Nowhere to Turn - The Plight of Civilians in the Syrian Civil War: A Comparative Application of Mass Killing Literature to State and Non-State Actors

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I. Introduction

Three-year-old Aylan Kurdi shocked the world in early May 2016, when images of the Syrian toddler's drowned and lifeless body went viral on global media. In the words of British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, "no one puts their children in a boat / unless the water is safer than the land."[1] For many Syrians, risking everything to flee their war-torn homes is the only hope for enduring the country's bloody civil war. For far too many more, fleeing is not an option, and the best chance for survival is keeping one's head down and hoping not to be noticed by any of the belligerents. It is clear that civilians have born the brunt of atrocities in the civil war that has plagued Syria since 2011; what is not clear is why. The intentional targeting of Syrian noncombatants is a well-established practice of both the government forces commanded by President Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The second part of this paper provides an overview of civilian causalities in the Syrian Civil War. Part three examines the literature on the reasons for mass killing and applies these theories to the actions of the Assad government and the Islamic State. Part four reviews the literature on mass killing on the individual level and how it relates to the Syrian conflict. Part five summarizes the gaps in mass killing scholarship. I conclude that the government's massacres serve a military purpose as a rational counterinsurgency tactic, but the existing literature falls short of explaining the rewards ISIL gains from the strategy. The literature succeeds, however, in providing a framework for understanding the motivations of individual perpetrators in both state- and non-state contexts.

II. Mass Killing and the Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, Arab Spring protestors took to the streets of Damascus and other major Syrian cities, demanding democratic reform from the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Government security forces responded by firing upon and illegally detaining protestors. By early April, protestors escalated their demands from reform to regime change, and chants of "the people want the fall of the regime" echoed throughout the nation. By July, activists and army defectors formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to fight the regime's highly organized army. Clashes between the two militaries continue today, despite a UN-led ceasefire attempt in early 2016. The Syrian rebels are exceedingly fractured, and the conflict is further complicated by the

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involvement of foreign backers on both sides and the opportunistic participation of Salafi jihadist groups, ISIL and its affiliate, the al-Nusra Front.

Sustained fighting has taken an incredible toll on the civilian population of Syria. Estimated total casualties range from 300,000-470,000. Of that number, at least 86,692 were civilian deaths, according to numbers recorded by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) between March 2011 and August 2016.[2] SOHR reports that about one fifth of civilian casualties were children under the age of 18. Both sides have been accused of manipulating casualty statistics, and Lebanese daily al-Akbar asserts that some insurgent deaths were wrongly counted as civilians.[3] In a joint report released in early 2016, the Syrian Center for Policy Research and UN Development Programme described a national death rate of about 10 people per thousand with an additional 1.88 million wounded, meaning approximately 11.5% of the Syrian population has been killed or injured in war.[4] The fighting has disproportionately disrupted civilian lives: an estimated 7.5 million Syrians are internally displaced and more than 4 million currently seek refuge in other countries.[5]

Acts committed by both government forces and jihadi rebels qualify as mass killing, defined by Valentino as "the intentional killing of a massive number of non-combatants."[6] The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria found that both government forces and the terrorist group ISIL committed and (as of the report's publication in February 2016) continue to commit crimes against humanity against Syrian civilians; these crimes included the use of indiscriminate air and ground assaults, siege tactics, and targeting hospitals and schools in violation of international humanitarian law.[7] In 2013, Assad and his forces used chemical weapons against civilians. In 2016, the United Nations declared that ISIL's actions against the Yazidi minority, including mass killing, kidnapping and rape, constitute genocide. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry went further to say, "In my judgment, [ISIL] is responsible for genocide against groups in areas under its control including Yazidis, Christians, Shia Muslims... and in some cases also against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities."[8] Sporadic reports also accuse other rebels and the FSA of intentionally targeting civilians, but the opposition is so disorganized that it is difficult to attribute these actions to a certain leader, and the scale of any atrocities of this kind is much smaller than those committed by government forces and ISIL.

