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Emergency Cinema in Syria: (Re)Envisioning Documentary-As-Witness

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Emergency Cinema in Syria: (Re)Envisioning Documentary-As-Witness

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Report

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Abstract

Emergency Cinema in Syria: (Re)Envisioning Documentary-As-Witness

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Abstract: By contrasting the uses of image-as-evidence and documentary-as-witness, this report challenges some of the maxims of documentary film studies and exposes the ways in which different forms of audiovisual media construct distant conflict. More specifically, the report analyzes a purposive case selection of videos/films related to the Syrian uprising: the first set of visual data includes a montage of 13 YouTube videos claiming to show the aftereffects of the 21 August 2013 chemical weapons attack in Syria; the visual analysis in section two centers upon a selection of 15 short documentary films produced by the Syrian Abounaddara Collective. Theoretically, the study advances the value of witnessing in the re-envisioning of documentary film. My research demonstrates the relative weakness of both legalistic and journalistic approaches to depicting war that treat visual material primarily as recorded fact or evidence. In its place, the report advances a new form of documentary with a higher degree of interpretive acumen based on the "emergency cinema" model developed in Syria – what I term "documentary-as-witness."

Table of Contents

List of Figures: Selected Images

List of Tables: Video Charts

INTRODUCTION

In July 2012, The New York Times launched a website entitled "Watching Syria's War" to track the human toll of the ongoing conflict through online video.[1] Times' blogger Robert Mackey characterized this "curated presentation of raw footage of violent news" as an "extremely valuable way of documenting these catastrophic events for our readers, and for history."[2] The main caption on the webpage, contributed by editor Liam Stack, claims online video has allowed the widening war in Syria to be documented like no other. Videos shot by non-journalists provide an important source of information about fighting waged mostly beyond the reach of the international press corps barred from entering the country by a paranoid regime.

Unlike other revolutions in the so-called "Arab Spring," the March 2011 Syrian uprising escalated into a full-fledged civil war now entering its fourth year. At the time of writing, the conflict has left forty percent of Syria's population homeless, sent three million abroad as refugees, and killed at least 150,000.[3] Due to the duration and severity of violence in Syria, more attention should be paid to the ways in which the outside world is witnessing the humanitarian crisis unfold. Beyond the sheer magnitude of suffering revealed by the statistics above, the inhospitable media environment in Syria also makes it an instructive case for exploring how the different forms of audiovisual media construct

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[1] http://projects.nytimes.com/watching-syrias-war (Accessed April 17, 2014)

[2] Bill Mitchell, "New York Times Creates New Story Form for 'Watching Syria's War'," November 2, 2012, http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/192783/new-york-times-creates-new-story-form-for-watching-syrias-war/.

[3] "Back and Forth," *The Economist*, March 22, 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21599411-bashar-assad-advancing-one-front-retreating-others-back-and-forth.

narratives of conflict. The popular protests that swept the Arab World in 2011 confronted citizens, journalists, and documentarians alike with unconventional and extremely challenging circumstances.[4] From the beginning of the revolution in Syria over three years ago, the censorship policy of the Al-Asad regime has meant a "virtual blackout of ground reporting by main-stream international media outlets."[5] Local Syrian activists also faced censorship, but from the beginning have defied the regime by uploading YouTube videos of protests online "often supplying foreign media organizations with what little footage they are able to access."[6]

The obstacles to objective reporting faced by news organizations throughout the 2011 revolts stemmed, at least in part, from a lack of access to credible visual information. Banned from setting foot on Syrian soil, media outlets had no choice but to rely on citizen-uploaded online videos circulating on social media sites closely associated with the opposition. Over time, the questionable veracity of image-information coming out of Syria – propagated by regime policy and reinforced by foreign-media in hopes of saving 'objective' face – led to confusion over the events transpiring in the country. While the Syrian war may be the most heavily documented, it remains the least understood. The question then becomes: How has the media constructed the Syrian conflict when video evidence abounds but grand narrative seems lacking?

