

## Introduction: The Government of Violence

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Over much of its rule, the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Asad and his successor, Bashar al-Asad, used violence on a massive scale, deploying disproportionate physical and destructive force to silence its critics and opponents. Indeed, the regime, as constituted under the Asads, has as its nucleus not only the figures occupying the top rung of political office, but also the apparatuses of violence, in particular the security services and elite military units. This security regime (*al-nizam al-amni*) has consistently acted in ways that convey the message that violence is the primary and organising modality of action in dealing with domestic opposition. The extent and scope of killing and destruction mounted by the security and military forces over approximately forty years of the Asad regime has made manifest a politics of extermination and annihilation as integral to the form of rule in Syria. Rather than betraying an irrational approach to government, this violence is governmental, not in the sense of being merely repressive, but as productive and performative – as shaping regime–citizen relations and forming political subjectivities.

Long before the 2011 Uprising, Syrians lived in anticipation of regime-instigated and perpetrated massacres and of civil war. The fear of civil strife was lodged in their hearts and minds. When spoken about in public, this fear referenced civil wars elsewhere in the region, in particular in Lebanon and Iraq. However, it had other unstated frames of reference and arose out of ordinary Syrians' common understanding that a challenge to or confrontation with the regime would mutate into an internal war – one that would pit regime supporters and opponents against each other. Significantly, the dread and anxiety over an impending outbreak of civil strife found expression in artistic works featuring apocalyptic motifs and themes. Syrians' premonitions and anxieties that a challenge to the regime would result in mass killings and destruction emerged as shared affect and knowledge cultivated over the period of al-Asad rule and, especially, in and from the 'period of the events'. This was a period about which silence was imposed in public discourse, but was recalled in everyday routines of government. The 'period of the events'

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(*fatrat al-ahdath*), the years between 1976 and 1982, was framed by a duel between the Hafez al-Asad regime and an Islamist insurgent group with ambiguous and not fully determined ties to the Muslim Brotherhood organisation. In effect, the duel was one dimension of a broad confrontation between the regime and oppositional forces across the political spectrum. Cast as traitors and subversives, these forces were subject to either physical elimination or social and political expulsion through long-term imprisonment. During that period, events of spectacular violence, culminating in mass slaughter in Hama in 1982, and routinised violence of incarceration, disappearances and extra-judicial killings, established the pedagogy of governmental violence inscribed through embodied lessons and memories.

In this work, I approach political violence in Syria as a modality of government, ordering and structuring regime–citizen relations. The detention camp and the massacre were and continue to be the two main apparatuses of governmental violence. These apparatuses work not only to contain and neutralise opponents and dissidents, but also to establish conditions of rule and to order citizens’ interpretative horizons and understandings of state/regime power.<sup>1</sup> The enactment of this political violence is grounded in the polarisation of the body politic and in the introduction and continual nurturing of a break running through it – the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide. This polarisation should not be reduced to the tropes of sectarianism and religious conflict, although, as the expressions of social processes and socially constructed antagonisms, both would map onto the divisions that are created and nurtured by the apparatuses of political violence. This work is concerned, then, with apparatuses, mechanisms and practices of governmental violence, and the terms in which this violence has been constitutive of political life in Syria.

While in scholarly work on Syria the Hama violence of 1982 is recognised for its brutality and spectacular scale, its character, as constitutive of the body politic, has not been the object of detailed study and investigation. Yet the Hama violence is paradigmatic of the operation of one of the apparatuses of governmental violence, namely, the massacre. The Hama massacres belong to a particular pedagogy of rule that framed citizens’ rituals of interaction with agents of the regime in Syria from the early 1980s onward. By virtue of its magnitude and its symbolic placement in the narrative of government and state – being

<sup>1</sup> The entwinement of state institutions and the Asad regime makes it analytically unviable to draw boundaries between the two. By virtue of the incorporation of the security apparatuses into the regime and the latter’s control of all governmental institutions, the regime and the state became tightly intermeshed.

characterised as expressive of the logic of sovereignty conceived of as the power of death and life (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2003; Mbembe 2003) – Hama was elevated to the position of master signifier in the language of violence. As a defining element of the pedagogy of rule, Hama is instructive of the powers of the ruler. Hama's place in the imaginary – haunting and haunted – is the unsaid that elicits silences and contests. The spectre of Hama haunted Syrians in a myriad of ways. 'The events of Hama' (*ahdath Hama*), as the massacres and destruction of the city were euphemistically referred to, possess a spectral quality. While many Syrians who were not residents of Hama at the time remained uncertain about the actual scale of death and devastation the city experienced, they nonetheless lived with the knowledge that unspeakable horror had taken place. They also lived with the fear that this horror would recur and that the regime would 'do Hama again'. Indeed, other smaller-scale episodes of violence, such as the security forces' shooting and killing of a number of protesters in al-Suwayda in 2000, were dubbed 'the Hama experience'.<sup>2</sup> At the end of March 2011, when the Syrian security forces put Dar 'a under siege, Syrians feared a repeat of Hama. Hama was thus the prototype of an apparatus of government.

