

Necropolitics in Conflict: Analyzing the Syrian War Through Samar Yazbek's *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*

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Abstract: This paper delves into the harrowing realities of the Syrian war, focusing on the concept of necropolitics as vividly portrayed in Samar Yazbek's memoir, "*The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*". Through Yazbek's personal narratives, the study reveals the brutal tactics employed by the Syrian regime to dominate and control the population. These tactics include extreme violence, torture, and psychological terror, all used to assert power over life and death in the war-torn country. By examining Yazbek's detailed and poignant accounts, the research sheds light on the relentless cruelty inflicted upon Syrians by the regime. It also uncovers the remarkable resilience and steadfast resistance of the Syrian people, who endure and fight back against these oppressive measures despite the overwhelming danger and suffering. The aim of this research is to deepen the understanding of necropolitics in modern conflicts. It provides a comprehensive look at how such destructive policies affect individuals and communities on a deeply personal level, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of those who are caught in the midst of such violent and dehumanizing strategies. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on necropolitics and its devastating impact on human lives.

Key words: necropolitics, ethnic-cleansing, death-world, suffering, and power.

Necropolitics is a term that describes the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die. The concept was introduced by the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe in his essay "Necropolitics," published in 2003. It builds on Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics but shifts the focus to the ways in which power is exercised over life and death. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in the context of modern conflicts where state and non-state actors exert control over life and death through violence, repression, and psychological terror. The Syrian war, which began in 2011, offers a stark example of necropolitics in action. This research paper examines how necropolitics manifests in the Syrian war, drawing on the detailed and personal accounts found in Samar Yazbek's memoir, *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*.

Yazbek's memoirs portray the appalling circumstances in which civilians of the country are forced to live in. Certain areas have become zones where normal societal rules and laws do not apply, and killing has become a normalized and constant threat. Mbembe describes these areas as death-worlds which is a new and unique form of social existence where in vast populations are subjugated to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living-dead. In *The Crossing*, many instances reflect people lingering in death-worlds. As the Assad regime meets protests with armed resistance, civilians in many cities live in constant suspension between life and death. Over two and a half years of daily killing, first through peaceful civil struggle, then armed struggle, and later the hijacking of the revolution by religious extremist groups, people are dying, being displaced, or succumbing to severe injuries. Buying a kilo of vegetables has become an "arduous and treacherous journey" (250) from the house to the market. Yazbek describes this devastated zone as, "A temporary journey to a delayed death and a never-ending cat-and-mouse game with the MiG planes... graves were dug and filled in. Bodies were discovered dumped in the valleys and in the hills. Religious shrines were destroyed by the *tafriki* battalions, and new camps for ISIS were built in their place" (250-51). Children as young as five and seven have lost arms or legs in shelling, with many losing their eyesight. Pregnant women lack food. There are no doctors, sanitation, or electricity in many places. People are living in caves and underground cellars. Children suffer from malnutrition, with swollen bellies and blue faces. A large portion of the population is left to die. Those capable of fighting are fighting. Those able to run are fleeing. Borders are crowded with old

men, women, and children waiting to smuggle through barbed wire. Young men are brainwashed to perform jihad. In fear of being raped, young girls as young as ten to twelve years old are being married off to men their grandfather's age. Hundreds of civilians die in barrel bomb attacks, and those fortunate enough to escape are punished for their customs, identities, and choices in their own homeland. The right to live now depends on the sect and religion one is born into. Merciless massacres occur in the name of religion, nation, and liberation. Yazbek sums up this dance of death as:

Here meanings emerged. Nothing was clear. Battalions tussled with battalions; the conflict was devouring the revolution. The religious extremist military, with all its factions, had turned into a ferocious many-headed beast. I saw children aged no older than sixteen carrying weapons and disappearing at night among the dark alleys. Gangs of thieves took on the grand names of imaginary battalions, and degenerated into *shabiha* thugs. This was a country in name only, sliced up into areas controlled by rival military brigades, all of them submitting to the absolute power of a murderous sky. But here we carried on with life, regardless. Families plodded on, eking out a living under the lethal sky, among the barbarism of the extremist battalions. (251)

Another important characterization of necropolitics is legitimization of death which often manifests in the form of ethnic cleansing. "The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die. To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits, its principal attributes"(Project Muse). This underscores the necropolitical control that leads to the systematic eradication of certain ethnic groups through violence, displacement, and other forms of coercion. Yazbek's memoirs showcase the ethnic cleansing of Alawites and other minority groups in Syria by jihadist extremist groups like ISIS and the Nusra Front. These groups claim to protect the Sunni population but, in reality, seek the extermination of Alawites and others, ignoring the fact that many Alawites are fighting against the dictatorship in Syria. This approach extends to other sects and religions, including the Druze, Kurds, Yazidis, Christians, and Jews, who face a similar threat of extinction. Yazbek's interview of Abu Ahmed, the emir of jihadi organization Ahrar al-Sham exposes this dark reality. When

questioned about their purpose and goal, he says, “we’re just raising the banner of Islam. Syria will stay as it is, but Islamic. The Alawites will leave” (236). Christians and other sects, “can leave Syria, convert to Islam or pay jizya” (236) and if anyone doesn’t leave, “they would meet their fate” (236).

In areas under their control, these extremist groups enforce puritanical laws, using radical religious education to brainwash people into supporting the ethnic cleansing of other sects. They coerce young men into jihad and impose strict dress codes on women, along with a hierarchy of male superiority and female inferiority. Gender segregation and the subjugation of women are mandatory, both in private and public life. Through their governance apparatus, these jihadist groups control the lives of Sunni populations in their self-proclaimed Islamic states. They determine which sects will be allowed to live and which will be targeted for extermination, all in the name of maintaining the purity of Islam. Those who comply with their rules are considered believers, while those who resist are eliminated to uphold their vision of an Islamic society.

