Sexual Violence in the Syrian Civil War is likely a State Strategy

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Abstract: Numerous accounts of sexual violence in the ongoing Syrian civil war have surfaced over the course of this conflict, in which government and pro-government forces have been documented to engage in rape of women and in various forms of sexual torture directed against men and women alike. This paper introduces the available sources on the issue, establishes the visible repertoire and patterns of sexual violence in the Syrian conflict, and addresses the question of its connection to government strategies. Considering that acts of sexual violence appear to go unpunished by the military chain of command in situations of command oversight and the high likelihood that orders are given to facilitate its application, it is highly probable that sexual violence is adopted as a military strategy by forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad.
Introduction

The ongoing civil conflict in the Arab Republic of Syria has inflicted immense human costs on the country and its inhabitants. Among the numerous reports of atrocities and violence emerging from this civil war are accounts of sexual violence such as rape and sexual torture. Overshadowed in public popular perception by the enormous death toll and incidents of large-scale chemical weapons use, sexual violence in the current Syrian conflict has received little analytical attention. This neglect is striking, given that evidence on sexual violence in Syria, compiled by various UN and NGO actors, suggests that rape and sexual torture by government and pro-government forces against civilians and alleged opposition fighters has taken place in numerous cases and appears to be a deliberate strategy. This paper takes on the task of analyzing the available evidence and concludes that its adoption as a strategy of war by Syrian government and pro-government forces appears likely. That acts of sexual violence occur in contexts in which command oversight needs to be assumed, that its infliction appears to go unpunished by the military chain of command, and that evidence that orders are given to facilitate its application exist, suggest that it has been adopted as a strategy of war by Syrian government and pro-government forces. The Syrian political elite fights a war for its own survival, in which it appears to see itself pressed to use every form of violence it deems necessary and effective. Sexual violence appears to be among them.
In support of the suggested reasoning, this paper will evaluate two alternative explanations for the occurrence of sexual violence in the Syrian conflict. First the notion that sexual violence occurs because it is ubiquitous and inevitable in war. Second the argument that a breakdown of social order in the midst of war creates an environment, in which men vent their contempt for women by engaging in rape. Since it is not possible to refute the claim of the ubiquity of sexual violence in conflict with a case study of a conflict in which sexual violence is prevalent, this argument will be countered with resort to the existing literature. The second argument, men rape because they are given the opportunity to do so, is countered by the fact that in the Syrian context it has been reported as targeted and public, as well as directed against both men and women and a wide repertoire of sexual violence is documented. In addition, I assess reports by deserters that rape was ordered by those in command positions.

The paper will proceed in four steps. It will first introduce the sources available in English language and briefly discuss their value and credibility. In a second step it will lay out the visible patterns of sexual violence in the Syrian civil war by assessing the available evidence that allows to identify the types of targeting and forms of sexual violence, and that gives a preliminary idea about the frequency of the phenomenon. It will proceed by assessing the plausibility of alternative explanations for the occurrence of sexual violence by government and pro-government forces. Finally, it will advance the claim that sexual violence during house raids and at checkpoints, and in the context of detention appears to go unpunished in contexts of command oversight and it is highly likely that orders are given to facilitate it. It is, therefore, highly probable that sexual violence is adopted as a military strategy.

Sources
Collecting data on sexual violence in conflict situations is a challenge in any given context, owing to reporting biases, social stigma, definitional issues and the like (Roth et al., 2011). The current situation in Syria aggravates those existing challenges by inhibiting physical access to the areas of military contestation. Any assessment of the phenomenon need, therefore, rely on accounts that are either not independently verified or are drawn from individuals who have left the country. The following organizations have, nevertheless, taken on the task of collecting reports of sexual violence in the conflict.

UN-affiliated Sources
Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Inquiry Commission): Established on 22 August 2011 by the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Inquiry Commission has been mandated to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law in Syria since March 2011 (UN, 2011). Since its inception to its most recent report, dated 16 August 2013, the Inquiry Commission conducted 2,091 interviews with victims and/or witnesses of violence
will therefore not be named. Geneva, 22 April 2013 under Chatham House Rule. The name(s) and affiliation(s) of the source(s) was given at a conference held at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, 22 April 2013 under Chatham House Rule. The name(s) and affiliation(s) of the source(s) will therefore not be named.

Non-governmental Sources

*International Rescue Committee* (IRC): In November 2012 the IRC dispatched a delegation to Syria’s neighboring countries to assess the country’s humanitarian situation, as well as of those who have fled Syria into bordering countries, namely Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. An undisclosed number of interviews were conducted with refugees, representatives of local and international NGOs and officials from host and donor governments. Together with assessments made by IRC medical and relief delivery teams, these consultations constitute the basis for a report released in January 2013 (IRC, 2013).