III. Literature Review – Why Leaders Command Mass Killing

Theories that explain the mass killing of civilians generally fall into three main camps: mobilization around cleavages, regime type or political stability, and atrocities as the byproduct of war. They point to different motivations for the leaders ordering murderous policies: ideology, power, or military necessity. For some scholars, one-sided killing is the only way to resolve intractable societal cleavages, while theorists on the opposite end of the spectrum believe killing is avoidable when there are checks on leaders' power and societies celebrate, rather than fear, diversity (both domestically and internationally.)

The first set of theories blame psychological cleavages or entrenched ethnic hatred for mass killing. This explanation claims that humans are adept at sorting themselves around perceived differences. These differences – whether constructed in the mind or more definite (like as skin color or religion) – inspire populations to murder members of the "outgroup" in incredible numbers. In "Killer Species," Richard Wrangham tracks this tendency to evolutionary biology, noting that humans, like genetically similar chimpanzees and wolves, organize to form alliances against other members of the same species.[9] He observes that killing is most likely when resource competition is fierce and the operation is low-risk, implying that modern massacres occur when aggressors feel they can forcibly take limited resources from the out-group at a low cost to themselves. Psychologist Ervin Staub explains identity-based violence by generalizing the frustration-aggression theory of individual psychology to the national level, arguing that in societies plagued by "hard times," such as economic depression, war, or other intense social pressure, threatened groups target an out-group to collectively scapegoat.[10] He cites the case of Nazi Germany, which blamed the Jews for the economic downturn leading to World War II as a supporting example. For Scott Straus, some nations are more susceptible to mobilizing cleavages than others. He contends that groups undertake mass killing when they perceive a "fundamental and imminent" threat to their core political project or political future.[11] Straus argues that "pre-crisis 'founding narratives' shape how elites understand and respond to threats," and that violence is more likely when the apparent threat derives from a group excluded from the country's founding narrative.[12] Scholars from the mobilization around cleavages camp commonly cite Rwanda's 1994 genocide and mass killing in Yugoslavia in the early 1990s as instances where perpetrators from a single ethnic group victimized members of another group on the sole basis of ethnicity.

These scholars offer an important warning: elements of identity, such as ethnicity, race, and religion can (and have) been used to delineate groups in conflict. They neglect, however, to explain the internal calculation of potential perpetrators deciding whether to participate in violence, and rely instead on the assumption that not only is diversity visible and existent, but that identity lines are salient enough for people to take up arms for, risking their lives and stability. They also fail to present a unified hypothesis for the path from divided societies, to prejudice, to conflict; Straus argues that prejudice and "othering" is present but latent and surfaces in times of crisis, while Staub would posit that discrimination can become a coping mechanism for difficult times. Finally, identity-based theories do not explain cases where mass killing occurs within a national or ethnic group, such as within communist regimes.[13] It is plausible that Staub-style "othering" can occur among subgroups of a generally homogenous population, but it is clear that diversity is not a sufficient condition in most instances.

A second set of scholars point to regime type or characteristics to explain what types of government target their own people. Rummel's power principle contends that democracies kill citizens less than their autocratic counterparts because checks and balance restrain this sort of behavior. Essentially, "where absolute power exists, inter-

ests become polarized, a culture of violence develops, and war and democide follow."[14] The power principle supplements the democratic peace theory, a key concept in the liberalist school of international relations. This theory maintains that democracies prefer diplomacy and peaceful conflict resolution in relations with other democracies because of shared norms and values. Mann retorts with the argument that democracies are equally capable of mass killing as their autocratic counterparts,[15] and that historical examples, such as the American use of the atomic bomb against Japan in World War II, or the mass cleansing of native peoples prove that they are also willing. He follows that democracies are peaceful when they have ethnically cleansed their land to the point where remaining groups are small enough or sufficiently restricted from power that they cannot threaten "the people." Stepping back from the regime type debate, Barbara Harff identifies six political criteria to predict when war or the failure of a regime will lead to mass killing: regime change ("political upheaval"), recent genocide, a political system with exclusionary elite ideology, ethnic and religious cleavages, lack of economic development, and lack of trade openness.[16] Case studies here are mixed: the communist regimes of Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao's China, and Pol Pot's Cambodia executed their own citizens on a massive scale, but so did democratic Germany in World War II.