The memory of Hama remains a difficult cipher of the Syrian polity. When the 2011 Uprising broke out, recollections of the 1982 violence in Hama rose to the fore from the recesses of consciousness, defying their banishment from public speech during the previous thirty years. The imposed closure had rendered mute the significations invested in these memories. This does not mean that they were marginal to Syrians as subject-citizens. Indeed, the silencing and silence had their own signifying powers. Violence, as lived and remembered, extends the performances and performative acts of past violence into the present in the form of bodily inscriptions and cognitive and affective dispositions incited in acts of recall and in acts of omission, in the remembering and in the forgetting.

As a case of spectacular violence of rule, the Hama massacres and destruction have their specificity as well as their commonalities with other instances of mass annihilation and ruination. They are approached,

<sup>2</sup> The protests, which occurred in November 2000, were spurred on by a conflict between Bedouin sheep-herders and Druze farmers in al-Suwayda, in which a Druze youth was killed. However, they developed into a general confrontation with the security and military forces who fired on the protesters with live ammunition. One of my interviewees, a former resident of al-Suwayda, recalls the threats that were directed at al-Suwayda in statements to the effect that 'al-Suwayda was not dearer [to the regime] than Hama'. According to my interviewee, these threats were spoken about in the city municipality offices (interview, Paris, September 2015).

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herein, to elucidate different facets of the massacre as an apparatus in the assemblage of practices of rule – an assemblage that includes the political prison as a space for the unmaking and remaking of political subjects. In approaching violence as a modality of government, I seek to bring into political studies an analytical vocabulary that would problematise the concept of violence, beyond conflict-centred perspectives, in terms of the techniques and rationalities of violence. In such a vocabulary and inventory of terms, I also seek to develop the analytics of horror as a framework through which to comprehend the cognitive, affective and symbolic work of violence.<sup>3</sup> In conjunction with developing ‘horror’ as an analytical construct for examining and understanding political violence, I draw on the psychoanalytic account of fear and bewilderment as advanced in Freudian analytics of the uncanny. I extend and recast the use of these concepts by means of an enquiry into their sociological grounding and their reconfiguration in and through governmental practices. My recourse to this vocabulary is guided by what I see as the necessity of examining extreme forms of violence as both emplotted and performative enactments that are generative of affectivity in the subjects drawn into the orbit of violent acts and performances as victims, witnesses and perpetrators. I extend this observation to assert that the affects generated through violence are the object of government and the terrain of making and unmaking political subjects.

### The Place of Violence in Government

In the project of government promoted by the Ba‘thist Asad regime, we find, in many respects, biopolitical objectives and rationalities expressive of the will to improve as discussed by Li (2007). As with other developmentalist and modernising regimes, a central objective of government was the management and improvement of the life of the population. Grand designs of modernisation, as exemplified by schemes such as the construction of the Euphrates Dam and the building of Thawra City, carried the stamp of such a project of the remake of subjects and nature. An early study by Raymond Hinnebusch (1989) outlined in great detail the contours of the modernisation enterprise in agriculture. Technicalisation, specialisation and rationalisation as the armatures of modern government were adopted as techniques and strategies for the actualisation of designs of improvement. The schemes of government entailed infrastructural build-up that comprised, among other things,

<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed below, I draw on Cavarero’s (2011) exploration of the analytic uses of horror.

agricultural cooperatives, schools of agronomy and agricultural direction boards. Notwithstanding shortcomings and failures, the targets of abundance and welfare and the strategies deployed in their pursuit confirm and conform to a preoccupation with the fostering of life.