*International Federation for Human Rights* (FIDH): Between 13 and 22 December 2012, FIDH conducted a mission to Jordan, comprised of six individuals, to document forms of sexual violence towards women and girls in Syria. The mission visited three officially recognized refugee camps, held focus group meetings with 75 Syrian women living outside of official camps and carried out five interviews with refugees in rural and urban Jordanian communities. In addition it met with UN officials, as well as local and international NGOs. The resulting report on violence against women in Syria considers accounts of refugees who have left Syria between June and December 2012 (FIDH, 2013). Several of the accounts cited, however, are based on reports published by the Inquiry Commission and the above-mentioned IRC report.

*Women Under Siege* (Siege): Siege is an online reporting tool, calling on women and men from Syria, those working with Syrian refugees and other organizations to provide reports of sexual violence in the Syrian conflict. In collaboration with epidemiologists from Columbia University, it offers the means to file and access highly detailed individual reports via its website. The vast majority of reports are compiled from NGOs, the UN, media reports, and reporting on the ground. In the time from 1 April 2011 to 8 February 2014, Siege has collected 228 reports. The inclusion of time and place into most of the reports puts Siege in the position of ruling out duplicate reports of the same event in most of the cases. Reports are coded with relevant categories, which allows for detailed analysis (Siege, 2014).

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1 Unless otherwise stated, information on the Inquiry Commission is drawn from statements made by UN officials who have inside knowledge about the procedures of the commission. The information was given at a conference held at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, 22 April 2013 under Chatham House Rule. The name(s) and affiliation(s) of the source(s) will therefore not be named.
Discussion of Sources

FIDH and IRC do not provide a definition for either sexual violence or special forms of it such as rape or sexual torture. The Inquiry Commission relies on the standard UN definition of sexual violence, which defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting” (Stop Rape Now, 1). Siege disaggregates reports of sexual violence into several categories, defining rape as forced vaginal, anal, or oral entry. Rape in the context of this overview, for a lack of a common definition, needs to be understood in a rather broad way, possibly including forced vaginal, anal or oral entry with objects as well as body parts. Sexual violence needs to be equally understood as a broad concept, including any act of a sexual nature involving violence or coercion.

All of the above mentioned sources are unanimous in the observation that under-reporting of sexual violence towards women is endemic “because of the stigma and social norms around the ‘dishonor’ that rape brings to women and girls and their families” (IRC, 2013, 7). “The concept of honor, not only of the individual but also of her family, is constructed around notions of female virginity before marriage and sexual fidelity afterwards.” (UN, 2013b, 79). Cultural norms and values are certainly not homogeneous across the country, and the importance of the concept of honor is likely to display variation across religious, ethnic, and other groups. None of the sources considered, however, disaggregate along these lines. Under reporting of sexual violence in the given context is, therefore, assumed even though it necessarily rests on a generalization of cultural attributes across different cultural groups. Male victims have also been reported as reluctant to speak about atrocities, though several accounts do exist on sexual violence against men in detention (UN, 2013b, 79).

In addition to the reluctance of victims to speak about past experiences, FIDH and IRC carry a strong women-bias. Both NGOs frame sexual violence in the conflict as a phenomenon of the wider violence against girls and women in war, introducing a selection bias against male victims.

Siege’s web based approach, and the freedom it offers anyone able to access the Internet to file a report, brings with it advantages and drawbacks for its value and reliability as a source. It allows for detailed accounts that can be sorted by different categories, time and place. Additionally it allows for individuals residing inside Syria to file reports without the risk involved in talking to representatives from organizations dealing with the issue. Siege does not, however, encourage filling reports in this way, since the security risk this involves is still very high. The openness and anonymity of the platform make it nearly impossible to independently verify accounts given by people from within Syria. Further, it cannot be ruled out that reports are being invented or distorted in order to influence public opinion and to accuse the other side of atrocities. Siege is not in the position to prevent abusive
use of their website in this regard. On the other hand, filling a report still carries the risk of leaving digital traces that might be discovered by intelligence services despite the possible precautions. Given that little personal utility might be derived from taking this risk, many incidents might go unreported even though the possibility to report them exists. It is impossible to say which of the two dynamics, if they are significant at all, has the greater influence on the number or type of incidents reported. The majority of reports documented by Siege, however, are taken from other sources (see above).

