

The Rule of Violence

Over much of its rule, the regime of Hafez al-Asad and his successor Bashar al-Asad deployed violence on a massive scale to maintain its grip on political power. In this book, Salwa Ismail examines the rationalities and mechanisms of governing through violence. In a detailed and compelling account, Ismail shows how the political prison and the massacre, in particular, developed as apparatuses of government, shaping Syrians' political subjectivities, defining their understanding of the terms of rule and structuring their relations and interactions with the regime and with one another. Examining ordinary citizens' everyday life experiences and memories of violence across diverse sites, from the internment camp and the massacre to the family and school, *The Rule of Violence* demonstrates how practices of violence, both in their routine and spectacular forms, fashioned Syrians' affective life, inciting in them feelings of humiliation and abjection, and infusing their lived environment with dread and horror. This form of rule is revealed to be constraining of citizens' political engagement, while also demanding of their action.

Salwa Ismail is Professor of Politics with reference to the Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her research focuses on everyday forms of government, urban governance and the politics of space. She has published on Islamist politics and on state–society relations in the Middle East and is the author of both *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (2003) and *Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (2006). Her recent publications have appeared in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Social Research* and *Contemporary Islam*.

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The Rule of Violence

Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria

Salwa Ismail

University of London



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Preface

This book undertakes a quest to understand how Syrians' experiences of political violence, both spectacular and routine, became formative of the Syrian polity over the decades of al-Asad rule (1970 onward). My interest in pursuing this quest formed during a period of fieldwork in Syria in 2005. The immediate political context, then, was marked by the suppression of the civil society movement that had emerged in 2000 and took organised expression in a number of discussion forums, in publications such as semi-independent cultural magazines and in artistic works. Although, at the time, the security services were arresting regime critics and silencing opponents, activists maintained hope and showed much personal courage in pressing for political change.

As an observer and participant in public cultural activities that took place in carefully circumscribed spaces of discussion and debate such as the al-Attasi Forum (closed in June 2005), the Journalists' Syndicate Club and the Institut Français du Proche Orient (IFPO), I both witnessed and experienced practices of silencing and of self-censorship. These practices drew the boundaries of what could and could not be said, establishing thresholds of the permissible in speech that were not to be crossed. Paradoxically, however, they gave rise to debate and disagreements among cultural activists and other engaged Syrians precisely about the contours of borders of public discourse and whether they should be observed. Yet many debates and discussions that inevitably veered towards the past, and proffered diagnostics of authoritarian rule to explain the country's political impasse, closed off pathways of memory and of reading the present in light of past experiences of violence, especially extreme violence.

In the course of interviews and conversations, a puzzle arose as much from my interlocutors' silences and ellipses as from their statements and declarations. In personal discussions with a number of politically engaged Syrians – activists in the civil society movement, dissident writers and former political prisoners – the authoritarian past and the dominance

of the security services were commonly invoked themes. These themes prefaced the cultural and civil activists' analysis of the constraints on their action and the challenges they faced in their struggle for political opening and accountability. The name of Hafez al-Asad was uttered to invoke, in an almost mythical sense, a figure of dictatorship that pervaded all aspects of political, social and cultural life and stunted political growth. The silence about the Hama violence in my interlocutors' narratives of the not-too-distant political past was expressed in interrupted speech. In private or more intimate accounts of al-Asad's dictatorship, the atrocities committed by the regime in Hama remained largely unspoken – a seemingly absent sign and referent.

During several of the politically oriented cultural gatherings I attended in 2005, I observed the tendency to speak in broad terms about dictatorship and to avoid making reference to specific events and happenings. However, there also appeared to be forms of speech and signification that, while not allegorical, were suggestive of the silenced. This was at times achieved by juxtaposing certain images and narratives of the past and the present in a manner that underscores interruptions and ellipses. For example, one evening, at a gathering at the IFPO in Damascus, prominent filmmaker Nabil El-Malih screened, sequentially, two of his documentaries: one on the pre-Ba'th nationalist figure Fakhri al-Barudi and the other on the industrial pollution of the al-'Asi River during the Ba'th period. The two works, together, spoke to 'the then and the now' – to the then of national aspirations and to the current moment of destruction.