 History makes it clear that both democracies and autocracies have the ability and resolve to kill civilians at a massive scale, so the Rummel/Mann debate is an interesting theoretical question but ultimately not as worthwhile as looking for common characteristics among the regimes (democratic or not) who have authorized mass killing in the past. Harff bridges this gap by highlighting these factors, many of which suggest that regime stability is a more reliable predictor than regime type. Her work should be expanded upon to include instances of mass killing independent from war. State composition theories do acknowledge a weakness of identity-based arguments by clarifying that killing is the result of decisions made by leaders and governments rather than the aggregate effect of grassroots outbursts of racism. Obviously, these notions do not apply to non-state actors or to counter-majority killing.

 Finally, some contend that the best indicator of mass killing is war, 1) because standard legal and moral norms are suspended during wartime, and 2) because mass killing can be a viable strategy for military victory. First, mass atrocities can be enabled by the circumstances surrounding conflict. Gordon notes that losers are generally the only ones punished for civilian abuses, while winning perpetrators generally emerge from the conflict with their international reputations unscathed. She points to Iraq, where American sanctions were premeditated to cause "large-scale and long-term damage"[17] to the Iraqi economy and population, but the occurrence is rarely mentioned in lists of atrocities. Furthermore, case studies suggest that racism is normalized during war in a way that it is not in peacetime to mobilize populations and increase troop cohesiveness. Dower studied both Japanese and American attitudes toward each other during WWII to conclude that "In the heat of war, points of common ground were lost sight of and the behavior of the enemy was seen as unique and particularly odi-

ous."[18] Japanese troops also committed excessively violent murders and rapes during their occupation of China, behavior Macdonald describe as "typical."[19] Mass killing is also a legitimate strategy to counter internal and external threats. Insurgencies rely on civilian populations for support, so targeting the civilian population both with positive incentives (a 'hearts and minds' approach), or negative ones, like the threat of blockade or execution, is a rational strategy to draw support away from the guerillas.[20]

An obvious drawback of this approach is that it limits the scope of cases covered. Yes, mass killing is often associated with war, but sometimes targeted killing is the instigator of war rather that its outcome, or completely independent from a multi-party conflict. Additionally, rather than being the cause of conflict, war could serve as cover to carry out a nefarious, premeditated goal of ethnic cleansing. Labeling mass killing the unfortunate byproduct of conflict risks desensitization to the crime's gravity.

Is it something about people, something about politics, something about war, or something else altogether that causes mass killing of civilians? These factors do not exist in a vacuum, and certainly interact with each other. Although they imply very different policy solutions, what each points to is a fundamental desire of groups to preserve or enhance their power, resources, or ideology in the face of an imagined or immediate threat. Case-by-case evaluation can help explain how these three schools of thought interact with each other. Existing literature glaringly neglects to account for atrocities committed by non-state actors, who have different stakes and incentives than state actors. Non-state actors may place more emphasis on ideology, may be more likely to strike during wartime when government is less stable, and have nothing to lose but everything to gain from a transition of power, so may be more likely to implement radical policies.

A. Government Killing as COIN Strategy in Response to Existential Threat

Although media coverage of the Syrian Civil War emphasizes religious and sectarian strife, religious or ethnic cleansing is not the main force behind government killing. Syria is largely ethnically homogenous, with Arabs constituting 90.3% of the population.[21] Nearly the same proportion of the country identifies as Muslim, but the Muslim population is split between the 74% Sunni majority, and the Shia, Alawites and Ismailis communities, which together comprise 13% of Syrian Muslims. There are also small but significant Christian and Druze minorities. Alawites have held power in Syria since Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, declared himself President in 1971. Although excluded from decision-making roles in both civilian government and the military, Sunnis are integrated into Syrian society and fill the majority of low and mid-level public positions. Sectarian tensions have flared into conflict in the past. A notable case is the 1982 Hama massacre – where President Hafez al-Assad killed between 10,000-40,000 citizens in Hama to subdue a coup attempt by the Sunni-led Muslim Brotherhood. However, the government maintains an official position of inclusivity, and the only groups it targets with pejorative language are jihadists and select