The Inquiry Commission and Siege frequently cite former members of government and pro-government forces as sources of reports. Such sources often claim having witnessed the perpetration of sexual violence by their co-combatants but also, rarely, report having committed sexual violence themselves after being ordered to do so. It is easy to see how former combatants have an incentive to claim that their application of sexual violence was ordered as a way of passing responsibility to their superiors (Cohen, 2013b). Such concerns weight heavy and potentially discredit the given accounts. For this reason, cases in which defectors speak about sexual violence committed by themselves as ordered are not taken into consideration in this paper. In contrast, I will tread reports of orders to facilitate sexual violence by others as credible. Numerous such reports exist, given to separate sources, among them the Inquiry Commission. Particularly the Inquiry Commission’s high standard of proof encourages me to take this decision. No claim to absolute truth of such accounts can be made, but rather a reasonable assumption about their accuracy as very similar reports have been given to various sources independently of each other.

Finally, it needs to be noted that FIDH, IRC and Siege contain a clear advocacy aspect in their mandate. Reference to the magnitude of the phenomenon of sexual violence is likely to be influenced by these organizations’ need to attract resources by making their message heard and/or overstating the phenomenon (Wood, 2009).

**Visible Patterns of Sexual Violence**

Despite the above mentioned limitations of the available data on sexual violence in the Syrian civil war, conclusions about the repertoire of violence of those who perpetrate it, patterns of targeting and the circumstances in which sexual violence occurs, can still be made. Conclusions are further offered, albeit cautiously, on its frequency and whether sexual violence is perpetrated by government and pro-government forces out of opportunism, tolerance towards it or strategic calculations. The following section provides a short overview of Syrian government

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2 The Inquiry Commission’s mandate as a fact-finding body has led it to adopt a methodology where it uses reports only if they “were the subject of two or more consistent and reliable witness accounts” (UN, 2012a, 6).
and pro-government, as well as opposition forces, followed by an assessment of the patterns of sexual violence perpetrated by the former. It shows that rape of women during house searches and at checkpoints and various forms of sexual torture of men and women in detention are highly visible patterns of this particular form of violence.

**Government and pro-government forces**

This paper treats regular government forces and irregular pro-government forces as one actor. The decision not to treat them as separate entities is rooted in the fact that three out of the four sources of empirical evidence on the issue do not make this distinction. This is a clear shortcoming in the available evidence, considering that when such a distinction is made (as in the case of Siege), the reports are suggestive of a pattern, which point to government forces as the perpetrator of sexual violence towards men and boys in the overwhelming majority of cases.

Syrian government forces include the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, which comprise the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. The armed forces are organized into three corps with a total of 12 divisions, numbering around 300,000 troops. Government forces, in the present context, further include the State security apparatus, with a multitude of security forces and intelligence agencies that have overlapping missions. They play a powerful role in Syrian society, monitoring and repressing opposition to the government. The internal security apparatus includes police forces under the Ministry of the Interior, the National Security Bureau, Air Force Intelligence, the Political Security Directorate, Syrian Military Intelligence and the General Intelligence Directorate (UN, 2011, 6).

Pro-government forces include a vaguely defined militia named *Shabbiha*, which is composed of an estimated 10,000 civilians. It is government armed and widely used to crush anti-government demonstrations together with national security forces. It further includes the People’s Army, a Baath party militia consisting of an estimated 100,000 reservists, designed to provide additional security and protection in cities in times of war (UN, 2011, 6).

**Opposition Forces**

The structure and scope of armed opposition forces is much harder to assess. While attempts have been made to unify various groups, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which has been at the center of such attempts, needs to be understood as an umbrella organization rather then a military chain of command in the traditional sense (Holliiday, 2012). Patterns of violence perpetrated by one group might be specific to this particular organization and not indicative of behavior by others. This fact makes any assumptions about behavior by “the armed opposition” extremely hard to make.
A limited number of instances in which sexual violence was perpetrated by opposition groups have been mentioned by the Inquiry Commission. One report is given in which women were separated during a house search, implying a possibility of sexual violence (UN, 2013c, 16). Another account mentions FSA members being punished by other FSA fighters for having raped a woman and a girl in Aleppo (UN, 2013b, 78). Such reports are too sporadic and vague in nature to draw any conclusions from them towards possible patterns of sexual violence by armed opposition forces. Siege has received multiple reports of sexual violence perpetrated by non-government forces\(^3\), but due to the concerns towards this source (see above), I am reluctant to suggest certain types of violent behavior by such a loosely bounded and heterogeneous group as the armed Syrian opposition based entirely on this one source. This is not to say that groups of the armed opposition do not engage in sexual violence of some sort, nor that some do, rather that the available evidence does not permit reasonable conclusions in either direction.

