Research Notes

The Syrian Oral History Project: A Plan for Documentation and Research

By Uğur Ümit Üngör

How do people experience mass violence? The Syrian civil war is an epic, bitter reminder of the profound relevance of this question. An unknown number of Syrians in Europe and beyond have experiences with and memories of very serious violence – as victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. This research project proposes to document and research Syrians’ experiences of mass violence and the dynamic of the violent conflict in Syria. It aims to interview as many people as possible in a strategic, scholarly and purposeful manner. At the same time, it should be realistic in creating expectations, and ethically responsible in identifying and approaching interviewees and storing sensitive data. Documentation and research is useful for academic output in key research areas such as trajectories and political economies of violence, the ebb and flow of refugees, and the roles of economic inequality, poverty, climate change, identity, and religion in violent conflict. In fact, due to restrictions, prohibitions, and lack of access, never before has it been possible to study Syrian history in such a comprehensive manner. Beyond academia, this project would also be relevant in educating the broader public about these topics, and even for assisting investigations and prosecutions of crimes against humanity.

Threefold relevance

A research project into the experiences of Syrians would pursue three major objectives: academic, social, and legal.

First of all, documentation and research on mass violence is invaluable to scholarly research. Mass violence is not only a thing of the past but one of the most pressing global problems of our time, and therefore deserves lasting academic attention. Much like the eyewitness accounts of the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, interviews would promote a rich source base for academics to use for the sake of their research (see below for research questions). Syrian collective memory cannot be narrowly conceived as only Middle Eastern history but can help clarify a range of issues in violence research, from perpetration to victimization, polarization and reconciliation, religiosity and secularism, mobilization and demobilization, organized crime and human trafficking, and social research more broadly. Indeed, the Syrian civil war is global history and concerns the whole world.

Second, there is a strong societal interest. As this destructive conflict drags on, a mass return to Syria is unlikely and therefore the million+ and counting Syrians in Europe should be seen as future Europeans, including victims and survivors of some of the most infamous moments and spaces of mass violence. Due to their exposure to very serious violence, it is not only vital for Syrians to be treated psychologically, but also to be heard societally as a group that is severely affected by those experiences. Participating in, say, Dutch society, including learning the language, finding a job, enrolling in education, and having faith in democracy and the rule of law are all processes that are affected by their wartime experiences. Therefore, international and Syrian NGOs have been advocating to reduce the distance between Syrians and European states.

Finally, there is an unmistakable legal interest. Syrian oral history is a body of knowledge that courts can tap into for prosecutions, for many hundreds of Syrian war criminals live in Europe and the already widespread impunity is an affront against the (international) rule of law and a potential security risk. With the help of Syrian refugees, war criminals in Sweden and Germany have already been prosecuted for
crimes committed in Syria. Both the international crimes sections of national police corpses and public prosecutors have a strong interest in detecting and prosecuting international crimes. A responsible interview project would cooperate with them and offer a body of knowledge that can support or contrast existing initiatives for databases of war crimes committed in Syria – an explicit objective of both the EU and separate European Foreign Ministries.

Research questions

A range of relevant research questions guides this project. These questions are being developed systematically and organized logically to fit existing research desiderata, gleaned from intersections between the specific historiography on Syria and broader discussions on mass violence. This structured, diverse, and broad set of questions includes but is not limited to four major chronological foci:

1. Life under Assad Sr., 1970-2000
   • How did Syrians experience social, economic, and political life under the rule of Hafez al-Assad? What were Syrians’ everyday encounters with his rule?
   • How did Syrians experience (religious) sectarianism and (ethnic) nationalism? Which forms of political participation could Syrians afford? How and why did people become active in politics?
   • How did Syrians experience the conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s?

2. Life under Assad Jr., 2000-2010
   • Which political, economic, and social changes did Syrians experience during the transition to Bashar al-Assad’s presidency? What were Syrians’ everyday encounters with the regime?
   • How did Syrians experience (religious) sectarianism and (ethnic) nationalism? Which forms of political participation could Syrians afford? How did they get active in politics?
   • How did economic liberalization affect Syrians? How was corruption experienced by the public?

3. The Uprising, 2011-
   • How did Syrians experience the broader Arab Spring from 2010-2011? Why and how did Syrians organize and become involved in mass demonstrations?
   • How and why did Syrians fight? With whom, and why with those groups? Why did they not fight? How and why were norms of pacifism developed and maintained?
   • How did Syrians experience the changes in everyday life as the war escalated? Which significant regional differences can we observe in war experiences? How important are factors of class, tribal, and religious identities in the conflict?
   • How did the civil war restructure Syrian society in terms of political identities?

4. Flight, Asylum, and Life Abroad
   • How do Syrians understand, interpret, frame, and explain the ongoing near ten years of conflict? What are Syrians’ ideas about the post-conflict period, including transitional justice?
   • How do Syrians perceive European states’ policies towards Syria? How do Syrians integrate into the Netherlands, what are the obstacles they face?
   • How do Syrian children experience the conflict, and their parents’ engagement with it? What do their parents tell them about the conflict, and what kind of responses to they develop toward it?

Approach

This research project will be carried out over a period of at least five years, with a team of interviewers and data experts. The project is based at the NIOD Institute in Amsterdam (www.niod.nl), whose broad experience in war documentation date from World War II; it cooperates with Syrian NGOs and groups
who have worked on documenting the course of the conflict through interviews. A brainstorm workshop on 29 March 2018 was held in Amsterdam to garner input and feedback on the designs of research and documentation. Towards the end of the project, a conference will present some of the main deliverables, including an online collection of testimonies.

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