebanese Christian communities to grow more insular and suspicious of outsiders. By the late 1990s, many Christians started making their confessional and political identities more visible, by wearing necklace chains with the cross, the crucifix, and more radically, the Lebanese Forces cross-dagger symbol, in defiance of what they felt was the presence of covert Syrian regime intelligence roaming their neighbourhoods. In Muslim areas, Syrian regime presence was more explicitly

visible, both in terms of armed Syrian officers patrolling the streets and an accompanying iconography of the Assad cult that included posters and banners of Hafez al Assad portraits. This gave West Beirut the visual impression of seeming more directly threatening to any dissenting views. It was perhaps that visible presence of Syrian troops and pro-Assad iconography in "Muslim" West Beirut that gave the impression of Muslim "support" for the Assad regime. In hindsight, this "support" was perhaps more a manifestation of fear and self-survival than that of a genuine conviction. When I reached the age of 16, perhaps as a coming-of-age symptom of searching for my own identity as a British-born national of Lebanese descent, I began to take an interest in the country of my parents' origin and its state of affairs. It was during this period of curiosity that I was told the Al-Lawzi story. His "crime", I was told, was that he had been an outspoken critic of the Syrian government and its interference in Lebanese domestic affairs. His brother, I later discovered, had owned a seaside resort in the northern Lebanese port city of Tripoli. In 1976, Syrian army officers had paid him a visit and requested that he hand over the business to them. He refused, and was later killed. It was after the murder of his brother, as well as a series of messaged death threats, and the final warning that saw the offices of his Al Hawadeth newspaper being destroyed by artillery fire, that Salim al-Lawzi chose a self-imposed exile in London, along with the relocation of the paper's headquarters. The behaviour and discourse I had observed and heard from my parents and family friends as a child on those stays in Lebanon suddenly came to form a consistent narrative that seemed to explain what my father's exile from Lebanon had been about. What had always been expressed by my parents and others during those trips had stayed with me in the back of my mind as visualisations and archived soundscapes. This archive of intertwined stories and observations of cautionary behaviour that I didn't much question as a child, seemed to come into clarity during my late teens once I started to take an interest in my parents and our family's experiences in pre and civil war Lebanon. It was at

that period too that stories from my mother's side of the family also started to be recounted. My uncle Andrea, like many of my mother's family, had been brought up in a politically Leftist household. His elder brother and father, along with a number of cousins, aunts and uncles, had been members of the Lebanese Communist Party. Political discourse in their households had revolved around ideas of supporting the Palestinian liberation struggle, establishing links with the PLO, and romanticising the Arab nationalism of Egypt's Gamal Abdelnasser, the anti-imperialist guerrilla warfare of the Vietcong and other international leftist icons. Yet these familiar politics and associations proved meaningless the day armed members of the nominally Palestinian yet Syrian officer-controlled Sa'iqa organisation ordered Andrea and two companions of his out of their car and marched them, at gun point, towards a back street—an urban feature that had become, in the context of war, associated with executions. It was fortunate that Andrea's good friend, a mime artist named Fa'eq Hmaysi, had spotted, out of his apartment block window, the incident in the street below. An immediate rush down the building's stairwell, accompanied by a frantic calling out to neighbours and friends, resulted in a sizeable gathering of locals catching up with the militants and seizing Andrea and his friends from the armed group. Andrea later revealed that it was when he called his friend's name, Tony (a Christian name) whilst in that leftist part of West Beirut in 1976, that the Sa'iqa militants ordered the three of them out of their car. "Tony? Who's Tony? Who's Tony?" they had demanded, before ordering them out the vehicle.

Whilst the Lebanese war had included a myriad of injustices committed by all sides involved in the equally myriadic conflict(s) of that period of violence, a contemporary fear remained that still posed a direct, real-world, existential threat to the lives of our family and those close to us. I had come to understand that Syria had been, and continued to be, ruled under a government that was brutal and undemocratic, and that this government's army was now occupying Lebanon, and any expression of opposition to

this occupation would be met with lethal punishment by the seemingly invincible governing power.

From that period onwards, an oral history of how the Syrian regime treated Syrians themselves opened up to me. Family members and family friends told of how Syrians revolted against the Assad regime in the Syrian city of Hama in the early 1980s, only to be crushed by the regime.   Assad's government, I was told, had massacred Hama's inhabitants as a punishment.   My own father, (who was born to a Lebanese father and Palestinian mother in Haifa, historic Palestine) had fled Palestine at the age of eight, with his mother and brothers in 1948, and had spent the remainder of his school years in Damascus, Syria.   As an active leftist and pan-Arabist protesting against pre-Assad Ba'ath party rule in Syria in the early 1960s, he had been detained by Syrian authorities and spent a night in prison. His release was granted after he had declared his agreement to become a casual informant for local state security officers. After a couple of weekly visits by these government figures, he secretly made the decision to leave Syria for good, and did so promptly, violating the mandatory military conscription required of him as a resident of Damascus.

An understanding that Syrians and Lebanese lived in a state of fear under this regime and therefore could not speak out against it without risk, became something I understood in theory, and later through a deeply infuriating lived experience during a subsequent stay in Lebanon in 2002. I had been warned prior to departing the UK, that I should under no circumstances express any opinion that was critical of Syria. Aware of my hot-headed outrage at this feeling of enforced censorship, my parents repeatedly urged me to shush and keep quiet that summer, whilst travelling in taxis or meeting people.   The "mukhabarat" (Syrian plain-clothed secret police) I was reminded, could be anywhere, and would kidnap those found to be speaking out. It was on that trip that I realised the

presence of armed soldiers manning checkpoints all over Beirut and across various regions and districts throughout the country were seldom Lebanese troops, but Syrian. Driving through "Muslim" areas of Beirut revealed posters of Hafez and Bashar al Assad; checkpoints across the country were demarked by metal barrels on which were painted the Syrian flag (Assad's flag), along with more portraits of the Assad family. Driving through rural areas, I saw large scale statues of Hafez al Assad scattered here and there, in the centre of a town square or in the middle of a field. The figurehead of an armed occupation force—a third world dictator of a foreign country that I considered socially and politically retrograde in comparison to everything Lebanon had stood for in terms of once being a country of free expression, a free press and the Arab world's intellectual capital— was now being canonized in bronze in the country that I wanted to have some pride of descending from. Growing up hearing that so many people had suffered under this regime that was now being imposed upon the population of my country of origin to the extent that one had to exercise an abstention from expressing an opinion, outraged me. The rules of society that I had been raised to value—rules of how to conduct oneself socially; to demonstrate courtesy and respect to people I met; to stand up against and denounce bullies and those seeking to hurt others; an understanding that criminals such as murderers, rapists, thieves and child molesters would be duly dealt with by a criminal justice system and democratic process; all these ideas seemed to be flipped onto their heads during that summer in Lebanon. For here I could see the imposed reign of criminals that were prepared to kill and burn your limbs in acid for having an opinion; bullies that actually committed these acts, for real, to people that family members and friends had known, and who were now holding guns and standing in my own mental space, ready to punish me were I to voice the thoughts running through my head. I fantasised about mowing down Syrian soldiers in a car. I wondered why Lebanese motorists hadn't already thought of and initiated a campaign of speeding down highways

and driving into these occupying thugs.   Then, three years later, something was to change.

1.1   The Cedar Revolution

Shortly following the 2003 entry of British and US forces into Iraq, the Assad regime initiated a recruitment and facilitation programme that would see international Jihadists flock to Syria in preparation for a cross-border funnelling into Iraq where they would wage war against the Anglo-American presence and any new Iraqi political establishment post Saddam Hussein.[4] The lethal violence and ferocity wrought against Iraq's new government, Iraqi civilians and British and US forces by this sudden Jihadist appearance eventually forced Washington's attention towards the Damascus regime and its dealings with and facilitation of this cross-border Salafi-Jihadist movement.   Policy circles within the US quickly came to view the Assad government as a primary sponsor of regional terror and a potential threat to global security.

From the perspective of those Lebanese who viewed Syrian military presence in their country as an occupation, Assad's backing of an Al-Qaeda presence in Iraq came as no surprise. I viewed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime as a symbolic threat to all the Arab world's dictators. It signalled the possibility of a new era, one in which tyrannies

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[4] Assad's facilitation of the rise and cross-border movement of trans-national jihadists from Syria into Iraq was documented and researched in English-language publications throughout the period 2004 to 2009. The subject constituted a focus area in a range of publications that included newspaper articles by Iraqi journalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad for the Guardian (See here: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/08/iraq-al-qaida [Accessed 12 September 2019]) whose reporting was conducted by on-the-ground stays in Syria and Iraq during that period; Hugh Naylor for the New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/world/africa/07iht-syria.1.7781943.html [Accessed 12 September 2019]), or Raymond Tanter for Lebanon's Daily Star (archived here: https://www.realclearworld.com/2009/05/25/why_syria_fuels_the_iraqi_insurgency_101031.html [Date of last access: 12th September 2019]). By 2009 Iraqi Prime-Minister Nouri Al-Malaki had also accused the Assad regime of this facilitation (see here: https://www.france24.com/en/20090901-maliki-blames-syria-attacks-assad-denies-claim- and here: https://www.rferl.org/a/Iraqs_AlMaliki_Demands_Syria_Explain_Aid_To_Militants/1814248.html [Accessed 12 September 2019]). The subject was also the focus of in-depth analysis in specialist journals and think tank publications such as Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies (see here: http://www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/0603cordesman.pdf [Accessed 12 September 2019]), or the Foundation for the Defence of Democracies' (FDD) Long War Journal (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/06/the_syrian_end.php [Accessed 12 September 2019]).

would be threatened with annihilation were they to posture the same deluded arrogance expressed by Saddam. The image of Iraq's long-ruling tyrant emerging from a hole in the ground at gun-point, unkempt and powerless, shattered the illusion of the god-like invincibility that Arab despots often projected of themselves. It served as a reminder that on a global scale, these dictatorships were in fact no more than relics of a bygone era, outmoded and militarily incapable of preserving their regimes when coming up against the firepower of the Western world. It could only have been expected that all the tyrants of the Arab world would come out against the Anglo-American war against Saddam Hussein's regime (even if they were former enemies, as was the case with the Assad government and its hostility towards Saddam Hussein's regime) for the deposing of that tyranny now meant that the same could happen to them. This was no truer than for Assad. Another repressive anti-democratic government, bordering Iraq, and long-accused of funnelling armaments to the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, Assad and his inner circle viewed their regime as the next natural target for a possible US-led military campaign. That Assad should pre-empt this potential attack seemed obvious. This was not about geo-political posturing but about his and his regime's own survival. Any US-led campaign targeting his regime had to be averted and off-set by any means at his disposal. Sabotaging the Anglo-American project in Iraq by the mobilisation of and material support for a cross-border insurgency of potentially endless international Jihadists targeting British and US troops provided a realistic strategy for low-profile indirect combat, with high potential for success.

As the Assad-backed insurgency started to come into the fore, the Bush administration's rhetoric against the Syrian regime grew more hawkish. By 2004, Bush had already made public his administration's preference for Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanese territory, with the US Congress applying sanctions against the Assad regime for this and for its harbouring of terrorists (Iskandar: 2006: 210). Bush's position regarding Syria

aligned with the democratic aspirations of Lebanon's civil society movement. My view was the same. For the first time ever, the subject of Syria's occupation of Lebanon had come into the spotlight of international news coverage. There seemed to be a collective belief among Lebanese democrats that they could now make public their opposition to the Assad regime's occupation of their country via a means of civil and peaceful resistance, and should the regime and its supporters resort to their usual acts of intimidation and threats of violence, they would be met with some form of response by a US administration that had already demonstrated its readiness to smash an anti-democratic entity in the region. A further injection of boldness to this civil movement occurred when it soon emerged that it was not only Christian Lebanon that stood in opposition to the Assad regime's occupation, but others from the Druze and Sunni Muslim sects too. This came with the announcement of Lebanon's then-recently resigned Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri[5] —a wealthy business tycoon of international influence and a Sunni-Muslim from the Southern port city of Sidon—that he would be forming a unified opposition movement with Druze leader Walid Joumblatt (son of assassinated leftist figure Kamal Jumblatt, who had been killed by the Assad regime back in 1976, and chairman of the Progressive Socialist Party), along with a coalition of Christian parties, and an independent civil society gathering that went by the name of the Democratic Left

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[5]According to Iskandar, Rafiq Hariri had come from a modest rural family but achieved immense wealth in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, where he ventured in construction. He became a billionaire businessman who returned to Lebanon and began to encourage international investment in the country and its industries. He was popularly known to be philanthropic in his vision, as well as being a believer in Lebanese reconciliation: "As testament to his achievements, by the early 1980s over 30,000 university students from Lebanon had educational support around the globe and major efforts were under way to bring about reconciliation between Lebanese factions" (Iskandar: 2006: 17).

—an alliance of students, young activists and ex-members of Lebanon's by then dwindling communist party.[6]

On the 14th February 2005, Rafiq Hariri was the target of an assassination by way of a powerful blast that engulfed him and a number of his accompanying advisors and associates, along with fourteen pedestrians, in flames, leading to their deaths within minutes.   The attack, which had struck Hariri's motorcade nearby Beirut's iconic St. Georges Hotel and just in front of a large HSBC building, created a gigantic charred crater in the middle of a busy commercial road in the city centre, unleashing fire and a shroud of black smoke that rose up and became visible from all corners of the city.   A United Nations investigative mission later found the explosion to have been caused by "1,000 kilograms of high-density TNT…that [had been]…loaded on a small Mitsubishi truck and detonated above ground" (Iskandar:2006:194).   Findings of this forensic mission eventually concluded that members of Syrian Military Intelligence, that "had a pervasive presence in Lebanon", along with allied Lebanese security officials, were primary suspects in the planning and execution of the attack, which the UN had by then declared to have been an act of terror.[7]

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[6] Membership of Lebanon's Communist Party had declined rapidly throughout the civil war years in the 1980s. According to members of my own family who had been active in the party, disillusionment with the organisation, its rigid ideology and its failure to adapt to changing political realities played a major role in its own demise. The party later split into two factions: one aligned to the Assad regime, and one against. It was members of the latter faction who later co-founded the Democratic Left alliance, a move that seemed to better represent the political views of the first cohort of millennial youth in 2004/2005, who attached more value to ideas of democracy and human rights than to those of state socialism and militarised anti-imperialism that had been espoused by the old Communist Party and National Movement—both of which had been infiltrated and overrun by sectarian and authoritarian-minded camps that allowed themselves to be co-opted by the Assad dictatorship.

[7] As quoted in Iskandar's 2006 book *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon*, the UN commission's report of 25th October 2005 states: "that the assassination of 14 February 2005 was carried out by a group with an extensive organisation and considerable resources and capabilities…Mr. Rafiq Hariri's movements had been monitored and the itineraries of his convoy recorded in detail…Building on the findings of the Commission and Lebanese investigations to date and on the basis of the material and documentary evidence collected, and the leads pursued until now, there is converging evidence pointing at both Lebanese and Syrian involvement in this terrorist act…Given the infiltration of Lebanese institutions and society by the Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services working in tandem, it would be difficult to envisage a scenario whereby such a complex assassination plot could have been carried out without their knowledge." (Iskandar: 2006: 201-202).

Once again, Lebanese public sentiment, including that of my own household in London, knew in their gut instinct that the assassination of a politically influential figure that publicly declared himself to be in opposition to the Assad-controlled government in Lebanon, was the doing of the Syrian regime. It was no different to how the Assadist state had enforced its control throughout the years of Lebanon's civil war. Intimidation, threats and killings were part of the regime's currency. The only difference this time was the scale of the attack, along with the scale of international influence that Hariri had carried. His business dealings around the globe, along with his statesmanship, garnered him friendships and special relationships with international leaders, such as former French President Jacques Chirac. In the assassination's aftermath, both in terms of the international community and the global press, this meant that Lebanon had the world's attention. A heightened sense of camaraderie and national unity that seemed to trump former sectarian sentiments, suddenly took sway over Lebanon's anti-Assad movement. The feeling was driven by a fervour that sought to exploit that historic moment of global attention. Only a few days after the assassination, and eager to play my part in the democracy movement, I gathered with a few Lebanese expatriates in Notting Hill Gate, London and protested nearby the Lebanese embassy, viewing the diplomatic mission as representative of a puppet government backed by the Syrian regime. Exactly one month after the assassination, on the 14th March 2005, in defiance of Syria's Military Intelligence and army that still remained in the country, Lebanon saw what was perhaps to become its largest protest in its modern history as a nation. It was estimated that 1.2 million people (roughly 30% of the country's entire population) "took to the streets to call for unity, independence and truth, and to express their rejection of practices by an antiquated government" (Iskandar: 2006: 145). More explicitly, demonstrators called for the "removal of security officers, and the elimination of Syrian military and intelligence hegemony over Lebanon" (Iskandar: 2006: 201). The frustration and profound sense of injustice I had felt

back in 2002 had found an avenue of release as I followed unfolding events. So inspired and energised by news of this movement was I, that I recorded onto VHS live coverage of the protest as it was broadcast on Lebanese television channels, which I was able to view via satellite at home. That event, and the movement behind it, was dubbed the Cedar Revolution. It made it onto the front pages of countless publications in the Anglophone press, such as the Economist and TIME magazine, along with the UK's most prominent broadsheets. Moreover, it solidified the multi-confessional anti-Assad coalition into a political bloc that became known as the March 14 alliance. The bloc was now ready to directly challenge the Assad-backed authorities by running for government.

Remarkably, Bashar al-Assad gave in. The order for Syrian troops to begin a pull-out from Lebanese territory was given. It was during this period of Syrian army withdrawal that a UN fact-finding mission was dispatched to investigate the assassination of Hariri, which concluded that "Lebanese security agencies were negligent in carrying out a thorough investigation". It was only after the withdrawal of Syria's entire military deployment was completed by the 26th April—just over a month following the historic protest—that a second United Nations mission, named the UN International Independent Investigation Commission, was dispatched to Lebanon to carry out a more robust investigation with Syrian military units no longer present. International attention and Bush's veiled warnings may have caused Assad to view withdrawal of his forces to be a wise option.

Despite the withdrawal of the Syrian regime's army and the subsequent arrests of former Lebanese intelligence chiefs believed to have tampered with evidence of the assassination and obstructed investigations of the UN investigative commission, Damascus' interference in Lebanese affairs and its tactics of terror persisted. That June, Samir Kassir, a Lebanese-Syrian-Palestinian journalist, Professor of history at Lebanon's

St. Joseph University, co-founder of the Democratic Left alliance and outspoken critic of the Assad regime, was assassinated by a small-scale bombing that detonated outside his home in Beirut's Achrafieh district. This was followed by the killing of George Hawi, former chairman of Lebanon's Communist Party, who was also a vocal critic of Syria's meddling in the country. His car exploded whilst he was driving down another Beirut district. In December, another fierce opponent of the Assad regime, Gebran Tueni, who had been a respected journalist and law-maker, was killed in a car bomb whilst being driven through a Beirut suburb. His driver and a passerby were also killed in the blast, along with a further thirty people who happened to be in the area, also sustaining injury. Earlier in September, TV personality and current affairs presenter May Chidiac was also targeted in a failed assassination attempt when a bomb detonated as she approached her car in the Christian region of Jounieh. She survived, but lost her left leg and arm in the blast. She was also known for her opposition to the Assad regime's occupation. This trend of terror continued from 2006 to 2013, with a string of killings that targeted Lebanese MPs and figures all known to be critics of the Assad regime. This was also accompanied by sporadic bombings that took place in residential and commercial areas throughout Lebanon that appeared to be an attempt to keep Lebanese civilians living in a state of fear despite the withdrawal of Syrian forces. It was clear that Assad's intelligence personnel still maintained the ability to operate on a subterranean level throughout Lebanon, signalling a message to all his opponents that his regime could locate and target anyone it wished to eliminate.

There was something about people inside Syria that also troubled me. Complete silence. No words of support or solidarity with the Lebanese struggle against that very same regime that continued to subjugate the Syrian people in their own land. It was almost as if Syrians adored the criminal entity that had enslaved them since 1970. During the pull-out of Syrian forces from Lebanon, I had seen news footage—most likely taken from one

of Syria's state-run TV channels—of modest crowds of Syrians welcoming Syrian soldiers home. They carried signs that had been written in English with the words "We are proud of you", and "welcome home". They also brandished the Palestinian flag, as if to signal that they, and their beloved dictator, were the true representatives of the Palestinian cause that was so dear to the Arab world. I was incensed. What were these people proud of exactly? That their army had invaded and occupied a neighbouring country and terrorised and killed many of its inhabitants for the sake of a kleptocratic dictator? And what did any of that have to do with liberating Palestine? But I reasoned with myself. Syrians had always lived in a state of fear. I had been aware of that for some time. I remembered how I was told to never voice any criticism of the Syrian regime when in Lebanon, and I imagined how Syrians still had to live in that state of fear and silence. At least the Lebanese were now relatively free of that aspect of repression, I told myself. My anger at those images of small groups of people welcoming their troops home began to evaporate. I realised that all I had seen was a staged propaganda stunt as could only have been expected from this regime. Suddenly I empathised with the people of Syria. If they chose to, or if they ever even could muster the courage to rise up against the totalitarian state, I'd support them. I had never been a pan-Arabist, and I had always viewed Arab nationalism as a chauvinistic myth-based idea that had been exploited by despotic regimes throughout the Arabic-speaking world. But the persistence of the Syrian dictatorship in its campaign to keep people in Lebanon, and in Syria, living in a state of fear, instilled in me a sense of shared struggle. If the people of the Arab world could unite in a rejection of totalitarianism, and embrace a shared vision of human empathy and compassion, this would be a pan-Arabism I would be proud of. At that moment in 2005, little did I expect that Syrians would in a few years to come, ignite a tremor that would shake the world.

1.2   The Syrian civil uprising and the regime's early response

"I expect someone may come to kill you at any moment while you are in the street, to rid the country from a germ like you"

(A Syrian police officer to activist Suhair Atassi. February 2011)

The first stirrings of publicly-performed dissent against the Assad dictatorship in Syria occurred during the initial stages of the Arab Spring.[8] Emerging sporadically from as early as January 2011, these early expressions of protest did not all manifest in explicit opposition to Assad's centralised authority in Damascus, but were instead enacted, as noted by activist Suhair Atassi (2011), through actions focused on grievances relating to local council corruption, systematic looting, the monopoly of Syria's only two mobile phone operators, as well as with expressions of solidarity with Egypt and Libya's anti-regime protests. In considering the first video recordings and written documentations of these actions, I view these early demonstrations as constituting a testing of the waters by individuals taking the first steps of a nascent movement—a process designed to gauge the reactions of the regime's security apparatus in both its severity and scale. This period may also be viewed as a Syrian civil society attempt to gauge the potential of other Syrians in their willingness to participate in and form a mass movement in opposition to the Assad regime, inspired by those that were then being undertaken by protesters against their respective authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

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[8] The Arab Spring was a wave of popular uprisings in the Arab world following the initiation of Tunisia's revolt against dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in December 2010. Countries that saw popular mobilisations against long-standing regimes included Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria.

In video recordings from the 22nd February 2011 (now viewable on Youtube),[9] Syrian demonstrators are gathered outside the Libyan embassy in Damascus for a candle-lit vigil of solidarity with pro-democracy protesters in Libya.   They are heard chanting: "The Libyan people declared it. Freedom is our demand. Dignity is our demand". The use of the word "we" by these Syrian chanters blurs the distinction between themselves and the Libyan democrats with whom they have declared solidarity.   The ambiguity in the intended meaning behind this "we"—and indeed behind the use of the word "our"—concerns both the chanters themselves, as well as the listeners they are addressing. On a surface level, these slogans were perhaps only made to quote those made by Libyan demonstrators in the streets of Tripoli or Benghazi, and thus repeated outside Gaddafi's embassy in Damascus for its Libyan staff to hear.   However, these slogans, ostensibly made in solidarity with the oppressed of Libya, also imply an ideological sentiment on the part of the Syrian protesters gathered outside the embassy.   Expressed by a crowd of Syrians in solidarity with Libyan protesters against Gaddafi, the political parallels between Libya and Syria become too strong to overlook.   That a congregation of Syrians should express solidarity with a foreign democracy movement, whilst standing in the capital of Assad's police state, implies a veiled call by these Syrians for the mobilisation of their own democratic uprising against the Assad regime.   In this sense, I would argue that the intended audience for these Syrian protesters was their own democratic compatriots—who were yet to join the protest movement—as well as the Assad regime itself.   Whilst

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9 The following urls link to videos that document two candle-lit vigils in solidarity with Libya's anti-Gadaffi protesters, both of which took place outside the Libyan embassy in Damascus, Syria.   Participants are heard chanting: "khayin yalli byi'drob sha'abo" (trans: "a traitor is he who beats his people").   The first two videos document a vigil that took place on 22nd February 2011, whilst the third video documents a further vigil that occurred on the 24th February 2011. [Accessed 17 September 2019]:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vybhI1YVwkY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oj28-ob1FSk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhXzZLhQTYk

not seen in these specific videos,[10] testimony of those who participated in the vigil maintain that the crowd of two hundred gatherers were violently set upon by both uniformed police and plain-clothed gangs who "beat people with sticks" (Williams: 2011), resulting in the arrests of fourteen of the participants.

A similar outcome befell participants of a small gathering earlier that month, on the 2nd February 2011. Taking place in the Bab Touma Square of Damascus' old city, the candle-lit vigil in solidarity with Egypt's protesters and their civil uprising was violently disrupted by 20 plain-clothes individuals (among which included two women) who proceeded to physically beat, kick and whip the vigil's fifteen participants. The incident culminated in the vigil's organiser—human rights activist Suhair Atassi—being briefly arrested by police and, whilst in detention, being threatened by one of the officers when he addressed her saying "I expect someone may come to kill you at any moment while you are in the street, to rid the country from a germ like you" (Atassi, in interview with al Jazeera: 2011).

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[10] For those who may claim that the absence of footage that could have revealed the regime's violence in this particular protest equates to the idea that the regime actually does *not* target protestors and is thus being unjustifiably demonised by a regime-change-serving narrative, I will point out that there are videos in their thousands—all available on Youtube—that evidence the Assad regime's violence against demonstrators in the early months of 2011, some of which will be included within the footnotes and reference list of this document.

1.3   Conspiracy? - A political introduction

The first signs of popular protest in Syria since the short-lived Damascus Spring of 2000 (George: 2003), signalled what was to turn into a wave of demonstrations across the country by March 2011.   Shortly following the outbreak of these mobilisations, Syrian President Bashar al Assad addressed parliament on 30th March to lay out the state's official stance towards the situation.   In his speech, he alleged that the outbreak of protests had been instigated by Syria's "external enemies" as part of a "conspiracy" to "destroy" Syria (Al Jazeera: 2011).   Adding that foreign and Arab news channels had launched a campaign to defame the Syrian state and that social media was being used to provoke and agitate unrest (Ibid.), he declared his resolve to "protect" the country's "security" and "ensure its stability" (Assad: 2011; translated in Al-Bab).

The Syrian regime's official narrative and explanation of those early events was thereafter echoed and endorsed by Alastair Crooke—a British diplomat and former European Union policy advisor who had formerly served in MI6. Crooke's October 2011 article, The 'great game' in Syria—first published in the Asia Times and then again in the Guardian in November—alleged a Saudi-instigated conspiracy to overthrow the Assad regime through the backing of Islamist terrorists.   He alleged that Western Nations were passively supporting the Saudi Arabian plan due to their intentions to weaken Iran (Crooke: 2011). He furthermore maintained that the Assad government enjoyed the support of the majority of the Syrian people and dismissed the Syrian opposition-in-exile as being unrepresentative of and out of touch with Syrian sentiments within the country.   These views were shared in another November 2011 piece by Irish journalist Patrick Cockburn, published in the Independent.   Foregrounding a narrative of the uprising against the

Assad government as being motivated by a Sunni Islamist hatred of the Shia,[11] Cockburn

alleged that the violence and chaos in the country was being pushed by a Saudi-

American plot with the intention to overthrow the Alawite[12]-dominated government of

Bashar al Assad in order to weaken Iran (Cockburn: 2011). Echoing Assad's statements

on mass media, he furthermore alleged that the Syrian opposition were involved in the

"manipulation of the media" in order to mislead foreign journalists banned from the

country—"the media's coverage has been misleadingly simple-minded and one-

dimensional, giving the impression that all we are witnessing is a heroic uprising by the

Syrian masses against a brutal Baathist police state"—whilst asserting that the fall of the

Assad government would lead to a "triumphant Sunni regime".   Both Crooke and

Cockburn's articles made the case for the regime's continued survival—and by

implication therefore, for its use of force—in the face of what they argued was an

international conspiracy for "regime change" that would only yield chaos and regional

instability.

The assertion that terrorists were being armed and funded by the United States to

overthrow the Assad government has been a repeated feature of Syria-related output by

Russian state-owned news channel RT—a narrative upheld by Russian President Vladimir

Putin himself, who has claimed that the emergence of ISIS was a result of American

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[11] The second largest branch of Islam after the majority Sunni sect. Shiism evolved out of a disagreement between followers of the prophet Muhammed following his death in the mid 7th century. Those that came to form what became known as the Shia sect believed that the prophet Muhammed had appointed Ali ibn Abi Talib to be his successor and Caliph (governor) of the Muslim empire. Adherents of this view believed that Mohammed's decision to appoint Ali as successor was by the command of God - giving Ali divine right to lead the Ummah (Muslim world)- a role which they believed could be granted only by God. Those that opposed this view become known as the Sunni sect. In contrast to the supporters of Ali, the Sunni believed that Mohammed's rightful successor was Abu Bakr, who had been elected by consensus in a meeting of Mohammed's followers. Today, Shiism forms the state religion of the Islamic Republic of Iran and is the branch of Islam of which the majority of Iraqis identify to be their sect (Momen: 1985).   Sizeable Shia communities are also found in Lebanon and Bahrain.

[12] A branch of Islam believed to have been founded by followers of the 11th Imam, Hasan al-Askari and his pupil Ibn Nusayr during the 9th century. Alawites are believed to revere Ali ibn Abi Talib, from where they derive their Arabic name "Alawi" meaning "followers of Ali". Their numbers are few and mostly to be found in Syria where they have been thought to constitute around 11% of the population (Freidman: 2009). Although the Alawite belief system remains secretive to most scholars, the Alawites consider themselves to be a sub-sect of the Shia branch of Islam. Bashar al Assad is from the Alawite sect.

"imperialistic" actions (RT: 2014). On 30th September 2015, Russia conducted its first air strikes over Syria, acting at the request of the Assad government (Reuters: 2015). In a televised address, Putin declared the strikes to be the start of a Russian campaign of "pre-emptive" "anti-terror operations" in Syria that would target the Islamic State (IS) and other "terrorist groups" (Ackerman et al. 2015: the Guardian).

The narrative of a Saudi-US plot to overthrow the Assad regime by way of funding and supporting Islamist terrorists is, however, challenged by researcher and investigative journalists Michael Weiss and Chatham House-based Hassan Hassan (a Syrian from the Iraq-Syria border town Abu Kamal). Their study *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (2015) details the Assad government's historic nurturing of and material support for Salafi Jihadists following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003—a military project intended to overwhelm and weaken the Anglo-American presence in Iraq with the ultimate objective of averting any potential US-UK anti-regime campaign being taken to Syria (Hassan & Weiss: 2015). Weiss and Hassan's study asserts that the jihadists that had formerly been trained in Syria under the auspices of the Assad government and whose cross-border movement between Iraq and Syria had equally been facilitated by the regime, were the precursors of the Al-Qaeda and ISIS emergence in Syria a decade later. The study furthermore maintains that the emergence of the radical Salafi-Jihadist elements within the anti-Assad armed movement in Syria were encouraged and strengthened by the regime as a strategy intended to undermine the democratic nature of the uprising, to divide the opposition movement and to materialise the regime's "terrorist" conspiracy narrative, giving itself justification before the eyes of the international community to pursue a military "anti-terror" campaign—an intended recasting of its image from a brutal dictatorship to a potential and "necessary" partner, despite its faults, in any Western "war on terror" scenario. This regime-sponsored Jihad is also affirmed to have taken place by other Syrian democracy activists, who claim to have witnessed the

processes of mobilisation and recruitment at the time.   One such example is Yazan Doueidari, who described his memories of the period to me in summer 2019:

> There was open Al Qaeda recruitment at that time. It was everywhere. I remember being in the library once, and there was this guy using the photocopier to print out Al Qaeda recruitment leaflets. He even gave one to me. It was calling young people for the Jihad in Iraq.   The whole process was done so openly. Maybe it wasn't official, but there's no way that something like that could have been done so openly without it being known by the regime.

This thesis argues that despite the research and testimony contradicting the regime's line; and despite the presence within mainstream news media, humanitarian bodies and political commentary that recognises the Assad regime's brutality—there *also* exist within both mainstream and fringe political news media, analyses and commentary that tolerate, apologise for, justify or outwardly support the Assad dictatorship and its war against a portion of Syrian society. This thesis argues that the existence of this pervasive Assad-leaning tendency is partly due to the regime's ability to successfully disseminate its narrative of events to the outside world with the help of third-party foreign commentators as exemplified above.

2.   Genocide

Before proceeding with a study of resistance to genocide and a conceptualisation of a resistance philosophy I term wujoud, it is necessary to define what I mean by the term genocide when used in this thesis. Crucially, it is necessary to clarify how genocide is to be understood in the Syrian context in order to later contextualise the terrain in which wujoud emerges.

This chapter therefore begins with a review of how genocide has been defined and interpreted by scholars in the field of genocide studies from both a legal and conceptual approach, as well as including how the term has been understood and applied by Syrian democracy activists to describe their perception of the Assad regime's war campaign. The purpose of this chapter's initial stage is to ascertain whether or not the term genocide is being justifiably applied—whether it has legal and conceptual grounding when used to describe the Assad regime's campaign.

In the second section of this chapter, I analyse what I term the "narrative component of genocide", and how this specific component of genocide has functioned in the Syrian context.   The concepts I elaborate on in this section act as a collective trigger that provokes, and rationalises, my concept of wujoud that I formulate in the following chapter. They also serve as the motivating rationale that underpins my audio-visual output, which is analysed in the practice review chapter of this document.

In one particular part of this chapter's latter section, the reader is given the option to momentarily jump ahead to a specific location of the practice review in order to gain an immediate understanding of how some of my audio-visual practice responds to some of the genocidal concepts I elaborate on.   This chapter on genocide should therefore be considered as constituting a foundational section of this research project's methodology.

2.1   Part 1

Is it Genocide? A legal definition

In early Autumn 2016, Syrian civil society activists inside Aleppo initiated an online awareness campaign of video and photographic documentation, as well as graphic art, using the hashtag #HolocaustAleppo. The intention was to get information out to the world that the residents of East Aleppo were being subjected to a crippling siege that the Assad regime and its allies Russia and Iran, had imposed upon them. The district was by then being targeted with airstrikes carried out by regime and Russian warplanes, with hospitals,[13] schools and search and rescue HQs being singled out for bombardment. In London, exiled Syrian activists organised demonstrations in which they carried placards reading "Syria is the new holocaust", while they stood outside Downing Street in rallies calling for the UK and the international community to take action to stop Assad and Putin's campaign of extermination, chanting calls such as "Stop the genocide".

Despite use of the word "genocide" by Syrian activists and those in solidarity with them, at the legal level, the term has not yet been applied to describe the regime's and its allies' crimes in Syria. The potential for designating the regimes' crimes as such is challenged by those who refer to legal interpretations of how "Genocide" is defined in the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*—a convention adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. According to this convention, the crime of genocide is summed up as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group". International Law specialist and prosecutor, Toby Cadman, who co-filed a criminal case against Bashar al Assad's regime for crimes against humanity, has himself stated that the regime's crimes against civilians should be

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[13] According to international medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontières, in 2016 the organisation ran "six medical facilities across northern Syria" and supported "more than 150 health centres and hospitals across the country, many of them in besieged areas. Several hospitals across north and south Syria have been bombed since the start of 2016, including seven supported by MSF - in which at least 42 people have been killed, including at least 16 medical staff".

legally classified as mostly constituting war crimes or crimes against humanity, but not necessarily genocide. The reason he gives for classifying the regime's crimes under these terms is "because there is not a single ethnic group…a single identifiable group under the Genocide Convention, that is being targeted. It is *all* opposition to the regime [that is being targeted]" (2017).

According to those who share Cadman's legally-informed designation of Assad's atrocities as constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity, but *not* genocide, the reasoning rests on the Genocide Convention's classification that genocide is the targeting of people based on their religious, ethnic, racial or national group identity. That the opposition to Assad is not a gathering of people that are solely comprised of one single ethnicity or confession, but rather is a movement formed out of individuals from across Syria's myriad of ethnic and confessional communities, has meant that the regime's crimes have also not been solely targeted against one group, but have rather targeted all its opponents irrespective of the numerous ethnic or confessional demographics that make it up. If one is to interpret the Convention's definition of genocide as a situation in which people are targeted for extermination because of their religion, ethnicity or nationality, then one would have to conclude that the regime's slaughter of civilians in Syria is *not* genocide because the state's killing campaign is motivated by political reasons. Since the Genocide Convention does not list a group as being defined by shared political beliefs, those who share Cadman's interpretation of the Convention's definition of genocide will conclude that Assad's war against the Syrian people does not fall under the genocide category.

This interpretation of the Genocide Convention is shared, to an extent, by political scientist Jacques Semelin, who has argued that genocide scholars ought to draw a distinction between "destruction to subjugate", and "destruction to eradicate". He has

postulated that the first type of destruction is usually committed against victims that are described as political, whereas the latter type of destruction was almost always committed against victims identified by their supposed ethnicity or nationality. Out of the two, he has argued that only the latter type of destruction should be considered to be genocide—an argument therefore in keeping with the literature of the Genocide Convention (Feierstein: 2014: 28).

But this literal interpretation of the Convention is by no means a settled case. Legally, the question of whether or not the co-ordinated targeting of and intent to destroy political groups is, or should, be regarded as an act of genocide has been one of debate among legal experts and genocide scholars since the late 1970s. In *Genocide as Social Practice* Daniel Feierstein analyses a number of conceptual definitions and cases that question whether the targeting of a group based on ethnicity, nationality or religion can ever be separated from the idea of political identity. The conclusion reached is that genocide involves the creation of a group identity that is used to label the victimised community by the perpetrator that seeks to eliminate it. Therefore, what is described in the language of ethnicity, race or religion, is in essence a politicised construction, designed to homogenise and stigmatise a collective of "others", for political purposes (2014). This conceptual understanding of genocide was applied in a Spanish court in 1997 as legal justification for the indictment of ninety-eight members of the Argentinian military for "crimes of terrorism and genocide" (Feierstein: 2014: 18) committed during the period of 1976-1983 by Argentina's then military dictatorship. Prosecutor Balthasar Garzón's 1999 indictment argued that "[r]acist thinking is essentially political in nature. "Racial groups" are imaginary constructions that always refer in fact to "political groups"" (summarised by Feierstein: 2014: 19). This conceptual analysis was then used as legal justification to refer to the Argentinian military personnel's actions as constituting genocide, as defined in the Genocide Convention. The conclusion to indict the Argentinian military dictatorship for

the crime of genocide, despite there being no single ethnic or religious characteristic uniting the political opposition, was made explicit in subsection two of Garzón's indictment, which states that "[t]he extermination of "political groups" may be termed genocide". Futhermore, Garzon's indictment gave precedence to the idea of interpreting the Convention's listing of "national" group as constituting a national group targeted by others of the same nationality. This is made explicit in subsection three of his indictment, which states "[t]he term "national group" is appropriate to classify the victims in Argentina" (Ibid.).