**Rape During House Searches and at Checkpoints**

Syrian government and pro-government forces are reported to conduct house searches, often following attacks on the civilian population in form of shelling and aerial bombardment of residential areas (UN, 2013b, 17). Every available source mentions house searches as a context in which sexual violence takes place. The rape of women and girls is the prevalent form of sexual violence during house searches that emerges from the sources. Often women and girls are raped by more than one perpetrator, with several reports of defectors stating that they have been ordered to assist in facilitating rape by summoning victims or holding them down (UN, 2012b; Siege, 2013, 91-94). Family members have been reported to be forced to watch their relatives being raped, both in case of gang rape and individual rape (UN, 2012b, 2013b; Siege, 2013). Forcing women to present themselves nude in public or in their homes in the presence of government and/or pro-government forces and family members has also been reported (IRC, 2013; UN, 2012b, 2013b).

Similarly, cases of (public) rape of women and girls, by multiple as well as by individual perpetrators have been reported to occur at checkpoints that are being set up as government and pro-government forces entered towns and villages in ground operations (UN, 2012b).

In summarizing the pattern of general violence wielded by government and pro-government forces when advancing in a certain area or re-taking it after opposition groups gained control, the Inquiry Commission (2012b, 69) notes that “[t]he most prominent pattern began with a blockade, then shelling, use of snipers, and an assault by ground forces including Shabiha [pro-government forces] followed by house searches.” The majority of the Inquiry Commission’s (2012b) numerous cases of documented sexual violence during house searches and at checkpoints, in which

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\(^3\) “Non-government forces” is used by Siege as one category besides “unknown forces”, “Shabiha forces”, and “government forces”. 

the approximate time and place of the event is known, have taken place in the context of such offensives or in areas in which the government has managed to establish control during violent contestation with opposition fighters. While cases exist in which women have been reported to be targeted for rape because of family member’s alleged opposition activities (UN, 2013a, 14), the majority of incidents do not mention such individual targeting and appear to be targeted collectively towards the population that inhibits an area in which government forces are advancing in ground operations to the expense of opposition forces.

Due to the social stigma associated with sexual violence in Syria it cannot be ruled out that cases of public sexual violence are more likely to be reported than other, more hidden types. Rape of women during house searches, in presence of family members or other witnesses, might therefore be a particularly visible type of sexual violence in this conflict. Given the state of the evidence available, however, it cannot be ruled out that other patterns of sexual violence exist, or are more or less prevalent.

**Rape and Sexual Torture in Detention**

The majority of reported cases of sexual violence in the Syrian civil war have occurred in detention centers, where it appears to be part of a course of ill-treatment and/or torture (UN, 2013a). Arrests leading to detention are often carried out during house searches and at checkpoint (UN, 2012b, 83).

Rape of women and girls in detention is reported by all sources, carried out by individual and multiple perpetrators (UN, 2012b, 2013b; FIDH, 2013; IRC, 2013; Siege, 2013). A report of a woman being forced to perform oral sex with her interrogators was given to the Inquiry Commission, as well as the threat of rape to coerce confessions (2013a, 14).

Accounts exist that suggest detention of girls and women primarily for sexual purposes. A medical service provider reported the treatment of a woman who had been detained and raped with 20 other women in a private apartment, where she was given a substance that made her feel weak and unable to resist sexual assault. (FIDH, 2013, 12). A former member of government forces gave a report on cells where kidnapped girls were held and raped. “Every patrol unit that brings the girls for example, rape them”, he stated. “If another patrol unit comes then they have the girls shower and rape them again” (Siege, 2013, Report Nr. 5).

Forced nudity, has also been cited as occurring. Detainees, male and female alike, were forced to strip naked in front of other detainees (FIDH, 2013, 12) or forced to walk naked in the streets of their home city (UN, 2013c).

Many accounts of boys and men being subject to sexual violence in detention have been given, reinforcing the claim that this phenomenon occurs more often than is commonly assumed (Oosterhoff et al., 2004; Sivakumaran, 2007). Many men report
having been raped during detention, in some cases in the presence of family members and with the use of objects (UN, 2011, 11; UN, 2013b, 76-77). One account is given of two men from the same family being forced to rape each other (UN, 2013e, 18). Several male detainees have reported receiving electric shocks to their genitals during interrogations (UN, 2012b) or having their genitals burned by cigarettes, lighters or melted plastic (UN, 2013b).

Many of the reports drawn upon in the above assessment mention the extraction of information, the coercion of family members believed to be fighting with opposition forces to turn themselves in, or the punishment of alleged opposition activity as reasons for the sexual violence inflicted.

The Scale of Sexual Violence
Given the difficulties associated with obtaining information on events inside Syria, it is not possible to make an estimate in regard to the rate of sexual violence in the ongoing conflict. As mentioned above, the vast majority of reports by the available sources have been compiled among the Syrian refugee population, which has fled the country in response to violence of various sorts. The likelihood to have experienced violence needs to be assumed to be considerably higher among this part of the population than the Syrian population in general, complicating conclusions to the scale of the phenomenon even further. Following Cohen's (2013a) approach of a four-point scale to categorize the magnitude of rape during conflict, and therefore make different cases comparable, it is, however, possible to categorize it as a context in which numerous reports on incidents of sexual violence exist.