There are essentially two ways to answer this question, each indicative of the uses of video/film in the case-studies discussed in this report. In the first scenario, media

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[4] Vivian Salama, "Covering Syria," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 17, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 516.
[5] Salama, 516.
[6] Salama, 516

organizations can either increase the sheer volume of video evidence or improve verification techniques to ensure the authenticity of available footage. The New York Times took the former approach in curating thousands of videos for their "Watching Syria" page, whereas the U.S. Senate took the latter approach by culling through hundreds of videos to find the best evidence to prove a specific event – the 21 August 2013 chemical weapons attack – occurred. The second possible answer would shift to the side of grand narrative and suggest the value of situating the available video evidence within some type of interpretive framework. The Syrian Abounaddara Collective takes this approach via the documentary genre. From April 2011 onwards, the group of anonymous and self-taught filmmakers in Damascus has been working to produce one documentary episode per week as a tribute and a contribution to the street protests. A strong supporter of the power of "smaller screens" like computers or smartphones, the Collective releases a new short film on its website,[7] Vimeo channel,[8] and Facebook page[9] every Friday. All of the films are subtitled from the original Arabic to either French, or English, or both, making them accessible to a global audience.

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This report analyzes two distinct uses of online video/film in the wake of the Syrian uprising: one by the U.S. government and the other by a group of Syrian filmmakers known as the Abounaddara Collective. In the first instance, I refer to the 13 citizen-uploaded YouTube videos compiled and disseminated by the U.S. Foreign

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[7] *http://abounaddara.com* (Accessed April 29, 2014)
[8] *https://vimeo.com/user6924378* (Accessed April 29, 2014)
[9] *https://www.facebook.com/pages/Abounaddara-Films/128084573918925* (Accessed April 29, 2014)

Relations Committee as evidence that chemical weapons were used on a relatively large-scale in Syria on 21 August 2013. The second set of visual data comprises a purposive selection of 15 short-documentary films produced by the Syrian Abounaddara Collective. For the purposes of this report, both projects fall within the documentary genre. Wary of assigning fixed meaning to a fluid term, Bill Nichols proposes a three-part definition of documentary that explores the genre from the perspective of the filmmaker, the text, and the viewer. Here my primary concern is with documentary as text. Documentaries traditionally derive their textual structure from an informing logic, the economy of which sets up an argument about the historical world.[10]

As we will see, the Senate videos contain an inherent argument in the way they were compiled together into montage format and disseminated with clear intent. What the YouTube video montage lacks is the "explanatory commentary" Nichols mentions in the following quote:

> The camera gazes. It presents evidence destined to disturb. The evidence cries out for argument, some interpretive framework within which to comprehend it. Nowhere is this need more acutely felt than in a film that refuses to provide any explanatory commentary whatsoever.[11]

My experience viewing the videos in research for this project confirms the acute need for an informing logic or interpretive framework when displaying atrocity images for public viewing. More practically, while individual online videos do not alone constitute 'documentary film,' when organizations cull through online content, select videos based

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[10] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 18.
[11] Cited in Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds., *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, Contemporary Film and Television Series (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 270.

on a certain set of criteria, then edit them together into montage format with the extra addition of title screens for each video – as in the case of the Senate videos – I consider that product 'documentary' albeit in a rudimentary form. On Abounaddara's Vimeo channel, the group describes themselves as "an independent film production company based in Damascus and specializing in documentary for all platforms worldwide." Jameli describes the group's documentary style as "eloquent, [yet] remains succinct and anonymous, in the style of the documentary shorts of May 1968 in France and of the French Nouvelle Vague, or New Wave cinema."[12] A close-reading of a selection of their films in section two will expand upon these initial observations, for now it suffices to say that the "emergency cinema" movement recalls earlier traditions in documentary such as "radical filmmaking" or "avant-garde cineme."

Framing the analysis around the documentary image does not privilege an evidentiary model of veracity;[13] to the contrary, the study interrogates the notion of visible evidence to theorize a new documentary aesthetic based on the "emergency cinema" model in Syria. My conclusions challenge some of the maxims of documentary film studies by highlighting certain approaches to documentary that strive not to "make sense cognitively, but to resonate affectively."[14] Questioning the "truth" or "efficacy of the image helps to re-conceptualize the most effective uses of video in today's media environment. I will return to these initial observations about documentary in section two.

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[12] Nehme Jameli, "Abou Naddara," trans. India Stoughton, *Mashallah News*, January 3, 2012, http://mashallahnews.com/?p=6527.

[13] Mark Ryan Westmoreland, "Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon" (Ph.D., The University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 26.

[14] Westemoreland, 16.