As mentioned by Feierstein however, Madrid's Central Criminal Court finally sentenced Scilingo (the only Argentine military figure that agreed to testify in a Spanish court) in 2005 for crimes against humanity, not genocide. This was based on the verdict that the crimes committed in Argentina "fitted the definition of crimes against humanity "better" than that of genocide".

Feierstein references numerous others who also share the "political group" view, the most explicit of which is expressed by Chalk and Jonassohn, who state that genocide should be legally defined as "a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator" (23:1990). American sociologist Irving Horowitz, also emphasises the inherent political intention that lies behind the crime of genocide when he states that "[g]enocide…functions as a fundamental political policy to assure conformity and participation of the citizenry" (17:1980).

The scholars advancing these arguments would not have done so had the Genocide Convention not omitted the mention of political groups—a category that was originally included in the Convention's draft proposal. As mentioned by both Feierstein and Jones' reference to Schabass, the final amendment to the Convention omitted political groups

from the list of designated protected communities, most likely as a compromise in order to gain increased support for ratifying the Convention from as many nations as possible (Feierstein, Jones et. al: 2014). It was understood that a number of countries had been uneasy about including political groups within the wording of the convention, due to their concern that some of their policies in dealing with dissent and political uprisings within their own territories and colonies would one day be seen as constituting genocide. This historic omission reveals that the restricting of the Convention's definition was itself a politicisation, which has resulted in on-going legal vagueness to this day.   More alarmingly, as argued by Feierstein, the Convention's current definition seems to enshrine the protection of some groups, but not others. He states, "any new legal definition of genocide will need to include the principle of equality before the law—a principle currently violated by the 1948 Genocide Convention, which protects some groups and not others…" (13: 2014).

The interpretation of the Genocide Convention at its literal level that omits the mention of "political groups" is also rejected by exiled Syrian activists I have spoken with. In their self-perception of their status as a group, one begins to see a transgression of the confines of the literal interpretation of the Convention. Syrian activist Yazan Douedari likens the shared political convictions of the Syrian opposition to those spiritual or philosophical beliefs shared by followers of a given religion: "when you kill certain people because they have certain beliefs, it's…what's the difference between this and religion? The religion is a certain belief. And this is a certain belief". In other words, the regime is targeting the opposition for their shared beliefs in the Syrian revolution in the same way that followers of a particular religion may be targeted for their shared spiritual beliefs that define their status as an identifiable group. If genocide refers to the situation in which a group is targeted for elimination *because* of religious beliefs, then, as Douedari asks, surely it is conceptually analogous with a community of people with a common socio-

political or philosophical belief. If it is a belief in a certain idea that has brought the wrath of the regime unto this group, then legally, does not the targeted group become analogous in status to a religious community? Does this not then qualify the Assad regime's actions as genocide?

Douedari goes even further when he expresses his consideration of the Syrian opposition as a nation in itself, distinct and separate to that governed by the Assad regime. In his view, the Syrian opposition constitutes a nation with its own culture, customs and territory: "[I]f you think about it, we *are* a nation. Because, we have a land. It has clear borders. Yes, the borders do change a lot, but it's clear borders. It's a very, very clear borders. And we have our own flag; we have our own songs. We have our own entity". Seen in this light, I start to understand Douedari's outlook. Isn't he describing the social conditions in which communitarian—or even national—identities have often been conceived?; a community with a shared consciousness of belonging to a particular territory, world view and culture that unites them as an identifiable entity? It can be said that in dehumanising them and targeting them with violence and murder, even the regime recognises them as a distinct entity, despite its recognition being driven by a fear of losing its monopoly on power. The regime sees them as an entity it seeks to destroy; to make sure this entity never evolves into a new Syrian nation. In this sense, Douedari's perspective fits the Genocide Convention's classifying requirement, for what he describes is the regime's "intent to destroy, *in part*, a national…group" (emphasis my own). Although there is omission of the term "political group", there is nothing within the Convention's wording to suggest that this targeted "part" of a national group *cannot* be one identifiable by a shared socio-political idea for their attempted extermination to be recognised as genocide. Douedari gives a more concrete example of this when he talks about the regime's targeting of people from the Northern Syrian province of Idlib:

…the Jews in Germany…they were targeted just for being born Jews. And people in Idlib now…they're being targeted and killed just because they live…they were born in Idlib. They live in Idlib. They can't really change that. And even if they, for example, migrated to regime areas, they will be prosecuted for just being from Idlib.

If his words are to be believed, this would demonstrate the regime's intention to eliminate a national group from Syria's population—a group identified as belonging to a particular province. In the case of Idlib, the regime's actions would seem to fit an observed strategy of population cleansing. Having cleared all other areas of opposition rule, Idlib remains as one of the last territories still under opposition control, alongside that held by the American-supported Syrian Democratic Forces in the North East.   With opposition populations having been forcibly displaced out of other regions such as Dara'a, cities such as Aleppo, or suburbs like Darayya,[14] opposition communities have been forced to migrate to Idlib.   Based on this pattern of population cleansing, it would seem that the regime views Idlib province as an area infested with undesirables it seeks to eradicate, and furthermore views the region's pre-conflict inhabitants as untrustworthy and complicit in treason for welcoming and hosting the displaced populations. The regime's strategy it seems, has been to force opposition communities into one single portion of land in order to quarantine them in preparation for its final stages of population cleansing. And if this is indeed the regime's intention, there is legal ground to make the case that the regime is committing genocide against "part" of a "national group" as defined in the Genocide Convention.

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[14] As reported on by Human Rights Watch and news media outlets such as the New York Times, Darayya was emptied of its population following the surrender of its inhabitants after a four-year siege by the regime. Armed opposition groups and their families were transported to Idlib, whilst civilians with no fighters in their family were taken to regime-held suburbs around Damascus. It should be noted that movement of civilians to regime-held areas in general, following such surrender deals, may not be voluntary, or are possibly taken as a tough decision by these civilians in the belief that they would not have to endure airstrikes or siege in regime territory, given that the regime would not aerially bombard or siege areas it already controls. Given that civilians would be aware of the regime's town-by-town forced displacement policy, the expectation that the regime would repeat its siege and bombardment campaign to Idlib in a future date is inevitably in the mind of many civilians. A Human Rights Watch article on forced displacement is viewable in the following url: https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/16/syria-residents-blocked-returning [Accessed 17 September 2019] and the New York Times report on Darayya can be viewed here: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/daraya-syria-assad-surrender.html [Accessed 17 September 2019].

If any of Doueidari's arguments are to be used to make the case for indicting the regime for genocide—in particular one that indicts the regime for targeting part of a national group—it certainly has legal precedence. A court in Argentina successfully "convicted former police commissioner Miguel Etchecolatz…and former police chaplain Christian von Wernich…for crimes against humanity "committed in the framework of genocide"" (Feierstein:25:2014). As noted by Feierstein, "In this landmark ruling, the court considered the systematic nature of the crimes and their effect on society as a whole, urging other courts to use the concept of "destruction of part of the national group" to resolve a number of conceptual and legal issues surrounding Argentina's state terrorism" (2014 : 25).

2.2 The "religious group" consideration

Whilst the regime's record of lethal violence demonstrates that it eliminates Syrians irrespective of their ethnic or confessional background, activists and international researchers have also interpreted the regime's killing campaign as a sectarian endeavour specifically focused on reducing in number Syria's Sunni population. Notable research has pointed to the Islamic Republic of Iran as playing a crucial role in this alleged campaign. A 2015 report by now-inactive research group Naame Shaam[15] states that Iran's military involvement has amounted to a campaign of sectarian cleansing characterised by a Shiite supremacist ideology, that has targeted Syrian Sunnis in an effort to alter the geo-sectarian demographics of the country.[16]

Naame Shaam's report keeps in mind that Iran's actions of sectarian cleansing in Syria

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[15] A May 2016 press release by Naame Shaam announced the organisation's cessation of activities following what it described as its two years of research into the Iranian regime's crimes in Syria being met with little interest by then-US President Barak Obama, and the consequent lack of political will—among the EU powers too—in taking decisive action to halt Tehran's military campaign. The statement is viewable via the following url: http://www.naameshaam.org/naame-shaam-to-fold-the-campaign/index.html [Accessed 17 September 2019].

[16] I use the term "geo-sectarian" to refer to the demographics that pertain to the sectarian makeup of populations within the multitude of geographic territories throughout Syria.

may be motivated by a militarily-strategic intention of creating a land corridor stretching from the Damascus-Homs highway and linking to Eastern Lebanon. This would provide a route cleared for Iranian military use, which would be inhabited and controlled by a multi-national Shiite Muslim army loyal to Iran, and would facilitate the movement of arms and personnel from Iranian-controlled territory in Syria all the way to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syria researcher Aymenn al-Tamimi partially shares this theory, yet he seems to downplay the idea of Iran's actions being motivated by sectarianism. In an article for online magazine *Syria Deeply*, he argues that sufficient evidence of an Iranian-backed policy of sectarian cleansing and re-population is currently scarce, and therefore Iran's intentions in Syria should be interpreted as being that of an army trying to expand and solidify the territory it currently occupies in the country.[17] Yet he acknowledges that Iran's military manoeuvring may necessitate the establishment of settlements for its foreign Shiite fighters within Syrian territory:

> Logically, Iran will want to establish a long-term or permanent presence in Syria – particularly for the estimated several thousand personnel in the Afghan Shiite units of the Fatemiyoun Brigade…[I]t's possible Iran may even plan to establish large bases there, integrated with Syria's armed forces, that will amount to settlements for these fighters.

Al-Tamimi has claimed that there is more evidence to suggest that an anti-Sunni cleansing campaign has been carried out primarily by the Assad regime's Syrian Alawite militias rather than Iranian-backed foreign Shiites. As an example, he cites regime-perpetrated massacres of civilians in Homs and Baniyas—towns that had been primarily inhabited by a Sunni population. Al-Tamimi's article provides a link to a blog entry by

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[17] Tamimi's article is accessible via the following url: https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/03/15/analysis-why-the-war-in-syria-may-not-be-about-demographic-change [Accessed 10 May 2020].

Syria researcher Joshua Landis[18] in which is included a video (now down)[19] of infamous pro-regime militia commander Mihrac Ural speaking at a meeting a few days prior to the Baniyas massacre. Landis describes Ural as the leader of a pro-regime militia composed of Syrian and Turkish Alawites. According to the blog, the video features Ural announcing his justification for an assault on the town of Baniyas. Landis provides a translated transcription of the speech:

> Banias is the only route for these traitors to the sea…It is necessary, as soon as possible, to surround Banias, and I mean (someone in audience says "cleanse [tathir] sir")… surround Banias and start the cleansing….[I]f we're needed within this week, we will join the battles in Banias and perform our patriotic duty. Everyone will see how the Syrian Resistance fights…Our plan has always been attack, attack, attack. Those who ask us "OK, so you entered the village, who's going to hold it", it doesn't matter, our job is to cleanse and liberate and its up to the army to hold the ground…You need to pay attention to the story of Banias, the only route [for] these traitors to the sea. It should be surrounded, liberated and cleansed as soon as possible…

The sectarian element of the regime's military campaign is further evidenced in numerous videos revealing regime personnel beating, stabbing and riddling with bullets civilians whilst taunting them in Arabic with a series of sectarian insults. One particular video[20] of Assad's soldiers chanting and clapping along to a sectarian song mocking historic Sunni figures, even demonstrates an instance of incitement to kill Sunnis. The phrase "we are

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[18] Landis is Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma, USA. It is worth noting that Landis is viewed by many activists in solidarity with the Syrian revolution as being subtly tolerant of the Assad regime, and whose output on Syria is seen as being a nuanced attempt to frame both the anti-Assad and pro-Assad blocs as equal in malevolence in their actions and intentions. Landis' blog entry can be read via the following url: https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/round-up/ [Accessed 17 September 2019].

[19] This video is now viewable via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bj2_5BH8Y_Y [Accessed 17 September 2019].

[20] Like many videos evidencing explicit acts of violence and torture in Syria, along with those evidencing incitements to attack a group, this video has recently been removed from the internet. Fortunately I downloaded it before its removal, but upon attempting to re-upload it to Youtube, it was blocked by Youtube's server. The rejection was accompanied by a message stating that the video may be in violation of Youtube's community standards, or copyright policy. The last time I had watched the video online was some time in Spring 2019.

going to hit the Sunnis",[21] which received whistles and heightened shouts of applause by the soldiers in the video, demonstrates a clear intent to target a particular sect. According to blogger and activist Kester Ratcliff, "This is evidence for the specific criminal intent (mens rea)[22] of genocide crimes, and incitement to genocide is itself an international criminal offence" (2018).

However, Al-Tamimi's focus on military strategy as Iran's primary incentive for its occupation of parts of Syria overlooks the identitarian politics of Shiite supremacy that the Iranian state exercises in order to mobilise and inspire its multinational army of jihadists. According to Naame Shaam's May 2015 report *Silent Sectarian Cleansing: Iranian Role in Mass Demolitions and Population Transfers in Syria*, "the discourse used to mobilise and recruit for these militias in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran was sectarian (protecting Alawis and Shia from Sunni fundamentalists and so on)" (2015 : 39). This observation is supported by a documented track-record of Iranian-backed Shiite militias' sectarian crimes in Iraq, as well as their deployment in Syria. A January 2017 report by Amnesty International, as well as 2016 reports by Human Rights Watch, found that Iraqi Shiite militias operating alongside the Iraqi army under a semi-official capacity in the war against the Islamic State, carried out summary executions of Iraqi Sunni male civilians, as well as arresting and disappearing hundreds more Sunni males at checkpoints and via abductions directly from the homes of Sunni families. The documentation of such events in Iraq is relevant when looking at Syria, for the umbrella organisation of the Iraqi militias in question is the Hashd al Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Units/Forces) which also

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[21] The word "nedrob" in Levantine Arabic can be translated into English as "we are going to hit/flog/beat". Whist the literal sense of the word indicates the idea of a single, or repeated, physical assault of punches or blows, the significance of the term in Arabic, when used in the context of armed conflict, expresses the intent to decisively overpower by use of force, or annihilate.

[22] Mens rea is the legal term for 'intention'. In terms of international crimes, the intention to commit a crime, or the intention to aid or facilitate the committing, or sustaining, of physical acts of criminality, constitutes a crime in itself. Mens rea is distinct from actus reus, which refers to the physical act of the crime.

operates in Syria, deploying around thirty identifiable militia groups[23] fighting as part of a multi-national Shiite Jihad that includes Hezbollah from Lebanon, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps from Iran, and an assortment of Pakistani, Afghan, Bahraini and Yemeni militias under Iranian command.

The anti-Sunni rhetoric and Shiite supremacist culture of these Iranian-supported militias are also evidenced in videos found on Youtube, which reveal militia commanders' incitements to wipe out Sunnis as a group. In one such example,[24] armed Iraqi militiamen —allegedly in Syria—listen to a speech steeped in sectarian imagery and vocabulary. The preacher announces, "we shall confront Yazid"—Yazid being the name of a historic Sunni figure, here used as a coded reference for Sunni Muslims as a collective enemy labeled and defined in sectarian terminology. In addition, videos that seem to reveal these militias carrying out sectarian-based killings of unarmed male captives on the street have also surfaced on Youtube. Following the capture of East Aleppo by the regime and its allies in Winter 2016, a heavily-pixellated video (now no longer available) appeared online, revealing footage of what appeared to be a group of Hezbollah militiamen (speaking Lebanese Arabic) dragging young male prisoners out of vans and shooting them in the head. One member of the militia expresses hesitation when he is heard telling his comrades that what they are doing is "haram", which can be translated as "this is a sin/ have mercy". His comment is met with an enraged shout by another member of the group, who yells, "we are carrying out our duty to God". A male prisoner is then executed. Meanwhile, a further two videos from Iraq also seem to corroborate Amnesty

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[23] Twenty-nine Iraqi Shiite militias operating in Syria are listed in an infographic included on Kester Ratcliff's blog: https://medium.com/@kesterratcliff/contradictory-propaganda-storylines-for-different-audiences-of-assads-supporters-especially-b9b6b5a71ff5?fbclid=IwAR08iqOihUbKSBQOPgaCeP5O0YYTGwP-VaezDRTvtIZYpx3IK9sNWrA4sPM [Accessed 17 September 2019]. The infographic itself was produced by the website FSA Platform, which acts as the official English language web presence of the opposition Free Syrian Army. The infographic is visible on the website here: https://fsaplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/Militia-graphic-july-14-7-2018.jpg [Accessed 17 September 2019], along with other updated information: https://fsaplatform.org/regime-forces [Accessed 17 September 2019].

[24] The video can be viewed via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=92&v=5kU8DEpwCv8 [Accessed 17 September 2019].

International's report of sectarian cleansing at the hands of the aforementioned Shiite militias.   In one (which also seems to no longer be available), a militia commander prepares his men just before they are about to enter the town of Mosul. He is seen telling them not to show any mercy to any man, sheikh or woman in the town: "There is no decent man, sheikh, boy or woman in there, for they have all harboured and collaborated with the terrorists" (quoted from my memory). In another video,[25] a group of armed men with Shiite militia and Iraqi flag insignia sewn onto their military attire, surround a young teenage boy at gun point. The boy, who looks to be aged around thirteen to fifteen years old, has his hands bound behind his back and is being forced to kneel on the ground. He is met with a series of humiliating insults and blows to the face before then being shot dead by the militiamen.

Whether instigated and perpetrated mainly by the Assad regime, Iran, or both, the analysed evidence and record of behaviour of both entities demonstrates that Syrian Sunnis have often been the target of specific killings and massacres carried out by armed groups under the command of the Assad regime and/or Iran, with highly sectarian motivations.

2.3   Forced displacement

Reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also documented what appears to be the Assad regime's policy of forced displacement, which has included the mass demolition of housing and property in former opposition-held areas, and the denial of access to property or neighbourhoods to any returning refugees seeking to reclaim the houses or apartments they once called home.   Whilst these reports have not made explicit the claim of the regime's alleged programme of sectarian cleansing, the expulsion

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[25] Edited versions of the video have appeared as part of a news reports by various outlets. An example by VOA News can be viewed via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujwHP18NvrE [Accessed 17 September 2019].

of opposition communities from swathes of land and the capturing of these vacated territories to regime control carries with it the consequence of transforming Syria's demography on sectarian lines.   Since Sunnis constitute the majority of Syria's population, it is inevitable that the bulk of the opposition to the regime is also formed of a Sunni majority. Although one reason for this may simply be down to it being a reflection of the country's demography, the sectarian rhetoric analysed earlier on in this chapter, alongside the targeted massacres of Sunni communities committed by the regime and Iranian-backed forces, indicate that Sunnis are generally identified as oppositional to the regime's authority, and therefore need to be reduced in number in order to discourage and ultimately remove any threat to the regime and Iran's militarily-focused territorial expansion.

That Syria's Sunni majority has been a specific target for population reduction has not been overlooked by journalist Martin Chulov, who has reported on the forced displacement of Syrian Sunni residents of particular areas, and on what could amount to a policy of sectarian and demographic repopulation that has been primarily led by Iranian military authorities (2017):

> In Darayya, south-west of Damascus, more than 300 Iraqi Shia families moved into neighbourhoods abandoned by rebels last August as part of a surrender deal. Up to 700 rebel fighters were relocated to Idlib province and state media announced within days that the Iraqis had arrived…

> …The Sayeda Zainab mosque on the capital's western approach has been heavily fortified by Hezbollah and populated by families of the militant group, who have moved in since late 2012. Tehran has also bought large numbers of homes near the Zainab mosque, and a tract of land, which it is using to create a security buffer – a microcosm of its grander project.

Whilst Al Tamimi disputes Chulov's claim that regime media had announced the arrival of Iraqi Shiite families into Darayya, he abstains from commenting on Chulov's words on Hezbollah and Iran. Journalist Robert Fisk—who is often regarded by Syrian activists, those in solidarity with their cause, and some other journalists, as being sympathetic to the Assad regime[26]—seconds Chulov's words on Iran's purchase of property. In an article (2018) about the Assad regime's property-focused "Law No 10" he acknowledges Syrian concerns of an Iranian land and property acquisition in the Damascus area:

> One widespread claim is that the law enables Iranians to take over the property of exiled Syrians. By law, neither Iranians no[r] any other foreigner can do so – but Iranian companies can own property if they join the reconstruction process, and so can Russian companies. There are repeated rumours in Syria itself that Iranian companies have bought hotels near the old city of Damascus, along with apartments near the Shiite Sayyida Zainab mosque in the city, a place of pilgrimage for Iranians and Iraqi Shia.

Fisk's interpretation of the regime's "Law No 10", as well as its other legislative decrees that concern residential property, echoes the conclusions reached in reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—namely, that they are legislations serving a campaign to prevent all those exiled and refugee Syrians—including those forcibly displaced from their homes and now residing in the last remaining rebel-held ares of the country[27]—from returning:

> Here's how it works. Destroyed areas of Syria are to be reorganised, developed and reconstructed. To prove your claim to property – damaged or destroyed – you must appear

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[26] The following url links to an article from the Pulse Media blog, written by University of Stirling lecturer in Digital Journalism, Idrees Ahmad, who provides an analytical review of what he considers to be Fisk's sympathies to the Assad regime via his Syria-focused journalism: https://pulsemedia.org/2016/12/03/robert-fisks-crimes-against-journalism/ [Accessed 17 September 2019]. Richard Hall, who, like Fisk, is also a Middle East correspondent for the Independent, has Tweeted his suspicions of Fisk's Syria reporting as being carried out whilst embedded with the regime's army and minders. He points out why this is problematic in the following thread of Tweets: https://twitter.com/_richardhall/status/986129483425107970?lang=en [Accessed 17 September 2019].

[27] Those Syrians who have subsequently become refugees within their own country due to being forcibly displaced from their homes are referred to, in International Law, as IDPs (Internally Displaced People).

in person with your real estate documents within 30 days. Clearly, nobody outside Syria who opposes the government can do this – nor can those tens of thousands who live outside Syria's frontiers to evade the military draft who, in theory and probably in practice, face arrest warrants if they go home…According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, more than 70 per cent of refugees lack basic identification papers.

…As far back as 2012, legislation 63 allowed the Syrian finance ministry to seize the assets of people who fell under the Counterterrorism Law (again of 2012). But this law itself embraces the regime's interpretation of what "terrorism" means. An opponent of the government? A critic of the regime? A civilian who turned to armed warfare when his home was attacked?

The intention to forcibly displace, reduce in number, or erase the presence of a targeted group from a particular territory, in view of then re-populating that territory with a group or community loyal to—or associated with—the perpetrator of the first act, is designated a genocide crime, as defined in the Genocide Convention. In this sense, the Assad regime and Iran's policy of reducing in number, or clearing out Syrian Sunni communities from areas for the purposes of engineering a more homogenous demographic of people with a greater sense of loyalty to the regime and/or to Iran, constitutes yet another case for legally designating the Assad regime and Iran's crimes as genocide. According to Syria's own state-run news agency, SANA (Syrian Arab News Agency), Assad himself conceded the great number of youth killed in conflict, yet he counterposed this loss with the supposed advantage of having "won a healthier and more homogeneous society in the real sense" (al-Sabbagh, al-Frieh and Said, for SANA: 2017).

2.4   conclusion of part 1

Analysis has demonstrated how indicting the regime and its allies for the crime of genocide may have solid legal grounds, based on conceptual interpretations of the term's legal definition, with particular emphasis to the interpretation of the clauses "part…of…a

national group" and "part…of…a religious group". Furthermore, the precedence of a successful indictment and arrest of Argentinian military personnel for "crimes against humanity committed under the framework of genocide" signals the legal potential for the regime and its allies to be indicted under a similarly-phrased charge. Furthemore, in considering the conclusions collectively drawn from Naame Sham's study and those of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, alongside the evidence and testimony analysed in the latter part of this chapter's section, the regime and Iran's sectarian cleansing campaign provide a further case for designating the regime's (and Iran's) crimes as genocide as defined in the 1948 convention, as they collectively constitute and allude to an "intent to destroy…in part…a…religious group".

2.5   Part 2

The narrative component of genocide

Having established that there are indeed legal and conceptual grounds that justify using the term 'genocide' to refer to Assad and his allies' military campaign against civilians, I shall henceforth apply the term to the Syrian situation throughout the rest of this thesis.

In this section, I will analyse what I term to be the *narrative component* of genocide in order to establish a deeper elucidation of how genocide is being implemented in the Syrian context. I do this in order to provide a concrete understanding of the specificities of the Syrian genocide so that I may formulate a strategy of resistance that responds to it.

2.6   Denial

This thesis makes the case that genocide is a process of total historic extermination. That is to say, genocide is not exclusively the process of premeditatedly murdering a population in physical terms, but is a process dependent on a campaign of eradicating

any knowledge that the victims ever existed in the first place—the total wiping out of a people from society's collective memory.

Scholars of the study of genocide, such as Richard Hovannisian, as well as leading advocates of genocide prevention such as Gregory H. Stanton, consider the attempt to eradicate public knowledge of the victim's existence as constituting the final stage of the mass killing campaign. This is usually referred to as constituting a part of genocide denial, and is understood as the intention to kill off society's remaining memory of the victims once and for all. This is what I term "total historic extermination" as mentioned above. Genocide Watch founder Gregory H. Stanton states that denial constitutes the

> …stage that always follows a genocide. It is among the surest indicators of further genocidal massacres. The perpetrators of genocide dig up the mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses. They deny that they committed any crimes, and often blame what happened on the victims.

As expressed by Richard Hovannisian (1999:202 (cited in Jones 2005)

> Following the physical destruction of a people and their material culture, memory is all that is left and is targeted as the last victim. Complete annihilation of people requires the banishment of recollection and the suffocation of remembrance. Falsification, deception, and half-truths reduce what was to what may have been or perhaps what was not at all.

But while genocide denial is mentioned here as a component that follows the act of mass murder, reflecting on the genocide in Syria reveals that denial plays a key role in facilitating the acts of premeditated mass killing throughout the period in which they are being carried out. This denialist element of the regime's genocide campaign is perhaps most directly enacted at the level of international diplomacy, such as within the context of the United Nations. Denial and obfuscation at a diplomatic level, as practiced by the

Assad regime and its state allies Russia and Iran, diverts international discussion and focus away from their crimes, allowing the perpetrators to continue destroying civilians en masse in the absence of definitive, and legal, international judgement and action.[28]

Having observed the evolution of pro-regime propaganda since 2011, I have found that this sort of diplomatic facilitation of genocide is by no means restricted to state actors at the international level, but is also largely practiced within the borders of individual nations by socially and politically influential apologists, supporters and sympathisers of the perpetrators. These apologists may go to great lengths to shape and influence public opinion in their respective domestic environments, with the aim of ultimately bringing about widespread societal consensus within their own countries, that is in political alignment with the foreign génocidaires of other nations. As expressed by genocide scholar Adam Jones, "the broader phenomenon of genocide denial is far more deeply entrenched, often representing a societal consensus rather than a fringe position" (Jones: 352:2006). With widespread societal consensus in any given nation, comes public pressure upon that nation's government to take a foreign policy approach in alignment with the public's desires. In the case of dealing with the Assad regime's atrocities, apologists have sought to nurture a popular grass-roots sentiment among citizens of their respective communities, that would, on aggregate, pressure their governments to take an isolationist approach of inaction—an inaction needed for Assad to continue his extermination campaign unimpeded. And if politicians are more concerned with

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[28] This has been seen in instances following the Russian airforce's targeting of a Red Cross aid convoy, a Médecins Sans Frontiers-supported hospital, and repeated attacks carried out against civilians in opposition-held areas by means of sarin or chlorine gas (launched by the Assad regime). In all instances, the pro-regime side managed to delay or prevent any definitive verdict or resolution being reached by the United Nations. This was achieved by means of unleashing a series of counter-accusations and refusing or delaying UN-sponsored investigative teams to enter the site of the crimes whilst deploying aerial or artillery fire to further bombard the relevant site, compromising any material evidence that could be used in any potential UN-backed investigative process on the ground.

maintaining their popularity among what they perceive to be the majority of voters in their respective constituencies, they will yield to this pressure.[29]

In this sense, genocide can be seen as an internationally-facilitated crime. If one is to have a holistic understanding of how industrial scale murder is allowed to be carried out within Syria's borders, it must be understood that the regime's acts of killing take place in the absence of any punitive actions or deterrents enacted by the international community; and this absence is often a result of the diplomatic support afforded it by its international backers such as Russia, but also by the efforts of politically-influential domestic figures in foreign countries with the ability to influence their respective government's policy towards Syria.

The denial of a genocide taking place is therefore part of the genocide process itself. Viewing denial only in the context that follows a campaign of mass murder is thus insufficient in understanding what genocide means in Syria. Rather, denial constitutes a necessary component upon which the act of killing is allowed to be committed, and allowed to continue to be committed, repeatedly.   This realisation is perhaps what prompted Gregory H. Stanton to modify his description of denial on the Genocide Watch

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[29] In the UK, this is perhaps best illustrated by the August 2013 parliamentary vote that rejected David Cameron's motion that Britain take punitive military action against the Assad regime for its gassing to death of one thousand four hundred civilians in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta. As speculated by numerous commentators and news media analyses, public weariness from Britain's military involvement in Iraq and the scandal of the weapons of mass destruction debate contributed to a lack of support for such a move (see for example: https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2013/08/2013831133840280552.html ; https://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/2014/Gribble2014b.pdf ; or https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/syria-what-should-we-do [Accessed 12 September 2019].
Sentiments in the United States seemed similar with "Democrats telling the president there was no appetite in their home states for military action" (Borger: 2019).   In tandem, this public sentiment was exploited by certain influencers, such as then MP George Galloway, the authoritarian elements of the Labour Party, the Stop the War Coalition, and an assortment of radical leftist groups such as Counterfire and the Communist Party of Great Britain Marxist Leninist, in order to portray the Assad regime as a victim of Western aggression, whilst simultaneously pushing the conspiracy theory that the regime had been framed by Western backed-jihadists in order to provide a pretext for a Western military invasion of Syria with the intention of regime change. Conspiracy theories alleging Assad's innocence intensified following the vote, most notably with journalist Seymour Hersh's December 2013 article for the London Review of Books *Whose sarin?*. In Winter that year, the Stop the War Coalition hosted a conference in which Assad propagandist Mother Agnes had been invited as a key speaker. Infamous for claiming that the chemical attacks had been staged in order to facilitate Western-backed regime change, Mother Agnes's scheduled appearance at the conference was to be one stop on her UK lecture tour, which had been organised and funded by a US-based pro-Assad organisation called the Syria Solidarity Movement. Conspicuously, no other Syrian had been invited to speak at Stop the War's conference, which devoted an entire section of the event to the war in Syria.

website in 2016, from "DENIAL is the eighth stage that always follows a genocide" in 1996, to "DENIAL is the final stage that lasts *throughout* and always follows genocide" in 2016 (emphasis my own). Scholars Smith, Markusan and Lifton argue that the "denial of genocide [is] an egregious offense that warrants being regarded as a form of contribution to genocidal violence", and "if denial points to the past and the present, it also has implications for the future" (Smith, et al: 1995). In the case of Syria, this "future" may not solely be that of distant years ahead, but at a time when genocide is being committed, could equally be the future of the following year or the following month if one massacre after another is met with international apathy and inaction.

But what is the narrative of the denial that is being propagated by the regime and its supporters? What is the tale being told? Observing the panorama of the regime-leaning media and commentary landscape—everything from the articles of Cockburn, Crooke, the Canary, or the Morning Star, to the Syria-related statements of Stop the War Coalition, and right down to the posts left by trolls in the comments sections of online discussion threads[30]—it becomes apparent that the regime's denialist narrative is a denial of two realities. The first relates to the existence of a revolution. The regime's narrative postulates that there is no revolution taking place in Syria. The denial of the existence of a civil uprising is in effect the denial of the existence of a non-militarised democratic populace (which inherently leads to the regime's second narrative of dehumanisation, which will be analysed in the next subsection of this chapter). With this claim, the regime's intention is to throw in doubt the idea that it is carrying out a campaign of lethal suppression. And herein lies the second denial. The regime denies it is carrying out a campaign of lethal suppression, for how can there be such a campaign against a movement and a people that do not exist? The logical conclusion that the regime would like observers to reach is that there is no civil uprising occurring in Syria—or if there once

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[30] For examples of internet trolling see footnotes on page 87.

was, it no longer exists, or is not large enough to warrant consideration—and that any mention of such a grass-roots movement is nothing more than an attempt to paint the regime in a bad light in order to bring about a Western-backed plot for regime change.

2.7   dehumanisation

Crucial to this research is the recognition that genocide denial with regards to Syria has relied upon a another narrative that originated in the Assad regime's propaganda department.   This second narrative has been the one of dehumanisation —"dehumanization" being stage 4 of the 12 stages of genocide as listed by Dr. Gregory H. Stanton. It is this second narrative that has played the more crucial role in providing the regime with an international societal consensus that is in broad agreement with its actions.   The premise of this narrative of dehumanisation is simple: *the Syrian government is fighting jihadi terrorists/Al Qaeda who are trying to take over the country*. And according to the regime's narrative, *all* its opponents are considered to be terrorists. The result is the official dehumanisation of swathes of the Syrian population—the effectual termination of their status as citizens and by extension, as human beings.

This myth that has reframed the Syrian popular and civil uprising as an imperialist conspiracy instigated by outsiders intent on regime change—a myth in which all civilians and civil society activists have been dismissed as terrorists and Al-Qaeda-like Jihadis—effectively dehumanises the Arabic-speaking Sunni majority, denies agency to millions of Syrians irrespective of their sect or social identity, and reduces the lived status of the citizens who initiated the grassroots mobilisation of the civil uprising as non-existent. It has been this single narrative in its varying versions that has formed the backbone of the pro-Assad line with regards to Syria, being disseminated relentlessly by numerous political commentators, certain politicians and pro-regime journalists around

the world, as well as a network of media outlets and political groups and organisations across numerous political demographics.

2.8 Duality of the regime's narrative component

Zooming out to a panorama of the regime's propaganda narrative, it becomes apparent that every single piece of pro-regime discourse, is based on either one or both of these two narratives: denial, and dehumanisation. Both of these narratives are pushed in tandem in order to bring about the societal conditions the regime needs in order to carry out its extermination project uninterrupted. So here we have the duality of the regime's genocidal narrative. On the one hand is the denial: *There is no civil movement in Syria— civilians are not* being *targeted*; and on the other hand there is the justification for the brutal crackdown: *We are crushing terrorists*.

2.9 Building the Assadist cult: abetting genocide via international participation in the narrative component

Raphael Lemkin—who conceptualised the idea of genocide as an international crime and who successfully had the United Nations recognise the concept as a crime punishable under international law—stated that the term genocide signified "a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves". Lemkin's recognition that the Nazi project to exterminate world Jewry and other "untermenschen" consisted of a variety of actions, is key to understanding what I conceptualise to be the narrative component of genocide. If the Assad regime's propaganda narrative is disseminated by influential commentators around the world with the intention of these opinion-makers steering their own government's policies to preserve the Assad regime, its interests and the status-quo of mass killing, then this propaganda narrative must be regarded as constituting a crucial component, or "action", of the many actions of the regime's

coordinated plan of genocide—a facet that legal experts could identify as liable for punishment under international or domestic law, with a variety of charges ranging from participation in forms of incitement or complicity intended to facilitate, bring about or maintain the international conditions of success needed for the génocidaires to implement their extermination; as well as the possibility of being charged for aiding and abetting the process of extermination—if ever the United Nations decides to officially apply the term 'genocide' to describe Assad, Iran and Putin's campaign of mass murder in Syria.[31]

In this respect, H.L.A Hart's argument for what may constitute complicity in a campaign of genocide poses potentially damning legal consequences for any influential individual active in promoting the génocidaire's narrative, no matter how disguised this promotion may be. In the following extract, Hart refers specifically to the practice of "omission", but this "omission" he speaks of is part of the practice of genocide promotion and facilitation wherein the accomplice intentionally omits acknowledgement of the génocidaire's crimes, or omits mention of the victims. His position is summarised by Professor Larry May:

> ...H.L.A. Hart argues that foresight of the consequences can be an important basis of criminal responsibility, and so can the failure to exercise foresight. He argues that it makes sense to punish someone not for inadvertence but for omitting to think, not for having a blank mind but for a specific omission. What we hold people responsible for is failing to exercise control in various ways, and failing to attend to certain facts that other reasonable people would attend to can trigger responsibility ascriptions, just as is true for failures to restrain one's passions. Here what is key is that precautions were not taken that should

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[31] It should be kept in mind that the prospect of legal action against any person found to be complicit in atrocity crimes is not dependent on the term genocide being used as a designation. As Toby Cadman has reiterated, the term 'genocide' is not needed as a legal prerequisite for punishment. The fact that atrocities have been committed is sufficient in warranting legal proceedings to punish those responsible. My argument that genocide is the correct term to describe the Assad regime's war against Syrians is not made in order to facilitate a speedier prosecution of his regime and its enablers, but to provide a deeper understanding of how the regime has conducted the purging of its opponents—an understanding that its atrocities should not be considered exclusively as crimes that have been committed at a time of war (war crimes), but rather as a series of co-ordinated actions that, on aggregate, ought to be appreciated as a campaign of total historic extermination (genocide).

have been taken, and we punish to deter people from such behaviour. (H.L.A Hart,

quoted in May: 2010: 125)

The following extract lists articles III - VI of the Genocide convention. The content of these

articles layout part of what constitutes the convention's definition of the crime of genocide,

as well as who may be considered complicit and thus liable for punishment:

Article III

The following acts shall be punishable:

(c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;

(e) Complicity in genocide.

Article IV

*Persons committing genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in article III shall be
punished, whether they are constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials or private
individuals.*

Article V

*The Contracting Parties undertake to enact, in accordance with their respective
Constitutions, the necessary legislation to give effect to the provisions of the present
Convention, and, in particular, to provide effective penalties for persons guilty of genocide
or any of the other acts enumerated in article III.*

Article VI

*Persons charged with genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in article III shall be
tried by a competent tribunal of the State in the territory of which the act was committed,
or by such international penal tribunal as may have jurisdiction with respect to those
Contracting Parties which shall have accepted its jurisdiction.*

In reflecting on what this section of the Genocide convention means, could the case be

made that influential individuals or public figures that have actively promoted the Assad

regime's narrative component of genocide be considered guilty of the punishable acts

listed in the extract? Could an analysis of how and to what extent these individuals have

participated in such acts, initiate a process to bring these individuals to be tried by courts

in their respective countries?