Insufficient Explanations
Drawing on four primary sources, I have pointed to two visible patterns of sexual violence in the current conflict in Syria that are documented through numerous accounts of sexual violence perpetrated by Syrian government or pro-government forces, committed during house searches, at checkpoints and during detention. At the same time, Syrian president Basher Al-Assad appears to be highly concerned about his regime’s image in international media and particularly in the eyes of a western audience. In the years since the outbreak of violence and the deterioration of the situation into outright civil war, Al-Assad has given several interviews to international media outlets, explaining his government's actions and advocating for an understanding of the measures taken to confront oppositional forces. This provokes the question why sexual violence perpetrated by government and pro-

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4 I thank Amelia Hoover-Green for calling my attention to this issue.
5 No reports, isolated reports, numerous reports, widespread reports.
6 Media outlets Basher Al-Assad appeared in include ABC, ARD, Addounia TV, CBS, Der Spiegel, Fox News, Russia Today, Rossiya 24, Syria TV, Syrian News Channel, Telesur, and Ulusal Kanal.
government forces plays such a “prominent role in the conflict” (UN, 2013a, 13), while the Syrian government seeks to enhance its perception in the eyes of an international public.

The following section draws on existing literature on sexual violence in conflict to discuss alternative explanations to the one presented in this paper. They are, however, insufficient to account for the pervasiveness and, above all, the repertoire of sexual violence in the given context.

**Ubiquitous in War**
Brownmiller’s (1975) seminal work on rape in a historical perspective contains the claim that sexual violence during war is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Gaca (2011) holds in a similar manner that sexual violence has been an integral part of ancient western warfare, in which the killing of fighting aged man and the sexual abuse of women have formed two sides of the same coin. Women, so Gaca’s argument, were part of the booty that constituted the reason for war, or sexual violence towards women part of the punishment of a population. Sexual violence in conflict, in other words, is claimed to be as old as warfare itself. If sexual violence in war were indeed ubiquitous, sexual violence in the Syrian civil war, despite Al-Assad’s efforts to appeal to an international audience, would not constitute a phenomenon that merits explanation.

It is not possible to refute the claim that sexual violence in the Syrian conflict is a normal occurrence of a phenomenon that is ubiquitous in wartime without looking beyond the case of Syria. When one does, however, it can easily be demonstrated that sexual violence is not necessarily a part of every armed conflict. Cohen and Nordas (2012) demonstrate that in Africa between 1989 and 2009, 64 percent of armed groups were not reported to have been engaged in sexual violence of any sort.7 Similarly, by focusing on armed actors in 86 major civil wars globally, Cohen (2013a) shows that in the same time period in fifteen conflicts no reports of sexual violence have emerged.8 Adding to the evidence of absence of sexual violence in war is an in-depth study of the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam of Sri Lanka (LTTE), in which Wood (2009) has shown that the LTTE did not engage in sexual violence in its armed struggle against the Sri Lankan state.

To point to the ubiquity of sexual violence in conflict in order to explain its occurrence in the Syrian civil war does not hold up to closer scrutiny. Sexual violence is not a part of every armed conflict and merits explanation if its does

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7 The data used stems from the Peace Research Institute Oslo, and includes both African interstate and civil conflicts and all active state militaries, armed rebel groups and pro-government militias.
8 The lack of reports on sexual violence in a given conflict does not rule out the occurrence of conflict-related sexual violence, as systematic collection of data or tracking of such violence (which goes largely unspoken) is not being carried out in many contexts. I thank Gina Torry for calling my attention to this issue.
occur. Even more so, if perpetrated by the armed forces of a government, which seeks international public approval.

**Breakdown of Order**

Another explanation of wartime sexual violence is rooted in an understanding of the phenomenon that points to patriarchy and opportunistic behavior. Brownmiller (1975, 32) states that “[w]ar provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women.” As Cohen et al. (2013, 5) have pointed out, this explanation contains two misconceptions about sexual violence in conflict. First it implies that if given the opportunity, men will rape. Second it suggests that rape in wartime is explained by men’s contempt for women (see also Wood 2006).