Theoretically, the study advances the value of "media-witnessing" in the re-envisioning of documentary film. Within this conceptual framework, the report argues that the mere fact of visibility (being seen) proves insufficient for engaging the contemporary witness.[15] Rather, I look to the processes and players of *visuality* that generate a testimonial encounter from the spectacle of suffering. Here I refer mainly to the range of aesthetic and formal techniques (processes) used by contemporary filmmakers (players) to "anchor the meaning of the atrocity and produce ethical claims."[16] The term visuality helps clarify what Torchin means by "anchoring meaning" so I offer a brief explanation of this term before presenting the literature review.

Visuality

Nicholas Mirzoeff traces the genealogy of the term visuality in a 2006 essay and his conclusions inform this report's understanding and use of the term. Mirzoeff claims that Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) coined both 'visuality' and the verb 'visualizing' in a series of writings between 1837 and 1841.[17] Carlyle devised the term in reaction to modernity and imperialism. He argued that history was "far more than the accumulation of facts" and implicated historians for presenting events as "successive, while the things done were often simultaneous."[18] Carlyle sought to convey a sense of the whole, which he rendered via "a succession of vivid pictures."[19] At the time Carlyle developed his ideas, these pictures were most likely certain history paintings "long

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[15] Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 216.

[16] Torchin, 216.

[17] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2006): 55, doi:10.1177/1470412906062285.

[18] Quoted in Mirzoeff, 56.

[19] Quoted in Mirzoeff, 56.

celebrated for their ability to sustain a narrative within a single frame."[20] Visuality, then, reflected a desire to "order and narrate the chaotic events of modern life in intelligible, visualized fashion."[21] Hal Foster's 1988 edited collection *Vision and Visuality* figures prominently in the literature surrounding visuality. In the opening paragraphs, he proposed that: "Vision suggests sight as a physical operation, and visuality sight as social fact."[22] The distinction between the terms signals various differences "among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein."[23] For contemporary critics, visuality further implies an engagement with the politics and aesthetics of representation.

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With this brief introduction to the project, I now turn to a literature review premised on three central concepts or themes of the report: first, media-witnessing; second, new documentary; and third, the ethical considerations posed by representing death.

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Media-Witnessing

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Media witnessing provides a useful conceptual framework for theorizing the new type of visuality called for in this report and demonstrated by Abounaddara. Bringing together the words media and witnessing, the compound term captures something "central to the practices of contemporary media as well as to recent scholarly interest in

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[20] Quoted in Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," 56
[21] Quoted in Mirxoeff, 56
[22] Quoted in Mirzoeff, 54.
[23] Foster (1988) cited in Mirzoeff, 55.

the aesthetics, ethics, and politics of representation."[24] Frosh and Pinchevski propose a simple definition of compound term media-witnessing: "the witnessing performed in, by, and through the media."[25] Conceived in this way, the terms makes distinction between witnesses in the media, witnessing by the media, and witnessing through the media. In this report, I am primarily concerned with the latter two varations: witnessing by and witnessing through the media. Following Frosh and Pinchevski, I propose media-witnessing because it offers new ways of thinking about perennial problems of media, communication, and film studies so often discussed within the rhetoric of 'representation' and 'effect.' The timeliness of media-witnessing as a distinct field makes it appealing, as well. Today we increasingly garner our news and information about the world, indeed our very perception and comprehension of it, from the audiovisual media. Thus, it behooves the scholarly community to consider further the ways in which audiovisual media construct conflicts.

Peters claims the act of witnessing involves two processes: the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying.[26] For sake of clarity, we can refine these terms further as the acts of a passive-spectator-observor versus an active-witness-participant, respectively. A spectator is either unwilling or unable to provide testimony about the event witnessed. Thus, the move from spectator to witness centers upon the ability to translate what one sees into language. Herein lies the fragility of witnessing: the difficult juncture between experience and discourse so crucial to all communication theory. This

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[24] Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, eds., *Media Witnessing Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.
[25] Frosh and Pinchevski, 1.
[26] Frosh and Pinchevski, 24.

is even more so true in today's hypermedia environment. Witnessing through the media is increasingly commonplace in today's world: we witness global media events via smartphones, tablets, computers, and/or televisions on a daily basis. John Ellis put it this way:

> Modern media witness places citizens in the position of the witness as the persons to whom testimony is directed. It is therefore important to understand this seemingly new and complex form of witnessing [brought about] by broadcast media. It is by no means clear what is expected of the millions who view news events or witness authentic emotions nightly through the relatively new devices of broadcast sound and vision: radio, TV, and Internet.[27]