To illustrate this point, it can be reasonably argued that George Galloway, Vanessa Beeley and Eva Bartlett are all complicit in the regime's orchestrated killing of civilians due to their publicly-made statements of support for its atrocities, as well as for their respective literary and verbal campaigns to dehumanise Syrians opposed to the Assad dictatorship. Whether or not their pronouncements of support—intended to influence public opinion and government policies towards Syria—have been successful is irrelevant. What makes them complicit is their *intention* to influence public opinion and pressure their respective governments towards implementing policies conducive to ensuring the Assad regime's survival and the continuation of its genocide campaign—an effort conducted through the exploitation of their public platforms, granting them the ability to reach and influence potentially large populations. It can be argued that through their respective on-going verbal and literary campaigns, they have contributed to the internationalisation and popularisation of the regime's narrative component of genocide, collectively normalising and making "reasonable" the narratives of dehumanisation that fall in line with the Assad regime's official publicly-broadcasted characterisation of its opponents. Specifically, all three individuals have referred to the regime's victims, collectively, as terrorists, thus implying them to be legitimate targets of Assad and his allies' military operations. The most direct call for this has been made by Beeley, who has tweeted on seven separate occasions that the Syrian Civil Defence search and rescue organisation (aka the White Helmets) are "legit targets"[32] for bombing. These direct calls are consistent with her overall message that the regime is conducting a legitimate war against terrorists—a narrative she frequently disseminates with her many appearances on broadcast media, including Russia's state-run television channel RT; a series of touring public lectures; and her editorship on the conspiracy theory website 21st Century Wire. Whilst direct calls for

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[32] See the Syria Campaign's 2017 report *Killing the Truth,* which provides screenshots of the seven times that Beeley has Tweeted for the Syrian Civil Defence search and rescue teams to be "legitimate targets" for bombing (pages 22-23): https://thesyriacampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/KillingtheTruth.pdf [Accessed 13 September 2019].

humanitarian rescue workers to be targeted are not made by Beeley's colleague Eva Bartlett, smear campaigns alleging the Syrian Civil Defence to be terrorists are a recurring feature in Bartlett's editorials for Russia's state-owned news outlet RT, contributing further to the dissemination of a dehumanising narrative that is repeated frequently, in order to render civilian victims of Assad's attacks as violent extremists that need to be eradicated. Beeley and Bartlett's smears against Syrian rescue workers have been echoed by Sami Ramadani—a lecturer at London Metropolitan University and an associate of Stop the War Coalition—who has publicly referred to the White Helmets as "the soft face of genocidal terrorism" and as having "close links with Al Qaeda" (2018).   In publicly Tweeting his "Thanks" to both women for "exposing" the rescue workers, Ramadani has also demonstrated the manner in which disinformation and dehumanisation narratives are successfully disseminated to wider audiences.   Ramadani is by no means the only academic sustaining the regime's narrative.   Former University of Sydney lecturer, Tim Anderson, has pushed the same conspiracy theory, referring to the White Helmets as "armed propagandists and auxiliaries "associated with" #al Qaeda and #al Nusra" (2018), and in a similar vein to Beeley, has implied the regime and Russia's targeting of the group to be legitimate.   Meanwhile The Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media brings together various lecturers and students from universities in the UK, the United States and Sweden, alongside Vanessa Beeley herself, for the aim of what it describes on its own website as facilitating "research into the areas of organised persuasive communication (including propaganda and information operations) and media coverage, with respect to the 2011-present conflict in Syria including related topics" (2016).   The group has been accused by Syrian democrats and other university professors, of spreading disinformation

on behalf of the regime and of being part of a wider circle of pro-Assad propagandists.[33]

For his part, Galloway made use of his time as a British MP to promote the regime's narrative within policy debates on Syria in parliament. In a 2013 parliamentary speech, broadcast on the BBC and now available online, he characterises the Syrian opposition as crazed fanatics and terrorists that chop off heads and eat hearts—a trope he has repeated in varying forms, with the same details, in almost every Syria-related speech and statement he has made, including his own radio and television shows on Russia's state-owned outlet Sputnik, the Iranian regime-owned Press TV, and the Assad-regime connected channel Al Mayadeen. In a 2018 public lecture in Derry, Ireland, he referred to the Syrian opposition as "fanatic, head-chopping, heart eating maniacs" and declared "I fully support the Syrian Arab Army and their allies"—a position he has also voiced repeatedly on his own Twitter account.[34]

A further commonality in the narratives pushed by Galloway, Beeley and Bartlett is their omission to mention the existence of a democratic civil society opposition to the regime, including the multitude of self-governing NGOs that emerged in opposition-held areas of Syria.[35] Their omission to mention these details is further compounded with their

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[33] The following article, published by the Huffington Post, details the group's associations and hears from its critics: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/uk-academics-pro-assad-conspiracy-theories-about-syria_uk_5aa51ea7e4b01b9b0a3c4b10?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly90LmNvL1RBdGGJYSHJjU08&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALIPmLy4jbiwopwnFX1Az10RGlw-RdCuYCEf921kb5EFyssdNrPEVLQA2SbW1uQwv1TB9_Pfb2nyOfgKkk8B8uzdomCfSRXhR-DRN2NAU90wc-iw6URVosvZWQtaaBnk6-MQKD5RmLMe-ngelMBrdAVvcw1VoZj-TLwxuketAlCC [Accessed 15 September 2019].
The following article is by Muhammad Idrees Ahmad—lecturer in Digital Journalism at the University of Stirling—one of the academics critical of the group: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/syria-on-academic-freedom-and-responsibility/ [Accessed 15 September 2019].
This article by student-focused paper The Tab, highlights how Syrian students at the University of Edinburgh feel unsafe by one of the University's lecturers who is a founding member of the group: https://thetab.com/uk/edinburgh/2019/09/05/syrian-students-put-off-attending-uoe-by-lecturer-accused-of-spreading-pro-assad-propaganda-58786 [Accessed 15 September 2019].

[34] For example: https://twitter.com/georgegalloway/status/1079705263630966785 [Accessed 13 September 2019].

[35] An exception to this is Galloway's publicly-made recognition of the presence of a democratic uprising in Syria, which he expressed in the following Al Jazeera article from August 2011—an acknowledgment he later betrayed by never mentioning the existence of this movement ever again: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/20118159535828664.html?fbclid=IwAR0G_jQiCOqqulpWUTD3aORTHj7xl3chH0-8_sndCqDuQjbeW_oHo-ufLcc [Accessed 14 September 2019].

omission to acknowledge the regime's specific crimes. The first omission reinforces the characterisation of the Syrian opposition as being, in essence, an array of Al Qaeda-like terrorists—a dehumanising and reductionist trope, and one designed to legitimise and justify the regime's targeting of civilians; whilst the second omission works to gradually build a public amnesia of the regime's crimes, with the ultimate intention of nurturing direct and open public support for the regime as the legitimate government of the Syrian Arab Republic—a mantra that is repeated in particular by Beeley and Bartlett in their public statements, and often seen in the form of comments posted in the public discussion sections of online news and audio-visual media platforms.

2.10   A point on international speech crimes and causation

Even before the Syrian conflict, the Assad regime already had a history of committing acts of collective punishment and lethal violence against all political dissent domestically, as well as against those opposed to its rule in Lebanon and even further afield (such as the bombing of the offices of the Lebanese newspaper Al Watan al-Arabi, on Rue Marbeouf, Paris in 1982, which killed one woman and, according to varying reports, injured between 46-63 others).[36]   This demonstrates that the regime's use of lethal violence against civil dissenters and opposition communities from 2011 onwards, would have been committed regardless of any vocal support and apologia afforded it by its international supporters. If one were to therefore bring a case against those supporters, the claim that it was their publicly-made speeches that had led to the regime committing such crimes would quickly be proven wrong by virtue of the regime's historical record of violence stretching back to 1970.   Had there been no Galloway, Beeley or Bartlett, the regime would certainly have

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[36] This incident, which took place on the morning of 22nd April 1982, was reported on in English by the New York Times —which can be accessed via the following url: https://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/23/world/bomb-in-paris-kills-1-2-syrians-ousted.html [Accessed 15 September 2019].   The following two videos from Youtube show reports on the incident from television, both which are archived by the Institut National de l'Audiovisual (INA): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvJlb-gqjtA and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlxWOKrq3XE [Accessed 15 September 2019].

continued its policy of state terrorism regardless. Therefore the case against the likes of Galloway et al. is one that relates to their *mens rea* (their intent) to aid and abet, through speech and literature, the regime's actions. Specifically, the charge would be that these people have aided and abetted the regime's crimes by intentionally agitating for policy decisions by their respective governments that would enable Assad and his allies to freely carry on with the killing campaign without being stopped by international powers. As mentioned before, what is important here is not the success or failure of the aid or abetment, but the intention behind it. i.e. the intention to bring about an international societal consensus—a grassroots public opinion—that would be favourable to the regime, whilst in the knowledge that atrocity crimes were and continue to be committed by that very regime. Legally, establishing that these supporters acted as aiders and abetters of the regime's campaign whilst in the knowledge that it had, and continued, to commit crimes against civilians, may help a court of law reach the verdict that their participation constituted an intentional participation in propagating a narrative designed to legitimise the regime's acts of killing. Indeed, the very narratives pushed by these three individuals are designed to present the regime's actions not as genocide or atrocities, but as a legitimate campaign by a "sovereign" and "elected" government at war with "terrorists" and "foreign invaders". If the narrative spoken by Assad's supporters were to be believed, then the idea that the regime were guilty of perpetrating atrocities against civilians would itself be a narrative that was part of the global conspiracy against Syria. According to their narrative therefore, being aware of Assad's crimes is not an awareness but a delusion, implanted into our minds by "corporate media" intent on demonising the Assad government and its allies. Yet, although these three figures have habitually omitted mention of the regime's crimes, an online search for their record of speech yields evidence that at least two of them *are* aware of the regime's crimes—a record that hints at their knowledge of the regime's criminal nature, and which therefore renders their

subsequent decision to participate in its propaganda narrative as intentional, and therefore constituting the aiding and abetting of genocide. Among the material that surfaced in my search, the following was significant: towards the start of the civil uprising, Galloway is on record acknowledging the regime's authoritarian nature and its brutality against civilians;[37] and a private Facebook conversation—leaked in 2017—between Beeley and another regime supporter, revealed her acknowledging the regime's use of torture.[38]

2.11 The Absent image

I have thus far focused on the Assad regime's narratives of denial and dehumanisation. I have argued that these two angles together constitute a duality that functions as the regime's narrative component of genocide. In the following section, I will analyse how this dual-narrative paradigm serves the regime's intention to render "absent" the physical and visual existence of Syrian civil activists.

2.12 The imagined event:
the absence of image in the claim to "truth"

Internationalised and disseminated to politicised communities around the world by a handful of non-Syrian commentators since the start of the Syrian civil uprising of February 2011, the Assad dictatorship's official narrative of an international plot against its rule reached populist status amongst conspiracy theorists and the political fringes of radical groups by the early months of 2011. Conspiracy theory websites such as Infowars, Globalresearch or 21st Century Wire ran analyses that aligned with the regime's narrative

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[37] See for example the following article that Galloway wrote for Al Jazeera in August 2011: https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/20118159535828664.html?fbclid=IwAR0G_jQiCOqqulpWUTD3aORTHj7xl3chH0-8_sndCqDuQjbeW_oHo-ufLcc [Accessed 14 September 2019].

[38] Screenshots of the private conversation between Beeley and her interlocutor are included in the following article on the blog *We Write What We Like:* https://wewritewhatwelike.com/2017/09/07/beeley-admits-even-assad-doesnt-deny-torture-spy-vs-spy-a-pro-assadist-comedy/?fbclid=IwAR1ldoapn84M4WOMvy--nKXPzXtJXlpeY6eFiA0_om53lbApFg5EENDsswA [Accessed 14 September 2019].

of events,[39] warning of a "globalist" conspiracy to destroy Syria, while material published by the media outlets of smaller political organisations such as Britain's Stop the War Coalition, Counterfire, Revolutionary Communist Group, or the Communist Party of Great Britain Marxist-Leninist promoted the Assadist narrative through self-declared anti-imperialist analyses and anti-Western rhetoric.[40]   Yet while the Assadist state-defined myth of an international "regime change" plot gained a following among the fringes of political society, October and November 2011 saw the regime's narrative introduced into a wider audience in the Anglophone press with two articles in two of the UK's most widely-read newspapers: the Guardian and the Independent. This thesis maintains that the expansion of the regime's propaganda into this larger, more moderate societal readership, may have sped-up its desired outcome of mainstreaming and internationalising its propaganda narrative, for   the statuses of the journalists and commentators who brought the Assadist line into this territory were of significantly higher repute than the cult-like conspiracists or politically-radical groups representing the fringe outlets.

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[39]A September 2011 article from the Infowars website, which had included a video clip that has since been deleted, reduces the Syrian war to a conspiracy by an international elite referred to as the "globalists", with the intention to destroy all nation states: https://www.infowars.com/libya-and-syria-the-neocon-plan-to-attack-seven-countries-in-five-years/ [Accessed 8 September 2019].

This June 2011 article from Globalresearch tows the regime line in alleging that the Syrian uprising is a conspiracy for regime change instigated by Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States. Echoing the Assad regime's official line, it maintains that "terrorists" from foreign nations had been crossing into Syria from neighbouring countries and had opened fire on the police and army from the very start of the uprising: https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-destabilization-of-syria-and-the-broader-middle-east-war/25312 [Accessed 8 September 2019].

Like the Infowars piece, the following August 2011 article from 21st Century Wire also refers to an international plot for regime change and takeover by the "globalists". Bashar al-Assad is framed as a defiantly resisting the plot and presiding over one of the last remaining "independent" states in the region: https://21stcenturywire.com/2011/08/23/syria-prepared-to-play-long-game-resisting-globalist-nato-regime-change/ [Accessed 8 September 2019].

[40]An example from October 2012. A Syria-focused analysis from the Communist Party of Great Britain Marxist Leninist's (CPGBML) website describes the Syrian uprising as "phoney" and as an imperialist plot instigated to overthrow a "progressive" anti-imperialist government. The video and blurb are viewable via the following url: /org.ml-cpgb.www//:http 728=art&display=subName&proletarian=secName?php.index [Accessed 8 September 2019].

Similarly, the following url leads to a June 2012 Syria-related article published on the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG) website, articulating a political angle analogous to that of the CPGBLM: https://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/middle-east/syria/2536-syria-un [Accessed 8 September 2019].

A December 2011 statement by Stop the War Coalition expresses an implied support for the Assad regime's survival against what is described as a UK-US campaign for regime change: http://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/resources/stop-the-war-statements/458-no-foreign-intervention-in-syria [Accessed 8 September 2019].

The overlapping of output by the conspiratorial outlets, the political fringes and the higher-profile mainstream opinion makers, has seen the Assad regime's primary conspiracy claim of an international regime change plot successfully constructed into an event of historical "fact"—a "fact" existent in the collective imagination of a significant portion of society. This "fact"—what I refer to here as an "imagined event"—has, and continues, to be expressed readily in lay political discourse—an imaginary perpetuated by the efficacy of the spoken and written word of third-party non-Syrian analysts. This imagined event has also been sustained and complemented by an endless series of what I term micro-myths[41]—myths that have appeared at every stage of Syria's civil uprising and conflict, as a means of bolstering the regime's principle conspiracy narrative.

The initiation of the Assad regime's myth-making campaign emerged shortly after Syria's first civil protests began to gain momentum by March 2011, beginning with the regime's allegation of the presence of "armed gangs"—"armed gangs" that, the regime claimed, were killing civilians and government security personnel.[42] Since the civil uprising erupted, along with the regime's subsequent response of war against civilians, the Assad dictatorship's global PR campaign has primarily revolved around a series of claims that

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[41] I define a micro-myth as a false idea, formulated with the intention to mislead public opinion regarding a specific incident, person, group or state/non-state actor. It can be a false idea about someone or something that may or may not have been committed by the person or group singled out for smearing. As is a common narrative practice of the regime, micro-myths are formulated out of an intention to defame its target victim or absolve the regime of the crimes the evidentiary material seem to implicate it in. I apply the term "micro", since each myth is but one of a series of others that collectively constitute the macro, or primary, false narrative the regime wishes to maintain. On aggregate, these numerous micro-myths are designed to serve this overriding "macro" narrative of the Assad regime—a narrative initiated by the regime as a propaganda of survival, intended to preserve itself and its monopoly on power.

Since micro-myths are formulated out of a response to audio-visual material implicating the regime in atrocities (evidentiary material), narrative strategies employed by a micro-myth "pusher" seem to be intended to direct public attention away from the evidentiary material. A pusher's narrative strategy may constitute the deflection of blame, the casting of doubt over the evidentiary material, or the shifting of discourse from the topic at hand towards a different subject, often including vocabulary and alternative theories intended to resonate with a specific target audience.

[42] A transcription (translated into English) of Bashar al Assad's address to the Syrian parliament on the 30th March 2011, in response to the outbreak of nationwide protests against his government: http://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/arab/docs/syria/bashar_assad_speech_110330.htm [Accessed 5 August 2019].

A video of Bashar al Assad's address to the Syrian parliament on the 30th March 2011, following the outbreak of nationwide protests against his government: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8P2kx-TvbU&amp=&list=PL_d1reqNAlzK2QCtw6V5vQvJg-4qHeGfS [Accessed 5 August 2019].

span a range of diverse conspiratorial narratives. These have included the conspiracy theory that alleged local armed rebel groups gassed their own communities and then blamed the regime for the attacks in order to provoke international military action against it[43]; to allegations that the "West" was "funding ISIS";[44] all the way to the defamatory campaign waged against the Syrian Civil Defence (a network of search and rescue teams known as the White Helmets, who operate in rebel-held areas) that alleged the organisation to be a "PR cover" for "terrorists".[45] In analysing these numerous myths that have been disseminated by the Assad regime and its cohort of international propagandists, a single commonality among them emerges: the absence of image. On aggregate, this absence of the images that ought to evidence the claims being made for each of these micro-myths, culminates in the overall absence of visual evidence to back up the regime's overarching narrative claim: the claim of a global conspiracy for "regime change". What remains is what I term the imagined event. On a macro-level, this is the imagined event of a global conspiracy for "regime change". On a micro-level, these are

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[43] The following three urls link to conspiracy theory articles claiming the Ghouta chemical attack to be a false flag operation. [Accessed: 9 September 2019]:

https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-ghouta-chemical-attacks-us-backed-false-flag-killing-children-to-justify-a-humanitarian-military-intervention/5351363

http://21stcenturywire.com/2017/04/06/mit-researcher-syria-wmd-facts-were-manufactured-to-fit-us-conclusion-for-ghouta-in-2013/

https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n08/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line

[44] The following urls link to a conspiracy theory articles about "West" creating/funding "ISIS". The first is from the Canadian-based outlet Globaresearch, whilst the second is from the Syrian Arab News Agency—Syria's state-owned news agency. [Accessed: 9 September 2019]:

https://www.globalresearch.ca/america-created-al-qaeda-and-the-isis-terror-group/5402881

http://sana.sy/en/?p=92812

[45] Below are links to Russia's state-owned media outlet RT and the Twitter account of the Russian embassy in the UK, both promoting the conspiracy theory of the Syrian Civil Defence (also known as the White Helmets) as being linked to Al Qaeda and radical Islamists. This is an example of how a micro-myth has been turned into a concerted disinformation campaign by the Russian state, in order to justify Moscow's targeting of the civilian rescue workers as part of a wider military strategy in support of the Assad regime. [Accessed: 9 September 2019]:

https://www.rt.com/news/381542-white-helmets-al-qaeda-members/

https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/836541463982923776?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.wired.com%2F2017%2F04%2Fwhite-helmets-conspiracy-theory%2F

the many imagined events (or micro-myths) peddled via Assad-friendly media outlets—

such as those claiming Western powers to be behind the financing of the Islamic State; or

those attempting to associate the Syrian Civil Defence with Salafi-Jihadist terrorism—that

collectively construct an imaginary landscape within which each micro-myth is formulated

to sustain Bashar al Assad's primary claim of the uprising against him being a conspiracy

instigated by outsiders.

In contrast to the thousands of hours of raw audio-visual material that has been produced

and distributed online by Syrian civil activists[46] since January 2011—alongside footage

shot by regime security personnel themselves—footage that evidences the regime's own

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[46] The following urls link to videos on Youtube that evidence mass protests against the Assad regime in Syria.
[Accessed: 9 September 2019]:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXfC3Ei575Q
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EU1jecnObw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hiqx7GpZoac
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZccyP2LKZs
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c8RpKcDNaI
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXszv5r92zY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPsWdGlyeSU
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyZW0_cOqF0
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK7qSP6J-xo
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-qDRkZ1354
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWL0FGodY24
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j1IiQLKtOs
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAumuuMDMT4
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUgA4_00MKY

Samples of videos evidencing the regime shooting at and beating protestors:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUsIFwQENiw
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TyQl7fTlFY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NfkXLGmdGM
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nx9SF0rx4c

Accessing the below video on 9th September 2019, I found out that Youtube has since terminated the account that published it. According to Youtube moderating instructions, Youtube users may report accounts or videos that are seen to violate the platform's community standards. One violation of these standards includes the showing of violence without educational or informational purposes.   It is unlikely that the account associated with the video would have been terminated by Youtube without it being reported by a user. Whilst difficult to determine the reasons for why Youtube chose to terminate the account, a possible theory put forward by human rights activists is that these accounts and videos are often reported by regime sympathisers or agents, who feel that the footage—or the Youtube accounts behind them—incriminates the regime in the committing of atrocity crimes. In this sense, a campaign of removing this online content could also constitute part of the regime's narrative campaign of denial and concealment—an attempt to erase the evidence of its culpability. [Accessed 9 September 2019]:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=562TZ8gFf2E

Disturbing, graphic content:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBXNfPsYsMk&bpctr=1512476776
As with the example of the previous link, the above video is no longer available due to its apparent violation of Youtube's terms of service. [Accessed 9 September 2019].

use of torture and murder of civilians as part of its campaign of extermination[47]—the disseminators of the Assadist narrative have failed to produce the audio-visual material to back up their conspiratorial allegations. Yet this absence of visual evidence has not prevented the regime's narrative from gaining traction among large swathes of societies around the world. The written word of journalists such as Alastair Crooke and Patrick Cockburn, and the spoken claims of obscure self-proclaimed journalists and investigators, such as Canadian blogger Eva Bartlett—who first appeared to a wider internet audience in December 2016 in a video featuring her sitting in front of United Nations wallpaper doing the regime's bidding—seem to have sufficed in popularising the regime's propaganda narrative among politically-engaged people in the Anglophone world. An example of this is illustrated by the phenomenon of the video of Eva Bartlett that went viral soon after its online release, snaking its way into Facebook newsfeeds and re-tweets that were shared across the social media sphere with the urgency of an exposé.

To be clear, what I describe to be the absence of image in the regime's propaganda narrative, is not an assertion that photographs or videos have not been used by Assad's propagandists (indeed, pro-regime disinformation has made frequent use of appropriating Syrian activist visual content and re-narrating and re-labelling the story behind the images in order to recast victims of the regime as victims of anti-regime "terrorists"). Rather, the absence of image denotes the intention that lies behind the Assadist propaganda campaign: for it has been a campaign held together by a strategy of rumour-making and doubt, all sustained by the spoken and literary, and crucially *non*-visual effort of a few key influencers from both the obscure fringes of populist conspiracy outlets, as well as from

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[47] The following urls link to found video footage allegedly filmed by Syrian regime army and security personnel. The material reveals regime troops humiliating, torturing, murdering and desecrating corpses of civilians. [Accessed 8 September 2019]:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sez3py768c&t=10s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFIgh_uL4NQ
https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=c16_1381861144
https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=573_1333927523 (video no longer available) [Accessed 8 September 2019].
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zg1ocFDno6k&list=PL5ehmny4ctEqKwK8b5_qQjIHCUNsWF5GO

those of supposedly more credible journalistic and intellectual statuses, such as Patrick Cockburn, Seymour Hersh, John Pilger or Noam Chomsky:[48] a coterie of esteemed profiles in the field of political theory and conflict analysis, with a considerable public following. It is with the support, and benefit-of-a-doubt, provided specifically by this latter group of high-status commentators, that the potential value of visual evidence starts to erode, as it becomes seemingly unnecessary in the face of these influential voices. The reputable status and wide readership of the Guardian newspaper, when provided as a platform to a non-Syrian—and therefore implicitly non-aligned—Alastair Crooke and his article *The Great Game* of Autumn 2011, provided the regime's propaganda narrative with its first entry into the realm of mainstream opinion-making.   The weight carried by the Guardian's status seemed to allow this article to eclipse the hundreds of videos that had already emerged from Syria earlier that year—videos that had evidenced the regime's security forces gunning down civilian protesters, and the torturing of countless civilians to death by regime personnel. The word of a non-Syrian commentator published in one of the UK's most widely-read broadsheets seemed to challenge the audio-visual material that evidenced Assad's crimes—material that had already become readily accessible online via video-streaming platforms and countless international news outlets. The evidentiary 'image', so to speak, seemed unnecessary when Crooke, and later Cockburn,

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[48] In the below video, Noam Chomsky acknowledges the Assad regime's brutality, but makes the case that the armed opposition to it is of an equally brutal character. He therefore warns against the idea of any outside power intervening militarily to stop the Assad regime, maintaining that it would result in the empowerment of the brutal opposition forces. This argument implies that the rise of the most "murderous" opposition, as Chomsky calls them—referencing Al Qaeda and the Islamic State—is an inevitable outcome. The argument also implies that the status-quo of the regime continuing to be the dominant power, is therefore preferable to the speculated scenario of an Al Qaeda/ISIS takeover. Although not ostensibly supportive of Assad, Chomsky's argument plays into the regime's official narrative of events, whereby the conflict is presented as that of Assad vs terrorists/Islamists.   A second argument Chomsky poses against intervening against the regime, is based on his doubt that military intervention by foreign powers is ever genuinely carried out for humanitarian purposes.

Although not stated, both of Chomsky's anti-intervention arguments imply that the most preferable policy position to take is that of international disengagement—a policy that Syrian democrats and human rights activists view as one that defaults to allowing Assad and his allies to continue their campaign of genocide. Whilst Chomsky's ideas are debatable, his public profile as a respected political thinker and the international influence he commands, risks giving credence to the Assad regime's oversimplified binary narratives—Assad vs terrorists / Assad vs imperialists—narratives that continue to fuel the arguments behind the regime's international populist allies on the far Right and the authoritarian Left:

57m40s=t&be.youtu=feature&JFiCg67cDTs=v?watch/com.youtube.www//:https [Accessed 9 September 2019].

made the case for the regime's continued survival—and therefore, implicitly, for its use of force—in the face of what they argued was an international conspiracy for "regime change" that would only yield chaos and regional instability. If the regime's propaganda narrative had already been devised and inaugurated in Assad's speech to the Syrian parliament on 30th March 2011, the visual evidence of the regime-alleged international "plot", that spoke of "armed gangs" and local rebels gassing their own neighbourhoods, wasn't anywhere to be seen. Yet the ongoing literary and verbal justifications that continued to bestowed upon the regime, from a handful of opinion-makers and their devotees, seems to have been a sufficient strategy for sustaining its narrative in popular lay discourse without the need for evidentiary images. So long as there were influential analysts willing and able to defend the regime's case in the most widely-read publications in the Anglophone press, so long did material visualisations remain unnecessary. The "truth" of the event was revealed in the written word, and, crucially, in the absence of image. The event became known, not by virtue of the visuals from activist videos on Youtube, but by the formulation of images in the collective imagination of Crooke and Cockburn's readers. Assad's imagined event had been implanted into the consciousness of a portion of the Anglophone world.

But the regime's imagined event was not merely formulated by an absence of the evidentiary image. The intention to make absent the other image—those images evidencing the regime's crimes—was also a policy pursued as part of the Assadist propaganda campaign. Complementing the regime's narrative component of genocide— the narrative being sowed into lay opinion by political commentators with the intention of nurturing public approval of the regime's lethal campaign of suppression—online propagandists and message board trolls initiated a further campaign of political and social undermining, working with the intention to slowly diminish and gradually stamp out the evidentiary value of activist video and photographic images that had sought to

expose the regime's crimes. In tandem with the phenomenon of high status commentators being offered platforms on widely-read news publications, enabling them to implant the regime's narrative into mainstream discourse, an electronic army of pro-Assad trolls also came out in force and flooded online message boards and comments sections of news media websites with endless streams of posts that aimed to push the regime's narrative into the political debate.[49] As investigative journalist Mike Hind describes it, internet trolls work to create "the impression of a false social consensus" (2017), a phenomenon he recognises as "astroturfing":[50]

> That's why they flood the online world…because anybody happening along to see that—and that includes politicians, and policy-makers, and other journalists—they want them to believe that this is the social consensus. That's what they're manufacturing. It's entirely manufacturing a false social consensus.

It was not enough for the Assadist propaganda arm that respected journalists were upholding its argument in widely-read publications. The formulation of an imagined event required a further policy of aggressively diminishing the value of those images exposing the regime's crimes: a policy of defaming the reputation of Syria's democratic opposition to the extent that any video or photographic images associated with them would be deemed untrustworthy and misleading—a conscious campaign to bring the activist's

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[49] The comments section underneath the following Guardian article on Syria reveals how a pro-Assad and pro-Putin troll army are able to dominate the discussion and outnumber others on a free comment space on one of the UK's most widely-read publications: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/28/the-guardian-view-on-syria-putin-tests-the-west#comments [Accessed 9 September 2019].

[50] According to Rosemarie Ostler's *Slinging Mud: Rude Nicknames, Scurrilous Slogans, and Insulting Slang from Two Centuries of American Politics* (2011) Astroturfing is a word that "describes expressions of voter opinion that critics suspect are being deliberately orchestrated". In other words, Astroturfing is a political term given to a campaign that seeks to create the impression of a vastly popular social consensus when no such consensus exists. Ostler states that an early mention of the term appeared in a Washington Post article on the 7th August 1985, in which U.S. Senator Llyod Bentsen is quoted as stating "'A fellow from Texas can tell the difference between grass roots and Astro Turf'" when commenting on a "mountain of cards and letters". "'This is generated mail'". This quote reveals that the etymology of term stems from a playful analogy that likened the distinction between grassroots political movements and campaigns designed to give the impression of a grassroots movement to that of natural grass on a lawn to its synthetically-produced substitute astroturf.

evidentiary images into a state of social stigmatisation that would effectively render the visual material "absent".

As can be read in the many comments found underneath activist videos on Youtube and other visual media-sharing platforms streaming activist material, the Assadist attempt to fabricate the impression of a social consensus in line with the regime's politics has included the strategy of casting doubt over the authenticity of the activist video content— a strategy intended to ultimately eradicate the "image" that these videos collectively communicate; a strategy designed to gloss over the regime's malign reputation by way of de-valuing and dismissing the video content to the point that no activist video is able to escape the public associating them with fakery and propaganda for "regime change" "imperialism" or "Jihadi" terrorism. Indeed, upon a cursory observation of the comments sections underneath numerous activist Youtube and Twitter accounts, or even third party outlets providing a platform to Syrian democrat footage, it becomes noticeable that an Assadist online rumour-mill is continuously sustained by an electronic army of pro-regime internet trolls that claim all the activist video and photographic material to be fabricated propaganda designed to dupe and mislead online viewers into supporting a take-over by
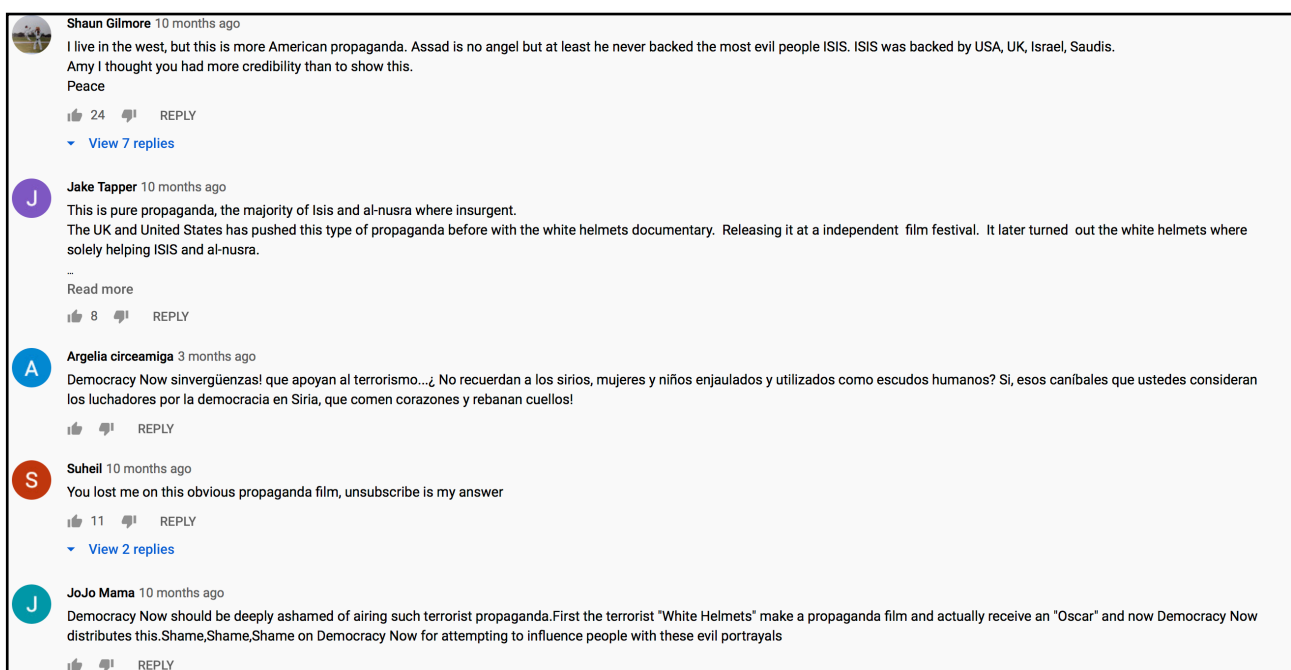
(Above). Screen grab showing pro-Assad trolls overtaking the comments section underneath a *Democracy Now!* video featuring Syrian filmmaker Waad Al-Kateab on Youtube.

radical Islamists, all orchestrated by an American-Saudi-Zionist regime change project against the Assad government.[51]

As mentioned by investigative journalist Mark Hind once again, trolls pay particular attention to occupying the comments sections of platforms with large audiences. While the vast majority of videos uploaded to Syrian on-the-ground media channels on Youtube actually reveal to have little to no comments underneath them (such as those published on the activist-run Shaam News Network or Aleppo Media Centre) a cursory survey of the discussion threads provided on internationally-renowned media outlets such as the Guardian newspaper, or on the Twitter accounts of human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, reveal the propaganda trolls have prioritised these platforms for their commentary.[52] It is specifically the case when these various outlets use footage

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[51] A glaring example of a pro-regime troll effort against Syrian activist filmmakers is seen in the following url, that links to a Youtube video of Syrian filmmaker Waad Al-Kateab and her husband Dr. Hamza, who talk about their film *For Sama* (2019)—which won the Golden Eye award for best documentary at the 2019 Cannes film festival—with Democracy Now host Amy Goodman. A perusal of the comments section under the video reveals a canvasing of over a hundred comments by anonymous posters smearing the filmmakers as being propagandists for Al-Qaeda; being funded by the US, UK and Saudi Arabia in order to produce a movie to agitate for regime change; and of being "warmongers". Among these, a number of comments make laudatory references to US Democratic Party politician Tulsi Gabbard for her promotion of pro-Assad conspiracy theories alleging the USA have been funding Al-Qaeda in Syria in order to bring about regime change: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0Gf-MuG4n0 [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Another common example of internet trolls working to tarnish the reputation of Syrian activists is displayed via the following url, where a large portion of supposed "user" reviews for the Netflix-produced documentary *The White Helmets* (2015), claim the documentary to be an Al-Qaeda propaganda film financed by Hollywood: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6073176/reviews . It should be noted that the Syrian Civil Defence (aka White Helmets) have habitually documented their search and rescue operations by video recordings, with this film being the first long-form documentary entirely shot by the humanitarian organisation's in-house videography team. [Accessed 9 September 2019].

A similar troll campaign is found in the online comments section under this Guardian review of the second White Helmets documentary *Last Men in Aleppo* (2017). This time the focus of the trolls is not on the film itself, but rather on pushing the pro-Assad narrative surrounding the battle of Aleppo. However, the White Helmets are repeatedly referred to as being in league with Al-Qaeda. This claim serves an implicit dismissal of the film and its filmmakers—the White Helmets' in-house videography team: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/24/last-men-in-aleppo-review-sundance-film-festival-white-helmets-syria#comments [Accessed 9 September 2019].

In a smaller-scale example, the following url links to a few comments under a Youtube video by activist channel Shaam News. In it, a troll claims that the victims in the video are attempting to frame the regime for a chemical weapons attack, whilst another refers to the video as "fake" with "horrible acting": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cB6kh8jjaKY [Accessed 9 September 2019].

[52] The following url links to Amnesty International's Tweet following their response to the Assad regime and Russia's aerial attacks against civilians in Idlib in January 2018. An aggressive campaign of pro-Assad trolls overran the thread, with the overriding allegation being that Amnesty International was promoting the propaganda of Al-Qaeda, ISIS, "jihadis", "head-choppers", and the White Helmets who—as usual for the trolls—were referred to as being in-league with terrorists. Many of these comments have since been deleted, but some are still visible: https://twitter.com/amnesty/status/951841606046543872 [Accessed 9 September 2019].

originating from the activist-run sources that the content being used has regularly been dismissed by online trolls. The trolls' preference of tarnishing the reputation of activists on the discussion threads of world-famous news outlets and international organisations rather than on the original activist channels from where the content was initially uploaded, is likely due to the trolls' desired intention to defame the activists in front of an initially non-aligned audience constituting a larger percentage of US and British nationals. The targeting of this particular audience demographic may be understood as a calculated intention for a gradual nurturing of a wide-spread public sentiment that would ultimately influence the policies of the citizens' respected governments with regards to Syria.

A series of micro-myths for every category of online video published since the early stages of the civil uprising have been repeatedly deployed by the troll armies. One such myth peddled during those early stages and which continues to be pushed to this day is the assertion that all the footage revealing mass protests against the regime were staged events in which demonstrators were "paid" to participate;[53] another myth frequently claimed is that aftermath footage and photographs of regime-perpetrated atrocities and its lethal responses to the civil uprising were actually showing the aftermath of crimes committed by the alleged "armed gangs" or operatives under orders of the CIA or, as declared by the notorious pro-Assad vlogger and Tweeter, Syrian Girl, by British Intelligence;[54] when footage emerged revealing regime security personnel in the act of torture and murder—footage that had been shot by regime forces themselves—the pro-regime trolls maintained that the acts were either justified by virtue of the victims being "terrorists", or claimed that the footage had actually shown opposition groups torturing

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[53] A comment left underneath the following video questions how many protesters are being paid: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIefHVixoOI [Accessed 9 September 2019].

[54] Syrian Girl's Twitter account claims the Houla massacre of 2012, which implicated the regime, was carried out by Al Qaeda under guidance of British intelligence: https://twitter.com/Partisangirl/status/237153714794815488 [Accessed 9 September 2019].

civilians.[55] (This latter example of the tactic of re-interpreting atrocity footage through the posting of comments on social-media threads echoes a strategy that has been applied proactively by the regime via its state-run media outlets, as well as by its more high-profile propagandists, whereby content revealing the aftermath of regime-committed atrocity crimes have been appropriated for use on their own online platforms: a regime attempt to illustrate its own narrative of an imperialist plot through the recasting of its victims as victims of the imagined conspiracy).[56] A further myth included the assertion that videos of anti-regime protests or those revealing the regime's forces engaged in violence against protesters was actually material originating from Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia or Yemen.[57] In all cases, the intended outcome of the troll's micro-myth strategy, as a supplement to the literary and verbal analyses emanating from regime propagandists

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[55] Comments under the following video of regime security personnel violently beating a young man, featured on the International Business Times' Youtube account, include a variety of posts that attempt to absolve the regime of wrong-doing, including statements that the victim deserved the torture because he was a "terrorist", to those alleging the torturers to be men from the opposition Free Syrian Army who had put on regime uniforms: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y0iGJZ0wW4 [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Comments under this other video allegedly showing regime soldiers beating a victim, also claim that the torturers are the opposition Free Syrian Army: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx-1NK2lCuM [Accessed 9 September 2019].