At the same time, this politics of life coexisted with a politics of killing, internment and incarceration on a mass scale. In fact, the entwining of the two facets of political government and their merger was given a crude enactment and symbolisation in the coordination of events which combined such activities as the inauguration of dams or the distribution of seeds with mass rallies organised in support of the military assaults on Aleppo in 1980 and on Hama in 1982 (*al-Ba'th*, 19 March 1980; *Syria Today*, 21 February 1982). The merger of festivities of life and rallies of death, more than being mere expressions of sinister manipulation, conveyed the interconnections of governmental power and sovereign power. Alongside the school and the agricultural cooperative, the prison and the massacre arose as apparatuses of rule that instanced the state and regime. Within these apparatuses, the citizens' bodies were the sites on which the regime and state were produced. As noted for other political settings such as Ireland and Colombia, political messages are communicated through bodies traversed by violence (Feldman 1991, 8; Rojas and Tubb 2013; Uribe 2004a). In Syria, the tortured body of the prisoner, the mutilated body of the massacre victim and the humiliated body of the ordinary citizen bear, in interrelated ways, the imprints of governmental violence. At the same time, as Allen Feldman (1991, 7) observes, fashioned into a political artefact by violence, the subject, whose body is the object of such violence, is no less a political agent than the authors of that violence.

Neither the political prison nor the massacre existed on the margin of the polity in Syria. For instance, rather than being merely the negation of political life, the political prison/internment camp developed as a space for the undoing of the political subject and as a referent for the general population's understanding of the terms of rule. Structurally and operationally, the political prison is continuous with the polity: disciplining and remaking recalcitrant subjects while being a spectre for the purposes of instruction of the wider population.<sup>4</sup> Syrian dissident and former political prisoner Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2011a) rightly argues that the political

<sup>4</sup> In testimonies and diaries of Syrian political prisoners, representatives of the ruler/sovereign feature as violent torturers and interrogators engaged in committing brutalising acts on the body of the prisoner. For example, in a testimonial given by Reda Haddad, who was imprisoned between 1980 and 1995, two high-ranking military officers who tortured him are named. These were Hisham Bakhtiar and Ali Duba (Haddad 2004). Both Bakhtiar and Duba punched, kicked and whipped Haddad during an extended period of interrogation, in which electrocution was also administered to his body (Haddad 2004).

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prisoner is not the exception but the general rule (*al-mi'yar al-'am*). Spatial arrangements of the edifice of coercive state agencies and acts of violence in the everyday also established the continuity between the space of the prison and its outside. The ubiquitous presence of security-service kiosks on city street corners, of military checkpoints throughout the Syrian landscape and the routine assaults by security services personnel on ordinary citizens going about their daily chores, blurred the boundaries demarcating the camp and the territory beyond it.

In tandem with the political prison, the massacres committed in Hama in 1982 came to represent a referential genre in the repertoire of horror managed by the regime. The discursive and symbolic coding of this horror, and the affective states and practices it patterned, have all been formative of Syrian political subjectivities. Consider, for example, that within silenced and interrupted narratives of the events of violence, narratives of certain enactments of violence came to represent emblematic memories of the horror that was visited upon Hama: narratives of mutilation linked to looting and particular stories about the severing of fingers, hands and ears to pry off jewellery from the dead bodies. Also emblematic are tales of atrocities that befell prominent community figures: the gouging out of the eyes of a number of city doctors, for instance. Although such narratives were hushed and muted, formalised accounts of the type that have emerged in human rights reports, cataloguing the destruction and killing, were known to Syrians of all generations who lived through the events.

Embodied transcripts of the Hama violence loomed large over the Syrian polity. Some youth activists of the 2011 Uprising reported that during the Uprising members of their families, for the first time, narrated details of the gruesome murder of close relatives during the massacres in 1982 (interviews with exiled activists in Montreal and Beirut, 2015). Parents and close relatives recalled silenced memories in a bid to dissuade the youth in their families from pressing on with their confrontation with the regime. Indeed, early on in the 2011 Uprising, novelist Manhal al-Sarraj (2011), the foremost Syrian literary witness to 'the Hama events', interrogated the ethic of sacrifice orienting the protesters' readiness to risk their lives and face certain death and destruction. The dread and anxiety experienced by al-Sarraj and by the families of youth activists are patterned in relation to the Hama experience. It may be argued that generational factors and related positionality from the events of past violence are factors in how memories of violence were brought to bear on activism during the Uprising. All the same, transcripts of historical horror and atrocities are not without their links with Syrians' experiences of regime practices of government in the everyday.