Brownmiller’s understanding of wartime rape conceptualizes rape of women as a distinct form of violence, rooted in the male perpetrator’s contempt for women and increased opportunity for rape, and is not connected to other forms of violence of a sexual nature. Accounts of rape perpetrated by Syrian government and pro-government forces exist that would allow for such an explanation, and it cannot be ruled out that instances of sexual violence did occur out of opportunistic behavior. The majority of reports about rape, however, are not explained by pointing to the mere opportunity. Many accounts display a clear pattern of targeting individuals in detention, or occupants of a certain geographical region during house searches, where it has often been reported as carried out by multiple perpetrators and family members were forced to watch the atrocities.

When turning to the many other forms of sexual violence, besides the rape of women, it becomes strikingly clear that the opportunity for men to follow their contempt for women is not a sufficient explanation for some of the forms of sexual violence that have been documented in this context. Several forms of sexual torture have been reported, all of which point to a different explanation, as does the fact that it is often reported as targeted towards individuals to coerce family members, to punish or to extract information. The rape of men and boys, with the aid of objects, and forced to rape each other, as well as other sexual violence committed towards male victims, is equally not explained by the breakdown of order and male contempt for women. Given the weak explanatory power of alternative explanations, this paper assesses the possibility of a strategic application of sexual violence in the Syrian context.

**The Cultural Meaning of Sexual Violence**

As in many cultural settings, the concept of family honor is central to the well-being and livelihood of many Syrians. *Sharaf*, honor, is based on a collective understanding, as opposed to an individual one, intensifying a propensity towards shame rather than guilt in the case of behavior deviating from social norms, because of the heightened exposure in front of others (Haboush, 2005). Women perform a crucial function in the establishment and preservation of a family’s honor.
vis-a-vis the community it is embedded in. Female virginity before marriage, and sexual fidelity afterwards, are elements of central importance to the concept of family honor (UN, 2013b, 79). Their loss constitutes a source of shame and dishonor, great enough to socially justify the killing of the female family member in order to restore a family's honor (Abu-Odeh, 2011). Several incidents have been reported in which women have been killed by male family members in order to preserve the honor of the family following rape, or in which women have voiced such fear (IRC, 2013; UN, 2012b; Siege, 2013). Equally reports exist of women and girls having committed suicide after being raped (FIDH, 2013, 14; UN, 2013b, 75), pointing to the highly destructive nature of the act also after it has been perpetrated.

While the restoration of a family's honor through killing is the extreme of a spectrum of reactions to the rape of female family members, it highlights the role of the male protector, which is tightly connected to the role of women. Abu-Odeh (2011, 15) states in regard to the notion of honor in Arab societies “that honor is not only what women must keep intact to remain alive, but what men should defend fiercely so as not to be reduced to women”. Being reduced to women, as Abu-Odeh puts it, and the inability to offer protection to female family members, are both a source of great shame for male protectors and their families alike. A case reported to the Inquiry Commission (2011, 11) is telling in this regard: “One 20-year-old [male] university student told the commission that he was subjected to sexual violence in detention, adding that ‘if my father had been present and seen me, I would have had to commit suicide’. Another man confided while crying, ‘I don’t feel like a man any more [after having been raped]’. It is in this regard that sexual violence perpetrated against women and men needs to be understood in the Syrian conflict. It constitutes an attack on family honor - a demonstration of male inability to protect their female family members as well as themselves and a stigmatization of women and girls as source of shame for their family.

Societies naturally display variation in the understanding of certain concepts, such as family honor, and the importance they carry. The Syrian population is no exception in this regard and is comprised of various groups that differentiate in terms of ethnicity, religion and language (see CIA, 2013 and below). Coming to a more differentiated understanding of the meaning of honor and its implications for various groups in Syrian society holds the potential of arriving at a more fine grained appreciation of the damaging impact of sexual violence on those victim to it. For the purpose of this paper, and in accord with the primary sources used, it suffices to note that the damage of sexual violence extends beyond the individual victims and negatively affects their families and communities as well.
Sexual Violence Is Likely a Strategy by Government Forces

To understand the motivations and driving forces behind the sexual violence perpetrated by Syrian government and pro-government forces, this paper adopts the definition presented by Wood (2012, 393-395), which distinguishes between sexual violence as being opportunistic, a practice, or strategic. Opportunistic sexual violence is defined as “violence carried out for private reasons, not group objectives”, and strategic sexual violence “as a pattern, or instances, of sexual violence purposefully adopted by commanders in pursuit of group objectives.” A practice constitutes the third category, in which “the violence is tolerated when it is not strategically beneficial as well as when it is.” I show below that the available evidence suggests that those forms of sexual violence by government and pro-government forces that are visible, are likely a strategy, not a tolerated practice nor unordered, opportunistic violence by members of government and pro-government forces.

House Raids and at Checkpoints

It has been suggested that house raids and the set up of checkpoints are an integral part of a military strategy during ground advancement by government and pro-government forces. A closer look at detailed reports in the Inquiry Commission’s third report (2012b) reveals that all reported cases of rape during house searches have occurred in a location that has, at the time of the incident, been subject to a government ground offensive.