[56] The following url links to a report that was originally broadcast on Syrian state-affiliated TV broadcaster Addouniya. In the report, corpses and victims of the Daraya massacre— a massacre that Syrian civil activists allege was perpetrated by the regime—are recast as victims of "armed gangs" to fit the regime's narrative. The pro-regime reporter provides a walking tour of bloodied and emaciated corpses before conducting interviews with injured survivors, including speaking to two children who are asked to speak on camera whilst reclining next to their dead mother in the back of a truck. The edit is accompanied by dramatic background music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRBnM8tmMuw&fbclid=IwAR1KUA2rSN_kJJqhcHIIN-kwslOzUNf-qYawD6YdQoK985gq7zu-r7CJTKc
A version without English subtitles can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GNEihwHkf8 [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Below are examples of pro-regime online platforms recasting the Houla massacre as an atrocity committed by anti-regime forces:

From Iran's state-own media outlet Press TV, and published on the Globalresearch Youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFTnNt42QKk [Accessed 9 September 2019].

From the Youtube channel of Infowars founder Alex Jones:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fj1YTxHaDmk (This video is no longer online. In Spring 2019, Youtube removed most or all of Alex Jones' video content) [Accessed 9 September 2019].

[57] Comments under this video of an anti-regime protest held in the Syrian city of Hama in 2011 claim that the video was from a protest in Yemen: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb5YIg-vyOE [Accessed 9 September 2019].

such as Eva Bartlett or more high profile figures such as Seymour Hersh[58] and Patrick Cockburn, was to undermine the trustworthiness and credibility of the activist provenance behind the evidentiary images. In this sense, the regime's policy towards the activist image-based material can be viewed as a bracketed attack: by asserting the falseness of the activist images on one side, the reputation of the Syrian activists responsible for the contents' production and dissemination becomes contaminated with a myriad of negative associations; in turn, once the political and social credibility of the activists reaches a point of wide-spread socially-consensual mistrust, public opinion towards any images that may reveal damning evidence against the regime, would have its authenticity doubted, questioned and even dismissed or ignored by members of the public or anyone with potential to influence their own government's Syria-related policies.

The regime's treatment of evidentiary images therefore reveals the essence of its policy: to render the image absent. The regime has no evidentiary images to back-up its own conspiracy narrative, and therefore must resort to fostering a social and consensual negation of activist-owned images, so as to render those images too as effectively absent.

At this point, the reader of this thesis may like to jump to the practice review section of this document and locate chapters **4.3** and **4.9** which offer conceptual analyses of my films *Testimony of a Former Detainee* (page 125), and *The Propagandist* (page 144). Both films respond to the phenomenon of the regime's absent image tactic by challenging it via the strategies I have elaborated on thus far. A viewing of both these films may also be suitable, either preceding, during or following the reading of those chapters. However, it

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[58] In a June 2017 article, Elliot Higgins (of the online investigative website Bellingcat) provides a summary of Hersh's journalism on two of the Syrian chemical weapons attacks. He states: "Hersh has presented…counter-narrative[s] based on a handful of anonymous sources. In his lengthy articles for the London Review of Books, "Whose sarin?" and "The Red Line and the Rat Line", Hersh made the case that the August 21st 2013 Sarin attack in Damascus was in fact a false flag attack intended to draw the US into the conflict with Syria. This claim fell apart under real scrutiny, and relied heavily on ignoring much of the evidence around the attacks, an ignorance of the complexities of producing and transporting Sarin, and a lack of understanding about facts firmly established about the attacks." (Higgins: 2017).

is by no means necessary to jump to those sections at this moment. An understanding of this research's methodology is possible in continuing to read this document chronologically, and therefore turning to the next chapter and reading on.

2.13   imposed invisibility

This ongoing audio-visual activism by Syrian democrats has, by the observation of Syrian activists themselves, in most cases, failed to move governments around the world to take action to stop the mass atrocities committed by the regime and its allies.[59] As expressed by the Beirut-based Syrian filmmaking collective Bidayyat, "nothing of the kind happened. The crime was too great to be checked by mere images." Exiled and refugee activists acknowledge that despite the success of Syrians in bringing this audio-visual evidence to the outside world, they have failed with regards to influencing foreign governments to formulate policies for civilian protection in Syria. This thesis argues that a factor which has significantly influenced this policy of inaction is the popularity of a discourse that renders Syrian civilians as non-existent.   As pointed out by Syrian revolutionary intellectual Yassin al Haj Saleh (2014),

> Syria and the region have always been defined in geopolitical terms. This… makes us invisible. We are the invisible subaltern in the most internationalized region on this planet. What is seen of our countries from the metropolitan capitals is Bashar Assad, his "rose in the desert" (his wife Asma), and their likes- the power and money elite- but not the people, not women and men struggling for a better life.

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[59] Whilst there has been the establishment of legal initiatives to try those responsible for atrocities and the gravest human rights violations in the Syrian conflict—such as the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM); the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry (CoI) on the Syrian Arab Republic; as well as multinational funding to a number of Syrian civil society groups and NGO's, most notably the Violations Documentation Centre and the search and rescue organisation Syrian Civil Defence—military action taken by states to prevent or stop the Assad regime and its allies from committing atrocities against civilians has been markedly absent. The exception to this was the US response to the regime's use of chemical weapons in April 2017, followed by a joint US-British and French launch of precision missile strikes against the regime's chemical facilities in April 2018. In all cases, the regime and its allies have not been stopped in their campaign to exterminate all civilians believed to be oppositional to its rule.

According to Saleh, this discourse of imposed invisibility constitutes a dominant narrative in the Western world with regards to Syria—one that he refers to as the "Western mainstream" (2017). Ignoring the people does not just seem to be the angle of commentary dominant among policy circles of UN security council permanent member states,[60] but crucially constitutes a wide-reaching general attitude among popular lay opinion in societies outside the Arab world (Ibid.)—a popular attitude that has most likely been nurtured by the conspiracy theory-wielding entities aligned or directly connected to the propaganda arm of the Assad regime and its international allies. Examples of this are seen in a plethora of well-known international TV broadcasters and lesser-known online news outlets all connected on some level to the Russian and Iranian governments,[61] as well as through a network of journalists, political figures, extremist and fringe populist parties and commentators all politically aligned to the Assad dictatorship and the Russian regime. Saleh expresses an acute awareness of why this narrative strategy is being employed, recognising it as an attempt to "insist" upon keeping Syrians invisible. He refers to it as an "approach that insists on not seeing us as individuals and collective actors". Saleh understands this insistent narrative as being one and the same as the act of the regime killing civilians, stating that Syrians "are being killed because they revolted, and they are being punished for their insistence on visibility by being forgotten again" (2014).

Parallels to Saleh's observations are to be found in Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* in which she elaborates on the processes by which certain lives that are

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[60] The United Nations Security Council permanent member states are China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA.

[61] Russian and Iranian state-run broadcasters include RT, In the Now, Sputnik and Press TV. Online pro-regime outlets include Infowars, Mint Press, Globalresearch, Consortium News, 21st Century Wire and Al Masdar News. Pro-regime publicists include Vanessa Beeley, Eva Bartlett, Tim Anderson, Rania Khalek, Max Blumenthal and the vlogger Syrian Girl. Pro-Assad political figures include George Galloway, UK Labour Party MP Chris Williamson, the UK's House of Lords' Baroness Cox, US Democrat party politician Tulsi Gabbard, US Green Party figure Jill Stein, Alt-Right movement founder Richard Spencer and former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke; while pro-regime political groups range from the Communist Party of Great Britain Marxist Leninist, to far right and anti-immigrant organisations such as the BNP, UKIP, Britain First, Greece's Golden Dawn, Italy's Forza Nuova and Casa Pound, Poland's National Rebirth and France's Front National.

targeted by killing or violence, seem to be ignored—exempt from society's grieving. She maintains that those with the power to shape the trajectory of dominant societal discourses regarding a given context of violence and killing, will often not recognise those victimised lives as existent in the first place, arguing that the narratives put forward by influential commentators often serve to omit those lives from the frames formulated in their discourse: "If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense" (Butler:2009:1). Earlier observations of negatory practices are analysed in Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) where she recounts an event that saw anti-abortion protestors using performance and placards imprinted with the image of a foetus as a means of foregrounding their own anti-abortion narrative while simultaneously rendering invisible the carrier of the foetus as she entered the hospital:

> In making the fetus the focus of the visible spectacle of the demonstrations, Operation Rescue subtly erases the pregnant woman herself. Detached from the mother, the image of the fetus is rendered as utterly alone and heartbreakingly innocent. Held aloft on sign posts outside of abortion clinics during Operation Rescue's demonstrations, the fetal image functions like a flag, a banner under which protecting "rescuers" march off to prevent the "slaughter of the innocent." But what happens, as in most wars, is a slaughter of a different order…Cropped out of the picture, the pregnant woman's life and reasoning are rendered both invisible and irrelevant… This literal ignore/ance of the pregnant woman limits sympathy for her situation and represses ethical uncertainty about her liberty.

The foregrounding of ideological narratives by a politicised but "foreign" demographic that pushes these narratives towards the status of populist dominance within a given society, whilst denying the agency and existence of the "natives"—the individuals directly implicated in and affected by the issues being tokenised, as exampled in Phelan's

description—has and continues to be a subject of frustration and antagonism for Syrian democrats. Exiled activist Loubna Mrié (from Syria's Alawite sect) identifies a popular Leftist narrative that seems to predominate in Western societies where she describes many in this demographic as caring "much more about a future, theoretical US-western-oriented policy change on Syria - such as some kind of "safe zone" - rather than about the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who are being killed right now, the majority by the combined air forces of Damascus and Moscow" (2016). Yassin al-Haj Saleh meanwhile categorises the mainstream international narratives on Syria into three areas, all of which seem to "tokenise" topics such as "refugees", "terrorism" or "security" whilst "overlooking the political and social dimensions of our struggles. These three discourses have one thing in common: "they are depopulated (Kelly Grotke), devoid of people, individuals, or groups. They are devoid of a sense of social life, of what people live and dream" (2017).

It is my assertion that these discourses of imposed invisibility, or an imposed "depopulation" as exemplified above, have been strategically nurtured by the Assad regime and its allies as the "narrative component" of a genocide campaign they seek to internationalise.[62] Those participant in the process of perpetuating these narratives

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[62] According to the Assad dictatorship's propaganda narrative, all its opponents are 'Islamist' 'terrorists'. While most governments around the world do not nominally share the regime's interpretation of its opponents (with the exception of Russia and Iran), the anti-terror foreign policies employed by numerous governments with regards to Syria, seem to have only targeted militant groups opposed to the Assad regime, whilst leaving the Assad dictatorship outside the terrorist designation. The result of these policies has allowed the regime and its foreign backers to continue their campaign of extermination without facing accountability (the exception to this is Israel's repeated air strikes against Iranian military assets in Syria and Iraq). Whilst many states around the world acknowledge that civilians are threatened by the regime and its foreign allies, this awareness has not factored into the formulation of their anti-terror military operations in Syria. The failure and reluctance of governments around the world to protect those Syrians endangered by the Assad regime within Syria's borders, is supplemented with the populist stigmatisation of Syrian refugees outside of the country. In Europe this sentiment is manifested in a rising trend of expressed anti-Muslim rhetoric by certain political parties and sympathetic media outlets. Expressions of this sentiment include the dehumanisation of refugees in tabloid and populist press, Donald Trump's "Muslim ban" and the increased popularisation of far right parties across the continent—all galvanised in the wake of what the UNHCR has referred to as the largest refugee exodus since the second world war. Meanwhile, politicians and political figures in the Western world who *do* share the regime's attitude to its opponents—such as US Democrat Tulsi Gabbard, George Galloway, Seamus Milne (who is Director of Communications and Strategy for the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership), Baroness Cox (of the UK House of Lords) and British Labour MP Chris Williamson—testify to the potential of pro-regime figures reaching the highest positions of power and influence in their respective nations. In this sense, the Assad regime has managed to export the dehumanisation of his opponents into the Western world: Syrians are being hunted down and killed in their own country, and are being reduced to "Muslims" "terrorists" and "rape-fugees" when attempting to flee their homeland.

therefore become implicated in this facet of genocide. It is this "narrative component" of

genocide that the practice of this research project strives to destabilise.

3.

وجود

In this chapter, I will introduce my concept of wujoud via initially providing an interpretive analysis of the context of the Assad regime's repression of the Syrian civil uprising.

In an earlier chapter of this thesis entitled *The Syrian civil uprising and the regime's response* (pages 39-41), I analysed the Assad regime's violent reaction to two vigils that did not make any mention of the Syrian government. When the Ba'ath party came to power via a military coup in 1963, an Emergency Law was put into effect which has since given "untrammelled powers to the [regime's] security agencies" (George: 2003: 12). According to George, "Anyone whose loyalty [to the regime] is suspect may be arrested, interrogated and detained on the flimsiest of pretexts, with no recourse to legal representation and with no avenue of appeal or complaint" (2003:12). On therefore considering the regime's response towards these early public events, it can be reasonably concluded that a candle-lit gathering in Syria need not even make mention of the Assad regime in order for its participants to be violently assaulted by police or government-sanctioned "baltajiyeh" (البلطجية / thugs). Writing for Time magazine in April 2011, Rania Abouzeid states:

> Syria's emergency law enshrines the autocratic nature of the Assad dynasty's rule. It restricts public gatherings and the free movement of individuals, it allows government agents to arrest "suspects or people who threaten security," it authorizes the monitoring of personal communications and it legalizes media censorship.

The restricting, or the outright prohibiting, of public gatherings by decree of Syria's emergency law, is a crucial factor in understanding the level of obsessive paranoia and the addiction to control that characterises the Assad government. In theory, a protest in Syria needs neither placards nor chants for it to provoke the wrath of the state. The Syrian regime's prohibition of public gatherings makes the very act of a small group standing in the centre of a town square, in silence, a suspicious act: an act monitored under the surveillance of Syria's ubiquitous mukhabarat (مخابرات / secret police) and its security apparatus. When I asked exiled activist Yazan Douedari how the regime would view the act of a group of people standing silently in a town square in regime-controlled Syria, with neither placards, nor flags, he responded that the regime "would see it as treason and terrorism, and they [regime forces] would shoot people. Definitely they would do that. I'm sure of it." Activist Susan Khairallah (not her real name) adds:

> [I]n the universities, there were a lot of, like, silent protests. Only people standing and saying nothing. And they have been targeted. Maybe they will not be targeted immediately. But the mukhabarat will come later and ask for this one, and this one, and this one, because they saw the face, because they know that this person…[was] there, and they will do something about it. So Assad regime now…if there is a group of twenty people standing in a very well-known square—doing even nothing—it is a threat. And you should expect that maybe they will come after you.

But the regime's perception of what constitutes a physical act of publicly-staged defiance goes beyond the markers of a clearly-performed silent protest when one considers the Emergency Law's detailing of how many people are legally permitted to gather in public at a given place and time. Douedari states "I think, you're allowed to be together up to two people… If it's three, they can arrest you. It's a law."; "To be a group…to be more than one person...it is defiance" (2018).

In this sense, the regime's intolerance of public expression can be considered as beginning with its policy of treating as suspicious the very "being" of three individuals standing in a public space. To physically assume a position of statuesque stillness, as part of a gathering of individuals in a public square, is by definition to fall foul of public order and the law, as defined by the Assadist state. This act, that is by its nature materialised through the physical presence of the individuals carrying out the action, becomes a form of corporeal evidence—an evidence that proves the existence of a civil opposition to the state, and one that challenges the state's monopoly of control over public space and national discourse. Arguably, it may have been easier for the Assad dictatorship to dismiss anonymous anti-regime posts on social media, so long as those sentiments had remained confined to a virtual online world that could be countered by the regime's own narratives. But it was the physical presence of a potential opposition—the embodied manifestation of an opposition in a gradually-growing mobilisation, that was getting ready to challenge the regime's monopoly on power—that shook the until-then self-perceived stability of the Assad government and its self-declared popularity.[63]

This thesis therefore argues that it is the physical being/existence, and specifically the *evidence* of this being—the corporeal evidence of a Syrian opposition—that constitutes the greatest threat to the Assad regime's self-image, and by trajectory, its grip on power. And it is the actions of deterrence and intimidation committed by the regime against those early dissenters that testifies to its deeply entrenched fear of having its self-declared image of mass popularity and supposed immunity to revolt exposed as hollow posturing. In the face of a physically-existent opposition—one that has been evidenced by the protesters' own bodies as they stood in the streets of Damascus, Dara'a or Homs

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[63] In a January 2011 interview with the Wall Street Journal, Bashar al Assad declared that Syria was "immune" from the Arab Spring protests that were then transpiring in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894 [Accessed 17 September 2019].

in defiance of the state's Emergency Law—the regime first sought to silence and disperse the protesters. However, the persistence and growth of the peoples' protest movement, along with an increased audio-visual documentation, which served to create an evidentiary legacy of their physical presence and existence of their then-growing numbers, provoked the regime to shift its policy of concealing the dissenting corpus, towards a policy of exterminating the people that embodied it. As noted by Douedari:

> At the beginning…[the regime] tried to end our existence by claiming that we didn't exist… using denial. Denial. Like, "That's that. There's no opposition. No one's opposing me. All these videos are not real…". That sort of stuff. [I]n the second stage, he resorted to arrests…to disappearing us from society. Distancing us from society and hiding us in his dungeons. In the third stage he resorted to physical killings. He started to kill us in order to end our existence.

It is in this context from which I conceptualise my methodology. I call it *wujoud.* In Arabic, wujoud (وجود) is a noun meaning: existence, being, or presence. In day-to-day usage, its adjective form—mawjoud (موجود)—is used to state whether or not someone is physically present at a given place at a given time. It is also used to denote someone or something's existence, in the abstract, such as an idea, a movement, a trend, phenomena, a belief, a settlement, colony or community. But my usage of *wujoud* in this thesis transgresses this day-to-day meaning. I conceptualise the term wujoud as one that takes on a deeply political significance in the context of genocide. In essence, it can be defined as follows: in the context of genocide, whereby the genocidaire's intent is to eradicate the existence of a targeted group, the very existence of that targeted group becomes an act (or state) of resistance.

The regime's desire to render invisible/non-existent any presence of a democratic opposition—even one manifested solely in standing silently in a public square—testifies

to the threat that the regime perceives in the existence of a democratic opposition. But the regime's fear is not exclusively triggered by the physical existence of this democracy movement. It is also a fear of the movement's existence being *evidenced* to the outside world, and to other Syrians who would be inspired to become an active part of it. This explains the motivation behind the regime's policy of attempting to "disappear" the early protesting groups (as mentioned by Douedari) as well as its construction of a narrative intended for global consumption—one designed to deny the existence of a homegrown democracy movement.

What the regime fears is therefore dual: a fear of the existence of a democratic opposition, and a fear of this existence being evidenced to the outside world. It is a fear that can be described as bipartite in nature. This consideration of the regime's bipartite fear not only aids an understanding of the regime's methodology for genocide, but also provides the grounds of rationale behind why wujoud (as a resistance) is manifested as it is via the intermedial strategies I have undertaken for the practice component in this project.

If the regime's campaign of extermination is motivated by this bipartite fear, then a response designed to resist the regime's campaign might require strategies that address it. Should resistance to the regime's intent also be formulated out of a bipartite concept? I propose that it could be. If the regime's intent to destroy is, at its core, triggered by a fear of the existence of a democratic opposition, then the first component of resistance to genocide, as I have already conceptualised, is existence. This is, as I have mentioned, the essence of wujoud. So long as one thinks thoughts that are in opposition to the regime, so long will one, by their very existence, embody resistance to the regime's genocidal intent. However, this state of "being", is initially not enough to provoke the regime's lethal response. This is because it is initially a state of being that has not yet

been made public.   It has not yet been evidenced as existing corporeally.   It is an embodied state of resistance without a public presence.   A Syrian-based democratic opposition without evidence of its physical existence is of less concern to the regime, for as stated earlier, anti-regime comments left anonymously on social media can always be countered by equally anonymous pro-regime narratives.   To an extent then, the absence of evidence amounts to a state of de facto non-existence.   It is only with the addition of the second component of this resistance hypothesis that the concept of wujoud begins to take shape.   This second component is the evidence—the act of evidencing one's own being; the act of making oneself "existent" in the public realm, in whatever form it may be manifested.   If all it takes to unleash the censorship and lethal reaction of the regime is for someone to just "be", and to evidence their being, at a certain place and time, then the concept of wujoud is materialised. It becomes a praxis of resistance.

Wujoud can therefore be understood as an ethos—one that is embodied in the actions of every revolutionary Syrian's struggle for visibility, in the face of the regime's imposed narrative of invisibility and erasure. Actions, protests and artworks that make use of the physical, audio-visual or emotional presence of the group being singled out and targeted in a campaign of genocide, all constitute a resistance that is driven by this wujoud ethos. This includes myself with regards to how I approach and rationalise the methods used to create the intermedial works that form part of this research.

But this dual hypothesis of resistance might also be better elucidated when considered as a process of revolution.   That is to say revolution in the literal sense, of a circular movement that begins at one position and ends up at the same position but with an altered state by virtue of the revolutionary movement. What I mean by this metaphor with regards to conceptualising resistance to genocide in Syria is the following: once the existence of a democratic opposition becomes known, the first component in this

hypothesised barpartite of resistance—"existence"—is an existence that becomes threatening with the second component of this resistance: the act of evidencing. Once this political act is done, the status of "existence" defaults into a status of resistance. It is in this sense that wujoud could be thought of as a resistance that moves in a circular motion. It is the movement from a status of "being" that is publicly unknown, to a status of "being" that becomes public, as a consequence of a political act. The return to a state of being, post-political act, is when the state of being becomes political in itself—in other words, existence defaulting to resistance. In this way, wujoud is revolution embodied, in the political and metaphorical sense (both of which here become one and the same). This is because to exist as someone from a community known to be oppositional, is what the regime does not want. For Syrian democracy activists, resistance is thus an embodied state of being precisely because their existence stands contrary to the regime's intention to erase it from history.

Wujoud therefore also ends up being a framework of analysis through which I attempt to make sense of how the process of genocide functions in the Syrian context—with a particular emphasis on its narrative component—and what may constitute effective strategies of sabotaging it.

3.1   wujoud by default

Having established wujoud as an internalised and embodied revolutionary state, I would here like to expand on the concept of wujoud being a state of resistance by default. To do so, I here apply this idea to a specific scenario.

A wujoud that resists and undermines the regime's genocidal intent, is sometimes unwittingly instigated by the regime's forces themselves when they carry out the acts of killing as part of the genocide process. This happens for instance, when we engage with

video or photographic documentation that reveals the corpses of civil activists that have been tortured and murdered by the regime's militias. Often, this is material that had been filmed and recorded by the militias' themselves, as a sadistic ritual of documenting their acts of killing, executed before the lens of a camera. With these images, the lives of the "featured" victims may have been taken, but their wujoud has not. This is because even in death—or even during the final moments of their life as their murder is recorded—their bodies are present. And this presence is what continues to resist the regime's campaign of eradication. It is the very sight of the victims' corpses, or that of life leaving their bodies, that resists the regime's primary intention, which had been to erase all evidence of the existence of a civil opposition. The evidence of their being was clear to the killers themselves, who witnessed the existence of the civil activists as they assaulted them. In turn, those viewers watching the videos of these torture sessions, will—in seeing the victims' bodies via the visual material—become aware of the existence of a civil opposition, and will simultaneously gain some awareness of the crimes committed by the regime. Furthermore, the creative activist, who may choose to appropriate these images as part of his/her contribution to the Syrian revolutionary cause, will be using the presence of the deceased people in their own audio-visual activism. In re-using the material and disseminating the corporeal evidence that exposes the criminals, whilst simultaneously affirming the existence of a civil opposition being singled out for elimination, audio-visual activists also become practitioners of a wujoud resistance. In this example then, Wujoud refers not merely to the literal presence of the victims in the video, but equally to the defaulting of this presence into one that is inherently disruptive to the génocidaire's narrative even after the victim's passing.

3.2   viral and perpetual

Based on the aforementioned trajectory of events, wujoud can therefore be thought of as an entity of resistance—one that is transmitted from a Syrian democrat to countless others via the process of corporeal evidence. It is a resistance with the potential for virality. If one way of defining wujoud is to refer to it as "the evidence of being (in the face of an attempt to render non-existent)" its virality emerges in the process of dissemination. The example of torture videos illustrates how electronic dissemination enables the existence of a civil or democratic opposition movement, along with its victimisation, to be known. It spreads from one individual to potentially millions of others. The wujoud of one Syrian democracy activist standing in a Syrian street has the potential to be transmitted to the whole world, with or without the world's consent. And it is perpetual for once this wujoud becomes known, it remains to be known in defiance of all the forces that attempt to render it invisible. In this sense wujoud is uncontainable. It is a phenomenon of transmissions that live and spread beyond the lifespan of the regime's victims, in effect making their existence potentially perpetual.

Does this premise of resistance being viral and perpetual therefore imply that the watching of torture or atrocity footage is a necessary act in resisting the génocidaire's intent to erase all knowledge of the victim's existence? Does the viewing of such footage constitute revolutionary action? In the following section I apply Sobchack's concept of "documentary consciousness" in an attempt to answer this question.

3.3   From irreality to witness

Sobchack's concept of what she refers to as the "irreal" world of a cinematic narrative and how viewers respond to it, helps us understand the struggle that Syrian activists face in influencing the popular discourse towards their country. Their struggle to disseminate and mainstream their own experientially-informed narrative of the situation back home into the popular discourses that non-Syrians attach to Syria holds parallels to Sobchack's idea of cinematic irreality. Sobchack describes the "irreal" world of a film—the narrative world of a fiction—as engaging viewers only insofar as it is something of interest, without the sense of a profoundly urgent or ethical implication aroused in the viewer.   As Sobchack describes, viewers of a fiction film know they are safe in the knowledge that what they are watching on screen is the "irreal" fictional world.   So too may we understand the average non-Syrian first-world citizen's relationship to the situation in Syria. Like the narrative of a movie, the non-Syrian first-world person's relationship to Syria may be understood as one in which they see events in that country as an "irreal" narrative—one of many narratives accessible on TV and print news; a narrative that may hold some engagement and interest, but a narrative in which any sense of urgency or concern that its audience may potentially feel for, or with, the Syrian victim, being prevented.   This sense of urgency is prevented from occurring due to the audience's subconscious knowledge that the Syrian situation exists in a world far removed from their own reality—too distant to stir any sense of profound concern or motivation for them to become politically active in defence of Syria's human victims.

Like the non-Syrian audience's attitude to Syria, Sobchack describes Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu* (1939) as failing to effectively engage her emotionally during her first viewing of the film. She felt this way until she noticed that the killing of a rabbit in the fictional world of the narrative was in fact documentary footage of the animal being slaughtered in real life:

in the non-fiction 'real' world. The ethical problems that she found herself in upon viewing this documentary footage resulted from her realisation that she had become a witness to something real; that this event unfolded, albeit through a recording on screen, before her eyes. She became witness to a killing—at least to an archived recording of it—and the experience provoked the ethical problems and concerns that she mentions in her account. With her example in mind, the question arises of whether a similarly profound experience would be felt by someone who is made to witness footage of a real-life murder of a young Syrian boy at the hands of the Assad regime's "security" personnel. Would the abstract awareness, or latent notion of an "irreal" narrative of war that this viewer may have had, be suddenly violated by the uncomfortable witnessing of an actual killing? Would that be enough to provoke the viewer into activism?

> It is likely that prior to the rabbit's death I experienced the fauna beaten out of the forest for the hunt in some generalized and diffuse way as "quasi characters," functioning in the service of the narrative and on the premises of the irreal world of the fiction. But if this is so, it follows that I also perceived them, to some degree, as never completely characters. Prior to the moment of the rabbit's death, I had bracketed its real existential status— that is, put it, quite precisely, "out of play" and on the "sidelines" of my critical consciousness. At the moment of its death, however, the status of its existence abruptly came back into play for me and stopped the game of fiction. The mortal gravity of the filmed event transformed the irreality of fictional space into a different ontological order of representation— namely, into the reality of a documentary space suddenly charged with existential and ethical investment.

In the same way that Sobchack speaks of having "bracketed" the "real existential status" of the rabbit before she witnessed the "document" of its being killed—a real-life "extracinematic" event—we may also consider someone's stated awareness of civilians being killed in Syria, as constituting a similar "bracketing" of the victims' lived status.

One may be aware that the victims existed and were murdered brutally at the hands of the regime—this awareness isn't denied. But if one is to be provoked into actions of solidarity in the pursuit of justice for the victims, their families, and the cause they died for, it could be considered that no such compelling urgency would arise without the documented image—without the documentary video footage of the specific crime. Like Sobchack's description of her experience witnessing real footage of the rabbit being killed in Renoir's *Les Regles du Jeu*, one's awareness of a Syrian boy's murder may very well be bracketed or sidelined in the realm of latent, passive awareness—a notion of the likelihood that such crimes are transpiring in Syria. But so long as the actual act of killing remains unseen, this type of muted 'in-the-background' notion may only exist in the recesses of one's consciousness and may not be sufficient enough to perturb and stimulate one's senses into an 'active' solidarity with the victims of genocide. Sobchack spoke of the killing of the rabbit as affecting her; waking her out of her semi-boredom and lingering on in her thoughts—haunting her—while the fictional killing of the character Jurieu did not. It was the experience of being witness to the 'real' killing—the 'documentary' footage—that was what stirred the ethical crisis within her thoughts. Does it therefore become necessary for one to witness the disturbing scene of 'real' crime—to witness the torture and murder of a young Syrian boy by the Assad regime's 'security' forces—in order to be emotionally disturbed into action?   In this sense, following Sobchack's logic, the everyday person's awareness that violence is transpiring in Syria can be regarded as holding the same engagement as one has when watching a fictional movie containing violence. One may be aware of war and violence taking place in Syria, but this awareness may not be emotionally-impacting enough to translate into an active resistance against the genocide process. Even in the case where the film being watched depicts historical events of violence and injustice, its status as fiction, along with our confidence that what is being depicted is the irreality of the cinematic narrative rather

than reality, means that we are not "ethically accountable to—and for— the fictional situation in the same way or to the same degree that we are in a mode of documentary consciousness." (Sobchack: 270: 2004).   So we may watch a film, either fictional or documentary, on Syria, with a certain degree of engagement that stems from our perceived notions on the subject—what Sobchack refers to as our "extratextual" or "extracinematic" knowledge—but once we are placed into a situation in which we are forced to confront the real footage of murder, our comfortable engagement with the material on screen may likely transcend the realm of the cinematic and instead implicate us in an ethically-challenging condition.   As expressed by Sobchack,"this extratextual knowledge informs our cinematic experience generally and at a preconscious level—until, that is, it is explicitly raised to consciousness by something so specifically shocking and existentially particular" (Sobchack: 271: 2004). While Sobchack uses the example of animals being slaughtered on screen as more profound and infecting than a fictional portrayal of death—for the fact that the footage contains a real life killing of a living creature—the parallel can be made with regards to the emotional differences between being "aware" of killing in Syria (parallel to what Sobchack refers to as inhabiting the "fictional space" of the "irreal") in contrast to "witnessing" one of the killings (parallel to Sobchack's idea of an embodied understanding, or, a documentary consciousness). The causality between vicariously "experiencing" the terror on screen and the point at which one's emotional agitation leads them towards political or humanitarian activism can be explained by Sobchack's comparison of audience reactions when watching a fictional tragedy and witnessing real footage of slaughter. She states that the fictional character's death

> does not elicit the same level of subjective and physical shiver we feel as our very bodies "know" the existential difference between the character's and the rabbit's or pig's death. Furthermore, the character's death does not cause in us the diffuse sense of guilt we

perhaps feel, as spectators of the spectacle, about our own small responsibility for the rabbit's and the pig's death.

Sobchack's referencing of the witness's "responsibility" holds ethical and political relevance in the context of Syria. Once witnessing a crime against humanity on screen, in the knowledge that these murders continue to be perpetrated, is there a responsibility for the 'witness' (the audience) to now be proactive in a pursuit for justice? Would a witness' non-action and refrain from intervening in the situation imply an ethical or biological deficiency? What might be termed as expressing a "lack of humanity"?

> The knowledge and care that transform fictional space into existentially shared and ethically invested documentary space simultaneously transform the fictional consciousness of the viewer, in which existence is nonposited and irreal, into documentary consciousness, in which existence and a world are posited in all their specific gravity and shared consequence.

Based on Sobchack's concept, the practice I have conducted as part of this research project, and based on my own viewing of atrocity footage and images of Syria—as well as of the footage that evidences the existence of a civil opposition alive and in action—I have come to feel that one may be provoked to acknowledge their own wujoud whilst viewing this sort of material. That is why the practice I have conducted as part of this research, often attempts to provoke its viewers. The intention is to push the viewer into a self-awareness of their own being, in relation to the events and people they witness via the practice's audio-visual material. The hope is that each viewer (or experiencer) questions their own position (at both a physical-existential and politico-ethical level) to the actions and situations unfolding before their eyes. It is the intention that they become self-conscious during their engagement with the material—that they engage with their

own wujoud in relation to that of the Syrian civil activists featured in the practice—as a means of continuing the resistance to the Assad regime's extermination campaign.

A deeper understating of wujoud as an audio-visual practice revolves around the idea of stimulating an embodied awareness among its audience. This intention is motivated by my own responses to the Syrian struggle, which have led me to conclude that empathy and activism can only be brought about by a physio-emotional experience. It is this experience that holds potential in countering the regime's genocide-serving narrative and which may potentially be achieved through a variety of audio-visual techniques. The techniques applied may exist on two levels of intensity: one that is soft, relying on the existence, presence and audio-visual visibility of Syrian civil activists, in proximity to a non-Syrian audience; whilst the other is hard, pushing a boundary of human emotion to a level that may be seen to be a forceful violation or an imposed condition—a placing of the audience in a situation of ethical discomfort; a provocation designed to implicate the audience in the reality in which the victims of this genocide are experiencing.

To resist the propaganda narrative employed in the Assad regime's genocide process entails the conscious involvement of taking action—be it physical, audio-visual or literary —to counter, destabilise and sabotage it; to destroy the narrative upon which genocide functions. Through a causation of actions and events, these forms of resistant actions would also intend to play a part in eventually sabotaging and halting the physical act of mass killing being carried out. This enquiry therefore considers that 'resistance' begins with the conscious *decision* to resist. This decision is what separates those that may have some 'awareness' of what is taking place in Syria, to those that have chosen to be active in the pursuit of justice. Therefore, if this form of audio-visual resistance is to exist, its existence is born out of its *intention* to provoke its audience into action; to provoke people into making the conscious decision to *participate* in resisting the

genocide process in any capacity they are able. In this sense, wujoud, and its audio-visual manifestation, embodies an element of the 'physical'. It is a provocation of physical action through the embodied experience it imposes upon its audience, using a variety of techniques that agitate the bodies, minds and consciousness of those that find themselves in the wujoud experience. This praxis draws from the connection that may exist between invigoration and disturbatory arts practice, as conceptualised and elaborated upon in Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* (1933). It also incorporates an ethos of participation and intervention as espoused and formulated by Augusto Boal in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Even if audiences later refrain from making the decision to be active on Syria, their awareness of the Syrian reality would have been altered to a state of embodied knowledge—a visceral state of empathy which they may not have understood prior to their experiencing the imposition of the wujoud film. In this respect, this embodied knowledge of the Syrian reality may also be regarded as the first stage of active resistance, since it is the experience of being in this altered state of awareness that constitutes a response that is both physical as it is emotional—a physio-emotional response of inter-subjective alignment between an audience (or experiencer) and the Syrian subject on screen.

At this point, the reader of this document may find it helpful to now jump to chapter **4.17** (page 169) which provides an analysis of an installation I conceived and created that tests the concept of embodied awareness, embodied resistance, and the sharing of wujoud I have elaborated on in this subchapter. However, jumping ahead to that section is suggested only as a momentary diversion in order to see how my audio-visual practice applies the concept of embodied awareness and embodied resistance as described here.

4.   Practice review:

Beginnings

The first Syrian film to critique the Assad regime was Omar Amiralay's *Daily Life in a Syrian Village* (1974), exposing the Ba'ath party's exploitation and disenfranchisement of rural communities in its plundering of the country's natural resources. This was followed by Ossama Muhammed's *Step by Step* (1978), highlighting the regime's authoritarian nature and its use of psychological and physical intimidation at the local level of society. These films exemplify an early societal opposition to the Assad dictatorship that manifested in more direct activism from the mid 1970s[64] alongside a militant anti-regime uprising spearheaded by the Muslim Brotherhood party that was eventually crushed following a state-orchestrated massacre of the inhabitants of the city of Hama in 1982, with the Assad dictatorship deploying its airforce to decimate the city's population and infrastructure (George:2003:16).

Although Amiralay and Muhammed's films were the first cinematic expressions of a Syrian opposition to the Assad dictatorship, the thematic lineage of oppositional film practice to which I feel their works—as well as my own—stem, is perhaps from an earlier wave of politically-concerned filmmaking that theorists such as Totaro and Debuysere consider to have had its first stirrings shortly before the student riots and occupations of Paris and the nation-wide strikes of French workers in May 1968. As expressed by Debuysere, this was a period in which filmmaking and film theory from various corners of the globe began to shift in accordance with the ethos and events of revolt that took root in various

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[64] As detailed in Alan George's socio-political study *Syria: Neither Bread Nor Freedom* (2003),"the regime faced increasingly fierce criticism from intellectuals, professionals and activists from secular opposition parties. Protests were organised by those professional associations, such as the doctors' and engineers' associations, that had managed to retain their independence from the state. While responding to the Islamists' terrorism with mounting brutality of its own, the regime also moved to crush its non-violent and non-Islamist opponents. The lawyers', engineers' and doctors' associations were disbanded in 1980 and their leaderships imprisoned" (page 16).

countries and for the various reasons that were specific to the circumstances and politics of each location (2014):

> [S]truggles against Western colonialism and neo-colonialism gripped the entire 'Third World': at the same time the Vietnam war was increasingly polarizing the world stage, guerrilla groups such as Uruguay's Tupamaros and Chile's Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) were sprouting throughout Latin America, independence movements were gaining ground in Portugal's African empire, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had brought together various forces struggling against Israeli colonialism, and left-wing rebellion was proliferating in various Asian countries, from India and Nepal to Malaysia and the Philippines. Che Guevara's 1967 call to 'create two, three, many Vietnams' was taken to heart by resistance movements all over the world, while propositions to construct new societal forms in Cuba and China seemed to offer fresh, grassroots-based models of socialism.