The type of violence mastered by the Syrian regime in conjunction or coincident with a governmental project aimed at the improvement of the life of the population is expressive of a puzzle of state power. This puzzle is similar, in some respects, to the paradox addressed by Michel Foucault in his analyses of the intersection, in modern times, of biopolitical power – a form of power that concerns itself with the fostering and management of life – with the old sovereign power to kill. In Foucault's account, the politics of mass killing in the modern period, as instanced in the cases of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, finds its rationalisation in a racist discourse which operates by drawing binary divisions between those deemed worthy of life and those who are, by necessity, expendable. Foucault uses 'racism' to refer to the discursive articulations and processes through which political and ideological divisions are rendered into biological ones.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the contentions regarding Foucault's unconventional usage of racism, what is of immediate concern is that a politics of mass killing is, perforce, calibrated through discursive and operational interventions that cleave into the body politic, creating interdependent zones of life and death. The questions that I raise in drawing on Foucault's analyses of the coexistence, in the modern period, of a politics of life and a politics of death, and of the convergence of one with the other, aim at getting a closer view of the politics of killing in Syria and the kind of political life it forges.

While Foucault poses the problem of the politics of killing (thanatopolitics) in the modern period as a paradox, Giorgio Agamben (1998) has countered that the subjugation of life to the powers of death has premodern foundations in the sovereign's power to create bare life – a form of life that is captured in the figure of *homo sacer*, the one who may be killed but not sacrificed.<sup>6</sup> This form of life, which is the product of abandonment and the spaces to which it is relegated, asserts sovereignty and is a precondition of sovereign power. In the modern period, sovereign powers of death materialise in the space of the internment camp, among other sites. Spaces of abandonment and exposure to death, exemplified

<sup>5</sup> Mbembe (2003, 17) notes that in the exercise of biopower, '[t]he function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state'.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Dean (2004) nuances Agamben's thesis on the sovereign power of life by pointing out that different concepts of life are at stake with different expressions of sovereign power. For instance, modern biopower subtends a specific concept of life, one in which it subjugates more aspects and spaces of life, bringing them into zones of indistinction and constituting them as bare life (see Dean for a reading of Agamben along these lines). In Dean's dialogue with both Foucault and Agamben, biopolitics, as a distinct phase of modern sovereignty, extends to capture bare life (*zoē*).

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by the camp, emerge in this topography as components of projects of government where political life and bare life become indistinguishable.

Foucault's observations on the politics of killing in the modern period and Agamben's analysis of the production of bare life are relevant to my examination of the nature of political violence, its rationalities and modes of enactment in Syria. I draw insights from both Foucault and Agamben's discussions of the terms in which sovereign power and governmental power articulate, interconnect and merge at certain junctures and in particular spaces. However, I depart from both in interrogating the forms of political life of which governmental violence is productive. My interrogation is predicated on the premise that, in terms of its objects and in terms of its techniques and rationalities, political violence is formative of political subjects, and of terrains of action and resistance. In their analyses of the politics of death as the flipside of biopolitics, both Foucault and Agamben appear to place it outside the realm of political life. As noted by Johanna Oksala (2012, 100), thanatopolitics, for Foucault, is an excess of biopolitics that may be brought into check through liberal interventions.<sup>7</sup> Agamben, on the other hand, by positing that political life and bare life have become indistinguishable in the state of exception, projects a totalising vision of bare life and, as a consequence, negates the possibility of political life in which agency and resistance are understood to be possible. Rather than casting the politics of killing as an excess of biopolitical rationality, or as a negation of political life, I propose to approach political violence as governmental – underpinned by rationalities of rule and formative of terrains of subjectivation and political action.

In conceptualising as governmental the forms that regime violence in Syria takes, I shift the analysis to the affective and cognitive objects of this violence and to its role in fashioning political subjects. The affective and cognitive objects of physical violence appear to be marginal in Foucault's genealogies of disciplinary power and of biopolitics and in Agamben's analyses of the camp. Left out, also, are the social, normative and political terrains upon which techniques of body-centred violence and

<sup>7</sup> Mbembe (2003, 14) observes that Foucault's conception of biopolitics is not sufficient to take account of a form of sovereignty that has as its central project the '*generalized instrumentalization of human existence, and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*' (italics in the original). The centrality of destruction and killing to this project, Mbembe (2003, 27–30) proposes, represents a particular kind of politics – necropolitics. The forms of subjugation of life to the power of death include state siege, the generalisation of slaughter as the dominant form of war and the creation of zones of human capture that are dehumanising (Mbembe 2003, 40). In these worlds and spaces, Mbembe argues, the power of death rules over life.

emplotted acts of violence are administered and which they aim to alter. The technologies of violence centred on the body, as, for example, in the operations of the camp or the detention centre and the massacre, are no less constitutive of subjects than the modern prison, school, reformatory and psychiatric clinic. Behind the seemingly irrational quality of extreme violence, there are rationalities of rule that act through the subject's affect and cognition, thus revealing violence as a modality of governmental power.