foreign actors, particularly Israel; a sharp contrast to the framing of targeted groups as subhuman pushed by Hitler's Germany in the Holocaust or Yugoslavia and Rwanda during their genocides. Assad's government does not intend to ethnically cleanse all Sunnis, Druze, and Christians from the country, because it relies on their majority to maintain everyday functionality in the country. Counter to the ideas of Straus and Staub, the government perceives its main enemy as political, rather than religious.

Is there something about the autocratic character of the Syrian regime that explains its brutality? Yes, the Assads' autocratic hold on power explains the regime's violent suppression of military and political threats, both past and present, but it does not account for the specific targeting of civilians. The regime's large military and police presence were designed to deter rebellion, and mandatory military service for men over the age of 18 warns potential dissenters of the government's power. The harsh crackdown on the 1982 Muslim Brotherhood power grab was carried out swiftly and brutally because the elder Assad's virtually unchecked power enabled him to act in a way that would be permissible in a functioning democracy. Today's Arab Spring demands for regime change pose another existential threat to the status quo, although this time the challenge is to the younger Assad. Genuine democratization would likely unseat Bashar, who has held onto power by maintaining a one-party state, but slaughtering all of the civilian opposition would be counterproductive because, like democracies, authoritarian governments also have an interest in mobilizing populations and creating favorable narratives among the population.[22] This desire to be seen as legitimate is evidenced Assad's decision to allow a presidential election in 2014, where he won in a landslide victory of 88.7% of the popular vote (compared to challenger Hassan al-Nouri of the NIACS party's 4.3%). The election was far from democratic – voting was only allowed in government-controlled areas of the country, the election was boycotted by the opposition, and both the U.S. and EU condemned the outcome[23] – but is highly symbolic. Literature that asserts authoritarian regimes kill because they can get away with it neglects both the strategic concern for popular support (or at least tolerance), and the regime's desire for a semblance of credibility to present to the international community.

It is the third scholarly camp, specifically theories that focus on mass killing as a battle tactic, which best explains government targeting of civilians. The Assad regime implements the standard counterinsurgency tactic of siege to strain the relationship between insurgent enemies and the population that supports them. In numerous instances over the course of the war, the Syrian army used "artillery, airpower, and ballistic missiles to drive Syrians out of insurgent-held areas and committed massacres when it entered controlled territory. The regime does not so much 'clear' territory of rebels as it does 'cleanse' it of opposition."[24] Although coercive, this tactic has proven successful – reports confirm that some Aleppo neighborhoods rejected the rebels to prevent further government reprisal for supporting the insurgents.[25] Although siege tactics and various other methods of credibly threatening civilian targets aid Assad's short-term goal of rooting out insurgents, modern counterinsurgency practitioners,

including the authors of the United States' counterinsurgency field manual (FM 3-24) urge positive incentives and policies to win civilians' hearts and minds for sustainable popular support. The theory that oppressors are able to get away with atrocities more easily in war is also applicable to the Syrian case; Stevenson argues that Assad's compromise on chemical weapons provided him with "political cover" to using conventional military tactics against civilians without backlash from outside actors.[26] Counterinsurgency strategy explains Assad's mass killing better than the concepts of identity conflict or typical authoritarian behavior.

B. ISIL KILLING AS IDEOLOGICAL OPPORTUNISM

ISIL's killing of civilians serves a very different goal than the state-sponsored civilian massacres in Syria. ISIL is pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing against all civilians unwilling to accept its extreme brand of Sunni Islam in line with identity-based hypotheses of mass killing. However, as an unconventional state actor, arguments about government type are irrelevant. War-centric models are useful only in that the chaos resulting from the conflict provides an opportunity for ISIL to launch an offensive when defenses are weak and the population is desperate for protection. Instead of focusing resources on countering violent extremism, the government's capacity is stretched between defending itself from the FSA, fighting to take back ISIL-controlled territories, and accomplishing its own strategic goals. A new theory is needed to explain the economic and strategic benefits of ISIL's mass killing of civilians, one that acknowledges its unique character as an organization seeking religious, geographic, and political power.