In this milieu of various struggles and agitation, a number of alternative conceptualisations of what form and to what purpose film should be created, started to proliferate. In Latin America, Argentinian filmmakers Solanas and Getino's initiation of a manifesto towards a radical film practice of revolution and political agitation they termed "Third Cinema", published in 1969, intended to resist what they considered to be the bourgeois system of neo-colonial cultural impositions and aesthetics of what they referred to as "First Cinema", or Hollywood—a vision that was quintessentially realised in their four-hour twenty-minute documentary *La Hora de los Hornos* (trans: *The Hour of the Furnaces*) (1968). In a related sentiment, Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha had already presented his *Aesthetics of Hunger* statement as early as 1965, which was to turn into a manifesto for Brazil's Cinema Novo—a wave of films underscored by a collective conscience that viewed filmmaking as a weapon for political struggle. This weaponisation of film practice was also explicitly manifest in the Near East when the Palestine Liberation Organisation established its own filmmaking wing in 1968, at a time when the organisation

was based in Jordan. As narrated—as well as historiographically and cinematically traced—by Palestinian filmmaker Mohanad Yaqubi in his 2015 film *Off Frame*, the then newly-established Palestine Film Unit was an initiative by Palestinian filmmakers, with the backing and authority of the PLO, to facilitate the taking charge of their own image as Palestinians. This, as explained by former Palestinian representative to the UN, Elias Sambar, was a policy they saw as constituting part of their struggle for regaining their visibility and presence among an international audience, at a time when they felt their country and national identity had disappeared from the world map. As expressed by the then PLO chairman Yasser Arafat (as seen in Yaqubi's film *Off Frame*) filmmaking became a constituent of the Palestinian revolution that enabled Palestinians to forge their own dignified and militant self-image—an image in service of their struggle for the liberation of their homeland from what they viewed as a Zionist occupation.

But this wasn't just a stirring of filmmakers of the so-called Third World.[65] In the Third Cinema mainfesto, Solanas and Getino made reference to Godard and what they saw as the French New Wave's failed attempt by its filmmakers to turn their activity into an organised movement. An observation of European film of the pre-May 68 period reveals an early cinematic experimentation in more overtly political subject matter. Tracing the filmmaking activity of the mid 1960s, one sees that this consciousness of revolt among filmmakers was undoubtedly shared across the long-standing industrialised "First World" nations. In the United States, the Newsreel Collective established itself in 1967, operating as a decentralised collective of radical filmmaking groups spread across various US cities. The topics with which these films were concerned covered the spectrum of the

[65] The term Third World—coined by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in his 1952 article *Trois Mondes, une Planète* —was commonly used throughout the 1950s and 1960s to refer collectively to those nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America that were neither aligned to the Soviet Union nor to the Western global powers of the NATO bloc. These were nations that were either recently independent from the former imperial powers of Britain, France, Spain and Portugal, or in the midst of liberation struggles against on-going occupations (for instance, Algeria's war of independence from France). Sauvy's term had initially been formulated to make a historic parallel between the peoples of those nations with that of the "commoners" of 18th Century France, historically referred to as the "Third Estate".

era's major social and political issues of contention, spanning the topics of opposition to American military involvement in Vietnam; to racism, the civil rights movement and the Black Panther party; to women's rights and abortion; to the workers and commuter strikes of local areas; and even incorporated films documenting the struggles of the Palestinian Liberation Movement and the Vietnamese struggle against colonialism and the US army, with films such as *Revolution Until Victory*: aka *We Are the Palestinian People* (1969) and *People's War* (1969) respectively.   The ethos underpinning the Newsreel Collective's agitational film practice can perhaps be traced back to a similarly de-centralised American filmmaking association of the 1930s known as the Workers Film and Photo League.   Initiated by members of the US-based branch of Lenin's internationalist relief and propaganda initiative—the Workers International Relief—the Workers Film and Photo League, founded in 1930, worked primarily to document, through the medium of moving and still images, the strike actions of American workers.   Films produced and photographs taken by the league were exhibited at workers' events as a form of agitation and awareness, alongside further activities that included lectures, the release of publications, and the provision of training in film production to labourers across the country—a means of facilitating social and political change (Campbell: 1977).

Outside the Western world, agitational film was also evolving in tandem with political upheaval in Japan.   Yuriko Furuhata refers to this period as the "season of image politics" (2014)—an epoch that fused a new wave of filmmaking and critical theory that was both part of, and a response to, the wave of peasant protests and media-conscious student unrest that manifested across various prefectures, cities and rural communities of Japan from the mid 1960s. This was a period characterised by university occupations (as documented in Shinuske Ogawa's *Forest of Oppression* (1968), clashes with riot police and one that culminated with the radical acts of political violence by the early 1970s, with the initiation of militant activity by the Red Army—a Japanese communist group seeking

world-wide revolution, members of which later relocated to Lebanon to join the Palestinian guerrilla organisation Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and out of which came the agitational call to arms *Red Army PFPL: Declaration of World War* (1971) by their associated filmmakers Masao Adachi and Kôji Wakamatsu. A tumultuous season of radical film practice, Furuhata identifies the films produced as part of this milieu as constituting a sub-category of the Japanese new wave of films which she names the "Japanese political avant-garde" (2014)—a movement dominated by the works of filmmakers such as Nagisa Oshima, Masao Adachi, Koji Wakamatsu, Toshio Matsumoto, Noriaki Tsuchimoto and Shinsuke Ogawa.

What I recognise in all the above film movements, is their shared belief that film was a weapon to be used in political struggle. It is this lineage of militant filmmaking that I feel the ongoing production of Syrian revolutionary film and video fall into. It is also one of the lineages with which my own work for the Syrian revolutionary struggle is situated.   An analysis of how my film practice partially evolves from this lineage is the focus of this chapter.

4.1   Militant cinema:

"They Do Not Exist" — Resisting imposed invisibility

Recounting his interview with Elias Sambar—former Palestinian representative to UNESCO[66]—Palestinian filmmaker and film historian Mohaned Yaqubi (2015) questioned the reason for the Palestine Film Unit's[67] obsession with documenting the militant

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[66] United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

[67] The Palestine Film Unit (PFU) was established in Jordan in 1968 as the official filmmaking department of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation). It later relocated to Lebanon by 1971 following Jordan's expulsion of the PLO and Palestinian militants to Lebanon. There the PFU made films up until the Israeli invasion which forced them to relocate again. The organisation continued to make films up until 1982 (Yaqubi: 2012).

operations and daily life of Palestinian refugees and the Fedayeen (guerilla fighters). Sambar explained, and as paraphrased by Yaqubi,:

"1948, for a Palestinian…it's a moment where we disappeared…like…totally disappeared: from the international community…from all of the record[s]; there's no state anymore… For someone who's disappeared, his weapon would be a camera. And that's exactly the sense of what is the Palestinian revolution…It was mainly about the representation, and coming back visually. The sound of the Klashen [Kalashnikov] was not to kill someone. [It was] to prove you exist. You have a sound; you have an image".

According to Yaqubi, and his paraphrasing of Sambar, Palestinians have always faced a problem of visibility. He recounts the history of non-Middle Eastern Christian missionaries being sent to the "Holy Land" to film footage of the territory, and returning with images that were devoid of any people. The Zionist movement later made use of this footage to promote their claim to the geography of Palestine, supplementing the visual material with their own slogan, "a land without people for a people without a land". For me, there are direct parallels that can be drawn with this history of a Palestinian struggle for visibility and re-existance, and that of the Syrian democrats' struggle for visibility since January 2011. To my mind, the historic Zionist narrative that worked to render non-existent the Palestinian people, is now being recycled for use in the context of Syria today, albeit this time by the Assad regime and its foreign allies: a narrative of "depopulation", as expressed by Saleh (2017).

When considering the intentions of the Palestine Film Unit to make the Palestinian cause and the Fedayeen (Palestinian guerrilla fighters) visible, existent actors, I would argue that wujoud becomes a pertinent concept for understanding their audio-visual struggle. The struggle against the negatory propaganda that attempted to wipe out the very idea of a Palestinian existence is consciously countered in Palestinian filmmaker Mustafa Abu Ali's

They Do Not Exist (1974), which takes its title from a quote made by then Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir. In a segment of the film, the word "genocide" appears on screen several times as a title, each time re-appearing following each of the following titles: "Mozambique", "South Africa", "the American Indians" and "Nazi massacres". Referencing these historic genocides before revealing footage of Israeli fighter jets launching bombing raids on a Palestinian refugee camp, the film reveals a reflexive awareness of where its audio-visual struggle lies—a struggle that foregrounds a resistance to genocide as being tied to the insistence of visibility. In this respect, this history of Palestinian militant cinema embodies the wujoud ethos in its most basic form. That is to say, that the audio-visual resistance processes undertaken in this late 1960s and early 1970s cinematic movement, was a conscious effort to make visible a people threatened by an imposed invisibility.

4.2   Visibility in the Syrian detainee film

The Syrian regime's policy of mass arbitrary imprisonment of its critics has been the subject of a number of films that span the genres and styles of investigative documentary, human rights advocacy, animation, dramatised re-enactment, an interactive website, and fiction based on true stories. Sara Afshar's *Syria's Disappeared: the case against Assad* (2017), which premiered on Britain's Channel 4, took the form of an investigative documentary that, as described on its website, follows "survivors of detention, families of detainees, regime defectors and international war crimes investigators as they fight to bring the perpetrators to justice and desperately campaign for the release of the disappeared". Aesthetically, the film adheres to the audio-visual conventions of high production value broadcast-standard current-affairs-style documentary programming, such as is typical of the one-off features commissioned by prominent news outlets such as the BBC, Channel 4 or Al Jazeera. In line with this style, the film incorporates High

Definition video interviews with its subjects, dramatic music for editorial flow, and a non-diegetic, journalistic voice-over that carries the narrative from one point to another, such as is used to introduce key contributors and their personal/political backgrounds. Meanwhile, a cross-disciplinary research project entitled Forensic Architecture, which is based at Goldsmiths University of London's Department of Visual Cultures, includes a Syria-focused collaboration with human rights NGO Amnesty International. The collaboration is experienced as a website through which is streamable a series of short videos featuring testimony given by former detainees of the Assad regime's Sadnaya prison. The website, entitled *Sadnaya: Inside a Syrian torture prison* (2016)[68], features an interactive three-dimensional to-scale model of the prison's exterior, including a roaming aerial view layout of sections of its interior, complete with cells and torture halls. Users are able to navigate their way around the 3D graphic of the prison's exterior and select access to certain parts of the building's interior via clicking on labelled sections. Clicking on each section takes the user to further sub-pages, each focused on a specific memory as expressed by one of the five survivors who participated in the project. According to its introduction, the website was a result of the project researchers' attempt to visualise the spatial layout and architecture of the detention centre by use of architectural and acoustic modelling software:

> the researchers helped witnesses reconstruct the architecture of the prison and their experiences of detention. The former detainees described the cells and other areas of the prison, including stairwells, corridors, moving doors and windows, to an architect working with 3D modelling software. The witnesses added objects they remembered, from torture tools to blankets and furniture, to areas where they recalled them being used. The recollections sparked more memories as the model developed.

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[68] The website can be accessed vida the following url: https://saydnaya.amnesty.org/ [Accessed 17 September 2019]. More information on the project can be found here: https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/saydnaya [Accessed 24 September 2019].

Alongside its interactive nature, the website features a constant background soundscape of a re-created environment of the detention centre's interior, including the sound of prison guard voices, detainee whisperings, beatings, cell doors being unlocked and slammed shut, chamber echoes, and the sound of an echoed breeze travelling through an interior void—all as auditory re-creations of the details described by the survivors. An additional technique applied in some of the videos also includes computer-facilitated or computer-generated animation as a means of further visualising witness testimony. Amnesty International later used animation as a story-telling technique for the entirety of a short dramatised video entitled *Saydnaya Prison: Human Slaughterhouse* (2017) that was published on Youtube in February 2017. Incorporating an accompanying voice-over, in English, the animation retells the story of a Syrian man's experience, first as a civilian protester and later as a prisoner, arrested and locked up in the notorious detention centre for his participation in non-violent demonstrations.

Since very few images of Sadnaya prison's exterior are attainable (barring those captured via satellite imagery) and with a complete absence of images of the centre's interior—thought to be non-existent, according to Amnesty International's video *Inside Saydnaya: Syria's Torture Prison* (2016)—the website's graphic re-creation of the detention facility through both visual and sonic means, is an attempt to materialise the documentation that is verbally communicated by the survivors. What does exist however, are the survivors and the testimony they bring to the investigation. As is seen in the numerous videos featured on the website, the prison's former inmates are seen, often seated, recounting their experiences and describing their memories to members of the Forensic Architecture team, and sometimes directly to camera. In this way, both the Goldsmiths-Amnesty collaboration and Afshar's *Syria's Disappeared: the case against Assad*, share the technique of directly confronting their audiences with the video presence of the survivors

themselves—a means of evidencing the existence of those arbitrarily detained in the regime's dungeons.

When considering yet more documentaries on the subject of the Assad regime's imprisonment policy, such as Al Jazeera's *The Disappeared of Syria* (2014) or Al Arabiya's *Testimony/Martyrdom of female prisoners* (2014), it is noticeable that video presence of former detainees in the form of direct to-camera interviews, seem to constitute the primary method of evidentiary documentation. A break with this trend is seen in Al Arabiya's *Women in the Syrian regime's prisons* (2016), which kept the voices of former inmates audible, but concealed their faces. Aesthetically, the film opted to present only certain parts of the former detainees bodies, with some head and shoulder shots in silhouette or partially-lit environments so as to anonymise the victims' identities. A similar approach is employed in the short video *Syria's Torture Centers Revealed* (2012), a Human Rights Watch production streamable on Youtube, which features former prisoners providing direct to-camera testimony without disclosing their faces or identities. In the absence of their faces appearing on camera, it is their voices, speaking in Syrian Arabic dialects, that constitute the testimonials to their experiences. The short also includes a video interview with a former torturer who had since defected. Like the former prisoners, his face is not revealed to camera. Instead, he sits with the back of his head and shoulder facing us in three-quarter view. One of the more directly forensic videos in its approach to the subject, *Syria's Torture Centers Revealed,* also makes use of hand-drawn illustrations depicting the scenes and methods of torture committed in the regime's detention facilities, as described by the interviewees themselves. Names of some of the officers involved in torture are also made visible, revealing a behind-the-scenes view into the documentation work being conducted by Human Rights Watch.

Tadmor (2016), a film retelling the personal experiences of twenty-two former detainees incarcerated in Syria's Tadmor (Palmyra) prison, also makes use of direct to-camera interviews. But this film—about Lebanese political prisoners kidnapped by Syrian regime occupation forces in Lebanon before then being taken to Syria—intercuts each interview segment with scenes of dramatised re-enactments of the men's collective and individual incarceration experiences. In a similar vein to Oppenheimer, Cynn and an anonymous Indonesian's *The Act of Killing* (2013), in which those responsible for carrying out the physical acts of torture and mass-murder in Indonesia's 1965-1966 genocide re-enact scenes of their own deeds of slaughter on camera, Tadmor relies on its human subjects to re-enact scenes from their own former lives of imprisonment in a re-created detention facility. But Tadmor differs to *The Act of Killing* in that the survivors also choose to play the roles of their former prison-guard victimisers—a reversed process to *The Act of Killing*, which presented a few scenes in which one or two of the Indonesian killers momentarily take on the role of one of their former victims. *Tadmor*'s website describes the film's preparation process as having constituted "an extraordinary endeavour of collaboration and trust, built on a years-long and enduring relationship" in which the survivors "were ready to confront—together—their common past".

For me, *Tadmor* holds a particular efficacy in undermining the Syrian regime's denial of its arbitrary detention policy. The film's non-Syrian—but Lebanese—human subjects provide a third-party (neither regime, nor Syrian opposition) accusation of the Assad regime's criminal nature. This collective Lebanese testimony is a valuable document, for it can be cross-referenced with those Syrian survivor voices that constitute the protagonists of the other Syrian detainee films, suggesting that those who allege the Assad regime's brutality are not restricted to a Syrian demographic, but are equally and historically also non-Syrians in the region. What is more, *Tadmor*'s twenty-two male survivors seem to have been drawn from across the range of Lebanon's confessional spectrum, with names such

as Raymond Bouban, Elias Tanios and Camille Bawaridi suggesting a significant "Christian" sub-group of the regime's victims, alongside Shiite and Sunni Muslims and those of the minority Druze sect. I view this detail as evidence of the regime's habit of treating all those it regards as oppositional as equals—equals, under a reign of terror: a fact that undermines the claim, made by some commentators and by the regime itself, of Assad's government being a "protector of minorities".[69] Tadmor's protagonists furthermore testify to the regime's very nature as historically totalitarian, with the vast majority of former detainees having been imprisoned in the 1980s, with a smaller contingency joining them in the early 1990s—further evidence that provides context to the Syrian uprising of 2011, suggesting it to have been an inevitable explosion of a long-suppressed collective sentiment of resentment against a regionally notorious regime of tyranny that had been terrorising civilians for decades, long before the 2011 revolt. Tadmor therefore constitutes an anthropological and verbal document of evidence in support of this historic argument, with testimonials provided by its sample of quinquagenarian and sexagenarian survivors from across Lebanon's plurality of sects.

In 2009, prior to Tadmor, and prior to the Arab Spring, my own imagined dramatisation of one Lebanese Druze man's real-life experiences inside a Syrian regime prison culminated in a nine-minute short film I conceived, produced, directed and edited. *RAT*, which told the story of a prisoner of conscience who befriends a rat whilst in solitary confinement, was subsequently re-edited in 2011 following the outbreak of civil protests in Syria, to incorporate found video footage of regime thugs beating a civilian in the street—one of

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[69] The idea of the Assad regime being a protector of minorities has been a claim made by pro-regime media outlets and publicists. These have included the website Global Research, the Assad government advisor Bouthaina Shaaban and a number of public figures in the world of politics and analysis, such as US congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who has stated at a US House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing that Syria, under Assad's leadership "has been recognised by Christians throughout the Middle East as the only place they can go and seek refuge" (see the following video from 36:27: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IErOnb6xkY [Accessed 24 September 2019]. The idea of the Assad regime as having guaranteed the rights of minorities in the face of what is often implied would have been a country devoured by an ultra religious and intolerant Sunni majority, has also been upheld by seemingly non-aligned commentators, such as Dan Snow and his BBC-commissioned documentary *A History of Syria with Dan Snow* (2013).

the first videos to have been uploaded online by opposition activists that revealed regime-backed lethal violence against civilians.   As Tadmor was to do a few years later post Syrian uprising, *RAT* provided a dramatised portrayal of life in a Syrian regime dungeon. Aside from the differences in film length and production value, *RAT* differs to Tadmor in terms of cast and dynamic.   *RAT*'s human protagonist was not played by a former detainee, but rather by an actor; and whilst Tadmor turned the narrative details of its survivor participants into cinematic re-enactments, *RAT* was only loosely based on one particular survivor's story—one that had been reported in an interview for Lebanon's MTV news.   However, the narrative of the film was less a detailed re-enactment than an imagined portrayal of how a prisoner of conscience initiated a friendship with a rat inhabiting his cell—the detail of the rat being the only particularity to the man's otherwise standard story of Assad regime imprisonment.   The visualisation of the film, in dealing with the prison' cell's appearance and spatial layout, as well as with the details of torture mechanisms and methods used, was formulated more generally from other survivor testimony and reports that I had come across in a book I had bought in Lebanon in the summer of 2005.   This was a book that featured forensic illustrations of the torture mechanisms and methods employed by Syrian state security personnel against Lebanese detainees who had lived to tell their stories.   In 2009, *RAT* was my attempt to initiate an awareness of Syria's use of arbitrary detention among whoever would see the film. As far as I knew, no other film or documentary had, at that pre-Arab Spring period, attempted to dramatically portray the Syrian regime's imprisonment policy. Perhaps like the animations used in Amnesty International's work, or like the computer-generated graphics and audio-scapes that constituted Forensic Architecture's Sadnaya website, *RAT* can be considered an attempt to materialise—visually and sonically—a document of evidence intended to expose the Assad regime's arbitrary, and politically-motivated, imprisonment policy.

As with all the films that constitute what I term here to be the Syrian detainee genre, it is visuality (whether as imagined re-creation, or in the form of to-camera interviews with survivors) that is intended to verify the existence of political prisoners in the face of the regime's official narrative of denial.[70]   Yet a cursory observation of how these visual documentations are received by a pro-regime presence online, as well as by Assad's political allies, reveals that even the video testimonials themselves are dismissed and discredited.   The most common and most frequent example of this pro-regime attitude can be witnessed in the numerous comments that are persistently left in the discussion threads under online videos on Youtube, Twitter and other platforms that enable the steaming of videos.[71]   An analysis of the extent of the regime's campaign of absenting the evidentiary image, as well as on how one may interpret the methodology behind its strategy, is provided in chapters **2.11** and **2.12** (pages 77-91).   What follows now however, is a consideration of a film I made with a Syrian activist and former detainee entitled *Testimony of a former detainee* (2017)—a detainee film that breaks with the trend of visually presenting or re-creating the evidentiary image.

4.3   *Testimony of a former detainee*:

the absent image as redirected subversion

The opening frame of the film *Testimony of a former detainee* (2017) occupies most of the film's entire running time.   The frame itself reveals a screen of black.   There is no image.   Instead, the viewer is met with an audio recording of what we know from the film's accompanying literary description to be a Syrian man recounting his past experience as a

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[70] At various instances in the Channel 4 documentary, *Syria's Torture Machine* (2011) both Bashar al Assad and his advisor Bouthaina Shaaban, reject all claims of the regime's policy of mass arbitrary imprisonment and torture. The film is streamable on Youtube via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3JlWntjXE4 [Accessed 17 September 2019]

[71] Pro-Assad trolling under Amnesty International's video, *Inside Saydnaya: Syria's Torture Prison* (2016) exemplifies a typical strategy employed as a means of discrediting the visual evidence implicating the regime in crimes against humanity. The video, along with the comments section, can be accessed via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysgnadic3Yo [Accessed 17 September 2019].

prisoner of conscience in an Assad regime prison. The absence of an image on screen allows the film's experiencer to meditate into a state of auditory concentration: a state in which the audience's focus defaults towards sonically taking in the story being recounted by the Syrian man.

Taking the idea of the absent image as a point of departure, *Testimony of a former detainee* alludes to the workings of Assadist online propaganda and the way such propaganda is received and accredited by internet users.   While pro-regime online propagandists work to undermine the credibility of activist-recorded images as a means of effectively eradicating, or rendering absent, the visibility of these images among online users, *Testimony of a former detainee* turns the idea of eradicating images into a concept. The regime's strategy of absenting an evidentiary image is applied in the most literal sense in this film, but its purpose here is to subvert the regime's intention and undermine its own narrative. Pro-Assad internet trolls are no longer needed to discredit and absent the visual evidence of Assad's crimes, nor those images revealing the existence of anti-regime democrats—for in this film, anti-regime activists are absenting the visual evidence of their own existence, all by themselves.   In this specific case, it is the image of the victim of regime crimes—the former detainee—that is withheld. The activists involved in the making of this film are therefore absenting their own visuality.   In doing so, the film intends to challenge the regime apologist to hold this film up to scrutiny alongside any pro-regime propaganda video of a similar "talking head" format.   The pro-Assad video that went viral during the regime's final onslaught against East Aleppo—a video featuring propagandist Eva Bartlett sitting in front of UN wallpaper[72]—acts as a working example. When held alongside one another, the opening frame of *Testimony of a former detainee*

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[72] The video can be viewed on the official Twitter account of In the Now—the outlet that first promoted it—via the following url: https://twitter.com/i/status/808748331019091969 [Accessed 17 September 2019]. An extended edit of the video was however released on a Youtube account three days prior to the In the Now promotion, and is accompanied by a long list of laudatory posts in the comment section underneath. This can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1VNQGsiP8M [Accessed 25 Sep. 2019].

and the Bartlett video both demonstrate an absence of any evidentiary images that ought to be presented to back up the claims being made by each speaker. Whilst the Bartlett video indeed showcases the moving image of the pro-regime propagandist herself—a non-Syrian Canadian seated at a press conference—it may as well be a black screen, for the image does not evidence the regime's innocence, nor does it work as a visual argument in defence of Assad's military campaign—which is the intention of the video and press conference itself. Taking the idea of the absent image to an extreme through a total abstention of its material visuality, *Testimony of a former detainee* aims to provoke the mild regime sympathiser, or even the neutral undecided observer (often susceptible to regime propaganda), to question the film's credibility for its use of no image.   The intention is to lead this experiencer to then question their own bias towards seeing the Bartlett video as "trustworthy".   The film therefore works to trap the mild regime sympathiser into dissecting their own analysis of the Syrian story.   For the other "undecided" experiencers, *Testimony of a former detainee* compels them to compare its black-screened non-image to that of the full colour "imaged" video of the regime propagandist.   Since the pro-regime video contains no evidentiary image to support its thesis, the talking head of Eva Bartlett holds the same visual value as that of the black screen in *Testimony of a former detainee*. What is left, therefore, are words. The words of a Syrian man against those of a non-Syrian Canadian. Their politics are opposed to one another and their narratives differ.   The Syrian man claims to speak from first-hand experience, while the Canadian woman claims to be a journalist with access to witnesses in regime-held territory. A comparison of credibility between the two therefore requires a non-visual analysis. If Bartlett's words are to be taken at face value without the inclusion of evidentiary material, what is it that makes a mild regime sympathiser view the former detainee's anti-regime story as supposedly less trustworthy?

4.4   Defaulting into militancy: weaponising the absent image

The conceptualisation of the regime's propaganda strategy of making absent the image, along with its subsequent appropriation and redirection for an anti-regime purpose, alludes to the regime's use of the term "terrorist" to refer to all people it sees as oppositional. This is because the appropriation of a regime tactic for the purposes of a contrary cause, is an act of sabotage which is considered "terrorism" in the eyes of Bashar al Assad's government. It is an act that sabotages the Assadist propaganda campaign. *Testimony of a former detainee* is therefore a film made by saboteurs. In the regime's narrative, the democrat-saboteur, or activist, is synonymous with the label "terrorist". Metaphorically then, the tactic of appropriating and redirecting one of the regime's weaponised media strategies holds parallel to the militant aspect of the Syrian revolution, or what the regime calls "terrorism". Just as defectors from Assad's army abandoned their posts and took what were once regime-owned weapons with them in order to form the anti-regime Free Syrian Army (FSA), the regime's intended media weapon of socially undermining its civil opponents is here plundered and redirected back against the regime itself. Just as the armed faction of the Syrian revolution eventually came to the conclusion that the survival of neighbourhoods and communities in opposition to the regime necessitated the elimination of the Assadist state's military capabilities, *Testimony of a former detainee* acts as an initiative intended to contribute to the dismantling of the regime's propaganda machine through appropriating and re-aiming the regime's own media weapon back at the regime itself. The former detainee's story of arbitrary imprisonment and torture is one more addition to a growing body of first hand testimony that stands as evidence to indict the regime of crimes against humanity, and potentially genocide, in a court of law. The threat to the regime posed by testimonials such as these are enough to provoke Assad's propagandists to smear the former detainees and their activist supporters with the "terrorist" label.   In this sense, the

evidentiary value of such testimony can be understood as constituting a threat to the regime as credible as military force, for the potential enforcement of international law would ultimately bring about an outcome in which the regime is eliminated.

4.5   Addressing the argument

It is worth keeping in mind that while *Testimony of a former detainee* exposes the regime's use of arbitrary arrest and lethal torture, comparing it to a regime propaganda video about the fall of Aleppo may seem to be mixing up two different topics. In the video recording of the pro-Assad press conference, Eva Bartlett's speech does not mention the regime's policy of arresting and torturing democracy activists. The subject does not cross her mouth once.   Instead, Bartlett's message focuses on the supposed villainy of the opposition—the "terrorists"—who she claims have held civilians resident in Eastern Aleppo as hostages under siege, starving them to near death and terrorising them into accepting a Salafi Jihadist tyranny akin to that of the Islamic State. Assad's government, she argues, is therefore engaged in a campaign of liberation, yet "corporate media", she insists, has been engaged in a campaign of "lying" as part of the conspiracy waged by Western governments in order to fool global audiences into siding with the "terrorists" and supporting a "regime change" instigated by imperialist powers. The argument is familiar Assadist rhetoric: the imagined event of a globalist plot to overthrow a secular, anti-imperialist government who has the well-being of the Syrian people at heart. Yet since the video addresses a topic completely different to that of arbitrary arrest and torture, of what use is it to compare the two? To address this question, an online search into various outlets and electronic manifestations of pro-Assad propaganda reveals that the regime and the vast majority of its supporters do not acknowledge the regime's policy of detaining democracy activists or committing heinous acts of torture and murder. On occasion, pro-regime internet trolls may leave one-line comments addressing accusations

of the regime's use of torture on online discussion threads. These would usually comprise one-liners conceding that the regime had "made mistakes", or attempted justifications for the regime's brutality by the stock line opener "Assad's no angel but…". While these comments are often made as an effort to make the Assadist side come across as more nuanced and reasoned in front of neutral or undecided online readers, the regime-supporting troll army is unlikely to engage in a discussion or analysis of the regime's use of arbitrary arrest and torture. The die-hard propagandists such as Eva Bartlett are also not likely to do so, since it would defy their purpose of selling to global audiences the idea of the regime as innocent victim. *Testimony of a former detainee*'s subject matter therefore does not seem to be of immediate effect in countering videos such as those by Eva Bartlett. But it is in the details spoken as part of the former detainee's testimony that work to dismantle Bartlett's self-purporting claims to "evidence" that she states were revealed in her interviews with Syrians upon her many visits to Syria.

The former detainee claims to have been imprisoned only for being a democracy activist.[73] This mere fact is enough to evidence, non-visually, the regime's policy of suppressing freedom of expression in Syria. The ensuing description the man gives of his time in the regime's dungeons details the sheer sadism of the regime, with the testimony revealing what the suppression of political thought in Syria actually means in practice: a policy reliant on the most depraved acts of psycho-phsyical torture and an almost eroticised thrill in the act of killing. That this man was imprisoned at a check point in regime territory casts doubt over the pro-regime Canadian's story of using witnesses from regime-territory to support her case of Assad's benevolent intentions. If this former detainee was imprisoned for voicing a pro-democracy opinion whilst in regime territory,

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[73] The version of the film in its current form is comprised of audio material in which the former prisoner recounts the details of his time spent in a prison cell. Parts of the hour-long interview where the man speaks of his hopes for freedom for all Syrians and his arrest at a regime check point for possession of a personal diary containing pro-democracy notes, do not form part of the current film. This decision was made in order to keep the film to a length of around 7 minutes in order to hold audience attention. However, the creation of an additional film formed of these sections of the recording is in consideration.

this implies that self-censorship would have to be exercised by those Syrians resident in regime-held areas for the sake of self-survival.   Zero criticism of the government, and repeating the state's official narrative to foreign journalists conducting interviews would form part of every Syrian's self-protective ritual when in regime territory.   In this context, does "testimony" given by Syrians currently resident in regime-held territory become trust-worthy?   This is the demographic that Bartlett and a series of other obscure journalists and minor celebrities[74] have used in order to back up the pro-regime narrative of "liberating" Aleppo from the "terrorists": an embedded journalism done under the "security" provided by regime forces, and the monitoring ears of the ever-present mukhabarat (regime spies in civilian clothing).   Paraphrasing the thesis of an article by journalist Robert Fisk, Syrian-British writer Robin Yassin-Kassab states:

> Robert Fisk, who wrote a great article during the Iraq war, about the dangers of embedded journalism…he said that you can't get the real story if you go and interview an Iraqi with a heavily-armed American soldier standing next to you, because of course, the Iraqi is going to say, 'yes, we like America, thank you'.

In contrast to the claimed "evidence" of Eva Bartlett's embedded journalism, the power of *Testimony of a former detainee* lies in the wujoud of the Syrian civil activist himself.   His presence is felt even in the absence of his own image.   His first hand testimony acts as an evidence of auditory presence—an auditory wujoud.   It evidences his existence as someone—a Syrian democrat—who stands against the regime and the crimes the regime inflicts upon the Syrian people.   As such, this former detainee undermines the regime

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[74] In 2016 Bolivian actress Carla Ortiz produced and starred in a documentary covering the conflict around East Aleppo from within regime-controlled territory. In her appearances promoting the film on various television channels, she claims to have spoken to former residents of East Aleppo as they arrived into regime territory, whilst also claiming that the Twitter accounts of East Aleppo's civil activists and citizen journalists were "fake". The following url links to a Youtube video of her interview on American TV channel Fox 11 (uploaded by the pro-Assad "Hands off Syria" Coalition—one of the front groups represented at the same press conference at which Bartlett presented—a conference hosted by the Assad regime's permanent mission to the United Nations): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=il7I1FTRSwY [Accessed 17 September 2019].

apologists' denialist narrative of a civil democratic movement being non-existent. By his very being, his living proof sabotages the regime's denialist line. Speaking as a refugee in the safety of a liberal Western democracy, away from the reach of the regime and away from the reach of the Salafi Jihadists, if his story were intended to be a promotion on behalf of the Islamic State, or Al Qaeda, or the Salafi Jihadist ideology—accusations and defamatory smears that are a staple of the Assadist social undermining strategy—he would not be promoting ideals of democracy, pluralism and human rights as he does in the audio recording.

4.6   Situating the 'absent image' strategy of *Testimony of a former detainee* and *A Friend Recently Told Me* among other activist works

Testimony of a former detainee, along with another film I have made called *A Friend Recently Told Me* (2016),[75] share a conceptual element with Nicholas Mirzoeff's redacted photographs as part of the Black Lives Matter movement; as well as with the works of Syrian filmmaker and conceptual artist Ammar al-Beik; and the militant film works of Masao Adachi and Kōji Wakamatsu. The commonality between these works relates to the concept of the "absent image", which both *Testimony of a former detainee* and *A Friend Recently Told Me* take to an extreme through the strategy of withholding the visual element of moving image material. Following on from an analysis of how *Testimony of a former detainee* embodies this conceptual resistance strategy, here I will elaborate on how the concept is applied in A *Friend Recently Told Me*.

Similar to the final moments of stroboscopically-presented footage of violence seen in *Testimony of a former detainee*, the final few moments of A *Friend Recently Told Me* also

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[75] Both of these films were screened at London College of Communication's Screen Research Forum in December 2018 and as part of the films I showed to BA students at the same institution during my activist film workshops in July 2017 and May 2020. *Testimony of a former detainee* has also played at a conference in Lille, whilst *A Friend Recently Told Me* was exhibited at the Senesi Contemporanea art gallery in London in January 2018 as part of the Against Forgetting film festival/exhibition. Audience reactions to these screenings are detailed on pages 185-200.

comprises found video footage of regime soldiers torturing a political prisoner. This time however, the footage used is one that—in its original form—reveals the victim being killed. The victim is initially beaten with whips and an iron rod, before being struck on the skull by a large concrete slab, after which his body ceases to move. However, as was practiced in the interview section of *Testimony of a former detainee*, the visual component of this footage is replaced with a black screen. What initially differentiates this film from the former is the nature of the footage that is withheld. With *Testimony of a former detainee*, the black screen replaces the image of what was originally that of the former prisoner seated in silhouette in front of an open window. However, in *A Friend Recently Told Me*, what is replaced is that of the found atrocity footage.[76] Given that the visual evidence of the atrocity is replaced with a black screen, I made use of titles in order to communicate the detailed actions of torture and murder seen in the original footage. These titles appear over the black screen as the scene is heard unfolding. The use of this lettering is in addition to further English language titles used to translate the audible Arabic dialogue. As was the case with *Testimony of a former detainee,* one effect of replacing the image with a black screen in this film is that the absenting of evidentiary images subverts the regime's intention to conceal evidence. The black screen's concealment of the visual does not hide the regime's crimes, but rather creates a space for its audience to visualise the atrocity being committed. The existence of the Syrian freedom fighter is not hidden either. In leaving the audio track intact, we do not need to see nor even hear the voice of this victim to know that these regime loyalists are involved in the act of murdering him for his call for freedom from tyranny. Indeed, rhetorically addressing the slain human, one of the killers is heard commenting: "This is where your call for freedom gets you". The killers' taunts and humiliating verbal attacks—interjected

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[76] My decision to withhold the image of the video was initially motivated by two concerns—the first being that the act of killing seen in the video might be too disturbing for some viewers; and the second being a fear that I would be accused by some of creating a "spectacle" out of a sadistic murder. I provide more detail on the considerations I took for this decision in chapter **5.3** *On the ethics of screening atrocity footage* (page 191).

by the sound of floggings inflicted against the victim's corpse—are sufficient in evoking an image of the crime taking place. The sectarian insults verbally hurled at him, and the demoralising emotional abuse enacted by his killers, create the context needed to understand what is taking place behind the black screen before us. It is in this way that the film can be understood as manifesting wujoud for the presence/existence of the Syrian freedom fighter is alluded to even in the absence of his own image and voice. The film's strategy of absenting the explicit image of this atrocity does *not* erase nor conceal the evidence of such a crime, but contrarily draws attention to it.   Therefore despite the absence of his own image and voice, the slain freedom fighter's wujoud is triggered via the self-incriminating acts and speech of those that took his life.

As well as presence/existence being created through the decision to withhold a visual element, this film's absent image strategy also makes apparent the regime's own policy of absenting evidentiary visual material.[77]   This can be understood when considering that the black screen now becomes a reference to the regime's own workings of absenting the visual evidence of an existent Syrian democratic opposition—a policy that becomes apparent when considering the regime's multitude of attempts to deny, conceal and finally eradicate all human manifestation of this democratic opposition (See page 99 for Douedari's summary of the regime's genocide policy). A parallel can be drawn here with the reworked, or "redacted", photographs of Nicholas Mirzoeff and his idea of the "space of nonappearance" (2017). Specifically, these are the photographs that capture a moment from the numerous instances in which Black[78] Americans are killed or harmed by a

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[77] For a reminder of the regime's policy of absenting evidentiary material, see subchapter **2.11** *The Absent Image* (p. 77).

[78] As Mirzoeff explains, the use of the term Black with an uppercase "B" is in keeping with the Black Lives Matter movement's preferred vocabulary. See Mirzoeff, 2017.

racialised US Police force and penal system[79]—screen grabs from police dash cams and security cameras in which the image of the victim has been cropped out of frame. What is of particular significance here is Mirzoeff's intention to draw attention to what he describes as the "spaces of nonappearance"—the "nonplaces" or "killing zone[s]" located in the deserted and unnoticed spaces "between private and corporate property" (ibid.) in which a racialised US-police force and a compromised legal apparatus work to sustain a "racial hierarchy" where Black Americans (see footnote 78) are murdered by US police officers who will be acquitted by virtue of a process that prevents the deceased victims from "appearing" outside that of the pre-designated frames imposed and enforced by the "settler state". As with the Assad regime's policy of absenting images, the "space of nonappearance" functions as a process intended to erode public faith in witness testimony and evidentiary material that would otherwise have incriminated the accused police officers—a process that, Mirzoeff argues, is implemented by the police force itself and often bolstered by sympathetic media outlets during the mediatised process of courtroom hearings. Conversely, Mirzoeff's "redacted" photographs of these spaces of nonappearance—images of the locations where the victims were killed or incarcerated, but now with the victims' bodies removed—have the effect of alluding to the guilty party's strategy of keeping these killings and injustices low profile and away from the public gaze. This is because when Mirzoeff removes (or redacts) the victim's body from each photograph, what is left demonstrates the loneliness and unpopulated emptiness of the spaces chosen for the killing (or arrest), making apparent the reason for why they were chosen as the spaces to commit the acts of injustice in the first place. When Mirzoeff's redacted photographs reveal these "spaces of nonappearance'", they cease to be spaces

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[79] These include a video still frame of the night-time street scene immediately following the moment 17-year old Laquan McDonald was shot to the ground in 2014; a still from a police dash-cam video revealing the tree-lined country road on which moments before motorist Sandra Bland was stopped and arrested for "failing to signal a lane change" (Mirzoeff; 2017) and who was to subsequently be found dead in her cell; and a further video freeze frame of the moment University of Chicago graduate Philip Coleman was tasered inside a prison cell following his incarceration after he had suffered "a psychotic episode at his mother's house" (ibid.)

of "nonappearance" and instead become images that *create* appearance. This is because they *make apparent* the workings of injustice that the perpetrators had intended to be unseen. As with *A Friend Recently Told Me*, the absenting of a visual element works to make apparent that which the perpetrators of injustice had intended to conceal.