Eleven interviewees spoke of rape during a government troops’ push into Homs city in February to May 2012 (see for example Washington Post, 2013); four give accounts of rape during the takeover of Al-Haffe after June 5 2012 (see for example BBC, 2012b); two stated rape incidents in Zabadani after government troops re-took the town in late February 2012 (see for example BBC, 2012a); finally two interviewees detailed rapes occurring during the government offensive in the Aleppo governorate (see for example Washington Post, 2013).

Anecdotal evidence further suggests a strategic application of sexual violence in these contexts. A case documented by Siege (2013, Report of Aug. 13, 2012) is very explicit of the intentions behind sexual violence during house searches: “The officers were mostly Alawite, and they would target the houses of [opposition] activists in Homs and gather the younger girls and rape them,” [a former Syrian Army special forces sergeant] said. ‘After they’d finished they’d tell the soldiers outside to come in and rape the girls, too. The girls would generally be shot when everyone had finished. They wanted it to be known in the neighborhoods that the girls had been raped, but they didn’t want the girls to survive and be able to identify them later.’” The Inquiry Commission details similar cases, such as the example of a defector who “said that commanders ordered them to tie up the men, tell them not to kill them, but to make them watch while they sexually assaulted their wives and daughters” (UN, 2012b, 92).
Sexual violence in conflict has been proposed to be understood as a function of an armed group’s leadership strategies, the group’s ability to produce compliance with its strategies and the individual soldiers’ attitude towards sexual violence (Wood, 2009). While it lies not in within the scope of the present paper to fully unpack the Syrian government and pro-government forces in this respect it is, however, possible to come to preliminary conclusions about the internal ability to enforce orders, even against soldiers’ wills. In 2011, Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2011) published a report on individual and command responsibility in atrocities committed by Syrian government forces. The report cites numerous cases in great detail, in which defectors recount imprisonment, torture and killing of soldiers who refused to carry out orders they perceived as brutal, illegitimate or illegal. Accounts given speak of orders to beat and otherwise mistreat opposition protesters, to shoot to kill during protests, and to kill in detention. After providing detailed accounts by various soldiers, who often times named their superiors by name,9 HRW goes on to assess the punishments with which disobedience was met.

Eight instances are being described, in which defectors where killed, mostly shot on the spot in field operations intended to suppress protest, because they refused to carry out orders to kill or otherwise seriously harm protesters. Three defectors have been documented to be detained, two of them tortured, for the same reasons. From interviews with 63 defectors, HRW concluded that “[v]irtually all defectors interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that they were convinced that officers or intelligence agents would kill them if they refused to follow orders” (HRW, 2011, 62). Although no cases of sexual violence are mentioned, a clear picture of a military and security apparatus is given, which goes to great lengths to monitor unwanted behavior amongst its ranks, and is willing and able to torture and kill its troops in order to create compliance with orders given. Unwanted behavior is both noticed and fiercely punished. The described patterns of punishment suggest, therefore, that unwanted forms of violence by Syrian government and pro-government forces rarely occur, and, if they do occur, carry a high risk of severe punishment for the individuals engaged in it. In other words, practices that are not sanctioned by the chain of command are not tolerated and met with punishment.

The available sources on sexual violence lack any kind of evidence that would suggest rape of women and other forms of sexual violence in the context of house searches and at checkpoints have been met with punishment by the existing chain of command. Given the ferocity with which disobedience has been met in other cases during field operations, the lack of such evidence suggests the conclusion that sexual violence during house searches and at checkpoints is tolerated by those in command positions. Further, the established pattern of house searches and the setting up of

9 HRW’s report is based upon 63 interviews with defectors from Syria and an unspecified number of witnesses in Syria and unspecified neighboring countries. Names of perpetrators are given in many accounts. Such accounts are based upon statements in which several defectors described an incident “separately and with sufficient detail to convince the researcher that the interviewees had first-hand knowledge of the incidents in question” (HRW, 2011, 11).
checkpoints following shelling and aerial bombardment of an area, and the connected collective targeting of the population in this area with mostly rape (often by multiple perpetrators and/or public, respectively in the presence of family members), suggest the conclusion that sexual violence in these contexts is likely a deliberate strategy to achieve military objectives.