How to react and respond to the steadily increasing flow of audiovisual information about the agonies of war remains an ever-more important and complex question for the viewer today. Ashuri and Pinchevski argue that "the very definition of what it means to be a witness in this day and age has changed with the expansion of media technologies."[28] Photography, sound-recording, film, radio, and television all extended the "realm of sensory evidence" available to audiences, but to what effect? During times of war and revolution, the rise of television news media has justifiably inspired a great deal of suspicion surrounding established practices that sensationalize distant suffering.[29]

Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* claims that the media – "which means, most decisively, images" – steers public attention. This idea finds expression in the term the CNN effect. A second idea highlighted by Sontag relates to oft-cited concept

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[27] Ellis in Frosh and Pinchevski, 74.
[28] Ashuri and Pinchevski in Frosh and Pinchevski, eds., 133.
[29] Torchin, *Creating the Witness*, 138.

of compassion-fatigue;[30] namely, that repeated exposure to war-images inures us to tragedy. Linfield claims the desensitization argument remains entirely unproven and lacks basic logic. "It is the camera, the video camera, and not the digital camera" she writes, "that has done much to globalize our conscious."[31] Indeed, the vast repository of images that exist today "[rob] us of the alibi of ignorance" making it more and more difficult to maintain "moral defectiveness."[32] For John Ellis (2000) television in particular helped seal the twenty-first century's fate as the century of witness.[33] He argues that in the age of mass communication, characterized by a ubiquity and accessibility of audiovisual information, it becomes more and more difficult to claim "I do not know" only that "I do not care" and for the purposes of this analysis that may be a moral issue. Indeed, the literature confirms that central to the concept of media witness is an element of morality – a sense of being complicit in the events we witness through the media. Thus, for Peters, witnessing the documentary testimonies of distant others evokes a cosmopolitan sensibility that necessarily implies membership in the global news public comes with ethical responsibilities to our fellow members.[34] Such ethical and moral considerations take on a heightened sense of urgency for the viewer when witnessing occurs within the context of war.

New Documentary

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[30] See Moeller (1999)

[31] Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance : Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 46.

[32] Linfield, 46.

[33] Ellis in Frosh and Pinchevski, *Media Witnessing*, 73.

[34] Peters in Frosh and Pinchevski, 1-22.

Periods of transition and social turmoil often produce some of the most innovative cinematic movements. The Syrian civil war is no exception. It led to the emergence of a new movement in documentary film referred to by its practitioners as emergency cinema. This movement offers insights into the current state and future possibilities of the nonfiction cinema genre. Related to other discourses of sobriety, the documentary film genre represents an appealing and popular venue for the attestation of truth claims. In contrast to fiction films, documentary professes a closer indexical relation to the real – that is, to the physical and historical world we occupy, as well as to actual problems, hopes, and struggles on the individual and collective level. For this reason, it allows for the engagement of concrete issues of ethics, politics, and technology. As such, documentary persists as the "primary mode of outreach and advocacy" for media activists on many different fronts.[35] These observations help justify the decision to employ documentary as the report's object of analysis.

Beyond the traditional types of documentary as defined in the literature – most notably by Bill Nichols (1991) – today's non-fiction cinema environment is characterized by a blurring of boundaries between 'objective' actuality and 'subjective' creativity. The wide diversity of styles, and accompanying conventions, that make up the genre in 2014 complicate attempts to define documentary. Stylistically, nonfiction films now employ "a more pronounced mixing of modes, combining elements of fiction and documentary."[36] Oftentimes, as I will show, this mixing of modes and experimentation with artistic forms

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[35] Torchin, *Creating the Witness*, 136.
[36] Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds., *Collecting Visible Evidence*, Visible Evidence, v. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 318.

comes about as a result of practical necessity just as much as aesthetic tastes of the filmmaker. More specifically, three primary factors lead to the adoption of less conventional, more avant-garde, approaches to documentary film: first, today's hypermedia[37] environment; second, the practical constraints faced by filmmakers working in conflict zones like Syria; third and finally, the often violent and traumatic subject-matter of war-time documentary films.

Technological innovations such as the rise of YouTube, Vimeo and other video sharing websites enable upcoming filmmakers from all around to offer their own portrayal of local conflicts. Often, these locally produced testimonial projects express a disdain for media portrayals. The World Wide Web also provides more opportunities for dissemination and exposure to new-form documentaries that continue to challenge and complicate assumptions related to the normative balance between representation and reality proffered by some theorists. Second, the practical constraints placed upon filmmakers working in a conflict zones — such as access to film sites, safety of those filmed, or lack of internet — necessitate experimentation with novel cinematic techniques and formats that serve to undercut typified forms of documentaries. Finally, questions related to the utility of depicting violence in film take on a renewed sense of urgency when producing documentary film in the midst of armed conflict.