Making oppression apparent through absence is a concept that may also be interpreted in the short film *Boulevard el Assad* (2001) by Syrian conceptual artist and filmmaker Ammar al-Beik. Visually, the film consists entirely of a single 1-minute tracking shot—a grainy closeup of the asphalt surface of a road, filmed from the angle of someone presumably inside a moving car whilst dangling/gliding the camera out of an open window or door. According to al-Beik, the film's title is that of a boulevard in Beirut, Lebanon. The film's brief synopsis—available on the artist's Vimeo page online—makes it clear that the location was chosen for its eponymous name, indicating the political power and force wielded over Lebanon during the Syrian regime's occupation. The visual subject of the film is a closeup of the asphalt surface of Boulevard el Assad—"the biggest street in Beirut", according to al-Beik's synopsis. That the "biggest street in Beirut" should share the same name as the dynastic dictatorship of Syria reveals the most obvious symbolism of the film: that of the Assad regime's then control over Lebanese public space and a daily reminder of its pervasiveness to every Beirut-dweller obliged to walk or drive through that urban stretch of dedicatory tyranny. Conceptually, the film shares common ground with Masao Adachi and Kōji Wakamatsu's "Fukeiron" (landscape theory), explicitly articulated in their own Lebanon-based militant film *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War* (1971)— in which the featured urban and rural landscapes of Lebanon (captured with human subjects mostly out of frame) allude to the power exercised over these spaces by the ruling Lebanese authorities, as well as their possible contestation by the guerrilla fighters of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) as they prepare for war. Whilst

the film *does* include visual footage of both the PFLP Fedayeen and their comrades of the Japanese Red Army, these shots are intercut among the extended scenes of landscape and interiors during which direct images of the primary belligerents are absent. Human presence is felt and maintained primarily via the audible voices of Fusako Shigenobu[80] and other key personalities being interviewed—a soundtrack that forms the accompanying audio to the kinetic landscape shots. What is key here is that this presence of personified militancy is again constant throughout the film without the need to reveal the faces or images of these very people.

Reading the "absent image" concept into *Boulevard el Assad* is possible insofar as the image of the Syrian dissident making the film remains unseen despite his political motivation—and thus existence—being unmistakably present. In this sense, if the film is to be interpreted in this "absent image" reading, it becomes even more extreme than *PFLP/Red Army,* for its complete eschewing of any direct image of its human subject in contrast to Adachi and Wakamatsu's inclusion of visual snippets revealing faces in interview and guerrillas in training. *Boulevard el Assad* may even be interpreted as constituting a more extreme example of an "absent image" strategy than *Testimony of a former detainee* and *A Friend Recently Told Me* for the film does not even use the sound of the Syrian activist's voice in order to create presence. Wujoud in this film is manifested entirely in the viewer's knowledge that they are watching a work made by a Syrian democrat at a time when Syrian democrats' very existence is under threat.

A further comparison can be drawn between the absent image strategy applied in *Boulevard el Assad* to that of the video footage filmed by the anonymous Damascus-based Syrian artist as part of her contribution to the audio-visual installation *—door open—*

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[80] Fusako Shigenobu was the founder and leader of the Lebanon-based Japanese Red Army. See Furuhata (2013), p.179.

(2019). I provide a more extensive description of —*door open*— in a later chapter of this thesis in which I focus on the installation's ability in achieving a 'soft' wujoud based on the concept of reflection (see pages 180-183). Here however, I will briefly reference the work as an example of its 'absent image' approach.

In —*door open*— the activist shooting the film does not reveal her identity. The only part of her body she chooses to include in the recorded footage, are her feet, as she walks along the surface of unidentified locations of regime-controlled Damascus. Wujoud here is stimulated because the audience is aware that the footage is shot by a democratic opponent of the Syrian regime, thus confirming her existence despite the regime's official denial; and because, via the restrictive self-censored footage she records, the film makes apparent the regime's surveillance apparatus and its propensity for lethal violence, thus destabilising the regime's self-proclamations of being benevolently protective of the country's people. Viewed together, both —*door open*— and *Boulevard el Assad* testify to the static nature of the Assad dictatorship: that despite the near twenty years separating the two works, both films reveal the Assadist state's ability to compel Syrians under its rule to a life of restricted existence; and that the restrictive conditions of this existence seem to be unchanging, no matter how much time elapses, so long as the Assad regime remains seemingly fixed and unmovable. These two films demonstrate that whilst images captured by Syrian activists under regime surveillance often remain allusive, symbolic and anonymised—by virtue of their authors' need to self-protect whilst inhabiting regime-controlled territory—they still evidence the continued presence of a democratic opposition to the Assadist state: a wujoud enacted via the strategy of emitting this oppositional presence despite the absence of the activist's own identifiable visuality, and thus methodologically similar to the "absent image" strategy applied in *Testimony of a former detainee* and *A Friend Recently Told Me*.

4.7   The Propagandist:

A brief back-story

I was introduced to Lina Shamy over Facebook's messenger application, on 22nd October 2016.   A London-based Syrian activist had put us in touch.   They had both studied at the faculty of architecture at the University of Aleppo prior to and during the civil uprising, which they had both participated in.   Lina had remained in Aleppo, and was by then trapped in the city's East, with her husband, as it had come under siege by the regime's troops and Iranian-backed Shiite militias.   I spoke to her briefly on Facebook messenger, and asked if she and her husband Yusuf would be willing to skype in to an event I was organising at University of the Arts London.   I had organised the one-night session, entitled Syrian Voices, as an opportunity for students at my institution to hear the first hand testimony of Syrian activists exiled in the UK, as well as of those that were still in the midst of conflict on the ground in Syria.   Lina and her husband skyped in for the session, giving the student audience a brief account of the daily political situation they were living through whilst under siege.   A month later, Lina was to become a recognised face on television news as Assad and Putin stepped up their offensive on her besieged home-town.   By early December the combined airforces of Russia and the Assad dictatorship had escalated their bombardments of the area, reigning bombs down upon the city relentlessly.   Lina was one of the young English-speaking activists that were being given a platform on television news across the world, to inform global audiences of the situation she and her compatriots were in and what the residents of the territory were being subjected to under the aerial bombing raids.   From the skies, devastation was being wrought upon the city's civilians and medical infrastructure, provoking worldwide outrage and condemnation by a multitude of human rights organisations and international NGOs.   The assaults were not new however: earlier that May, in an emergency meeting at the United Nations, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) President Dr. Joanne Liu, had already condemned Russia and the Assad

regime for committing war crimes in their deliberate and systematic targeting of the area's medical facilities, including the MSF-supported Al Quds hospital.[81]   But it was that December that television news coverage of the situation, including video footage and updates, were being provided by Lina and other Syrian activists and citizen journalists on the ground, all of whom were trapped inside the city.   Alongside Lina, these included Abdulkafi Alhamdo, Monther Etaki, Zouhair al Shimale, Ismail Alabdullah, and 7-year old Harry Potter fan Bana Alabed.   The video footage of general views and on-the-ground reporting that was shot by these individuals, alongside the testimony they gave through live video calls over Skype, provided the bulk of the Aleppo-focused coverage to news outlets across the globe, securing broadcasts on channels such as the BBC, Sky News, TRT World, CNN, Al Jazeera, France 25 and the online Democracy Now.   The UK's Channel 4 went even further by featuring, on a near-nightly basis, Syrian filmmaker Waad al-Kateab's video observations of the inside of Aleppo's hospitals, revealing a close-up of the daily stories of each human individual's loss and suffering—a video diary she would later turn into an award-winning feature documentary entitled *For Sama* (2019), in a co-direction with Edward Watts, and go on to win the Prix L'Œil d'or for best documentary at the Cannes Film Festival in summer 2019.

4.8   The Eva Bartlett video

It was during that December—in the midst of the regime's assault on opposition-held Aleppo—that I came across the Eva Bartlett video.   It had been published by an online news outlet I had not heard of at the time, that went by the name of In the Now, which I

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[81] The video of her full speech at the UN can be viewed on Youtube via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scWfecSmP_k [Date of last access: 12th September 2019].
Further details can be viewed on the MSF website via the following url: https://www.msf.org.au/article/project-news/syria-al-quds-hospital-destroyed-airstrikes [Accessed 12 September 2019].

later discovered was a spin-off of Russia's state-funded news channel RT.[82] Captioned with the phrase "Independent Canadian journo totally crushes MSM reporter on what's actually going on in Syria", the video had been shared by a couple of people from my Facebook friends list, neither of whom were Syrian, nor were they experts on the country and its political situation. In fact, they were both individuals that had not demonstrated any significant history of concern in Syria's state of affairs on their social media accounts. For this reason their sharing of the video concerned me, for it demonstrated how effectively non-experts could be taken in and won over by the claims made as part of a calculated propaganda stunt.

I engaged with both of these friends of mine on their Facebook walls—an electronic space viewable to everyone on their friends lists. The more politically aware individual seemed to be sympathetic to my concerns, and after an amicable and constructive discussion, swiftly removed the video from his timeline. I had made sure to provide him with links to some of Lina Shamy's videos in our exchange, and offered to put him and some of his other colleagues in touch with her, over Facebook, should they have had the interest to engage directly with Syrian activists in the part of Aleppo that was under aerial bombardment. By contrast, it was the other individual who had shared the Bartlett video that did *not* respond to the comment I left under his post. I was careful to make sure my tone was one of amicable advice as I stated that the video was a PR stunt by a pro-Assad propagandist, already known to the Syrian activist community.[83] It was however a friend of his that

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[82] In the Now's connection to RT and its participation in pushing a pro-Assad regime narrative, along with pro-Kremlin disinformation via its video content, is reported on in the following articles by Buzzfeed News and EU vs Disinformation. [Accessed 12 September 2019]:

https://www.buzzfeed.com/ishmaeldaro/quirky-viral-video-channel-is-funded-by-the-russian-govt

https://euvsdisinfo.eu/rt-goes-undercover-as-in-the-now/

[83] I had already been familiar with the name Eva Bartlett prior to the video's emergence, having heard of her and her pro-regime blogging from others in the circle of activists I was involved with. I had never bothered to read or watch any of her media content prior to the release of this video however, as I knew that there already were individuals within our extended network of activists, who were following and archiving her propaganda.

decided to engage me on the comment thread. We had a diplomatic debate on Syria in general, but his views revealed the usual pro-regime talking points: Assad's government is secular; the uprising was a Western-instigated conspiracy; the West are funding and arming Jihadis who are trying to take over the country, etc. I realised my interlocutor was someone who genuinely believed in the pro-Assad narrative of events, and I sensed that the others who had clicked on the "like" tab under the Bartlett video that my friend had shared, were all being persuaded by its politics, possibly due to very limited knowledge of the Syrian situation, or perhaps because they were already on board with the pro-Assad line. None the less, the person I was debating conceded that I had made some "valid points" and accepted to watch one of the videos I posted in our exchange. The conversation ended.

Then a third friend—also non-Syrian, but this time someone who had in the past expressed sympathy to the Syrian revolutionary cause, and had often 'liked' and shared my Facebook posts on the topic—suddenly posted a shorter edit of the Bartlett video (3 minutes, 25 seconds) on her Facebook timeline. This time, the video had been published by Unscripted, a self-described news channel by ScoopWhoop—another online media outlet I had not heard of—that listed its address in Delhi, India. Perhaps more tabloid-like in its presentation than that of the In the Now version, the shortened video had been repackaged with dramatic music, video titles and the inclusion of stock war footage, completed with the headline "Canadian journalist exposes the lies of the Western media and the US about the war in Syria".[84] I remember commenting, in a somewhat exhausted state, on my friend's timeline under the video she had posted, expressing my surprise that she out of so many people, would post a video of that nature. Although I remember her

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[84] The video seems to have been exclusively disseminated on Facebook, a link to which can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/ScoopWhoopUnscripted/videos/580686822128516/ [Accessed 12 September 2019].

responding sympathetically, looking back at her timeline three years later, my typed comment was nowhere to be seen, yet the video remained.

I remained disturbed. It had taken so little for some perhaps well-meaning people to be misled by the pro-Assad narrative, to the extent that they had felt it appropriate to share what I could see was a blatant propaganda video. The fact that they had come across the video in the first place indicated the pervasive reach that the regime's propaganda continued to have. Why, I asked myself, had they ignored BBC or Channel 4 interviews with some of the Syrian activists still in Aleppo, and had instead chosen to share content published by a virtually-unknown internet news outlet[85] that seemed to have suddenly come out of nowhere?   And upon seeing the video, my friends had evidently been convinced by its caption and content to have thought it worth sharing on their own social media accounts, without any disclaimers, as if it had been in the interest of all their Facebook connections to see. What was particularly worrying was the apparent ease and speed at which they had been convinced—at least briefly—by what seemed to me, to be so obviously conspiratorial. Bartlett claimed to be a journalist, yet most likely had not been known to my friends that had shared the video; and the claims she had made directly contradicted international news headlines, on-the-ground TV interviews with Syrian activists, and the human rights NGO reports that were making headline news around the world. Surely her status as an "independent" journalist should have been questioned by my friends, as well as her allegations that the world's news was "lying" whilst she, out of everyone else, was telling the "truth". And yet my friends had chosen to share this Syria-related video, apparently because they had suddenly saw this unknown—and non-Syrian—figure, as a credible authority on the subject. The indication was that my friends had a worryingly low level of critical filtering towards Syria-related content.

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[85] According to its own Youtube account, In the Now is registered as having been set up in May 2016—seven months prior to the publication of the Bartlett video.

4.9   The film

A year later, I made a film that would respond to that video.   The film, entitled *The Propagandist* (2018) functions as a 26-minute debunking of the claims made by Bartlett during her participation as a panelist at that December 2016 United Nations-set conference.   The film is comprised of extracts from the full-length recording of the conference, methodically intercut with footage from Syrian activist-made videos, close-up shots of websites, regime-filmed torture video, and even one segment of Russian-made pro-regime war propaganda.   There had already been one talking head response to Bartlett's video in 2016, by an exiled Syrian activist sitting in his white-walled study somewhere in the world,[86] extracts of which were also used in the film.

Bartlett had been virtually unheard of outside of pro-Assad circles and the Syrian activist communities she was opposed to until her 2016 propaganda video appeared online. The video, which focussed solely on her participation as a panelist in the conference, went viral soon after the original full-length conference video was published on the United Nations TV website[87] four days earlier. As she speaks, the United Nations logo is seen behind her as a patterned backdrop—a visual feature that perhaps contributed to the air of credibility that some may have sensed when encountering the short propaganda stunt for the first time.   Yet the video did not reveal how her press conference at the UN came into being. This is the first point that is drawn attention to with *The Propagandist*'s opening frame: a close shot of my computer screen, on which we see Bartlett's name being typed into the search bar of the United Nations TV website. A thumbnail of the full-length video of the

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[86] The video can be viewed via the following url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6Fr3UVocH0&app=desktop&fbclid=IwAR0yYPHrUA7lmGSBjVD0y3AnrIP9IcmKgEra_mcuUR_PnERsXD2ZM1lmDk4 [Accessed 12 September 2019].

[87] The full length recording of the press conference hosted by the Assad regime is accessible via the United Nations TV website via the following url: http://webtv.un.org/search/permanent-mission-of-the-syrian-arab-republic-to-the-united-nations-press-conference-9-december-2016/5241732190001/?term=Eva%20Bartlett&sort=date&page=3 [Accessed 12 September 2019].

press conference then appears on the computer monitor. Its description reveals it to be a recording of a press conference held by Syria's permanent mission to the United Nations. Bartlett was therefore part of a small panel of individuals that the Syrian regime had handpicked and entrusted to face an audience of journalists from around the world, all attendant at the United Nations building in New York. And what had Bartlett been entrusted to talk about? According to the spokesperson of the Assad regime's UN mission —who is the first person to be seen speaking in the full-length UN video—she and her fellow panellists (four in total) had been invited to talk about "the Syrian fight against terrorism".

My intention with *The Propagandist* was to provide a methodical and comprehensive debunking of all the false claims and assertions made in Bartlett's speech. To enable this debunking film to reach as wide an audience as possible, I uploaded it to Youtube as soon as it was completed in January 2018 and promoted it online within my circle of activists in the hope that it would go "viral". In terms of how I constructed the film and its content, my approach can be interpreted as applying wujoud via three distinct techniques:

First, by including footage of Syrian activists on the ground in East Aleppo—who provide on-camera testimony of the situation they are living through whilst under siege and bombardment—wujoud in its most elementary form is enacted. Syrian activists verbally countering the claims made by Bartlett whilst standing on the war-ravaged rooftops and levelled streets of East Aleppo, as well as one exiled outside the country vlogging from his own bedroom, amounts to the act of Syrian democrats evidencing their own existence to the world—an existence that Bartlett had ignored in her conference address;

Second, by revealing that the host of the press conference was in fact the Assad regime's permanent mission to the UN, *The Propagandist* makes clear the role played by the regime delegation in bringing their vetted panel together, as well as the reason for Bartlett's inclusion within it. Yet the film provides no commentary or opinion on this detail. Instead, it relies on the inclusion of footage from the UN video that the In the Now edited version had left out. And it is precisely this inclusion of a further few minutes of footage from the same conference, that undermines the claim often made by Bartlett's supporters of her alleged status as an "independent" journalist.   The revelation of the regime delegation's presence, and their hosting of the press conference, sabotages the illusion of unbiased, non-aligned independence that the edited versions of the video had attempted to construct. Indeed, how can a journalist be regarded as politically independent if she is willingly and knowingly allowing herself to be hosted and given a platform by a major belligerent to the conflict? If In the Now is, as is claimed in a December 2016 Buzzfeed article by Ishmael N. Daro, to be identified as a channel that operates as part of the Russian state's propaganda arm, then the pro-Assad narrative of events—which for military and political reasons ought to logically align with that of Russia's—would likely be one that is promoted in any Syria-related content produced by the channel. If this is the case, then the intention of In the Now's decision to edit out the regime's presence and its hosting and convening of the conference, hints at another regime propaganda tactic— namely, that the regime's policy of denial also extends to denying its own presence when it considers it to be detrimental to its propaganda effort. And it is precisely this intention that *The Propagandist* seeks to counter by revealing the regime's organising of the conference. And it is this revelation of the regime's presence that constitutes the second wujoud technique applied in this film. The presence of the regime in itself is not a wujoud in the political sense, but if this presence is evidenced at a time when it had sought to deny it for furthering its narrative component of genocide, then the act of imposing upon

the regime the recorded evidence of its own presence, turns the regime's presence into a wujoud that resists its propaganda narrative. This is because the regime's own presence undermines its own attempts to conceal its PR effort (in this case the PR of a United Nations-held conference featuring an allegedly independent journalist); and since its PR effort is part of its narrative component of genocide, imposing evidence of the regime's own presence unto itself at a time when it did not want to draw attention to it in front of certain audiences, constitutes a wujoud resistance. Medusa could not, after all, see evidence of herself in a mirror;

The third type of wujoud concerns the idea of revealing the existence of an agenda. In the film, the countering of each of Bartlett's claims with those made by Syrian activists in Aleppo, or by a Syrian activist in exile, the regime's—and in its service, Bartlett's—agenda is made apparent. Alongside the aggregated clips of Syrian activists, the addition of NGO material, Russian-made war propaganda, and visual evidence of the regime's atrocities all combine to contextualise Bartlett's words—words that she, and her promoters, had attempted to sell *without* context, to a target audience of low-level knowledge on Syria. The In the Now video that was supposed to promote the regime's narrative, revealed Bartlett only in a superficial sense: her face, and her words—elements that were, for propaganda purposes, to be taken at face value. But Bartlett's presence (or existence) on the Syria scene becomes known in more than just a superficial capacity as one watches the unfolding debunking process presented in *The Propagandist*. The wujoud of context created in the film therefore becomes a wujoud of resistance, exposing Bartlett's manipulative rhetoric and revealing her as part of the regime's propaganda effort.

4.10   A reasonable argument

Like *The Propagandist*, *A reasonable argument* (2018) is a short film I created that incorporates the exposing of another pro-Assad public commentator engaged in the promotion of dehumanising and denialist narratives against Syrian democrats. The film—screened at London College of Communication in December 2018; and to students on my activist filmmaking classes[88]—consists of a series of black and white photographs I took at a political demonstration led by Syrian activists in Trafalgar Square, London, at the end of summer 2018.   The gathering was intended to raise awareness of the Assad regime's long-standing policy of conducting mass executions of civil activists held in detention—a crime the United Nations Commission of Enquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has referred to as "a state policy of "extermination" of the civilian population" (2016).   Expressed through the staging of a "die-in", the demonstration consisted of each participant assuming the identity of an individual killed under torture in the regime's detention centres.   In the images I captured, 2 or 3-digit numbers are seen written over the foreheads of each demonstrator. These are numerical figures that parallel those scribed, in Arabic, on cards that appear alongside the dead bodies of individuals seen in the Caesar files—a cache of photographs smuggled out of Syria by a military defector in August 2013.   Identified by their families and friends,[89] the victims in those photographs are known to have been detained by the regime, and are thus confirmed to have been killed during their incarceration.   In my photographs of the demonstration, the activists are seen wearing these numbers across their foreheads as identification markers of the victims they are representing in the "die-in". Perhaps to get the message across to observing pedestrians, the demonstrators also display sheets of paper on which are printed—in a sans serif

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[88] For further details on screenings and audience reactions see chapter, **5. *Final Thoughts and Conclusion*** (pp. 185-200), and *appendix* (p.204).

[89] Reactions of people to seeing photographs of their detained relatives among the Caesar files can be viewed in the following Human Rights Watch video from 01:26: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=570&v=eQni3qn6GIU [Accessed 15 September 2019].

capitalised font, and sometimes omitting definite articles—the victims' names, their professional or social statuses, and causes of death:

I AM REHAB AL-

ALLAWI FROM DEIR

AL-ZOR

I HAVE BEEN

TORTURED TO DEATH

BY THE SYRIAN

GOVERNMENT .I WAS

ENGINEERING

STUDENT

As well as displaying literary and numerical references to the murdered detainees, participants of the demonstration were also directed by its organisers to physically perform, through mime, a simplified story of arrest, detention and death, culminating in the group of activists taking up spaces on the ground and collectively playing dead. In my photographs, the demonstrators—dressed in black and covered in white chalk dust, with some wearing white masks—are seen lying silently on the ground in a disorderly array of bodies concentrated over an area of concrete. With some participants wearing T-shirts and trainers, the black and white images remind me of those photos of atrocities of recent history—specifically those of civil-wars in the latter half of the 20th century, such as in Lebanon or Cyprus—that captured the aftermath of massacres. Having known that the participants were requested to wear black or dark colours when the call-out was made, I decided to capture the action in high-contrast black and white film, so as to emphasise the protagonists' visibility and their performance, against the lighter-shaded backdrop of Trafalgar Square.

Alongside the photographs taken of the demonstration, *A reasonable argument* makes use of some of the limited images made publicly-available from the Caesar files. Originally comprised of digitally-captured colour images of the corpses of political detainees killed under torture, I de-saturated them to monochrome in order to match the black and white analogue stills of the die-in. Out of these, it is specifically those images that reveal groups of bodies—near-naked, bruised, burned, and gaunt to the point of skin stretched over skeleton—that trigger images of the Holocaust into my mind.

Triggering memories of the Holocaust, and genocide more broadly, is an intended outcome of *A reasonable argument*. The film demonstrates the incongruity of a supposedly reasoned argument—expressed verbally as an audio track—with that of photographs that collectively illustrate a reality that is contradictory and irreconcilable with the argument being implied in the audio. Like its predecessor *The Propagandist* (2018), *A Reasonable Argument* takes a well-known figure in the international pro-Assad camp, and recreates a platform for this individual, allowing their argument to be heard once again, whilst juxtaposing it with the presence of Syrian activists. But whilst *The Propagandist* relied on a technique of alternating audio-visual material on equal terms—namely alternating between segments of pro and anti-Assad talking heads and videos—*A Reasonable Argument* reverts to playing with the idea of the "absent image".

The most obvious conceptual application of the "absent image" in the film is that of concealing the image of the speaker making the argument. George Galloway's voice is heard, but his visual image is withheld.[90] In theory, this does not undermine his argument. As elaborated on in an earlier chapter, the pro-Assad narrative was constructed out of the

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[90] See pages 72-77 for an analysis of Galloway's participation in the Assad regime's narrative component of genocide.

written and spoken word, and *not* out of any evidentiary images. And the written and spoken words of the Assadist narrative were designed precisely to undermine public faith in—and ultimately render as absent—those images evidencing the existence of a Syrian democracy movement, and of those evidencing the regime's crimes. Galloway's words are therefore his weapon of choice. The withholding of visual footage of him in a lecture hall does not undermine the argument he seeks to make. Therefore, the film's conceptual application of an absented image in itself, is harmless to Galloway. In fact, although the film contrasts the absence of Galloway's image with that of photographic stills of Syrian activists, the film also withholds any audio recording of the featured Syrian activists. Galloway's voice is present, but an audio of activist voices is not. Both sides in this film are therefore denied an element of their presence, whether it be their image or their voices. However, neither of these elements are required by the opposing sides in order to make their respective points. Galloway aimed to convince his audience through his speech, and the activists aimed to raise awareness of their cause through a silent visual happening. The film therefore does not deny anything to either side. In fact, the film condenses the arguments that both sides had sought to make via means of documentation suitable for their preservation, publication and continued dissemination: the audio recording of speech, and the capturing of images of a non-verbal action.

It is when these two elements of documentation are brought together however, that the visual evidence begins to expose the manipulative disingenuousness of Galloway's spoken word. Galloway speaks of the "character of the Syrian opposition". His use of the definite article—"the"—indicates an intention to present the entirety of the anti-Assad movement as monolithic in character. "Fanatic, head-chopping, heart-eating maniacs" are his often-used stock epithets of choice for reducing the Syrian opposition to the singular status of Al Qaeda-type terrorists. His use of the definite article "the" when referring to the

opposition as singular, implies an intention to discourage recognition of the existence of a democratic and civil opposition. Simultaneously, his erasure of the human and civil element within the Syrian opposition sets up a trajectory that leads towards justification for the regime's use of military force against the group he has described. He declares that he "fully support[s] the Syrian Arab Army and their allies", because he "want[s] to see every member of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and every organisation like them, dead". His words are in full accordance with the Assad regime's propaganda line—namely that the opposition, in its entirety, are composed of terrorists, and the regime's war is all about defeating these terrorists through the use of force. The narrative he constructs therefore, does not merely refuse to acknowledge the existence of a civil opposition, but actively works to render any such opposition as materially non-existent in the collective imagination of his audience—a rhetoric that amounts to the dehumanisation of all Syrians in opposition to the Assad regime. It makes no difference that the physical image of Galloway giving these speeches is not shown in this film or any other platform he has access to, for his objective to persuade his audience has always been intended to be made by the words he uses. Given his public profile and influence on certain sections of British and international political opinion (namely segments of self-identifying anti-imperialists and nominally anti-war campaigners) his Syria discourse can therefore be considered a crucial part of the Assad regime's propaganda narrative—one that is essential in order to justify the destruction of a people before the eyes of the world. His rhetoric fits the purposes of the Assadist narrative: so long as those being killed are considered as nothing more than Al Qaeda-like terrorists, so long are the regime's military manoeuvres excusable, tolerable and even justified. Galloway's words can therefore be considered to be an extension of the regime's propaganda effort, constituting a crucial part in its narrative component of genocide. In this sense, Galloway becomes complicit in the genocide process through the

construction of dehumanising narratives and his participation in agitating for societal approval and support for atrocity crimes.

Back to the absent image. Galloway's words were said with the intention of rendering non-existent the civil and democratic part of the anti-Assad movement. He intended, with his rhetoric, to absent this human demographic from his Syria-focused discourse. Yet his rhetoric—condensed here by use of extracts from four of his public speeches[91]—fails with its intention when juxtaposed with the stills from the Syrian activist-led die-in in Trafalgar Square, as well as with those images of three civilians—first alive, and later dead—killed in the regime's detention centres; and with those shots of groups of emaciated corpses reminiscent of Holocaust images. The incongruity of conflicting narratives created by this juxtaposition exposes Galloway's words as a calculated intention *to* absent—a plan to absent a people from the debate. His intention to render absent a civil opposition and the crimes of the regime is undermined by the accompanying photographic evidence of Syrian democrats and regime atrocity crimes. Ultimately, with the film's visuality consisting of photographs of the regime's human victims—dead and alive—*A Reasonable Argument* is an attempt to imprint a lasting visual image of these people and their trauma into the memories of its viewers: an attempt to preserve these silent images of a people's existence, and the evidence of the crimes committed against them, through strobing into the infinite recesses of the mind's eye.

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[91] Defenders of Galloway may claim that in using only short extracts of his speeches, the film decontextualises his words and therefore misrepresents his intended meaning. However, time taken to follow Galloway's public statements and addresses on Syria since 2005 should make clear that the extracts used in *A Reasonable Argument* reflect precisely his long-standing support of the Assad regime—one that predates the civil uprising—and the fact that a democratic Syrian opposition does not feature anywhere in his discourse except for a 2011 article (a recognition he has never repeated since, and which has instead been replaced by a subsequent parliamentary campaign and on-going media discourse that has framed the entirety of the Syrian opposition as Al-Qaed-type jihadists, alongside repeated public broadcasts declaring support for the Assad regime and its international allies).

4.11   Resistance through disturbance

A Reasonable Argument's use of holocaust-like photographs situate the film within a historic landscape of militant and activist art that share an ethos of provoking reactions through the exposure of disturbing material or enactments. Whilst political performance artists from the Viennese Actionists of the 1960s to more contemporary political performers such as Pussy Riot or Pyotr Pavlensky, often rely on the act of extreme self-harm (such as the performer sewing their mouth closed or cutting their scalp with a knife) and the public display of nominally anti-social behaviour (such as urinating in someone's mouth or masturbating in public) as a form of political protest, it can be argued that the reality of the Syrian genocide—as revealed in disturbing audio-visual documentation—is so emotionally unsettling that its very exhibition in its raw form is enough to stir an "ethical crisis" in anyone who bears witness. The political symbolism of performance art makes visible an injustice which people may be aware exists, with the symbolic performance serving to fill the void of where the injustices have remained materially unrecorded.   However, in the Syrian context, genocide is evidenced by audio-visual footage and photographs of atrocities and crimes in compound with the physical reality of what the UNHCR calls the largest refugee exodus since the second world war's aftermath (2015).[92]   The stirring of empathy among non-Syrians is therefore left only to the possibility of the haphazard consequence of people taking notice of the evidence before them. Since the Assad regime has a vested interest in maintaining popular ignorance of the Syrian genocide, it has been up to Syrian democracy activists to bring to the attention of a global audience the video evidence of the regime's on-going crimes. Based on audience reactions to my own use of atrocity footage in the activist films I have created (when screened at London College of Communication; an academic conference in Lille;

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[92] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees states in the following 2015 report, that "the current number of displaced globally is nonetheless the highest since the aftermath of World War II":https://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7 [Accessed 15 September 2019].

an exhibition at the Senesi Contemporanea art gallery in London; and my conversations with Syrian activists, including exiled filmmaker Ossama Mohammed) it has come to be my belief that the exposure of such footage to the outside world—specifically that of material often of a disturbing nature—plays a significant role in resisting the Assad regime's narrative of denial.

Whilst my use of such material in the work I create does *not* constitute theatrical performance, one reason for my use of such material lies in part to my reading of the theories developed by a key figure in Western theatre—Antonin Artaud. The idea of a performance art disturbing an audience out of their position of comfort may be traced back to Artaud's vision for a radical stage practice. Artaud referred to this envisioned practice as the *Theatre of Cruelty* (1933). His vision was based on the belief that an audience must have their collective nervous system assaulted; they must be perturbed and shaken out of their comfortable apathy. He maintained that audiences had to be imposed upon and disturbed into vigour through the various theatrical techniques he envisioned for this type of theatre. Although predating the *Theatre of Cruelty* text, the idea of performing provocation in the vein envisioned by Artaud, may have inhabited a space within the Dadaist and Surrealist movements with which he had previously been involved. Cinematically, this is perhaps most explicitly detected in the eye-slitting shot seen in Buñuel and Dalí's Surrealist collaboration *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). But the *Theatre of Cruelty* as well as the Dada and Surrealists' conceptual lineages perhaps stem from Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*—a play that premiered and closed on the same night of 10th December 1896, following a riot among its audience, allegedly provoked by the work's elements of outrageous obscenity, bizarreness in form, content and costume, and intermittences of linguistic nonsensicalities, sounds and noises that created an overall wildness that amounted to a manifest rejection of the period's social conventions.[93]

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[93] See Keith Beaumont's *Jarry: Ubu Roi* (1987).

The manner in which an art form may play upon the sensorial and the human nervous system also constitutes a primary focus area of theories pertaining to experiential film viewing, cognitive embodiment and affect theory, all of which analyse the sensorial experience of arts practice. Vivian Sobchack effectively encapsulates these ideas in her elaboration of an 'embodied awareness' through what she describes as a "documentary consciousness" in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004). A closer analysis of her account—outlined in chapter **3.3** (page 105)—offers a theoretical justification for the use and viewing of potentially unsettling imagery in audio-visual resistant practice, while simultaneously—taken in compound with Artaud's ideas—leads to a consideration of a more experimental approach to these practices.

Sobchak's "documentary consciousness" details the idea that when watching a film, the experience of being confronted with an uncomfortable reality on screen is able to trigger an ethically and morally problematic condition within the spectator. Both Artaud and Sobchack's ideas on how humans respond to specific audio-visual situations may be described as phenomena that come under Josephine Machon's concept of (syn)aesthetics—a term used to describe both a particular form of visceral performative art and an audience's pre-reflective embodied experience of that art: a set of audio-visual and physical aesthetics that play upon our haptic, olfactory, cerebral and physical receptors—creating the embodied experience—before our intellectual thought processing kicks in.[94] Machon explains that there is a sense of synesthesia in the visceral process of corporeally understanding this style of art. Like the symptoms of the medical condition known as synesthesia—which result in the sufferer experiencing an acute confusion of the senses—Machon conceptualises the (syn)aesthetic style of art as causing a series of corporeal and visceral sensations of embodied understandings, which is what led to her

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[94] See Machon's *(Syn)aesthetics: Redefining Visceral Performance* (2009), and page 4 of the introduction for a summary of the concept.

conceptualising it under the neologism of (syn)aesthetics—a hybrid of synesthesia and aesthetics. Machon's theory draws from an earlier conceptualisation of a synesthetic understanding of visual art which was expressed in Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) in which he elaborated upon the use of colour and form in painting as a means of stimulating psychological and spiritual affects and sensations—or more precisely, the idea that colour was associated with musical sounds.

4.12   Participation and provocation

A key element of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974) is the idea that an audience is invited to intervene and participate in the real-world problem being re-enacted on stage: the idea that an audience would break out of their status as passive spectators and instead metamorphise into what he termed "spect(actors)" (parenthesis my own).   This concept of participation holds powerful potential for a radical cinematic resistance practice, especially with regards to achieving an inter-subjective alignment with the Syrian activists on screen.

But what if this audience intervention was not so much invited but rather provoked, or brought about, beyond the will of the audience? Could an Artaudian position to unsettle and disturb merge with a Boalian ethos to inspire participation, generating an affect[95]-driven condition in which an audience would feel so provoked and emotionally unsettled that it would lead to a non-voluntary participation and involvement in the crisis dealt with in the audio-visual material?   Would this level of ethical crisis and political urgency be heightened if the intentions of these stage theories were applied to a cinematic work that was able to immerse its audience in an environment that reached out beyond the confines

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[95] 'Affect' denotes the immediate cerebral-corporeal responses of the audience in reaction to audio-visual stimuli. The effectual experience is not a reaction based on contemplation and intellectual thought-processing. Intellectual reflection of the artwork is considered to take place after the initial moment of the 'affective' experience has passed. As well as Sobchack and Machon, theorists writing in the field of 'affect' in film include Laura U. Marks in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), and Greg Singh in *Feeling Film: Affect and Authenticity in Popular Cinema* (2014).

of a two-dimensional screen?   Is the element of emotional disturbance and trauma necessary for achieving this inter-subjective alignment, or could spect(act)orship be stimulated through use of a spatial interplay with the audio-visual material, bringing about the situation of the film's audience finding themselves in alignment with the Syrian activists on screen without the need for unsettling material?   The following section of this thesis is an attempt to address these questions via an initial consideration of how resistance may be achieved through "embodied" experiences.   This is then followed by an analysis of two of my own works entitled *Statues* (2016) and *(im)position* (2017), found under the subchapters **4.15 Resistance strategy 1: Participation** (page 161) and **4.17 Resistance strategy 2: (im)position** (page 169).

4.13   Embodied awareness: immersion or imposition?

The Expanded Cinema and Structural film movements of the 1960s and 70s experimented in the process of taking audio-visual content beyond the two-dimensional screen and expanding it out onto audiences.   An early example was Stan Van Der Beek's "movie drome" (1963-1965), which consisted of a large walk-in spherical structure in which audiences lay down at the outer edges of the dome to experience the immersive environment of thousands of still and moving images being projected simultaneously across the interior surface of the structure.   Similar experimentation was developed by artists of the psychedelic scenes in San Francisco and London, exemplified in the States by pioneers Elias Romero—who combined light projections of liquids and film and who worked alongside Expressionist Abstract painter Bill Ham; and the Boyle Family in the UK, who utilised the organic interplay between a variety of oil paints and chemicals and the heat of the projector lamp.   Artists from these scenes developed light shows that sought to immerse their audiences in a realm of transcendental, trance-like states, simulating the experiences induced by hallucinogenic substance ingestion.   Whilst these

serve only as examples, the idea of incorporating off-screen audio-visual elements and site-specific conditions in order to bring about a sensorially immersive environment may be applied to the idea of an 'imposition', or a 'provocation' intended as political agitation. Whether the immersive techniques used are those that instil discomfort and anxiety within an audience, or one that relies on a gentler method of stimulating participation, these strategies hold potential for generating an embodied experience of significant physical and emotional intensity.