Identity conflict is key to understanding ISIL's massacres in Syria, because it is necessary to fulfill the group's ultimate goal of creating a religiously pure state, or Caliphate, centered around modern day Iraq and Syria but eventually extending throughout the entire Muslim world. It is extremely rare for genocidal leaders to publicly admit the extent of their nefarious aims – historians struggled to find a document linking Hitler to an order to exterminate all European Jews. ISIL, however, has been very explicit in its aim of building a devout empire of all Muslims under the prophet (and ISIL's current leader) Abu Baker al-Baghdadi. ISIL preaches a fundamentalist Wahhabi doctrine of Sunni Islam that promotes violent jihad and considers Muslims who disagree with extreme Quranic interpretations infidels. Rather than winning over the existing populations of Iraq and Syria, ISIL seeks to cleanse all "non-believers" from the land and replace them with the descendants of their loyal supporters and pilgrims to the holy site. Advocacy groups and internal ISIL documents provide evidence of ISIL's eliminationist ideology. Human Rights Watch reports that male Yazidis held in Iraq and Syria were given an ultimatum to "convert or die," while Yazidi women were forced to marry ISIL fighters to produce children for the cause.[27] The documents of assassinated ISIL strategist Samir Abd Muhammed al-Khlifawi clarify that there is no room for apostates in the Islamic State – the group seeks to physically annihilate all potential opposition.[28]

ISIL enjoys further benefits of mass killing that are not considered in the existing literature, namely the propaganda value of graphic atrocities and the economic benefits of controlling land. ISIL's sophisticated propaganda machine serves two purposes: one, to antagonize western governments and undermine their cultural and military hegemony, and two, to inspire both foreign and Muslim recruits to settle in the Caliphate. Showcasing civilian massacres forwards both of these aims. First, professionally produced English-language videos portraying the brutal murder of western journalists and travellers including American James Foley send the message that westerners and their governments are not safe, even though they are far from the battlefields. Additionally, ISIL produces an online magazine, a series of films, and prolifically uses social media to highlight the quality of life followers enjoy in its territories. Accounts of ruthless executions back up these claims by projecting ISIL's power and the idea that ISIL is militarily strong enough to protect its supporters. An ISIL defector describes an "army of media personnel," with equal rank to military leadership, reflecting the earnestness of ISIL image project.[29] Additionally, indiscriminate killing allows ISIL to more efficiently capture lucrative oil fields and operate them without worrying about internal uprising. Oil is the jihadist group's largest revenue source – ISIL controls Syria's Deir Ezzor province, from which it extracts between 34,000 and 40,000 barrels of oil per day for profits of a maximum $1.5 million per day.[30] In ISIL's mind, this economic benefit outweighs the costs to human life. Bottom line, killing for no strategic reason can be rational when fear is your currency. Current scholarship fails to take this into account, only accounting for irrationality when it is driven by deep-seated ethnic hatred.

IV. Literature Review – Why Individuals Carry Out Mass Killing

To understand how mass atrocities occur, one must not only look at leaders and their governments, but also at the individuals responsible for executing the orders to kill. An incredibly small number of culprits are capable of extensive violence – over the course of only six weeks in Rwanda, a Presidential Guard of a mere 1,500 men and approximately 50,000 recruits massacred an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians.[31] History testifies that mass killing is usually done in a way that is incredibly visceral. In Rwanda, for instance, the majority of killing took place at short-range using machetes, and piles of bodies clogged the streets and rivers. Perpetrators were often normal people drafted into the armed forces and police. Two main hypotheses exist explain how individuals are capable of murdering innocent men, women, and children in cold blood: first, that killers are a self-selected group of abnormally belligerent individuals looking for an outlet for their aggression, or two, that everyday people can be induced to violence through a combination of psychological and situational pressures.