Detention
Sexual violence in detention has been reported to portray a wide repertoire, including rape and sexual torture, perpetrated against men and women alike, who often appear to be individually targeted to coerce relatives, to extract information, or to be punished. In detention centers set up and run by government forces, it is not plausible to assume that knowledge of the repertoire of violence applied would not travel up the chain of command. The Inquiry Commission (2013c, 16) states that in the case of a particular detention facility, “there were no indications of action taken by senior commanders to investigate, prevent or punish acts of sexual violence.” Targeting individuals to obtain strategically relevant information, or to coerce opposition fighters to turn themselves in, points to a clear strategic benefit for the perpetrator as a group. It is, therefore, highly probable that sexual violence in detention is a deliberate strategy.

By All Means Possible
It has been suggested that sexual violence during house searches and at checkpoints, as well as its use in detention facilities is likely an intentional strategy. It is, in other words, probable that it is carried out with the tacit approval and full intention of the governmental chain of command. The damage of sexual violence on the Syrian population goes far beyond the immense pain inflicted on the victim during the act. As is evidenced by the many reports of suicides after victimization and family member’s accounts of the implications of sexual violence, the social stigma and the feeling of having been destroyed stays with the victims long after the violence has been perpetrated. Even more important, however, is the fact that the destructive quality of sexual violence reaches beyond the immediate victim and affects its entire family by destroying the immensely important concept of family honor. All the available evidence points to the conclusion that this high potential for damage is being utilized for military purposes.

Government and pro-government forces have been reported time and time again to deliberately target civilians and alleged opposition fighters for killing, torture, and other ill treatment. The use of chemical weapons, which is believed to have killed approximately 1,400 people in a single instance on August 21, 2013 (BBC, 2013), is just the most visible and publicly discussed event in this respect (UN, 2013d). In an analysis of all interstate war participants between 1816 and 2003, Downes (2006) demonstrates that states are likely to engage in civilian victimization in times of
desperation and ongoing high costs of the war. Focusing on violence in civil wars, Kalyvas (2006) similarly concludes that violence towards civilians is an integral part of military strategies in civil conflict.

The Syrian government has traditionally relied on its security apparatus and the support of foreign powers (most prominently Iran) to secure the political control of a dominantly Alawite elite vis-a-vis a Sunni majority population (see for example Fildis (2012)). While initial demonstrations have not appeared to be along sectarian lines, the Syrian government now finds itself in a struggle to preserve Alawite political domination against armed opposition forces that draw primarily from a Sunni population, which makes up approximately three quarters of the country’s population (see for example Bhalla (2011)). Loosing control to a Sunni majority would not only mean a devastating blow to Basher Al-Assad, but also the Alawite community that would see itself faced with waves of reprisal attacks (Sharp and Blanhard, 2012; Abrams, 2013). An internal political solution appears not possible at this point, leading to the sobering conclusion that government and pro-government forces are willing to apply every means possible to inflict harm and damage on the parts of the population that are associated with political opposition.\textsuperscript{10} This willingness is highlighted by comments made by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, who concluded, based on the Inquiry Commission’s findings, that “massive evidence [... point[s] to [... ] responsibility [for crimes against humanity and war crimes] at the highest level of government, including the head of state” (NYT, 2013). The highly destructive nature of sexual violence, to the victim as well as its entire family, appears to have led the Syrian government to adopt its strategic use. It seems to be employed to coerce family members, to extract information, to punish individually and collectively and to spread terror among the receiving population.

\textbf{Conclusion}

It appears that in its effort to crush an armed opposition by military means, the Syrian government and pro-government forces are engaging in a wide repertoire of sexual violence. Rape of women during house searches, often public and/or by multiple perpetrators, and rape, sexual torture and other forms of sexual violence towards men and women alike in detention have been recorded. Neither pointing to an alleged ubiquity of sexual violence in war, nor to a breakdown of order can sufficiently explain the repertoire and the targeted nature of sexual violence that has been reported by multiple sources. Rape during house searches follows ground advances of government and pro-government forces. The ferocity with which unwanted behavior in other contexts, which displayed similar command oversight, has been reported to be met with, accounts of orders to facilitate rape, and the apparent impunity of perpetrators within the existing chain of command, all lead to

\footnote{10 For a concise formulation of the same conclusion see Abrams (2013).}
the conclusion that its adoption as a strategic choice by those in command positions is likely. Sexual violence in detention appears, further, to be applied to coerce family and community members, to punish, deter, and extract information. Knowledge of such application of violence by commanders needs to be assumed in the context of detention centers. Its strategic use in the mentioned contexts is therefore highly probable.

While Bashar Al-Assad appears concerned about his regime’s image in international public opinion, he and his power base are engaged in an armed struggle for political dominance and, ultimately, survival. Given the highly damaging nature of sexual violence, in large parts due to cultural factors, and the apparent strategic nature of its application, this abhorrent form of violence appears to have been willingly and intentionally included in the application of violence towards opposition fighters and the civilian population in alleged sympathy.

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