Whether in the case of imposing a condition of unsettling sensations, or that of bringing forth a gentler immersion into participation, the concept underpinning both methods is that of transferring, or sharing, the political wujoud of the Syrians on/off screen. The intention of such immersive work is to bring its audience into a state of self-awareness: to feel one's own political complicity or responsibility in relation to the Syrian situation. In essence, it is a Syrian revolutionary wujoud transferred to the audience. In this sense, wujoud can be understood as a state of personally-reflexive political consciousness, as well as an embodied understanding. This wujoud invades the mind and corpus of anyone engaging with the Syrian activist or regime's atrocity material: a contagion that brings an inevitable burden of responsibility and complicity upon those sharing a moment with the Syrian activists, whether the activist is a victim of violence, torture or death, or a protestor, witness or militant. This is the audience's wujoud: a wujoud that is reached through the engagement with the Syrian activist—one that is caught off them, like a fever, disease, or sense of guilt.

4.14 Embodied awareness as political action

In her 2013 book *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics*, Furuhata notes that "in 1968, the conception of filmmaking and film viewing as forms of political action was clearly operative". As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this concept seemed to be a defining ethos within the militant cinema ideal of the time, as was manifested by the works, the stated intentions, and the distribution strategies of Solanas, Getino, Rocha, Adachi, Wakamatsu and numerous other filmmakers of the same period. Since my practice is intended to provoke its experiencer into political action, I feel it appropriately fits into this tradition of militant film practice. Yet it is not only the optical viewing of the audio-visual material that may be considered a form of political action, but the embodied experience brought about through the immersive qualities of the cross-disciplinary works I strive to produce. As mentioned in chapter **3.** (entitled وجود)—specifically in subchapter **3.3** (pages 105-111)—it is the internal mechanics (or actions) of the human nervous system, stimulated beyond the experiencer's will, that initiates the embodied awareness and sense of urgency that may have been absent in the period of latent awareness that characterised the experiencer's

Screen shot from Adachi and Wakamatsu's 1971 militant film *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War.*
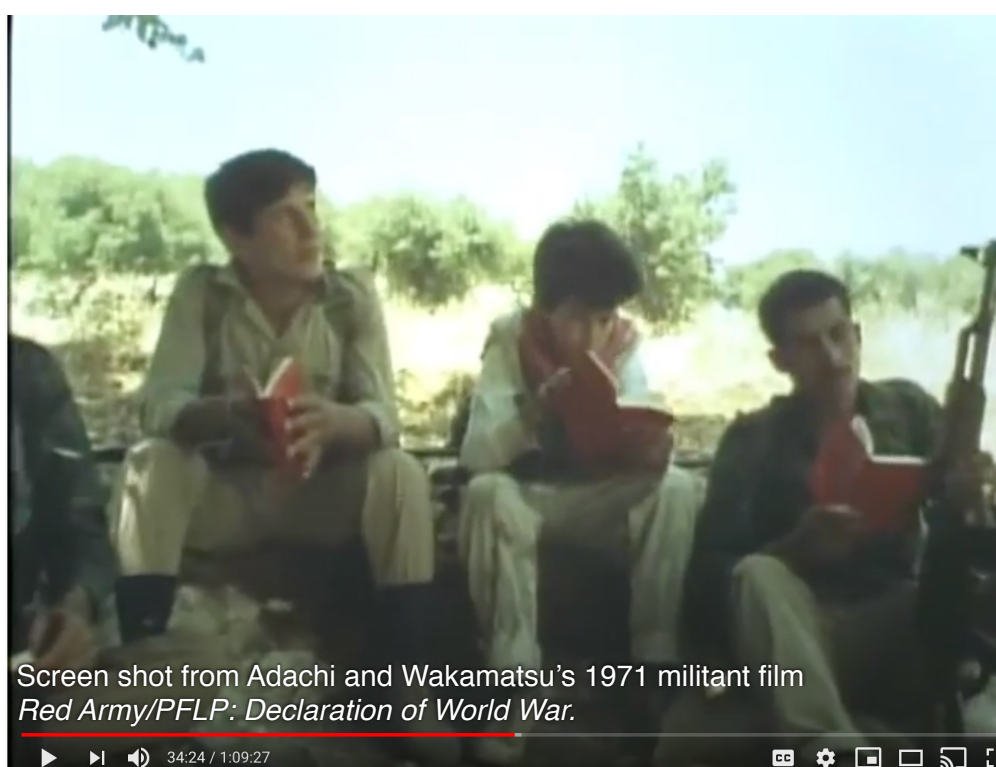
condition prior to entering the immersive work. In my work therefore, political action starts with embodied awareness.

4.15   Resistance strategy 1: Participation

According to Furuhata, the Japanese political avant-garde "had a strong affinity with street politics. The movie theater, for example, was often imagined to be an extension of the streets rather than a place where one escaped from reality" (2013). Describing a film trailer for Nagisa Oshima's *Death by Hanging* (1968), she quotes the director's words as he appears on screen to address his audience: "This is an art theater. But we are not making art. You should also not regard this place as a theater. We made this film just like the way we work or protest on the streets" (Oshima, quoted in Furuhata: 2013). This "contiguity", as referred to by Furuhata, between the movie theatre and the street as existent within the agitational philosophy of the Japanese political avant-garde, is an idea pertinent to another work I co-authored with Syrian civil activists. This piece—a work in progress entitled *Statues* (2017/2019)—consists of a 3:50 minute video, and is also intended to be projected as part of an immersive audio-visual installation. Although I have not yet had the chance to exhibit the work as an installation, what follows is a description of what it would consist of:

On the surfaces of two large walls, video footage will be projected on loop. The projection on each wall will be footage of four Syrian civil society activists standing outside the Russian consulate in London. They stand upright and still, in silence. They hold neither sign nor flag. They make no chant or verbal sound. The projection on each wall allows the activists to be life-size.

On the fourth and third wall, each opposite one of the projected walls, are mounted large mirrors from floor to near-ceiling. Visitors entering the space see themselves standing alongside the life-size projections of the activists when looking at the mirrors. The effect

is a virtual participation in a protest alongside Syrian civil society activists in London. (See Figures 1, 2 and 3).

The piece uses wujoud in its most basic form—the visible presence of Syrian civil activist refugees—as a means of proving their own existence in a public space and therefore demolishing the Russo-Assadist narrative of denial, imposed invisibility and dehumanisation. The wujoud is carried through to a physical participation of audience members, who here become spect(actors), having the opportunity to join the protest and align themselves with the activists. Even if audience members are in disagreement with the politics of the activists, the denial of their existence and the smearing of them as Salafi-Jihadists would be an irrational argument to make whilst in the virtual presence of these Syrian democrats.

What is of particular interest in this piece is the double or even triple life of its performative element. As was the case with the Japanese student movement of the 1960s, the activist protestors in the film are highly media-conscious. Although staging a real protest in the street outside the consulate, the demonstration was performed for camera, with the activists' knowledge of the potential for its distribution via various avenues.[96] The protest was performed live, in the real world, once. Yet its audio-visual record has the potential to be performed ad infinitum via both online distribution and the exhibition space. Even the building of a protest movement may now be possible in the context of the exhibition space given the participatory potential of the work when projected with mirrors. Or can it?
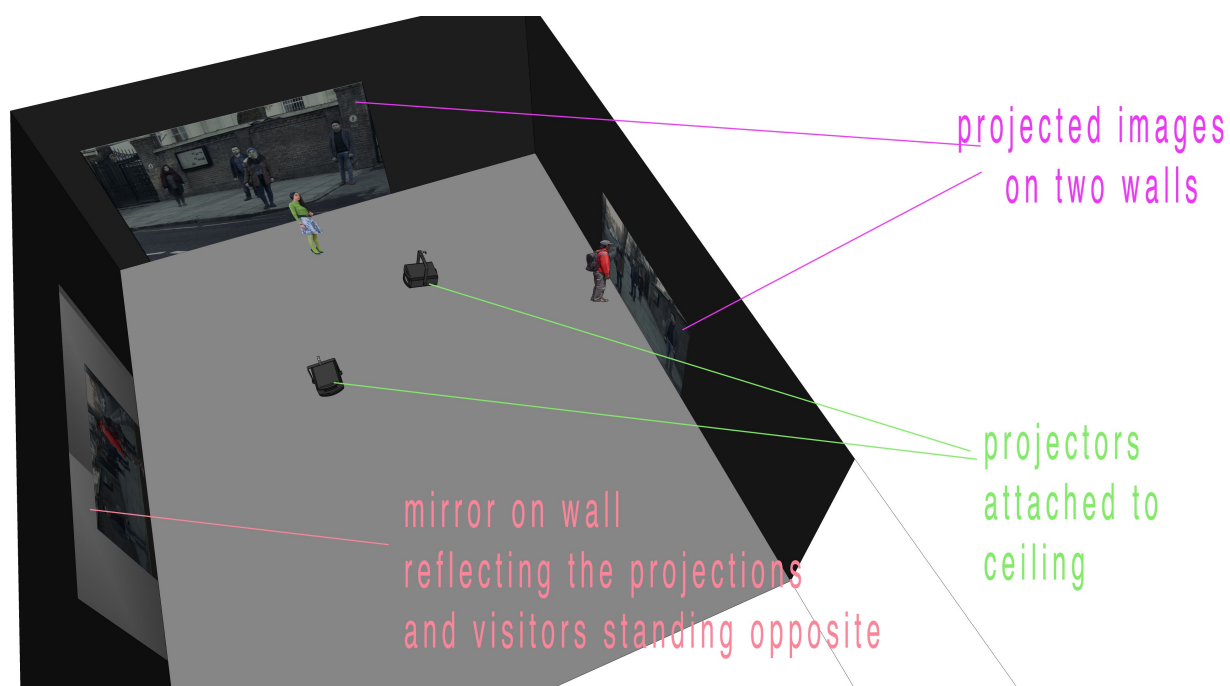
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[96] The protest was performed and recorded outside the Russian consulate in Notting Hill Gate, London, on the afternoon of the 2nd February 2017, roughly a month after the regime, Russian and Iranian forces had expelled East Aleppo's remaining residents.

Despite the intention of the installation to simulate participation in Syrian revolutionary protest, the placing of exhibition visitors into a visual scene of street protest is achieved regardless of their sentiments or political viewpoint.   It could therefore be argued that in its installation form, *Statues* also functions with a degree of imposition, since some visitors may feel that their placing within the protest scene to have been imposed beyond their will. But this argument is itself likely to be politically-motivated, for the accusation of imposed participation would likely *not* be an objection to seeing oneself standing alongside Syrian activists, but at the fact that the accuser had been compelled to *acknowledge the existence* of the democratic activists present in the room (via the video projection).   In this sense, in its installation form—and along with the social setting that may come with such a context—*Statues* potentially works to disarm pro-regime propagandists of their denialist pronouncements.   As mentioned, to claim that the activists in the protest were Al Qaida-like Islamists would be an irrational accusation given the appearance of the protesters and the manner of their protest (male and females standing in proximity to one another devoid of visible Islamist signifiers, garments or behaviour). The Assad supporter visiting the exhibition may indeed attempt to argue that the protest and the work was "Al Qaeda propaganda", but with the video on loop, and in a public setting, the argument would not be a convincing one to all.   It is therefore possible that the wujoud of *Statues* is especially potent in a public setting, for the Assad regime's narrative component of genocide would not be able to compete over "truth" in the midst of the presence of the Syrian democrats in the room via the video projection. However, since *Statues* has not yet been presented in its intended installation form, visitor reactions are yet to be recorded. At the time of writing therefore, *Statues* remains a work in progress.

However, *Statues* has been exhibited in its screen-based form.   The first showing took place at London College of Communication's Screen Research Forum in December 2018,

where I exhibited the film as part of a presentation of my research. The film was later exhibited—again in its screen form—in an art gallery in Canterbury as part of the 51Zero experimental film festival in October 2019, and was subsequently screened further by the festival organisers at the University of East London's Moving Image Research Centre in December of that year. I have also distributed the film online, via the sharing of the blog on which it is included. Distribution has so far been carried out using Facebook and emails to colleagues interested in the work. In addition, I have presented the film to students on the MA Global Media Cultures and BA Creative Media Cultures programmes at London College of Communication as part of the activist filmmaking classes I teach. Responses to the screenings by various individuals have so far generated more questions than comment. One attendee at the Moving Image Research Centre expressed political support during the Q&A session, whilst also asking if I had encountered difficulty from the police for the staging of the protest, to which I responded that I had not. At the same event, a postgraduate student asked if the film had been inspired by the 2015 refugee crisis. I explained that my relationship with Syrian activists and their cause predated the events of 2015 and that the film was more about the reasons for why Syrians were becoming refugees in the first place. And a fine art professor had expressed his desire to watch the film again, describing the protest scene as transient and understated. These experiences have so far demonstrated that public screenings followed by my participation in Q&A sessions in relation to the work, provide opportunities to engage with audiences that foster greater understanding and awareness of the Syrian reality and the Assad regime's extermination and propaganda processes. This method of exhibition is similar to that conducted by Syrian-activist filmmaker Waad Al Kateab, who actively pursued a screening tour and Q&A of her BAFTA-winning film *For Sama* (2019) throughout the UK, the United States and France, using every media, video and festival interview, and every celebrity endorsement, to rally for greater public and governmental support for stopping

the Assad regime's on-going crimes. Whilst the screen-based version of *Statues* may not have the opportunity to play at the world's most prestigious film festivals and theatres, it has potential for further exhibition in academic and activist environments where Q&A sessions will form part of the process.

projected images
on two walls

projectors
attached to
ceiling

mirror on wall
reflecting the projections
and visitors standing opposite

(Figure 1). An early visualisation of the installation intended for *Statues*. Visitors stand in front of walls upon which video footage of the silent protest is projected. On the opposite walls are floor-to-ceiling mirrors. When visitors face the mirrors they see their own reflections standing alongside the protesters in the video projection, simulating their participation in the protest. Summer 2017.

(Figure 2). A closer look. Visitors in the exhibition space stand in front of the walls on which the video of the protest is projected life-size.
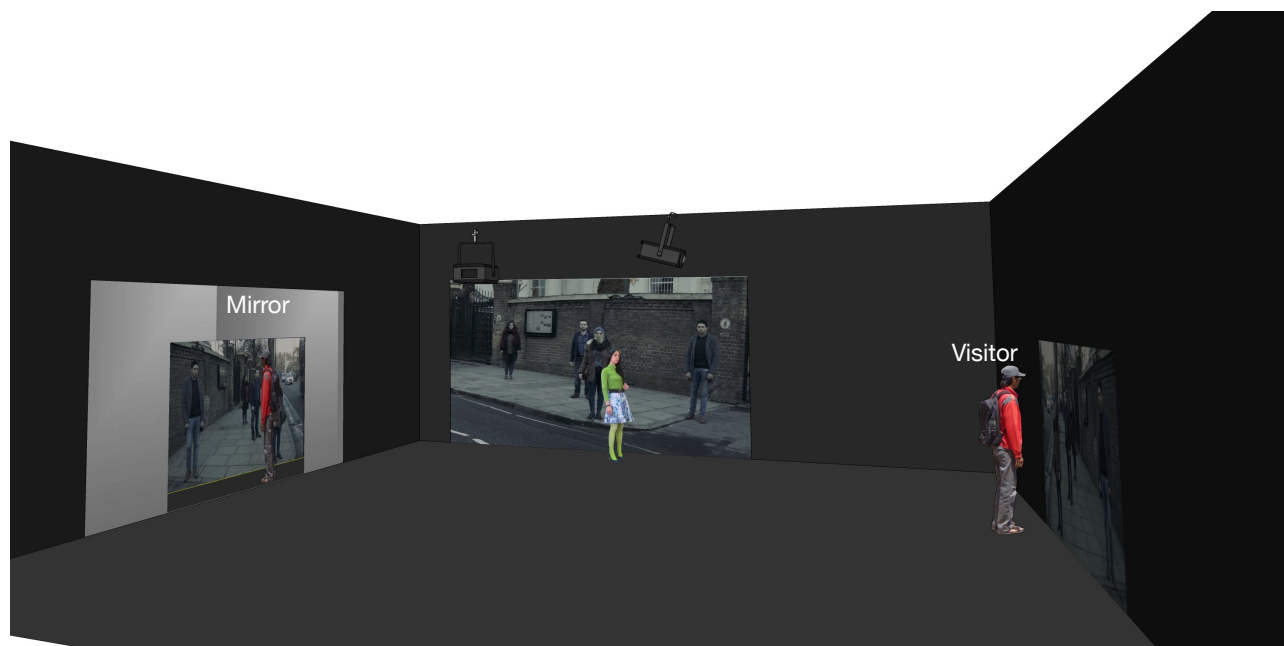
(Figure 3). On the left can be seen the floor-to-ceiling mirror in which the reflection of the visitor in the cap on the far right is seen. The reflection in the mirror also reveals the life-size projection of the protesters, resulting is the simulation of the visitor's participation in the protest.

4.16   Wujoud as participation (observed in the work of others)

On the morning of 1st July 2020, an installation entitled *The Muted Demonstration* was set up in the open space of a small public park outside a court of justice in the German city of Koblenz. The work, created by exiled Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh, consisted of fifty mannequins standing in protest-like postures facing the city's court house. According to the artist, each mannequin had been attired in the personal clothes of Syrian activists who had participated in the first wave of pro-democracy protests across Syria in 2011. The location of the installation was significant, for within the court house, two former prison guards of the Assad regime were being tried for crimes against humanity— the first ever prosecution of the regime for state torture.

This installation is comparable to *Statues* in a number of ways. Firstly, although the mannequins are headless, the detail of their being attired in garments originally worn by

real Syrian activists, in addition to their location outside a court house in the process of trialling two former members of the regime's prison system, provides a sense of Syrian activist presence in a virtual manner, similar to that created via the video projections in *Statues*;   Secondly, as is intended to be the case with *Statues* in its as of yet untried installation form, *The Muted Demonstration* creates an immersive environment in which passersby are able to participate in the protest being staged by the mannequins.   And thirdly, the areligious clothing worn by the mannequins, and the visible presence of both female and male-shaped bodies standing in proximity to one another as part of the protest scene created, indicates a non-Islamist character of the Syrian uprising just as that evidenced in the video footage seen in *Statues*—a point necessary in the process of challenging the regime's claim that the entirety of the opposition are Al-Qaeda-like "terrorists".

Key to understanding this installation's ability to transmit wujoud to its audience is the concept of participation, which seems to function on a level similar to that envisaged for *Statues* in its eventual installation form.   In the obvious sense, this participation is due to the possibility created by both works in enabling visitors to participate in the protest through standing alongside the virtually-featured activists.   But there are differences that arise in each work's ability to achieve this due to the spaces in which each of the works are presented.   With *Statues*, the indoor-setting of the exhibition space and the entirety of its use for the purposes of the installation, has the effect of confining its visitors to the conditions it imposes.   These conditions are enforced by the continuous projection of the protest footage and the fixed presence of wall-sized mirrors, each element of which collectively combining to occupy the entirety of the exhibition space.   The effect is the imposition of participation upon visitors to the space, as every single wall is claimed by either the video projection or a mirror reflecting it.   In contrast, the outdoor street setting of *The Muted Demonstration* means that passersby are free to refrain from standing

alongside the mannequin protesters. There is furthermore no reason for passersby to take any notice of the work, since the public environment of the street does not command any gallery-type ritual to pay attention to the artwork being presented. However, for those that are curious enough to approach the work, the transmission of wujoud from the work's Syrian activist presence to that of the curious passerby is enacted, and is experienced corporeally by the passerby upon their conscious decision to stand among the mannequins and participate in the protest.   What is however of particular effectiveness in *The Muted Revolution*'s public street setting is its potential to stimulate a spontaneous gathering of live participants via the curiosity generated in the display of mannequins in the public space. The installation can therefore be considered a generator of immediate political action, for it nudges curious pedestrians into spontaneous participation in a protest—one that becomes open to documentation and dissemination by potentially any participating member of the public with a camera, enabling this Syrian activist wujoud to be transmitted to more curious observers over the internet, achieving its viral and perpetual potential (see subchapter **3.2 viral and perpetual** — p.104).

Syrian activist and former political prisoner Wafa'a Mustafa stood outside the court house on the day of the installation's setting up. Her own father was detained by the Assad regime in 2013 and has not been heard of since. When asked by The Syria Campaign about her feelings standing among the mannequins, she stated:

> It is very important for us, as families of detainees—some of whom were just arrested for protesting peacefully—to see that away from Syria, here in front of the court where the trial is taking place, we see protesters. And we see voices of people who actually, maybe, do not have [a] voice anymore.

Wafa'a's mention of "see[ing] protesters" and "voices" of those who may not have a voice anymore, indicates a feeling on her part that the mannequins stimulate the presence of those Syrian victims whose lives were taken away by the regime. In managing to instil this sensation felt by Wafa'a, the installation can be thought of as manifesting the continued resistance of Syrian activists even in death or disappearance. This is an example of the "wujoud by default" (See pages 102-103).

There is a further potency to the wujoud surrounding *The Muted Demonstration*: that of the installation's physical proximity to the regime's former "security" personnel who were undergoing trial in a courtroom from where the view of the public park in which the protest was taking place is visible when looking through the windows.[97] From this observation, it can be inferred that once again, even in death, the anti-regime uprising created by the millions of protesters in the first few months of 2011—the period in which the two former prison guards committed acts of physical and psychological torture, including rape and murder, against those detained for participating in the protests[98]—has come back to haunt the two former regime employees. Wujoud here can thus be considered a spectre, exorcised in the collective presence of Syrian activists, both alive and via the garments of those who are not physically there, and one that is shared and spread by the addition of new protesters carrying the wujoud within them upon their participation in the action and potentially the on-going resistance movement against the Assad regime.

4.17   Resistance strategy 2:   (im)position

What if an audience were given no choice but to endure an experience of discomfort that would provoke an "ethical crisis" as spoken of by Sobchack (2004)? In the same way that the Syrian victims of genocide have been set upon by regime security personnel and

[97] See video by The Syria Campaign (2020).

[98] See Amnesty International press release (2020) and Channel 4 report (2020).

forced, beyond their will, to witness their loved ones being raped, tortured and murdered in front of their eyes, what if we—as an audience—had no choice but to endure an experience that vicariously placed us in a position of vulnerability, shifting our condition from that of a latent awareness to that of an emotional, embodied awareness following an assault on our nervous system through the immersive experience?

In my film practice, I make extensive use of audio-visual material shot by Syrian activists, as well as that of torture footage carried out by the regime (shot by Syrian regime personnel themselves). The practice of including found Syria-based footage for creative activist endeavour is not unique. Syria-based footage plays a prominent role in Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan's 2014 documentary *Silvered Water, Syria Self Portrait*—a film described by its filmmakers to have been shot by "1,001 Syrians". In the film, it is primarily Mohammed's piecing together of the Syria-based video material during his exile in Paris, through which the film's narrative is structured. Yet it is Bedirxan who provides a large segment of the non-pixellated Syria-based footage that constitutes a sizeable portion of the film. This is material she herself shot whilst under siege in the city of Homs. Collaboration between the two existed as a long distance correspondence via email, with Mohammed in Paris, and Bedirxan in Homs, with the film's evolution resulting out of their discussions following Bedirxan's initiatory question to the veteran filmmaker of what he would shoot with his camera if he were there in Homs. But it is the film's intermittent segments of heavily-pixellated mobile phone video footage, revealing regime troops and militia-men sadistically torturing activists via a variety of techniques, that I have found to be the most viscerally unsettling instances of the film. Lebanese playwright, actor, theatre director and visual artist, Rabih Mroué, whose self-termed "non-academic" lecture performances also comprise amalgamated extracts of activist-produced audio-visual material (most notably his 2012 work *The Pixelated Revolution*, which is based around the footage of a Syrian activist recording his own death on camera

after being shot by a regime sniper) has stated that he "no longer find[s] any need to re-shoot or re-create images, because the images have already been shot. It's much more interesting to use what's already there" (this comment was recorded in my mind whilst attending his lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London in 2018. I include it here from memory).

Both *Silvered Water* and Mroué's *Pixelated Revolution* make use of Syria-based found footage in their own artistic works of activism. While Mohammed and Bedirxan's work is a cinematic documentary, Mroué's work incorporates the pixellated footage of his presentation as a live performance that lies at the intersection of forensic analysis, academic lecture and theatre. Like *Silvered Water*, my practice brings together various types of Syria-based footage as an evidentiary component to an activist work. As does Mohammed and Bedirxan's document, I also make use of found torture footage that could only have been filmed by the regime's personnel. What differentiates some of my practice to *Silvered Water* however, is my application of this footage into what may be considered a form of politically-charged Expanded Cinema. That is, the use of such Syria-based footage in a work that expands the spectator's experience of the material beyond the confines of the screen, using a multitude of differing techniques. In this light, my work *(im)position* (2017), is perhaps closer in from to the cross-disciplinary works of Mroué. Like *Pixelated Revolution*, *(im)position* is focused around a single Syria-based video of violence. Yet this time, the work situates its audience within the physical and psychological confines of an enclosed and potentially intimate space, compelling the viewer to confront their own reflection in a mirror. Exhibited at Chelsea College of Arts in Winter 2017 as an installation in collaboration with architect Krishan Pilch, the work acts as a cross-disciplinary experiment in provocation and agitation, combining spatial design, found footage, and an element of imposed self-reflection that is both literal (with the mirror) and metaphorical (metaphorical after undergoing the process of coming to terms

with the unsettling audio-visual material). The first act that the installation compels of the viewer, is to see him/herself. Upon entering the small tent-like structure (Figures 4a, 4b), the viewer is directed to sit down on a stool (Figures 5) that directly faces a mirror, confronting the viewer with their own reflection (Figure 6). This is the "self", as indicated in the installation's title through the use of the "im" (I'm). After a moment of silence examining one's reflection through the mirror, a video starts to play out as a projection underneath the wall-mounted mirror. The projection—found footage of what seems to be Syrian regime troops taunting and beating a young teenage boy as punishment for his participation in a pro-democracy protest (Figure 7)—is partially intended to bring the viewer into a state of empathy for the victim on screen. Having been pre-warned of the nature of the video and its authenticity before entering the tent (Figure 8a, 8b), the viewer realises that they have now become a witness to the crime that unfolded on screen before them. It is then that the mirror becomes a tool of metaphorical self-reflection, demanding the viewer to question their own position, both physically as seated on the stool, and ethically, in relation to the crime they have now been made a witness to; and even politically, in that they now carry an embodied awareness of the regime's crimes with which they can either choose to ignore or act on. This condition is referenced in the use of the word "position", which forms the second component of the title following the bracketed "im". Conceptually then, *(im)position* is the imposing of a condition in which the viewer is compelled to question their own self and position in relation to what they are made to witness. On one level, given that the installation subjects its audience to the watching of a real-life crime against humanity, this work may be interpreted by some to be an exploitative violation of the viewer's comfort. Yet it is precisely this feeling of discomfort, experienced in the multitude of its ethically-contentious facets, that is intended to agitate the witness into political self-questioning and, hopefully, action.

But what does political action on the part of the spectator constitute in this case? Can it be described as political action at all, if all that happens following the spectator's viewing of the violent video and their self-reflection in the mirror, is for them to then walk away with an awareness of Syria still un-manifested and characterised by the same inaction as they had carried prior to experiencing the installation? Indeed, in his essay on *The Intolerable Image* Rancière hypothesises that "there is no particular reason why it [the intolerable image] should make those who see it conscious of the reality of…" genocide, crimes against humanity, or any other injustice, let alone become "desirous of opposing it" (2009: 85). What is more, as also suggested by Rancière, the audience may only comprehend the video in generalised terms, when they "incriminate the horrors of war and the murderous folly of human beings…in general" (Ibid.), without understanding that the specifics of the scene and the point in time at which the video appeared in early 2011, reveal and epitomise both the nature of the Assad regime and its policy of genocide. Here it seems that the spectator's reaction would depend on the level of awareness they had on Syria before being subjected to the installation. Equally, the spectator's reaction would also depend on the level of emotional connection to events in Syria that they may have carried prior to entering the projection space. Racnière addresses this point too, albeit in reference to political collages made in protest against the USA's war in Vietnam, yet his commentary is intended to address the problems inherent in the agitational display of atrocity images in general. He states:

> For the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it [the image] shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general…In short, she [the spectator] must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt.

In other words, the moral outrage and heightened compassion I intend to provoke within each viewer of *(im)position* is dependent upon their prior knowledge, prior awareness or

prior emotional investment.   As if to validate Rancière's words, responses to the questionnaire[99] I devised for spectators who had just experienced the installation, included one participant who revealed that "[i]f I knew more people in Syria it would be more personal, and more troubling" (2017).   The same respondent also stated that his ignorance on the subject was an "impediment to action":

…the problem I face and people like me is a lack of understanding. There seem to be no goodies or baddies. Or maybe all baddies. I don't know much about the situation but it appears each side has committed bad acts. If not so, this is how it seems. The moral ambiguity is an impediment to action.

There is therefore no guarantee of *(im)position*'s effectiveness in driving someone to political action for a human rights cause in Syria.   Some might be affected by the disturbing reality captured in the video to a degree that would compel them to pursue some form of justice for the victim and those like him.   But there is no guarantee of this.   Although I never claimed that *(im)position* would remedy a viewer's possible ignorance of the Syrian conflict, nor their ignorance of the country's modern history and the Assad regime, the respondent's answer to my questionnaire makes clear that it is precisely ignorance that is an "impediment to action".   This view is expressed despite his stated admission to feeling "riveted" by the atrocity he witnessed.

But looking at responses given by other viewers of the work, the acknowledgement, or confession, of ignorance, seems to have added to their post-viewing desire to "understand more" about the situation.   When asked "Has anything changed in your thoughts or motivations, after having experienced this installation?" a respondent wrote "*I have realised the limits of my understanding about the situation Syria and I'm conscious of*

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[99] I have created a website especially for *(im)position*, which includes photographs of the installation and of peoples' answers to the questionnaire. The website is viewable via the following url: https://wujoudcollective.wixsite.com/action/exhibitions .

my lack of knowledge, and I want to understand more about how this came about". Other respondents' answers included:

"*I feel I need to keep reading about Syria and their news*"

"*I would like to know more about people from Syria*"

"*I would like to know more about where these conflicts come and what should we do to help*"

"*I'm going to pay more attention what's happening there*"

"*I always heard about Syria in mass media, but it was edited version. I think it was really effective in a way to approach people to feel how violent it is*"

Judging from these comments, one could argue that the experience of the installation nudged its participants to become "desirous" of learning more about Syria. And, if one were to consider the action of intentionally learning more about a situation as a necessary prerequisite to increased political involvement, then perhaps *(im)position* does trigger an urge within its experiencers to pursue justice for Syria's victims in some form.

What the viewing of such a video in the environment it is displayed in, *does* do, is undermine the regime's effort at denying its own crimes in front of an international audience. So long as this video, like many similar others, continues to be viewed by people, so long does it expose the regime's claim of being "better than jihadis" or "protector of minorities" as empty rhetoric. More significantly, as elaborated on in the **wujoud** section of this thesis (see chapter entitled وجود), the embodied awareness that comes about in experiencing this imposition, is the first act of political action, even if an involuntary one. The body and mind undergo a shift from having only heard of atrocities

and conflict, to a state in which they come closer to *feeling* it, via the installation's ability to induce a corporeally-experienced vicariousness. A moral ambivalence may be carried within the experiencer either after or during the viewing, who may be wondering what to do about the crime they had just witnessed. They may not know how to respond. They might indeed lack the knowledge of the conflict and its history needed in order for them to make an informed follow-up action to the crime. But if they are sensitive enough to have been viscerally affected by the imposition, they would arguably carry this unease within them, which may one day inspire them to take an interest—or participate—in an action that they may never have thought of doing had they not undergone this shift from ignorance/latent awareness to embodied awareness. To interpret this work from the wujoud ethos, one could say that the installation, with the use of the mirror and self-reflection, seeks to make each participant aware of their own wujoud in relation to the injustice they are presented with. Therefore, with the desired outcome, *(im)position* centres on the wujoud (the embodied resistance, perhaps still dormant) of each participant as much as it is centred on the wujoud by default of the teenage victim in the video. As deduced from a respondent's comment further below, even the refusal to look —the refusal to face one's own reflection—indicates the acknowledgement of one's own being and sense of "guilt" (or "shame") in relation to the injustice in the video. Here, the feeling of guilt, or shame, is to be understood as a "revolutionary emotion" as expressed by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in their 1967 manifesto *Black Power*[100]. The following comment was made by a twenty two year old art student from South Korea, with limited knowledge of events in Syria:

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[100] In the preface to Black Power (1967), Carmichael and Hamilton state the following: "Camus and Sartre have asked: Can a man condemn himself? Can whites, particularly liberal whites, condemn themselves? Can they stop blaming blacks and start blaming their own system? Are they capable of the shame which might become a revolutionary emotion?" (xvii). I use their term "shame" not because I want to make any analogy between the Syrian struggle and the plight of black Americans in a racialised "white" society from where Black Power emerged. I use it because it captures the concept of one's self-awareness and the feeling of shame in one's inaction in the face of injustice, which has the power to turn into an emotion that drives political action. That is precisely the feeling that *(im)position* is intended to provoke.

It was hard to face that sometimes I want more from what I have not helped them.

And after I saw that exhibition, I realised it is not something I can choose to avoid. It was extremely cruel for me to see the reality not only from the video but also somewhere inside me.

Where I seat, I could not see the reflection from the mirror. I knew the purpose of the mirror, but I decided not to see myself through it. It was hard enough to just watch the video.
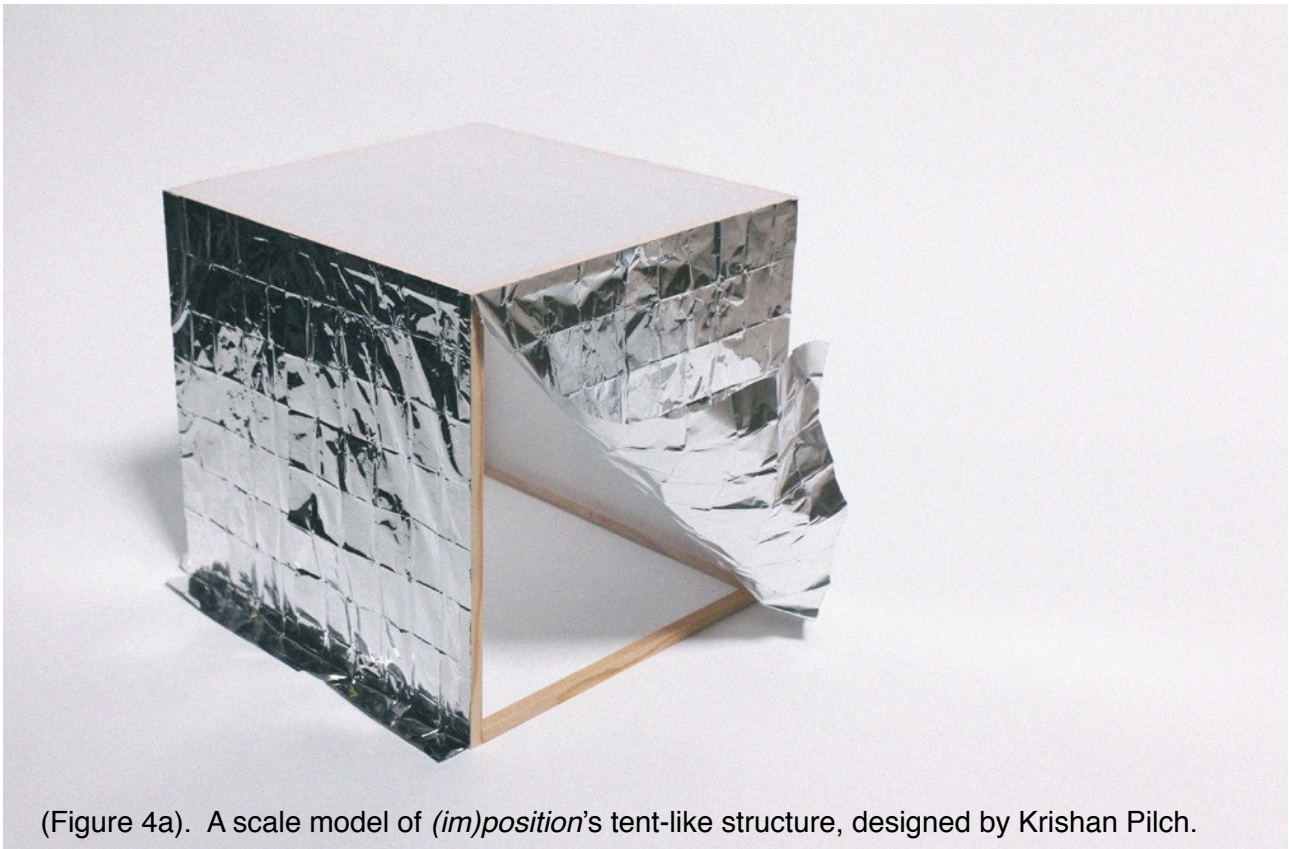
(Figure 4a). A scale model of *(im)position*'s tent-like structure, designed by Krishan Pilch.

(Figure 4b). The completed tent-like structure, viewed from the ante-room of the exhibition space.

(Figure 5). The stool.

(Figure 6). The mirror.

(Figure 8a). A controlled environment. A sign in the exhibition's ante-room warns visitors of the disturbing footage they are about to witness in the next room.

(IM)POSITION

The video projected as part of this installation has been taken from found mobile phone footage that was shot by Syrian regime army troops. The footage reveals the troops interrogating and violently beating a young boy of 13 to 14 years of age. The scene is explicit and upsetting to watch.

This installation exposes a distinction in the way people respond to awareness. Many viewers may already be aware of events taking place in Syria, yet this "awareness", in most cases, is limited to a latent awareness: an awareness that is emotionally detached from the lives of Syrians experiencing a prolonged existential threat and severe violence.

In watching the footage in this installation, the participant becomes a virtual witness to a real life crime against humanity. A crime recorded on a mobile phone. Upon witnessing this atrocity and undergoing the emotional transformation that emerges as a result, is the viewer content to continue their relationship toward Syria in the same way as they were prior to watching the video, or, has seeing the crime now imposed a responsibility upon the witness? Is the witness content to continue their life pretending as though what they had witnessed didn't happen, or, are they now driven to seek justice for the young boy in any capacity that they are able?

(Figure 8b). A closer shot of the warning sign.

