On the Multiple Uses of Video Footage among Contemporary Perpetrators

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Video as a Weapon in Contemporary Conflicts

In early June 2019, I was attending an academic conference at the American University of Paris on the scholarly uses of video testimonies of survivors and eyewitnesses of mass violence. I had prepared a presentation on the use of videos of and by Syrian perpetrators, a topic I have been working on for the past seven years. As I was waiting for my panel, a Syrian friend living in Paris called me, asking to meet urgently. We did so right before my panel. We sat down in the back of a quiet café, and he pulled out his smartphone and urged me to watch a harrowing video on it. The 6-minute video shows Syrian intelligence agents in military fatigues taking out blindfolded and bound civilians from a white van, marching them to a large, pre-dug pit, lined with car tires at the bottom, and executing them one by one by shooting them with AK-47 automatic rifles. The perpetrators carry out the executions in routine fashion, speaking only to bark orders at the victims ('get up', 'get out', 'walk ahead'). One agent is filming, while the other is shooting. The killers are not particularly emotional, but judging from their gleeful facial expressions, they are clearly enjoying the job. At some point, the cameraman turns his smartphone around and smiles into the camera: 'This one is for you, boss!' The fact that the video was shocking, even for someone like me, used to violent footage emerging from Syria, was remarkable. In addition, watching the clip while attending a conference on video testimonies of mass violence was darkly coincidental.

Many questions can and must be asked about this footage. Why did the perpetrators create this footage? What meanings did they attach to the filming? Did the filming affect the violence inflicted in any way, and if so, how? What is this footage's provenance? And how should researchers and scholars approach this type of footage? These and other questions are important beacons in the new intellectual landscape studying videos and perpetration and should therefore guide future research on the topic.

Since the turn of the millennium, the rise and widespread availability of digital technology has had a profound impact on contemporary

conflicts. Digital cameras and especially smartphones with built-in cameras have changed and continue to change the way that wars and genocides are being experienced, represented, and even conducted. Reporters, human rights workers, and ordinary citizens have access to smartphones and are recording acts of violence to document, advocate, and report them. Indeed, there are applications, like *eyeWitness to Atrocities*, that allow victims to upload video evidence of human rights abuses even while they are happening. Soldiers in combat and perpetrators of massacres use their smartphones not only for social media access, but also for their cameras.[1] In contemporary conflicts, smartphones are thus not only a documentation device, but can also be considered a weapon, given their triple use for communication, coordination of violence, and publication of propaganda.

The Syrian uprising and ensuing civil war are an excellent example of how the increasing presence of smartphones to cover political conflicts can lead to an unprecedented proliferation of visual material. We can safely argue that Syria is the first conflict ever to have been broadcast online in real time. The resulting war clips range from short videos containing battleground shootings between armed groups, to carefully constructed reports of entire military campaigns, as well as executions and their aftermath. Among these, the worst cases are recordings of violence that can be considered crimes against humanity: security forces dispersing demonstrations through shootings and beatings, the torture of activists, mass bombardments on residential areas, and finally, individual as well as mass killings of defenseless human beings. These kinds of videos are of fundamental importance for studying mass violence and the role of perpetrators therein for various reasons. First of all, this type of footage is rare and often unique and must be treated as a privileged insight into mass violence. Since there is scant recorded material in general, we should appreciate that there is so much available on contemporary conflicts like Syria. By contrast, we hardly have any footage of killings for most cases of genocide; there is no video evidence of the genocides in Cambodia, Guatemala and Darfur; there is only one video of actual killings during the Rwandan genocide and only several dozens of recordings of the wars in Yugoslavia. Secondly, since those who

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1   The effect of social media on wars has been studied fairly extensively. See Markus Rohde and others, 'Out of Syria: Mobile Media in Use at the Time of Civil War', *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 32.7 (2016), 515–531; Jacob Shapiro and Nils Weidmann, 'Is the Phone Mightier Than the Sword? Cellphones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq', *International Organization*, 69.2 (2015), 247–274.

commit the crimes are prominently visible in these videos, the latter offer unique access to the perpetrators' acts and emotions. A detached observation of these acts and emotions, in turn, is the only way to acquire a better understanding of the perpetrators themselves. Finally, a third argument is that this type of visual material presents a range of disciplines (history, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, media studies, and others) with valuable opportunities to pose their questions and offer their perspectives on it. As a historical sociologist interested in perpetration, when watching these videos, I attend to the emotions, words, and acts of the perpetrators, as well as the interactions between perpetrators and victims in their last minutes together.

The ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq are the quintessential wars of digital technology and constitute therefore an excellent platform to explore questions relating to smartphone use and mass violence. Not only are smartphones widely accessible nowadays, but the conflicts are also fought by a generation of millennials who grew up with them and are familiar with their use. There are, to date, over a million videos related to the Syrian conflict. The Syrian war is indeed a war of images, so much so that the number of hours of recorded video of the conflict greatly surpasses its actual length.[2] Perpetrators create hours of video content, often in the form of 'trophy videos' or livestreamed violence designed to spread terror. Indeed, online video is changing the nature of violence in the modern era. However, the specific way in which it is doing so requires further research.[3]

Research is entirely dependent on sound documentation. Fortunately, several institutions consistently preserve and store footage of the Syrian conflict since the beginning of the uprising. One of these is the *Syrian Archive*, created by a group of young Syrians and Europeans who have set themselves the daunting task of documenting the violence by safekeeping the data, identifying personal and spatial details, generating metadata, and offering an online platform to examine these videos. Although this archive is not yet fully searchable (because not yet indexed, catalogued, declassified), its analyses of the meta-data of videos do allow researchers to confirm when, where, and by whom a

2   Avi Asher-Schapiro, 'Youtube and Facebook are Removing Evidence of Atrocities, Jeopardizing Cases against War Criminals', *The Intercept*, 2 November 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/11/02/war-crimes-youtube-facebook-syria-rohingya> [accessed 18 September 2019].

3   For a broad discussion of violence and video footage, see Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 413–462.

video was uploaded.[4] Since only a fraction of the total collection of Syrian videos is researchable, a good way of starting off this research is to look into one massacre or case of mass violence and scope out how videos have been used before, during, and after it.

The Baniyas Massacre, May 2013

Baniyas is a breezy Syrian town of 50,000 inhabitants, perched on the slopes of the mountain range that lines the Mediterranean coast. The town and surrounding countryside is famous for its dates, olives, citrus orchards, and timber, which the region exports to foreign markets. The population of Baniyas mostly consists of middle-class Sunni, Christian, and Alawite bureaucrats and business owners, as well as industrial laborers, whereas the poorer countryside lives off subsistence farming and seasonal labor. On 2 and 3 May 2013, Syrian security forces murdered around 250 unarmed civilians in the twin villages of al-Bayda and Ras al-Nabaa, just south of Baniyas.[5] According to a comprehensive field report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights based on survivor testimony and eyewitness accounts of activists, the security forces first cut off all electricity and communications to the village, after which the army indiscriminately shelled the village for several hours. Then, security forces along with paramilitary auxiliaries from neighboring Alawite villages and pro-Assad militia headed by Mihraç Ural (*nom de guerre* Ali Kayyali) stormed the village and systematically killed people.[6] In broad daylight, unarmed civilians were herded together on street corners and shot at close range with semi-automatic firearms.

The Baniyas massacre is particularly relevant for studying the links between video and violence, because the perpetrators shot lots of footage of it before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. Before the massacre, Ural gave a videotaped speech to his

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4   See *Syrian Archive: Curating Visual Documentation for Justice and Human Rights* <https://syrianarchive.org> [accessed 26 August 2019].

5   Human Rights Watch, *'No One's Left': Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas* (New York: HRW, 2013).

6   Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Baniyas Massacre: Blatant Ethnic Cleansing in Syria* (London: Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2013). See also Dellair Youssef's documentary *Baniyas: Beginnings*, online video recording, YouTube, 5 October 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tbvvxtc​DxH4> [accessed 12 March 2019]. Mihraç Ural (1956), a veteran Turkish left-wing militant hailing from the neighboring Antakya province, runs his militia, the Syrian Resistance, from the coastal town of Latakia.

followers, arguing that Syrian land is sacred and Syrian sovereignty undisputable, and portraying the civilians among whom the rebels live as 'terrorists'.[7] The armed man in military camouflage and with a white beard standing next to Ural is Muwaffaq Ghazal, an Alawite sheikh who publicly called for Alawite youth to take up arms and assault the country's Sunni majority. Standing next to the fiercely secular Ural, he lends an air of religious and sectarian legitimacy to the campaign that is about to unfold. In the left bottom corner, the logo of the Syrian Resistance is visible in typical Socialist fashion: two crossed AK-47 automatic rifles and a red star.