The affect, as material and terrain for practices of government, remains at the margin of studies of governmentality. In a critique of the governmentality literature's tendency to leave out the affect in its theorisations of rationalities of rule, Elaine Campbell (2010) suggests that considerations of what she calls 'emotionalities of rule' would permit a more inclusive perspective on governmental technologies and apparatuses that 'propose and suppose particular ways of *feeling* about the world' (Campbell 2010, 39, italics in the original). Campbell points out that, in design, governmental strategies do not aim only at inculcating, in the subject, certain ways of thinking. Rather, governmental strategies aim, also, at engendering ways of feeling in the subject. I share Campbell's concern with the need to bring the affect into the investigation of rationalities of rule. Additionally, I share the view (Warwick 2004) that power works on the subject's psychic and affective capacities. It does not only bring them into effect.

Understanding violence as a form of governmental power underlines practices and strategies that have as their objective and outcome not only to harm the body, the mind and the affect but, also, to reconstruct, shape, discipline and normalise the subject of government. Practices of violence that generate the affects of humiliation, abjection and horror should not be dismissed as premodern or archaic, rather they should be examined in terms of rationalities aimed at making and unmaking political subjects. The operation of this governmental power unfolds on the basis of knowledge and assumptions about affect, emotions and cognition and about their sociality (i.e. their cultural embeddedness and their intersubjectively produced meanings). I illustrate the workings of these assumptions and practices by looking at body-centred violence that elicits feelings of fright and disgust and at emplotted performances of violence that are productive of cognitive uncertainty and uncanny experiences. As I will elaborate below, I use concepts of abjection and the uncanny to develop an understanding of the affective dimensions of governing through violence.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This examination of affective governance ties in with a semiotic analysis of violence

The analytics of affect guiding this investigation into Syrians' lived experience of violence draws on elements of varied theorisations that disclose different aspects of affective life and affectivity. In one of the pathways of these theorisations, affect is understood as 'the body's capacity to affect and be affected' (Anderson 2016, 9).<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, affect is a body's charge or emergent disposition that comes forth in encounters, contacts and interactions between and among subjects and between subjects and their lived environment. Affect is expressed in embodied feelings and emotions which are mediated by configurations of other forces that include, among other things, social histories, individual experiences, cultivated knowledge, memories and prior encounters (Anderson 2016). The attention to the social and historical mediation of affective experiences aligns with an understanding of affect as socially embedded, patterned and enacted in practice, as suggested by Margaret Wetherell (2012). Wetherell (2012, 78) proposes that it is in the course of situated social interaction that affect takes shape and is enacted in embodied practice. In this respect, affect lends itself to being approached in terms of patterned practice.<sup>10</sup> The patterning of affective practice occurs through repeated encounters and interaction, and is inflected by historical, social and cultural materialities (Wetherell 2012, 77–8, 89). By virtue of its social and historical imbrication and its processual emergence in interaction and encounters, affect is transpersonal and collective (Anderson 2016, 102). By the same token, affective charges are not solely or fully located in a subjective interiority, but are produced within and in relation to a given environment (Anderson 2016; Navaro-Yashin 2012, 21–7; Wetherell 2012, 78). As is the case with the affective force of encounters between subjects, the affective charge of the environment is sensed by the subjects in mediated terms. In its subjective and social manifestations, affective life constitutes a terrain of action and of governmental intervention.

as meaning-producing practices (meanings that emerge in relation to other signifying practices).

<sup>9</sup> This conceptualisation of affect is formulated in Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's work in conversation with Baruch Spinoza (Anderson 2016, 78).

<sup>10</sup> Wetherell's approach to the affect aligns with Ian Burkitt's (2014) analysis of emotions as patterned relations, expressive of socially embedded responses to the world. The terms of analysis that such an approach entails also resonate with earlier writings by sociologists and anthropologists of emotion. For example, Leavitt (1996) advanced a construct of emotions as socialised embodied feelings that are called forth in recurrent social experiences. Similarly, Abu Lughod and Lutz (1990) underscored that emotions are socially situated and hence are interpreted and appraised in relation to contextual factors.