Self-selection theories emphasize individual motives for mass atrocities. John Mueller conjectures that most conflicts that appear to be ethnically motivated are actually waged by a small group of combatants, usually consisting of drunks, crim-

inals released from jail, and thugs. Nationalism is not what rallies this motley crew, but rather serves as "the characteristic around which the marauders happened to have arrayed themselves."[32] Mueller cites instances in the Yugoslavian and Rwandan cases where perpetrators enjoyed a 'carnival' of rape and looting. This question of killers' mental soundness has haunted psychologists for decades. Waller surveys all attempts by psychologists over decades to identify a "Nazi personality" or shared mental ill-ness among the executioners of the Holocaust, but finds that "the most outstanding common characteristic of perpetrators of extraordinary evil is their normality."[33] If Mueller's theory is correct, then killers are selfish and violent, but they are not crazy.

A growing body of psychological research finds that under the right circum-stances, the majority of (normally peaceful) individuals are capable of knowingly in-flicting pain upon others. Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments discovered that 65% of volunteers were willing to shock another participant with a deadly 450 volts of electricity when asked to by a lab-coated Yale experimenter, despite the victim's cries of pain.[34] In addition to having the tendency to obey authority, humans are adept at adopting the societal roles assigned to them, even if it means violating their personal moral code. In Philip Zimbardo's infamous "Stanford Prison Experiment," college students selected for their averageness were held in a mock prison and asked to play either prisoners or guards. Within a few days, the prisoners showed signs of helpless, dehumanization, and depression, while guards found "inventive" ways to be cruel to their wards.[35] Bandura posits that individuals can psychologically "disengage" from their morally dubious actions by believing that noble ends justify violent means, dis-placing responsibility to commanders and/or victims, and distancing themselves from the direct consequences of their actions.[36] These theories and experiments grew out of the real-world observations of historians like Christopher Browning, who catalogued the brutal actions of German Police Battalion 101 in the systemic massacre World War II of Polish Jews at Jozefow. His study found that the killers were not particularly anti-Semitic or violent, but rather motivated by deference to authority, diffusion of responsibility, and to some extent career ambition.[37] Goldhagen counters, labeling the men of Battalion 101 as "willing executioners" – anti-Semitic Germans who sup-ported an anti-Semitic government, went above and beyond to inflict pain on their victims, and did not take advantage of opportunities for dissent.[38]

Ultimately, these varying descriptions of likely killers are not incompatible. Although Zimbardo's sample size of guards was small, he noted that about one third were "cruel and tough," half acted "tough but fair," while 20% were "good guards," offering the prisoners small comforts when they could.[39] Perhaps Mueller and Gold-hagen's theories explain this first group, while Goldhagen and Bandura uncover how the middle group can carry out their duties faithfully yet unenthusiastically. Little is known about the 20% of interveners. Additional scholarship is necessary to under-stand the majority of the population who neither participates in killing nor stops it, and what incentives are needed to increase the ability and willingness of these bystand-ers to intervene. More work is also needed to differentiate the calculations of lower

level perpetrators from those of their commanders.

A. Government Perpetrators: Invested Alawites

Syria's executioners hail from the various branches of the security services and are armed by international allies. At beginning of the war in 2011, the Syrian army consisted of nearly 300,000 active duty troops with an additional 314,000 in reserves and 108,000 members of various paramilitary groups. The vast majority of the conscripted soldiers are Sunni, but Alawites dominate the officer corps, filling 80% of leadership positions. The number of low-ranking combatants fell dramatically at the beginning of the conflict, when great numbers of Sunni soldiers defected to join the Free Syrian Army, effectively leaving the most loyal and invested soldiers behind to fight for the government. Elite paramilitaries, including the Presidential Guard and the Shabiha, lead the charge in civilian deaths. The 25,000-man Presidential Guard is controlled by Assad's brother Maher and is tasked with defending Damascus from any foreign or domestic threats. The Shabiha (translated to "ghosts" or "spirits") is a government-maintained shadow military composed completely of Alawites and is responsible for cracking down on dissent.[40] Russia has provided more than four billion USD to the Syrian government in both weapons and support. North Korea, Iran, and Hezbollah have also provided weapons to Syrian forces.