Video Still 1. Mihraç Ural addresses his troops before the massacre.[8]

The existent footage of the actual massacre – six videos possibly shot by the same participant – shows the killers armed with Kalashnikovs, marching off columns of men with their hands above their heads or behind their backs, moments before their execution. In the video, the perpetrators are dressed in military fatigues, jubilant, triumphant and defiant, strolling through the town, each clearly carrying out a task.

7   See كلمة لمجرم مجزرة بانياس علي الكيالي 9 أغسطس ('A Speech by the Criminal of the Baniyas Massacre, Ali Kayÿali'), online video recording, YouTube, 9 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKz7986K1xc> [accessed 18 September 2019].

8   Ibid.

Video Stills 2 & 3. Pro-Assad militiamen walk through Baniyas during the massacre.[9]

9   See بانياس . البيضا مجزرة في الشبيحة من مسرب ('Leaked by the Shabbiha in the Bayda, Baniyas Massacre'), online video recording, YouTube, 4 May 2013, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0mbIOnK-pr4> [accessed 18 September 2019].

Some victims have been killed on the streets, others are dragged into a shed and burned, together with their property. The victims, all dressed in civilian clothes, are young and old women and men, including very young children and infants.[10]

The footage allows us to establish basic facts, such as the affiliation of the perpetrators to the National Defense Forces through their uniforms and insignias. Moreover, the particular variety of Arabic spoken by the perpetrators discloses their origin: the Syrian coastal region. The footage also reveals the perpetrators' *modus operandi* in the killings – the victims are shot through the head with large exit wounds, and sometimes dragged away from the roads.

In addition to videos recorded during the massacre itself, videos that were produced by the perpetrators after the massacre are also important sources, for they bear witness to the perpetrators' recollections and retrospective narratives of the killings. Ural gave two public interviews in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. In an online Arabic-language interview, flanked by his assistant and Sheikh Ghazal, he argued that he had fulfilled his Syrian patriotic duty by assuming responsibility for the "liberation and cleansing of the coast" (*tahrir wa tathir al-sahil*).[11]

Video Still 4. Mihraç Ural explains the motives for the killings after the massacre.[12]

10 See 'Leaked by the Shabbiha in the Bayda, Baniyas Massacre'.
11 See شبيح النظام يعترف بارتكاب مجزرة بانياس ('Shabbih of the Regime Confesses to Committing the Crime of the Baniyas Massacre'), online video recording, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8oOq_MKf14> [accessed 18 September 2019].
12 Ibid.

In a later interview for Turkish television, however, Ural denied his involvement in the massacre, blaming Israel and the West and accusing the Turkish government of undermining Syria's sovereignty. [13]

These videos make the Baniyas massacre into one of the best-documented atrocities in the entire Syrian conflict. But despite all having been created by perpetrators, there are key differences between these videos, in particular regarding their intended meaning and trajectory. Whereas the massacre videos were likely meant to function as secret war trophies, not to be circulated beyond the perpetrators themselves (but leaked somehow), the videos preceding the massacre were aimed at a broader, pro-Assad audience. The videos following the massacre, for their part, were likely a form of public, retroactive legitimization of the violence. In other words, the perpetrators killed the victims with a particular audience in mind, then shot the videos with a different audience in mind. It is the relationship that the perpetrators develop with these audiences (before, during, and after the violence) that is vital to understanding videos shot by them. Future research will have to study the videos for factual corroboration, but also interview the perpetrators in an attempt to understand the meanings they attached to them. We need to understand how and why they killed who they killed, but also how and why they filmed what they filmed.

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13   See 'Interview with Mihraç Ural', *Yol TV*, 14 May 2013; 26 September 2013.

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