(Figure 7). A still from the found atrocity footage. The adolescent victim is seen being interrogated by regime "security" personnel (off screen in this image). Subtitles are my own.
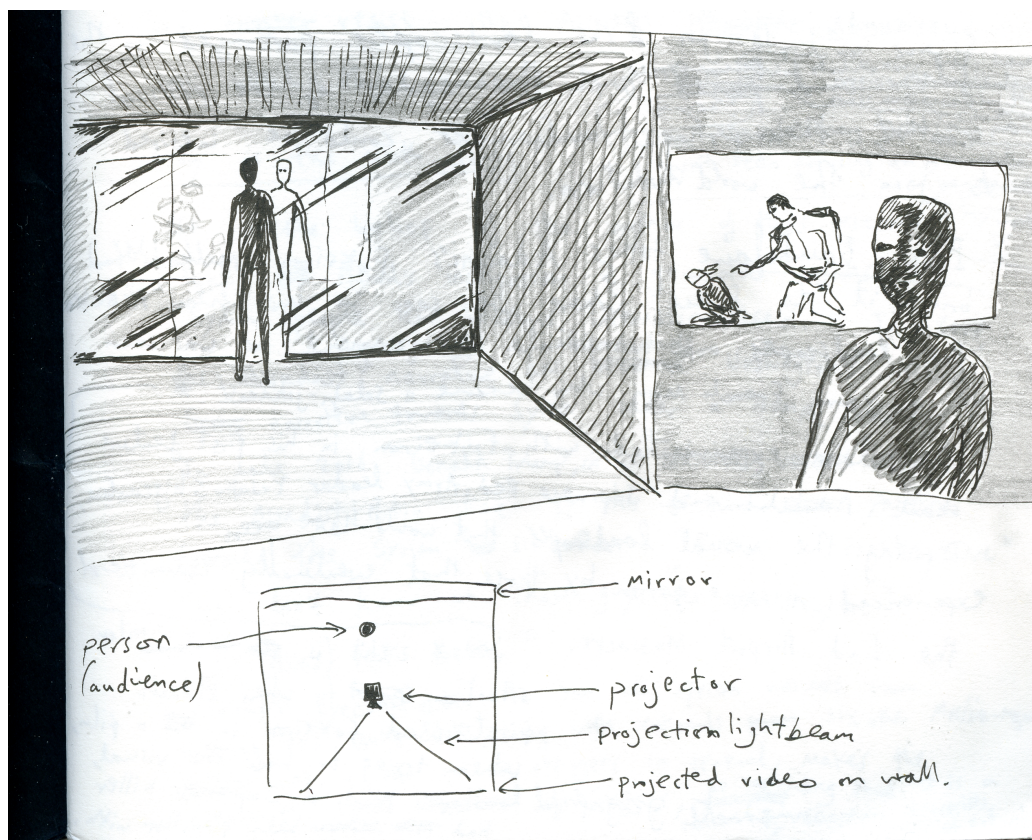
(Figure 9). An early sketch idea for *(im)position*. A single viewer stands in front of a mirror in a darkened screening space. In the mirror the viewer sees his/her reflection, as well as the reflection of the atrocity video that is being projected onto the wall behind them. Winter 2017.

4.18 "reflection" as resistance in the work of other activists

Like *(im)position*, Zou Zou group's —*door open*— (2019)*,* a 25-minute three-screen video installation exhibited at the Ikon gallery in Birmingham between December 2019 and February 2020, "opens up a space for (self-)reflection and (self-) awareness" (Deml: 2019). But "(self-)reflection" in —*door open*— is not initially focused on that of the audience or experiencer of the work, but rather on that of the two creators behind it—one Syrian, based in regime-controlled Damascus; the other British, based in the UK. It is the reflections and self-awareness expressed by these two artists as they correspond via a dialogue-based audio-track that accompanies the video footage throughout the duration of the visual material. This dialogue foregrounds the limitations and obstacles they experienced as part of the process of creating their video project. For the British artist, self-reflecting on her own freedom of movement and action in contrast to the restrictions

experienced by her Syrian collaborator, is vocalised as a feeling of "shame". As stated in the audible British-sounding voice (supposedly not that of the real artist) this feeling of shame was felt throughout the process of making the film—a sentiment revealed in the first few minutes of the audio track when she addresses the Syrian artist: "I'm silenced by a sense of shame I can't name, by thinking about you in a war zone. How can I critique your work?". This "shame" implies that the British co-author of the work occupies a similar space of reflection to that potentially triggered within those visitors to *(im)position* —the type of "revolutionary shame" as spoken of by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967). Just as the experiencers of *(im)position* may have reflected upon their own position to witnessing a crime against humanity revealed in the installation's found torture video, the British creator of *—door open—* cannot help but reflect upon her position of freedom—the freedom to move, act, speak and film what she chooses in an environment of safety—in contrast to the absence of such circumstances as lived by her Syrian counterpart in regime-controlled Damascus. The audio-based correspondence between the two voices confirms the point: the Arabic-accented voice declares that "[i]t's not easy to work on this project. I ask myself all the time if I can get a good result from it…I can't film in the street, so I use a mobile as if I'm reading it", to which the British-accented voice responds, "[w]hen I get the mobile videos of your feet walking, I realise that you can't film the horizon. You can only film above and below".

For the Damascene artist, self-reflection (and self-awareness) is also expressed through her own acknowledgement of the relationship she has with her surroundings, revealed through her footage of "stolen" glimpses of unidentifiable locations, tree foliage, feet and fleeting moments of street life. Her footage implies an acute awareness that to be seen filming extensively in public in regime-controlled Syria would mark her out for suspicious behaviour, and subsequently potential lethal punishment, by the Assadist state.

In listening to this correspondence about the restrictions affecting the two artists' production of their work, the three-screen installation begins to explain itself. On the left hand side, a screen seems to display video footage shot by the Syrian artist with her mobile phone camera. We see footage taken as if the camera operator had stood beneath a tree and filmed the foliage and sky as she pointed her lens upwards; we see her feet walking on slabs and tiles on the ground; we see market places and street vendors, presented both as photographic stills as well as segments of moving video. In the middle screen, it becomes evident that what is playing out is the point-of-view shots of the British artist, *not* in Syria. We see shots of the sky and sea, taken from an aeroplane window; train station platforms around the world (possibly Moscow or Portugal, as detailed in the notes accompanying the installation), also taken from behind the interior window of a travelling train; and crucially, we also see a laptop screen, on which footage of the streets and market places of Damascus play out—footage that includes shots of items found in touristic shops, such as mugs and other paraphernalia with the faces of Bashar al Assad, Vladimir Putin and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah printed over them. This middle screen of the installation therefore evidences the British artist's viewing of the footage sent to her by her Syrian friend. The action of viewing—and of *reflecting* upon what is being viewed—is therefore part of the installation's subject matter.[101] The third and final screen, placed on the right, reveals a continuous aerial shot of the sea/sky, perhaps symbolising the geographical separation between the two artists; or perhaps a series of related further reflections—such as the perilous sea journey taken by hundreds of thousands of refugees; or the freedom of movement enjoyed by some, but not others.

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[101] This echoes the militant cinema ethos of the mid 1960s to early 1970s, exemplified by the actions of such filmmakers as Solanas and Getino in their screening-discussion tours of their film *The Hour of the Furnaces*, where verbalised reflection on the issues brought up in the film was encouraged as part of the screening process.

In —*door open*— self-reflection is therefore a primary component of the film itself, for it is the self-reflections of the two artists that trigger the correspondence between them. And it is this correspondence that the installation itself centres around. This contrasts to *(im)position,* where self-reflection is not the subject of the video content being projected, but rather constitutes the intention that lies behind the piece's imposition. In other words, self-reflection is *imposed* on those visitors to the exhibition space via the violence of the video material and the confrontation of their own physical reflection in the mirror in front of them—a self-reflection that is instantly felt on a visceral level. However, this is not to say that —*door open*— does not also cause its audience to begin to reflect upon their own position towards the Syrian reality. It is likely that any experiencer of the installation would eventually begin to reflect upon their own relationship to the Syrian situation communicated via material they hear and see in the work—that is, via witnessing the self-reflections expressed in the two artists' dialogue. On the subject of the audience's self-reflection, the difference between —*door open*— and *(im)position* is therefore in the manner in which this audience reflection is achieved. It is in this consideration of audience (or experiencer) reflection through which an interpretation of the two installations as manifestations of wujoud emerges. Just as *(im)position* stimulated its experiencers to become aware of their own position in relation to genocide in Syria (and subsequently their own potential to play a part in resisting it), so too can —*door open*—'s stimulation of audience self-reflection be considered a stirring of an audience's wujoud. The absence of explicit violence in —*door open*— perhaps induces a much gentler realisation of this wujoud in comparison to that provoked in *(im)position*, yet the work's potential to nudge its audience into a questioning of their own position towards the reality of daily existential threat experienced by Syrians living under regime rule is none the less present.

5.   Final thoughts and Conclusion:

Reflecting on my proximity to this research

My background has helped me understand much about the Syrian reality. As narrated in this document's first chapter—*A personal reflection*—my involvement with Syrian civil activists and my investment in their cause of democracy and human rights—a cause that I have embraced as my own—came about by virtue of a knowledge rooted in my familial background and adolescent experiences. Screening some of my films at London College of Communication in December 2018, I was told by a sympathetic colleague that I was "too close" to my subject, and therefore I had fallen into the trap of representing Syrian revolutionaries as "victims" in a vein similar to television news. I accept that I am of course close to my subject. The feeling is rooted in my own personal experiences and upbringing, making it inevitable that I should sense a certain level of emotional investment in the Syrian peoples' cause for democracy, justice and universal human rights. The divergence in opinion with my colleague is that I do not view this emotional proximity as one that clouds my judgement or empiricism.   It has been precisely this proximity to the Syrian peoples' cause that endowed me with much of the knowledge that I brought to this research and to my activism in working for justice with Syrian activists. It is also precisely this relationship that has enabled me to acknowledge that Syrians *are* victims, but that presenting this victimisation in my films did not amount to a re-presentation of Syrians as something they are not, but rather a perspective that sees within the images of these victimised bodies a resistance—a wujoud—embodied via their very presence on screen.

5.1   On evidence and distribution, or lack thereof

Wujoud has been a concept which within this thesis, I have intrinsically tied to the idea of existence, and the evidence of such existence. In chapter **3** (pp.96-102) I argued that only when the existence of the victimised group became known—or evidenced—could

existence be understood as constituting resistance. Yet after five years of working on this research as a student at University of the Arts London, I realised that I had not—despite the urging of my supervisors—formulated a strategy of exhibition and distribution to evidence the audio-visual resistance pieces (the wujoud works) I produced as part of this project. In some specific cases, certain works I had created were not presented in the manner or environment I had intended them to be. This is true for my film *Statues* (2016/2019) (see pp.161-166), which is yet to be presented in its installation form but was none the less projected at London College of Communication's Screen Research Forum in December 2018 and a year later at the University of East London's Moving Image Research Centre as a two-dimensional single screen film.

Whilst I had decided early on that I was unable to realistically measure the success of my work in turning people into activists in support for the Syrian revolution, the point still remains that the works I have created for public viewing as a form of activism, have as of yet remained largely unseen aside from visitors attending a small number of university-bound screenings and a single external exhibition at Senesi Contemporanea—a small art gallery in Mayfair, where *A Friend Recently Told Me* (2016) was shown to visitors over a period of a month as part of the *Against Forgetting* exhibition in early 2018. Part of the reason for this lack of a wider distribution was my intention to get these short films screened at prestigious and well-known international film festivals, such as those held in Cannes, Rotterdam, Sundance, Oberhausen, Edinburgh or Melbourne. Since those festivals often stipulated a world, European or national premiere as a condition of inclusion, I remained committed to holding back any public screenings of the works outside of the academic or small exhibition environment in order to avert disqualifying them from the festivals. I had believed that if a major festival or two would screen my films, they would receive a level of recognition and publicity that would enhance their

reach, and thus effectiveness, in countering the regime's propaganda narrative in a manner similar to the Netflix production *The White Helmets* (2016), or the independent feature *Last Men in Aleppo* (2017) or Channel Four's *For Sama* (2019)—all of which received high acclaim at festivals and in cinema-focused commentary, as well as resulting in their respective filmmakers receiving verbal and literary abuse, and smear campaigns, by Assad regime supporters and the Russian state. I submitted both *A Friend Recently Told Me* and *A Reasonable Argument* (2018) to the above mentioned festivals, receiving a modest stipend from my university in order to cover the fees incurred for each submission. Within the space of almost a year, I received rejections from all the mentioned festivals, causing me to feel that the time I had invested in this process took away from the time I could have used to distribute these two works online and in make-shift and unofficial public screenings.

I had however followed the advice of my supervisors and uploaded *The Propagandist* (2018) to Youtube as soon as I had completed it in January 2018. This allowed the 26-minute film to function as a work of direct resistance—the point of the films had always been to function as activist works. I began to distribute it via various online activist groups and in the comments sections of social media threads where it could be used to counter and debunk posts made by trolls promoting the Eva Bartlett video it responds to. As a matter of security I chose not to draw any reference to myself or reveal any connection I had with making the film, instead opting to set-up a new Youtube account under the name of *wujoud collective* and maintain anonymity. I also made sure to deny the pro-Assad trolls a platform to post their usual attempts at smear-campaigns and disinformation-pushing by disabling the comments section underneath the video on the Youtube account. The 26-minute video is now a constant presence online, ready to be

used by any activist as part of their actions of debunking Bartlett's pro-Assad propaganda.

On the 3rd July 2019, I screened *The Propagandist,* as well as *Testimony of a former detainee* (2017), to a small audience of political economists and activist filmmakers in France at the Université de Lille, Sciences Po. The event was part of the Committee on Activism—a side section of an annual conference organised by the Association Française d'Économie Politique. After the screening, I was accused by a middle-aged political economist from Italy of being "biased". He told me that whilst he had enjoyed the first film I had screened—*Testimony of a former detainee*—he was "so disappointed" in *The Propagandist* because of what he described as my failure to mention and condemn the Islamic extremists' involvement in the Syrian war. Comments made by two other activist filmmakers from the UK and the US were by contrast those of gratitude, as they thanked me for making them aware of Eva Bartlett and her propaganda. A further filmmaker from Canada expressed being deeply impacted by the two works and requested permission to screen some of my films to his students at the university he lectures at; and British filmmaker Jill Daniels suggested that *Testimony of a former detainee* be screened at a festival she was in the midst of co-curating at the time.

These comments and expressions of interest have triggered my thoughts towards a few considerations. The first is that I realise with much greater urgency, the benefits of, and the need, to start taking my films to wider audiences in order to contribute towards the Syrian revolutionary effort of awareness building and as a form of education on, and prevention of, disinformation. Part of the process of exhibition and distribution would expose me to an array of direct responses to the audio-visual works, which may trigger within me assessments of how these films are to be interpreted, and how I may shape my

future work. This is an area of research that I therefore intend to undertake both as a form of activism as well as a form of continued scholarly research into developing wujoud as an intermedial practice. The second consideration triggered by the responses of the viewers, pertains to the problem of identifying what I set out to achieve in each work I create. The experience at the Lille conference reaffirms the considerations expressed in the *(im)position* section of this thesis' practice review chapter, which is that each audio-visual experiment I undertake does not intend to address or elucidate all factors of the Syrian war to all people. Rather, the films I create intend to address specific points, all of which pertain in one way or another, to the regime's propaganda narratives, to its micro-myth-making campaign, to its strategy of dehumanisation, or to observer participation or complicity. The Italian economist's comments highlight the question of whether or not some of my audio-visual pieces require some form of literary or audio introduction, in order to contextualise their existence (or their wujoud). It should be noted that he did not stay for the question and answer session following the screening, and therefore did not hear my belated introduction to the films and why they were presented alongside each other (the reason of which is elaborated on in this document's Practice Review chapter, in the section on *Testimony of a former detainee*, as well as in the Genocide chapter's *absent image* section). The third consideration however is to keep in mind that sometimes people are so convinced of certain ideas and narratives, that they establish a cognitive dissonance that prevents them from seeing or hearing anything in front of them that disproves, contradicts or puts into question the story already existent in their heads.

5.2 wujoud

I formulated wujoud in this thesis as an interpretation of Syrian resistance to the Assad regime's genocide campaign. In interviews I conducted with Syrian activists, I mentioned facets of the wujoud idea among the conversations we had, although I refrained from presenting the concept fully as a lecture. I did not want to appear to be philosophising a

struggle that I am still careful to present as theirs not mine, as many have experienced imprisonment and been at the receiving end of state-perpetrated crimes at a level of which I am fortunate not to have experienced. Yet wujoud as an idea still needs to be put out into the world of thought and scholarship.   To those of a profession or temperament in philosophising and creative/artistic production, it is my intention to share my idea of wujoud and seek their thoughts. It is for this reason that I intend to publish articles on wujoud in a peer-reviewed academic journal, and use the publication as a platform from which to disseminate the idea into philosophical discourse on Syria and on modes of political resistance. At the time of writing, I have recently launched a blog, powered by Tumblr, featuring my wujoud films.[102]   I am yet to work on its distribution, but it is an initial attempt to push my works and the wujoud concept they embody, into the realm of public discourse and commentary.

Sometime between 2017 and 2018, I came across a blog, on which was an entry that alleged the slogan "Existence is resistance" as being one popular among Palestinians. The entry linked to another blog run by a New York City-based organisation that went by the name "Existence is Resistance", describing itself as an organisation that uses "the arts as a means of expression and liberation of marginalized peoples throughout the world with a focus on connecting to the situation of occupied Palestine" (2009).   There however seemed to be no literature on the website that offered any explanation of the meaning behind the slogan used. From my interpretation of the slogan, it would seem inevitable that communities faced with an existential threat should generate some form of resistance culture based on an idea similar to that which I have attempted to elucidate in my concept of wujoud.   However, without the literature to evidence the thinking behind the alleged Palestinian use of this slogan, my thoughts on its philosophical conceptualisation and the

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[102] The blog is available via the following url: https://wujoudcollective.tumblr.com/

reasoning behind its usage remain to be speculative. This can also be said of another online discovery I made midway through my research, where I learnt of the existence of a museum devoted to Palestinian craft, cuisine and culture, located in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, which happens to be named the Wujoud Museum. Although the reason for its appellation is again not explained anywhere on its website, I imagine that a similar conclusion of thought to my own wujoud concept, must have been reached by those that decided to bestow that title upon their project. But aside from the name of that museum, there exists no literature to my knowledge, that formally rationalises the word "wujoud" as one with inherent political significance. I am therefore confident that "wujoud", as I have conceptualised it throughout this thesis—as both a framework for interpreting resistance to genocide, and as an ethos and praxis of this resistance—is an original contribution to knowledge that I have brought to the study of political resistance.

5.3 On the ethics of screening atrocity footage

> I think people in this country should see these videos. They are very strong; they are very hard. I understand this. But the solution is not to close your eyes. The solution is to open your eyes…open…and see what is happening. Because if you didn't see, you wouldn't understand.
>
> Yazan Douedari. October 2018.

A key element of wujoud elaborated on in this thesis involved the experiencing of images of violence and atrocity. As described in the وجود and Practice Review chapters of this document, I have made use of atrocity footage and atrocity aftermath images from Syria in my audio-visual works. But the subject of showing images and video of real-life violence and atrocity imagery is a contentious one, with a variety of issues to consider. Is it necessary to show images of this nature in order to achieve the sense of urgency and

human empathy or solidarity I desired among my audience? How violent or gratuitous would footage have to be before I would have to exempt it from presentation? In screening videos of atrocity, at what point or where was the line to be drawn between maintaining respect for the victim and that of sadistically deriving entertainment out of his/her suffering? Could the viewing of such material constitute complicity in the victim's tragedy? Is there a risk that the viewing of such material would turn into a fetishisation of horrific acts and torture? How would Syrians themselves react to my making use of such footage as part of films intended to generate solidarity for their democratic and humanitarian cause? And what would be the reaction of the victims' families and friends?

During the process of installing *(im)position* (see chapter **4.17**, pp.169-180) I privately screened the footage that was going to be used for the piece to Krishan Pilch—the architect who designed the tent-like structure for this work. I was already familiar with all the stages and sections of the few minutes of footage to be shown, after having spent time subtitling it in preparation for an Anglophone audience. There was a part towards the end of the video however, that I had always considered to be horrifically disturbing, to the degree that it filled me with a combination of confused rage, sadness and a profound sense of helpless injustice. As introduced in the practice review chapter, the entirety of the video concerned a young boy, perhaps 13 years of age, being interrogated by what seems to be Syrian regime soldiers. Throughout the video, the boy is verbally insulted and beaten by these adult men, with a woman, wearing jeans, casually walking by at one point. But there was something about the final part of the video that had always provoked the most visceral response within me, and I had not been sure whether or not it was too much for an audience to witness. Would viewing that final segment cross the boundary of decency and respect for the dignity of the victim and his family? Prior to showing the footage to Krishan, I did not warn him about that final segment specifically, though I mentioned that I was in a dilemma about whether or not the footage should be

shown at all, or whether to choose a different video with an adult being beaten up, rather than a young boy. I played the video to Krishan. He took the initiative of pressing the pause button himself as the footage got to that final part that I had been concerned about. It seemed to disturb him, as it did me, to the degree that he opted to stop watching at that specific moment of the video. His reaction confirmed some of my concerns. He suggested the video be edited to exclude that final part. I agreed, and so the footage presented as part of the final installation did not include that last moment of what appeared to be the act of murder through sheer beating.

In a Q&A following the screening of my short films at London College of Communication's Screen Research Forum on 12th December 2018, a non-Syrian audience member commented that my films contained scenes that were "difficult to watch", stating that "We're often made to see things that we don't want to see" (quoted from my memory). Two other audience members mentioned that the use of torture and atrocity footage in some of my works, risked becoming yet another addition to the ubiquitous "war" imagery, already heavily mediatised on television and online news, and therefore risked achieving nothing more than "representing as victims" the very people I proclaim to be in solidarity with. But this view was countered by an alternative consideration provided by a Syrian activist present at the event. Susan Khairalla—who I interviewed as part of this research —brought to the audience's attention the fact that all the atrocity footage seen from Syria was only made a possibility because people—overwhelmingly Syrians—had risked their lives to bring these images to the attention of the outside world. She added that back in 2011, Syrians had even been arrested by the regime merely for having saved photographs on their mobile phones of the mutilated body of thirteen year-old boy Hamza al Khatib— who had been arrested by regime security services, tortured and then killed, before his corpse had been handed over to his parents. She argued that, as an audience, we owe it to the people who brought these images to the world. The screening and viewing of such

material, she implied, was therefore a duty owed to those who took great risk to record, save, leak and bring these images to the world's attention. Another defence of viewing such material was expressed by Abdulaziz Almashi—a prominent London-based Syrian activist and founder of the organisation Syria Solidarity Campaign—also in attendance. He stated that it was necessary to consciously make an effort to watch at least one atrocity video from Syria, for the reason that only by doing so, could one reach a level of understanding of the Assad regime's depravity and what Syrians were going up against in their struggle for freedom.   His viewpoint is shared by other Syrians, including activist Yazan Douedari, who expressed the same argument when I interviewed him on the matter in October 2018:

> I think people in this country should see these videos. They are very strong; they are very hard. I understand this. But the solution is not to close your eyes. The solution is to open your eyes…open…and see what is happening. Because if you didn't see, you wouldn't understand. And if you didn't understand, you wouldn't know how to react or how to act in the correct way. So I would say, we need them to see. We need people to see what is happening. And they don't need to see, like, a hundred video[s]. [A] couple of videos are enough. And they don't need to continue seeing this forever. For me, I did see it for a couple of months. It was enough for me. It filled me with anger. Anger that still exists til' [to] now, after seven years. And I didn't continue to watch them, because I know now. I know what is happening. I have seen it. I can say that I have seen it.

I made sure to put the question of viewing atrocity footage to Syrian filmmaker Ossama Mohammed, with whom I conducted a conversation at the Screen Research Forum on June 13th 2019.   As part of the event, extracts of his film *Silvered Water: Syria Self Portrait* (2015) were screened, which included the heavily-pixellated mobile-phone video footage of torture described in the practice review part of this thesis, as well as footage of demonstrators being shot and injured by regime snipers.   One particular segment

included that of a corpse, sitting upright in a chair, with his face blown off; and another with a man being sodomised by regime personnel using a metal rod, with the result being the splatter of the victim's blood onto the wall by which he stands. I asked the director, "we see a lot of very disturbing scenes in this film…Why do you show these images?" to which he responded:

> People I think were filming freedom. So how to film freedom? Is it possible to film freedom? It is. But it's a multi, multi, multi layered film…[S]uddenly, the next five seconds…[of] filming freedom, people started to be killed inside the cadre! [frame]. People were not filming violence. They didn't want to film their beloved killed. But…looking to the first demonstration, which is filmed by anonymous…and then your beloved was killed in front of you. Do you stop the camera? My idea [is] that people were filming just to keep their beloved ten seconds more in life…

> … They were filming freedom, and freedom became mixed with tragic moments, with blood. You cannot take the blood and throw it [out] the cadre, because this blood…it's your beloved one. You cannot ask him, "my dear, you're killed. But why you have blood? It's not good…it's violence". It's violence, of course. It is violence. It is about violence. It is about the monsters of violence killing the dream of freedom inside the soul and body of people.

> … We are the monsters in this case if we don't smell what…it means…the second, of the second, of the mili, mili, millimetres of time inside those images.

For Ossama Mohammed therefore, the inclusion of these images as part of a feature film is to reveal the stories of each Syrian civilian's struggle for freedom. As he argues with his "monster" analogy, to turn our eyes away from such footage—or to refuse to "smell" the spirit and air of that environment—would be to become part of the very monster of violence that is "killing the dream of freedom inside the soul and body of people".

In essence, what is being communicated by these Syrian voices—from Khairalla to Mohammed—can perhaps be summed up by the comments of Paul Conroy—British war photographer and colleague of the late journalist Marie Colvin, killed in Syria under regime artillery fire. In the documentary feature *Under the Wire* (2018) that recounts the story of Colvin's killing in 2012, Conroy comments on his escape from the Syrian city of Homs, which had come under relentless bombardment by Assad's military during his and Colvin's stay. He states that he was told by his Syrian activist friends, "go and show the world what's going on here". He remembers carrying this plea within his mind during his escape and promising to fulfil it—a promise that he states gave him the drive and determination to get out of Syria alive: "I've been telling that story, and I'll continue doing it".

I acknowledge that the use of atrocity footage and images are disturbing to many viewers. My entire contemplation of using such footage was based precisely on this acknowledgement. I wanted to unsettle viewers because I believed this disturbance would arouse within them an emotional concern towards the Syrian tragedy. I reached this intention from contemplating the ideas of Artaud and Boal's differing theories of audience engagement in their *Theatre of Cruelty* and *Theatre of the Oppressed* respectively, as outlined in chapters **4.11** and **4.12** (see pp.154-158). But the reactions of Syrian democrats to the viewing and presentation of such material, as expressed in this concluding chapter, affirm that my decision to screen these images has been in-line with their sentiments. As had been my intention, Syrians too approached the presentation of these images with an intention to arouse human empathy and an understanding of the Syrian reality for those unfamiliar with it. Whether or not the desired audience reaction is achieved, I am convinced that the presentation and viewing of atrocity footage can be an act of solidarity and activism.

However, receiving reactions of those who viewed my film *A Friend Recently Told Me*, the use of atrocity footage as a visual tool is not the only method that seems to shake its viewers into a response. In this film, a selection of black and white photographs documenting a series of theatre workshops I initiated as a forum of creative expression for UK-based Syrian activists and refugees, culminates with a screen of black—in the same vein as *Testimony of a Former Detainee*—but with the sounds of another regime torture video clearly audible, and visually subtitled into English. The sounds of the footage indicate the killing of someone at the hands of pro-regime people. Beating and flogging, accompanied by degrading expletives riddled with rape references and psychological humiliation, as well as commentary and calls by members of the group to "shove it through his head!" and to "film him" are all heard during this period of black screen. The sonic environment suggest it is a session of sadistic torture. Like the footage of the thirteen-year old boy being interrogated and beaten by regime security forces, I also watched this video in its full imaged version. The scene depicts a man being beaten by a group of regime soldiers using a variety of metal rods, clubs and whips, with the victim frantically rolling around on the ground in an effort to evade the blows. Eventually one of the regime's men throws a large grey brick slab at the victim's head. The victim immediately ceases to move following the hit. It is not clear whether or not the man has died after the use of this crude weapon. In much the same feeling I experienced from the final moments of the footage used in *(im)position*, the brick-to-the-head image of this video unsettled me to a point at which I turned my eyes away from the screen, despite continuing to listen to the rest of the video. My initial reason for discarding the visual element of this footage and keeping only the audio, was due to the concerns I had struggled with early on in my research. Having found that particular moment of the brick throwing and possible death captured on camera as too disturbing to view, I wondered whether I would be condemned by many people for being insensitive to the victim and his

dignity in incorporating it as part of a film. I did not want to make a spectacle out of a murder. I also realised that I had started researching these atrocity videos frequently, and feared the possibility of turning into someone addicted to the thrill of watching these crimes unfold on camera—like a sort of torture porn as expressed by historian Joanna Bourke in her 2003 Guardian article *Torture as Pornography,* on the Abu Ghraib torture photos, which was a concept criticised by Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2009). Simultaneously, I worried about becoming desensitised to such scenes, the more I watched them. And yet, despite all of these concerns, I still believed that footage of these crimes should be experienced by people unaware of the Syrian reality.

Exhibiting *A Friend Recently Told Me* as part of a group show of artist filmmakers at the Senesi Contemporanea gallery in London in Winter 2017, I received one comment by a student who watched the film. It had been presented on a small wall-mounted electronic tablet, with headphones attached to the device. She stated that she felt the situation of watching a screen of black whilst the abusive language and sounds of torture played out into her ears, was possibly worse than if she had seen the visuals. She maintained she felt this way because the absence of image triggered her mind to start constructing a visualisation of what was going on.

In the two pieces of atrocity footage used for *(im)position* and *A Friend Recently Told Me* there were moments in both that I withheld from including in the final films. In the former, I simply ended the video before it got to that particular scene, and with the latter, I removed the visuals in their entirety. Looking back at these decisions, I now wonder if the reactions of people to these films, and the impact they could have on their experiencers, could have been radically different had I decided to leave the most disturbing parts of the videos intact—at least for *(im)position.* Would the sense of audience wujoud have been

more profound if visitors to the *(im)position* installation had witnessed the final moments of beating in that short video? This is something that I am now reflecting upon.

Furthermore, how impactful would a work like *(im)position* be if it were experienced by British policy makers?   Would it provoke them into a sense of moral indignation that would drive them to mobilise a multi-national coalition of naval power and enforce civilian protection by putting a stop to the regime and Russia's airstrikes on civilians? In March 2019, I was offered the role of Advocacy and Policy Manager with a newly-set up Syrian advocacy organisation called the Syrian British Council. I accepted the job, which I got thanks to the trust I had built up among the Syrian activist community. On Twitter, I came across an activist's video shot in Syria's North-Western province of Idlib.   The footage showed the aftermath of a bombing raid by Russian and regime aircraft—one of the many videos of these on-going attacks. In this video, the severely burned body of a little boy, perhaps no older than the age of seven or eight, is seen packed into a cardboard box. His limbs and entire body are skeletal. His skin and clothes are of the same ashen-grey, white and black. I made the assumption that he had died of near-incineration caused by the fires started by the aerial bombings. As the cardboard box's cover is lifted open, revealing the boy's body, a man hysterically shouts out rhetorically in Arabic, "Is this your terrorist Bashar?   Is this your terrorist?".   Using the Syrian British Council's Twitter account, I tweeted the video to the UK's foreign minister, Jeremy Hunt; Britain's ambassador to the United Nations; Teresa May; the Royal Air Force, and the Royal Navy, with the phrase, "Are we going to do anything about this?" I received no comment, no re-tweet, and no "like". I do not know if the intended recipients saw the video or my tweet. Perhaps I should now focus my efforts on making sure that some of the heads of state of liberal democracies are exposed to my audio-visual work.

5.4   A contribution to the field of genocide studies?

In peer-reviewed journals devoted to the study of genocide, articles have appeared that focus on the atrocities committed by the Islamic State (IS) against Syrian Kurds and Christians—studies that make the case that IS's atrocities against these identified minority groups constitute genocide, thus applying the literal surface understanding of genocide as defined in the genocide convention: as atrocities committed against minority groups based on their ethnicity or religious identification.   However, to my current knowledge at the time of writing, there exists no study in peer-reviewed journals that argue that the Assad regime's war on the Syrian people is a genocide.   I therefore view the chapter on genocide in this thesis to be valuable, for it makes the case that the regime's actions constitute genocide, via a number of studied considerations from a legal and conceptual angle.   Although I still view the main contribution to knowledge that has yielded from this research to be the resistance concept of wujoud, the hypothesis that the Assad regime's war against the Syrian people constitutes genocide, and the research into currently maintaining that this hypothesis is indeed appropriate, warrants recognition as new research and as a contribution to knowledge in the field of genocide studies pertaining to Syria.   However, my writing on the matter still needs to be held up to scrutiny in peer reviewed journals devoted to the study of genocide.   Submitting my hypothesis to relevant journals is therefore a course of action I intend to enact now that this thesis is done.   Research into the internationalisation of genocide is an additional element of the Syrian genocide hypothesis that I also intend to investigate further.

5.5   A contribution to disinformation busting?

Since starting my research in late 2014, the amount of literature and media that has challenged the various micro narratives waged as part of the regime's propaganda effort

has increased. One example of this is the Bellingcat website, which uses open-source information in order to provide on-going forensic analysis of many atrocities committed in Syria. Much of these analyses challenge the narratives put out into the public domain by the official statements of Russia and the Assad regime. As written about in the practice review chapter of this thesis, Forensic Architecture is another example, which also conducts investigations in a similar vein, but with the added element of audio-visual content re-creation, fusing 3-D modelling by spatial design practitioners with victim testimonies, open source audio-visual material and expert input from various bodies, such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Further examples of bodies and individuals that have worked on debunking the regime and Russia's micro-myths include The Syria Campaign, University of Birmingham professor of international politics Scott Lucas and his online newspaper EA Worldview, Snopes, and Olivia Solon writing for the Guardian—all of whom have contributed to the growing topic of coverage, analysis and commentary on regime and Russian-perpetrated disinformation pertaining to Syria. My research, of which this thesis is a component, is a contribution to this growing field of study. One consequence of this effort in disinformation busting, is that those involved in its generation have come under attack by the Russian state, the Assad regime or their supporters. This happened quite profoundly to Olivia Solon following the publication of her Guardian article *How Syria's White Helmets became victims of an online propaganda machine* in December 2017, around the same time I was working on *The Propagandist*. An outburst of Tweets and articles generated by those called out in Solon's article—such as the conspiracy theorist website 21st-Century Wire and Eva Bartlett's blogger friend and colleague Vanessa Beeley—was launched as a smear campaign against the journalist. Other examples include Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins, who has been publicly criticised on Twitter by the Russian embassy in South Africa; whilst the White Helmets have had to endure a concerted and on-going campaign—starting from 2015—of dehumanisation,

consisting of verbal abuse and defamatory accusations by the Russian state—including the Russian Embassy in the UK—for their on-going success in filming and documenting the destruction and killings caused by Russian and regime airstrikes on civilians. In what can possibly confirm my contribution to the growing study and action of tackling pro-regime propaganda efforts, when I released *The Propagandist*, it too was met by a few un-studied attempts to delegitimise it after it was distributed online in a limited capacity, by a small number of activists.   I recently found out that on a Twitter thread, the film, along with wujoud collective, had come under attack, albeit in a non-rationalised manner, by a regime supporter, who provided a link that he/she claimed contained a discussion thread on Eva Bartlett, that included a "debunking of wujoud collective".   Upon clicking on the link and reading through the few comments left on the thread, there was no sign of any video or comment that even made mention of wujoud collective or the film, let alone any attempt to "debunk" anything.   I imagine that as my work attains increased circulation, I too may come under concerted campaigns of smearing by the Assad supporters if I am to be identified as the author. The release of this very thesis in the public domain itself poses a risk of identifying me and exposing me to such an attack. For the moment however, *The Propagandist* has not been met with any significant backlash from Assad supporters, possibly due to my keeping the film non-didactic, revealing almost nothing about its authorship, and maintaining wujoud collective as an anonymous entity.   In this way, the Assad propaganda army has been unable to identify an individual for attack, meaning that my partial anonymity has worked as a component of my resistance.

Appendix: A list of where and when the activist films of this research have been publicly exhibited

Wujoud (2015) — (audio-visual installation).

- *Research student work-in-progress exhibition.* London College of Communication. London UK. 16 December 2015.

A Friend Recently Told Me (2016)

- *Reel Lives. Creativity and Diversity: a celebration of one decade of LCC PhD student films*. London College of Communication. London UK. 24 January 2019.

- *Screen Research Forum.* London College of Communication. London UK. 12 Dec 2018.

- *BA Film Practice* (activist filmmaking workshop). London College of Communication. London UK. 5 June 2018.

- *Against Forgetting*. Senesi Contemporanea. London, UK. 24 January - 20 February 2018.

Testimony of a former detainee (2017)

- *BA Contemporary Media Cultures* (Theory and Analysis of Media Culture module). Available for online streaming as part of class materials. London College of Communication. London UK. 23 April-18 May 2020.

- *Envisioning the Economy of the Future, and the Future of Political Economy AFEP-IIPPE Conference* (activist film section). Université de Lille. Lille, France. 3 - 5 July 2019.

- *Screen Research Forum*. London College of Communication. London UK. 12 Dec 2018.

- *BA Film Practice* (activist filmmaking workshop). London College of Communication. London UK. 5 June 2018.

The propagandist (2017)

- *Envisioning the Economy of the Future, and the Future of Political Economy AFEP-IIPPE Conference* (activist film section). Université de Lille. Lille, France. 3 - 5 July 2019.

- *Screen Research Forum*. London College of Communication. London UK. 12 Dec 2018.

(im)position (2017) — (audio-visual installation).

- Chelsea College of Art. London, UK. 23-16 November 2017.

A Reasonable Argument (2018)

- *Screen Research Forum*. London College of Communication. London UK. 12 Dec 2018.

- *BA Contemporary Media Cultures* (Theory and Analysis of Media Culture module). Available for online streaming as part of class materials. London College of Communication. London UK. 14 April-18 May 2020.

Statues (2017/2019) — (work in progress)

- *BA Contemporary Media Cultures* (Theory and Analysis of Media Culture module). Available for online streaming as part of class materials. London College of Communication. London UK. 14 April-18 May 2020.

- *Wishful Images*. Moving Image Research Centre. University of East London. London, UK. 29 January 2020.

- *51 Zero.* Film festival. University for the Creative Arts. Canterbury, UK. November 2019.

- *Screen Research Forum*. London College of Communication. London UK. 12 Dec 2018.

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Tadmor. 2017. [digital video] Directed by Monika Borgmann, Lokman Slim. France, Switzerland, Lebanon

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What follows is a list of online material that are mostly referenced individually at various stages throughout the thesis, either in the main body of the text or as footnotes. This list is *not* alphabetical but rather corresponds to the specific page numbers of the thesis where references to the online material is made. The list is presented in this way because *not* all titles or authors of the material are indicative of their content or subject, nor do they always correspond with their mention in the thesis' text or footnotes. This list therefore corresponds to the thesis' page numbers, providing a running commentary that facilitates navigation of content as the reader goes through the document page by page.

Whilst some of the material in this list are viewable via urls presented in many of this thesis' footnotes, some others are listed here as sources of further information to events or statements mentioned in the main body of the text where no direct reference to the online material is made.

It should also be noted that whilst this list includes some online videos, it *excludes* Youtube videos. A separate list for Youtube videos is found on page 225.

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Youtube videos

What follows is a list of Youtube videos that are individually referenced at various stages throughout the thesis, either in the main body of the text, or as footnotes. This list is *not* alphabetical, but rather corresponds to the page numbers in which each of the references are made. The list is presented in this way because *not* all video titles as they appear on Youtube are indicative of their content or subject. In this way, a list that corresponds to page numbers acts as a running audio-visual commentary, facilitating navigation of content as the reader goes through the thesis page by page.

Whilst some of the videos in this list are viewable via the urls presented in many of the footnotes of the thesis, some others are listed here as sources of further information to events or statements mentioned in the main body of the text where no reference to the video is made.

It should also be noted that this list is specifically focused on videos that are viewable on Youtube. If a video is referenced in the thesis text or footnotes, but is *not* seen in this list, it is likely to be part of a Twitter post or website, in which case it will be listed in the previous section of online references.

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