Chapter 6
Violence and Masculinity in the Syrian Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analyzing the various forms of violence carried out by the different categories of people directly involved in the actual Syrian war: 'regular' soldiers, Alawite elite troops (plus the different security services), (mostly) Alawite militiamen, rebels from the (Sunni) mainstream armed opposition, and Islamist fighters, not to mention rogues who thrive on unruliness. This paper's hypothesis is that the demobilization of combatants is just partially connected to concrete issues – in the sense, for example, that any nationwide economic reconstruction will probably not be enough to promote reconciliation – since other factors impede any eventual transition from a violent civil war to a peaceful agreement, among them: a peculiar middle-eastern sense of masculinity plus the plague of sectarianism which builds organic barriers between people.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at analyzing the various forms of violence carried out by the different categories of people directly involved in the actual Syrian war: 'regular' soldiers, Alawite elite troops (plus the different security services), (mostly) Alawite militiamen, rebels from the (Sunni) mainstream armed opposition, and Islamist fighters, not to mention rogues who thrive on unruliness. This paper's hypothesis is that the still very distant demobilization of combatants is just partially connected to concrete issues. For instance, any nationwide economic reconstruction project – probably the most tangible of incentives – will certainly not be enough for the time being to promote reconciliation between warring factions. When, some weeks after the first demonstrations, the regime started to fear the consequences of the upheaval and realized that it was finally not that strong, its supporters (from the Alawite-dominated security services and special combat units) wrote on the walls: 'Either Asad, or we will burn the country.' And that is exactly what they have been doing. The Islamic State, a newcomer on the war scene, has adopted the same strategy. The other armed groups' attitude may be described as in-between. In such a furious outburst of mutual destruction, envisaging mutually profitable economic projects seems a bit odd.

Indeed, other dominant factors seriously impede any eventual transition from a violent civil war to a peaceful agreement. Among these multiple domineering factors, a peculiar middle-eastern sense of masculinity can be identified plus, above all, the plague of sectarianism which has built organic barriers between people. Not to mention the 'natural' desire of harmed and offended people to take revenge, sometimes irrationally, particularly when there is no justice at all. The mechanism of violence, after the conflict turned bloody (a few months after March 2011), seems therefore to be only partially linked to concrete and practical questions, which renders any solution very remote, in the sense that the struggle is first of all perceived by many as being existential, and thus non-negotiable. Syria's distressing situation, after more than four years of conflict, does not allow the author to envisage any reasonable solution for the near future, since all indicators point to the fact that the country is very far from accepting the simple idea of implementing any form of transitional justice, in the wide framework of a peace building process. Syria is now *de facto* divided, geographically and mentally, to the point that any attempt at fostering citizenship, trust, and recognition is doomed to failure. Thus, if many people long for a ceasefire (reconciliation still being too far-off), this may not be on the same premises. In any case, no faction is actually able to articulate an encompassing, coherent, and inclusive political agenda. To this gloomy picture must be added the material interests of armed groups for continuing a fighting that sounds for them much more preferable than making reasonable concessions.

From an academic point of view, it could assuredly be interesting to discuss methodically what lays at the intersection between categories like gender, ethnicity, and religion in a war context. It would appear that Kurdish ladies and women play a paramount military role, especially when they are recruited into PKK-monitored units. Alawite ladies and women now also do take part in the regime military effort, especially in police and control missions, because of the huge male bleeding within the community. From a Sunni Arab point of view, women have generally remained in the military background. Whatever these remarks, it remains difficult to see what could be the implications of these three categories (gender, ethnicity, and religion), with their respective stances towards violence, on any still inconceivable peaceful solution. War is usually a man's business, while women have to comply with males' decisions and errors, especially in the patriarchal Middle East, which signifies that the sole gender category is probably not the most adequate paradigm to use for analyzing the Syrian war (with the exception of the Kurds, who are by the way rather peripheral actors). So, in such a context where (transitional) justice is totally absent and where peace building is too frequently understood as the destruction of enemies, the dynamics of primordial identities (religion and ethnicity), together with personal interests, shapes the course of the conflict. Finally, the author admits that he perceives the exclusive gender perspective, albeit interesting, as too narrow since the Syrian war is infuriated and global.

The role of social media in contemporary wars is something that has no previous antecedent. Syria is in this sense an interesting case study. Although no thorough analysis of this issue will be carried out here, this issue has to be kept in mind. First because social media have played a paramount role in disclosing the regime's crimes, and then jihadist groups' abuses. Secondly because social media have become an easy way of promoting violence, either for personal virile bragging or for scaring foes. There is therefore a close link between social media and the containment / promotion of violence. Moreover, the role of the cellular phone, slowly introduced in the early 2000s, may deserve some reflection: the regime was then torn between its economic interests (taking people's money through its providing a useful service monopolized by a few individuals connected to power) and security concerns (controlling society), probably

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