The Ethics of Representing Death

As Bill Nichols explains, representing death in documentary films "engages many

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[37] "The term hypermedia captures the technological convergence and media saturation that characterize many contemporary societies, while emphasizing the speed and convergence of communication processes" (Marwan Kraidy, *Reality TV and Arab Politics, 187).*

in an ethical dilemma... because [such films] are, generally speaking, associated with useful knowledge, ethics, and more improvement."[38] The depiction of death and dying in video and film adds a further layer of ethical concern to both the creator and consumer of documentary footage. Sobchak (1984) explores more closely the "highly charged ethical stances [that] ground certain codes of documentary vision in its spectacular engagement with death and dying."[39] She claims these differing codes also "charge the film spectator with ethical responsibility for her or his own acts of viewing."[40] Drawing on Sobchak, Nichols posits that in documentary we see how filmmakers regard, or look at, their fellow humans. He theorizes further that the filmmaker's implicit and unavoidable position – physically, politically, morally – manifests itself in different types of the camera's gaze, each of which lead to different ethical implications for the viewer. As opposed to the fictional space of narrative and questions of style, in this study we confront the "axiographic" space of documentary and questions of ethics.[41]

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This brief literature review introduces the major themes of this report and situates the study within the current scholarship on media-witnessing, documentary, and the crisis of representation posed by death. The video analysis to follow proceeds in two sections. In section one, the primary material to be considered includes media coverage and citizen-uploaded digital video claiming to show the aftereffects of the 21 August 2013

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[38] Grant and Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary, ?*.
[39] Vivian Sobchack, "Chapter 10: Inscribing Ethical Space," in *Carnal Thoughts : Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
[40] Ibid.
[41] See Nichols, *Representing Reality*. 73-91.

chemical weapons attack in Syria – what I term videos-as-evidence. Drawing on Lawrence Douglas' 1995 essay entitled *Film as Witness: Screening Nazi Concentration Camps Before the Nuremberg Tribunal*, I relate the use of documentary video at the Nuremberg Trials to the U.S. Senate's employment of filmic evidence in making the case for military intervention in Syria after news broke of the chemical weapons attack. In section two, I analyze a diverse case-selection of 15 documentary episodes produced by the Abounaddara Collective. Their films respond directly to uses of video-as-evidence and develop a new form of documentary aesthetic with a much higher degree of interpretive acumen and affective power. As such, the "emergency cinema" model provides important insights to the current state and future opportunities for the documentary genre.

The video analysis to follow requires at least a brief introduction to the events that led to the Syrian uprising. By early 2011, despite the rumblings of change elsewhere in the region, the situation in Syria seemed relatively stable.[42]   Amid the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen, President Bashar al-Assad told the world his country was "immune" to such domestic unrest.[43] At the time, many in the region and around the world generally agreed. Contrary to expectations, the wave of Arab unrest reached Syria on March 15, 2011 when residents of the small Southern city of Deraa took to the streets in protest of the regime's heavy-handed response to a seemingly insignificant act of vandalism. In Syria, the uprising "began with the graffiti," as one

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[42] David Lesch, "The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East" in M. Hass, ed. *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East* (Westview Press, 2013), 81.
[43] Lesch in M. Haas, 82.

New York Times columnist put it.[44] Led by a paranoid Assad, the government arrested and tortured a group of teenagers accused of spray-painting a popular phrase associated with the Arab Spring – "Down with the regime!"[45] – on the wall of a local school. Demonstrations spread quickly thereafter.

From the outset, President Assad used the bully pulpit and heavy doses of propaganda to portray the revolution as an outside conspiracy. Moreover, Assad and his security forces stirred up sectarian strife in the country to strengthen the claim that the President alone stood between stability and utter chaos. The President effectively played on sectarian divisions to induce fear among Syria's religious minorities – including Shia, Christian, Druze, Alawi and Jews – long supporters of the regime for fear of persecution under the majority-Sunni alternative. As demonstrations intensified around the country in March and April 2011, the Asad regime also turned to another tool: the state-run media. As Stephen Starr observes: "Syria's state media went into overdrive during the unrest."[46] From the first, the state carried out a well-coordinated campaign reassuring many, "particularly the country's minorities and those living in Aleppo and Damascus," that Syria was facing an external campaign to destabilize the country.[47] For hours each day, the state-run Dunia television broadcasted what Starr describes as fascist propaganda: "images of soldiers and policemen being carried to their graves, others lying in hospitals with nationalist music as background" and "emotive videos of people kissing portraits of