The Shabiha is accused of the worst atrocities against civilians, in line with Mueller's drunks and thugs theory. Sources disagree about the exact origin of the Shabiha, but rumors tie members to the mafia and/or networks of doping gyms, and accuse leadership of paying Shabiha recruits with steroids and large cash sums. Recruits are "less professional and often more brutal than conventional forces,"[41] and are infamous for bragging about drinking the blood of their enemies. The 2014 documentary film "Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait" complies unprofessional footage of government forces committing human rights abuses during the siege of Homs, including footage of a solider forcing a naked teenage boy to kiss his boot. The filmmaker contends that abusers took sadistic pleasure from their actions, filming them for fun, and singing taunting songs about their future victims.[42] Human Rights Watch reported multiple instances of Syrian security forces using sexual violence against detainees and during home raids "with complete impunity," but "does not have evidence that high-ranking officers command their troops to commit sexual violence."[43] Portions of the Syrian forces are undoubtedly ruthless beyond the necessity of war, but it must be noted that the Shabiha are a group hand-selected for the most odious tasks, and reports of these kinds of abuses are sporadic among mainstream security forces. By refusing to acknowledge and punish perpetrators of extraordinary abuses, the government is sanctioning (at least tacitly), Shabiha atrocities, and may even encourage them as a tool to inspire fear in adversaries.

The majority of Syrian soldiers are motivated not by deep-rooted sadism, but by the fear of losing the spoils they receive in exchange for loyalty to the regime. Although many infantrymen defected, the corps of middle- and high-ranking officers

remains faithful to Assad, arguably because to reach this level of achievement, officers must invest their personal and professional lives to the regime's success. For example, Dahiet al-Assad is a military housing complex on the outskirts of Damascus, inhabited solely by officers and their families who can apply to purchase homes through a state run subsidy program. The program is a rare opportunity for ambitious men from modest backgrounds to attain property in the expensive capital city and the social capital that comes with it. However, this lifestyle is contingent on the stability of the regime, so revolution is "a personal threat to [the officers'] assets and livelihood."[44] Furthermore, membership in this fringe community means accepting isolation both from officers' home communities, often inhabited by impoverished Syrians who have never visited the capital and from mainstream Damascus life. Instead, residents only option for community and shared identity comes from their neighbors and peers.[45] This desire for community resonates with social science theories of the human desire for conformity and belonging. Compounding the incentive for officer loyalty is the fear of reverse genocide and discrimination if Assad's regime were to fall – a Sunni majority could easily target the Alawite community if it controlled the resources and arms of the Syrian state. Essentially, the Alawite soldiers and officers have nothing to gain but everything to lose if the government were to be toppled. While psychological mechanisms may inspire Syrian soldiers to believe in their cause and act more brutally than they would be comfortable in everyday life, it is clear that more tangible material incentives and security concerns drive their continued loyalty.

B. Jihadists Seek Community and Cause

ISIL sources its fighters from around the globe, but the vast majority of its troops fight in their home counties of Iraq and Syria. In late 2014, the CIA estimated that ISIL had 21,000-31,500 troops in Iraq and Syria, but other estimates place the number as high as 100,000. Up to 6,000 ISIL fighters are foreigners. Neither figure accounts for the continued supply of fighters traveling to the region from abroad, the potential for similar jihadi groups to pledge loyalty to ISIL, padding their numbers, and the non-armed supporters who support ISIL and live in its territories. ISIL mainly relies on weapons captured from the Iraqi and Syrian armies to arm its combatants, but sometimes asks volunteers to bring their own arms. A Quantum Research survey quoted by the U.S. Department of Defense shows that the motivations behind foreign ISIL fighters and their internal compatriots differ greatly; foreign fighters are more likely to be facing identity crisis and/or seeking belonging, while Muslim fighters are motivated to protect Sunni brothers from the 'apostate' Assad regime.[46] To a lesser extent, money and status are also incentives.