In some sense, the silence about Hama that I encountered in 2005 was made more puzzling by the fact that, at the time, a literary and artistic movement, preoccupied with the work of memory, had acquired some prominence in cultural circles in the country. This work journeyed to the past to retrieve prior selves and banished histories and to give account. In some of these early works of memory, the Hama violence figured in ellipses. Hama was a gap in narratives of the Syrian experience of life under the Hafez al-Asad dictatorship. The puzzle of silence on Hama crystallised for me one afternoon during a visit with a Syrian friend at her home in Damascus. Speaking about the progress of my research, I brought up the puzzle that this silence posed, saying: 'It is as if Hama was forgotten.' To this, she responded: 'We will never forget Hama.' Nothing more was said. My friend did not seek to elaborate. In turn, I refrained from pressing for an explanation, apprehending a closure in her brief response and immediate silence. The said and unsaid in conversations like this one and in the work of memory, led me to think that the Hama silence is infused with meanings and feelings that are powerfully present in Syrians' lives.

Looking back, I realise that I read, then, somewhat differently than I do now, the conversations and gestures that directed me to pose the question of the role of violence and memories of violence in shaping the Syrian polity. I recall that while I was in Damascus in early 2005, a friend from Aleppo, who was a civil rights activist and a former political prisoner, sent me, by email, a Word file of Manhal al-Sarraj's *Kama Yanbaghi li-Nahr*. I was conscious, then, of the risk he took in doing so (the novel was banned by the authorities). However, I was, perhaps, less conscious of the salience of the gesture he was making in enjoining me to read this novel about Hama.

Works of memory, which began to appear by the mid 2000s, gave a sense of what had been silenced or banished from public speech. These works brought forth ghosts of the past and showed that reckoning with it was urgent. In fictional writings, Syrian novelists sought to tell untold stories, to show that Hama was *nationalised*. Some, like Rosa Yassin Hassan, moved the account to the coastal region, telling a part of the story as it takes root in the unwritten histories of diverse communities. By the late 2000s, literary witnessing offered more untold stories from various regions of Syria. Although many of the writings were banned, they could be acquired in bookstores without much difficulty. Secrets of the past became open secrets.

In certain respects, this book is about an atmosphere, the weight of a particular history and hauntings that live on and inhabit the present. Enmeshed in Syrian narratives, it seeks to understand and assume a responsibility to tell a story, or part thereof – a story of the Syrian present as it has been shaped by a mode of government. Through the narratives of political prisoners, the memories of massacre survivors and the recollections of everyday life experiences of ordinary citizens, this book offers fragments of that story.

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I undertook ethnographic research in Syria first in 2004–5 and then again in 2010–11. My conversations and interviews with Syrians as part of that work, and extending back to earlier visits commencing in 2002, shaped the approach and the terms of analysis orienting this book. These conversations and interviews opened to me ways of understanding Syrians' experiences of life under the Asad regime.

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I connected with a group of youth activists who were involved in the coordination of protests. Through them, I learnt much about trajectories of activism. More than that, however, I came to understand something about the courage and spirit of defiance that fueled the Uprising. In this respect, I owe a special debt of gratitude to ‘Amer Matar. After I left Syria at the end of May 2011, I established further contacts with youth activists and had ongoing correspondence with some of them through to late 2011 and early 2012. I want to express my gratitude for their willingness to respond to my questions at a very difficult time. I am also thankful to the activists I interviewed in Beirut in 2015. I extend special thanks to the Syrian women in Shtura, Lebanon, for sharing with me stories of their past life in Syria. I am grateful to Samar Yazbek, Yazid Sayyigh, Jamil Mouawad and Jessy Nassar for their help with introductions to Syrians in Beirut, to Karim al-Afnan for assisting with contacts in Amman and to Jonas Skovrup Christensen for locating relevant research material.

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