In these captured areas, jihadi extremists monitor every aspect of people's lives, from their clothing choices to their religious practices and social conduct. Those who conform are deemed faithful, while those who deviate are eliminated, all in the name of creating a purer and more homogeneous Islamic society which is undeniably necropolitical.

Deliberate targeting of civilians and infrastructure is a common necropolitical tactic in modern conflicts. Mbembe writes, “Increasingly, war is no longer waged between the armies of two sovereign states but between armed groups that act behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories, with both sides having as their main targets civilian populations that are unarmed or organized into militias (87). His observation goes in tandem with the political and social scenario depicted in Yazbek’s memoirs. In the façade of sectarian agenda as projected by Assad regime to the world political stage, lies a population of civilians who are massacred, silenced and punished for raising their voices against years of dictatorship and corruption. With the use of barrel bombs, MiG planes and chemical weapons, civilians are targeted. Barrel bombs are crude handmade weapons which are basically water tanks, rubbish bins or ordinary mazut cans, stuffed with dynamite, explosives and iron bars. This tactic of dropping barrel

bombs is more lethal than war on ground as it causes massive destruction and death. Most of the people die by burning or burying under rubble. Those who escape death are severely injured by shrapnel. There is no family in the conflict areas which has not lost its member. Most of the children and youth are amputated. Those who are living are transformed into “hungry and frightened creatures” (201). Furthermore, innocent people who have joined the revolution un-armed, simply raised flags and slogans are targeted with utmost barbarity. The testimony of a revolutionary named Haji reveals the genocide which regime is committing on its own citizens. He recalls the memory of 17th of April 2011 at Bin al-Alby Square and says,

We’d agreed to demonstrate peacefully, marching from several mosques to a sit-in on the square. Women and children were carrying the Quran and chanting, “We’ll protest until the fall of the regime”. After the night prayer, at around eleven thirty . . . army had surrounded the demonstration . . . People were chanting, “The army and the people are one,” and “Peaceful, peaceful, peaceful”. The army ordered them to disperse and they refused, so the army fired at them, intensively- live ammunition. Two hundred people, including women and children, were slaughtered that day. I was a witness. (256)

Jihadi organizations have also the same propaganda. They are intimidating people by chopping off their heads and mutilating corpses. Under the pretext of Salafist ideology and purity of Islam, they are subjugating civilians with all sorts of horrendous crimes. Their operations are not random or chaotic adventures; they are carrying out well- planned and orderly executions so as to divide Assad liberated regions among themselves. A competition of power among various fundamental organizations has emerged and innocent civilians are lingering between the brutalities of regime and organizations.

Syrian crisis has severe and extensive consequences that cannot be limited to the situation in the country, but also in the Middle East and internationally. It has led to a sharp increase the humanitarian crisis featuring high numbers of death and acute displacement. Currently, more than half of the pre-war population of the inhabitants of this country is displaced. This include millions of internally displaced people and refugees who have fled to other neighboring countries such as

Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and beyond to Europe. Due to the war devastating structures such as homes, schools, hospitals, and industries, the economic structure and the living standards of Syrians are significantly affected. Many people have been displaced or killed, hence a large part of the country's human capital has been cut, and what is left has been further weakened by inadequate trade and resources. It has deepened the sectarian and ethnic divisions and resulted in the fragmentation of society. In addition, the application of power respectively regarding to heavy armamentations and destruction of facilities also bleak environment pollution including soil erosion and water pollution. It has worsened the levels of water and arable land deficiency which if continued in the future will have consequences on the sustainability of the region.

Despite the pervasive violence and destruction in Syria, the people have not abandoned hope for the future and continue to stand in solidarity with one another. In her memoir, Samar Yazbek offers glimpses of clean houses amid the devastation and the warm hospitality she experienced during her three clandestine visits. Yazbek writes fondly about her project aimed at improving the conditions of women amidst the chaos by providing them with economic opportunities. Through various language courses, computer training, sewing and embroidery work, hairdressing, and nursing, Yazbek aims to empower women to contribute economically to their families. Although the war in Syria has become protracted and intensely necropolitical, civilians continue to display remarkable resilience.

Conclusion: To reiterate, necropolitics provides a critical lens through which we can understand the brutal realities of the Syrian conflict. Achille Mbembe's concept, when juxtaposed with the detailed and harrowing accounts in Samar Yazbek's memoir, "The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria," reveals the extreme implementation of control and violence exercised by both state and non-state actors. This power dynamic dictates who may live and who must die, manifesting through targeted killings, ethnic cleansing, and the deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure.

The Syrian war encapsulates necropolitics with its rampant violence, repression, and psychological terror. Civilians are forced into exist in death-worlds where survival is precarious, and normal societal rules no longer apply. Yazbek's vivid descriptions of life under the Assad regime and jihadist groups are realistic pictures of humanitarian crisis which signify towards the systematic eradication of minority groups. These groups underscore heavy weaponry to enforce strict moral

codes and to bring in their own forms of extremism and beliefs that augment the suffering of civilians caught in the crossfire between these groups.

In spite of the overwhelming necropolitical control, Syrians' demonstrate remarkable resilience and solidarity. Yazbek's efforts to empower women amidst the chaos highlight the persistent hope for a better future. However, the conflict has left deep scars on the nation, with profound economic, social, and environmental repercussions that will take years to heal. Understanding the necropolitical dynamics of the Syrian war is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of modern conflicts and the extreme measures of control that define them. It also paints a picture of the need to have international intervention and support in addressing the plight of people that are in such terrible living conditions.

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