ISIL fighters, particularly foreign ones, are far from "ordinary." They are, after all, willing to give up their passports and chance of returning to their families in pursuit of ideology. However, demographic research on foreign fighters reveals that ISIL recruits at least look normal on paper – according to a World Bank dataset of 3,803 foreign ISIL recruits leaked from the organization's personnel files, the jihadis are an

average age 27.4 years old, nearly 70% have at least a secondary education, and recruits from the MENA and SE Asia regions have higher education attainment than is typical for their countries[47] – a far cry from the stereotypical image of the poor and uneducated terrorist. Instead, the study found that countries with low male employment rates were more likely to yield jihadis, and concluded that foreign fighters seek social and economic inclusion.[48] The anecdote of a 23-year-old girl from rural Washington State induced to convert to Islam through gifts and the promise of friendship from online ISIL contacts[49] further evidences the inclusion/community theory. Like Goldhagen's German killers, ISIL fighters believe that struggling for their cause will lead to a better life. But like Browning's ordinary men, many are inexperienced in killing, and acclimatized to violence through psychological incentives and group norms.

Extreme abuses and violence are institutionalized ISIL practices that serve the purposes outlined earlier in this essay, but the orderly execution of these practices suggest that they are strategic rather than simply the self-indulgent actions of individual soldiers. Sexual violence is systemic within ISIL strongholds. Human Rights Watch confirms that young Yazidi girls are separated from their families and forced to marry combatants, sometimes as "gifts" to fighters.[50] ISIL not only acknowledged this practiced of providing girls as "spoils of war," but also justified it in Dabiq, claiming that Islam allows sex with young, non-Muslim slaves. This perceived need to validate their atrocities (in combination with the controlled nature of ISIL's rape system) is more in line with Bandura's disengagement theory, which posits that it is easier to commit brutalities if you believe that your actions are justified, than Mueller's thugs who seek simple, hedonistic pleasure. More support for Bandura's theory over Mueller's comes from fighters' lack of personal financial enrichment. ISIL soldier salaries are modest and tightly controlled; fighters receive between $400-$1,200 USD/month with additional stipends for wives and children. Recent pay cuts did not result in massive defection, as would be expected if the recipients were solely motivated by greed.

V. Conclusion: Application of Mass Killing Literature to State and Non-State Actors

This examination reveals that the gap in applicability of existing literature is wider on the strategic level than on the individual. Although government forces are driven by the great personal costs of defeat, while ISIL recruits primarily seek a community of like-minded individuals, contemporary scholarship provides frameworks to explain both, while also accounting for the abnormally brutal members of each group. The government-level decision to commit mass killing is best understood in the framework of counterinsurgency strategy, a sub-theory of war-related mass killing literature. ISIL's strategy, however, is tailored to fit goals unique to its status as a radical non-state actor, and is not explained by the same theories as government-sponsored killing. First, ISIL is not bound by the same expectations as an official actor; it aims to profoundly change the norms of everyday life and does not seek legitimation from outside states. Second, non-state actors are able to take advantage of power vacuums

left by civil unrest within a state to accomplish their goals of identity-based cleansing. And finally, ISIL does not need to preserve a civilian population to serve the bureaucratic needs of the country, as it assumes foreign immigrants to the caliphate can replace the dead. Hybridizing literature on terrorism with literature on mass killing may help resolve some of this dissonance, as the two phenomenon are often linked in the 21st century.

It is crucial to identity the factors that enable mass killing on both the macro and individual levels so that concerned peacemakers can address the root causes of conflict, and develop an approach to address similar situations in the future. Until then, those seeking to alleviate the Syrian population's suffering can a) support refugees by lobbying their home governments to accept Syrian immigrants and donating to refugee aid organizations; and b) encourage organizations dedicated to cataloguing human rights abuses for future prosecution.

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