[44] Kareem Fahim, "A Faceless Teenage Refugee Who Helped Ignite Syria's War," *The New York Times*, 8 February 2013.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (London: Hurst, 2012), 69.
[47] Ibid., 55.

the president and people cheering the army [for liberating the town] from 'armed gangs."[48]

As the crackdown dragged on, thousands of soldiers defected and began launching attacks against the government. With the U.N warning that Syria was on the brink of civil war, Obama came out publically in August of 2011 to demand that Assad step down. By November 2012, what began as a relatively peaceful stand against years of repression transformed into an armed uprising against the Assad regime. While many scholars and pundits view the fall of Bashar al-Asad as an inevitable reality, if not a foregone conclusion, his regime has managed to weather the storm thus far. Syria's chemical weapons saga has been one of the dominant storylines of the civil war in recent months. I turn to media portrayals of this aspect of conflict in Section One below.

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[48] Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* (London: Hurst, 2012), 171.

Section One: Videos-As-Evidence

The horrifying videos that accosted our various screens in the wake of the 21 August 2013 chemical weapons attack deserve further attention because of their temporary ubiquity in the Western news media this summer as America prepared for a retaliatory strike against the Assad regime. These videos served primarily as visual evidence of the atrocities committed by a brutal dictator in a far away place; their dissemination sought to justify US military intervention in Syria without regard to the ethical dilemmas posed by the display of such distant pain and suffering. The Senate montage analyzed in research for this project was chosen on the basis of the "stamp of authenticity" bestowed upon it by the intelligence community.[49] All of the videos included were first posted to YouTube and claim to show victims of a chemical or poison gas attack. According to the U.S. government, "together they depict a representative range of YouTube content posted regarding the reported chemical weapons attacks in the suburbs of Damascus, Syria."[50] Senator Dianne Fenistein led the effort to show these videos to the world. She asked the CIA to prepare a DVD which would have specific instances of evidence, largely victims. As a supporter of military intervention, Fenstein went on to say that she found the videos "horrendous" and felt the need so multiply the DVDs and have them sent to members of the Senate to bolster calls for intervention and

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[49] Jake Tapper, "First on CNN: Videos Show Glimpse into Evidence for Syria Intervention," *CNN*, accessed February 5, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/07/politics/us-syria-chemical-attack-videos/index.html.

[50] See Appendix for a breakdown of each video, as well as the information included on the government site that hosts the videos.

sensitize the American people.[51] The thirteen videos were also hosted online and remain available for viewing today.[52]

The government website that hosts the Senate montage carries this warning: "These videos contain disturbing images of dead bodies, including children. VIEWER DISCRETION IS ADVISED [sic]." Most clearly in the brief historical moment that makes what the camera captured breaking news, curiosity alone motivates the gaze. What better way to pique curiosity than to warn viewers that some may find the following videos disturbing? Images or videos preceded by "viewer discretion advised" challenge the viewer to watch. Indeed, if the images were not worth showing then why post or broadcast them at all? The news media depends on spectators, no matter the content or consequences of showing. Advising the audience to use discretion abdicates the media from the act of showing, shifting responsibility back to the individual viewer. Yet, in a media-saturated world, this person is often unprepared for or unwilling to accept such such a responsibility. Instead, we as spectators typically satisfy our desire to know by watching the segment, then we move on with our lives. In such a case, not filmmaker nor journalist nor viewer accepts responsibility for filming, reporting on, or viewing the footage.

The transcripts from two news segments on CNN Newsroom from September 7, 2013 – when CNN editors first aired the 13 videos shown to Senators in a close-door briefing two days before – offer additional insight into how media organizations and governments construct conflict. CNN was the first new organization to acquire this

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[51] Tapper, "First on CNN...".
[52] *http://www.senate.gov/isvp/?type=arch&comm=intel&filename=intel090613* (Accessed April 27, 2014).

footage and did not hesitate to let the world see: "We felt like the viewers and citizens of this country deserve to know," one journalist explained.[53] In their coverage of breaking news stories, anchors rely on expert commentary to give credibility to their reporting. For example, in the afternoon portion of CNN Newsroom moderator Don Lemon turns to his guests for explanation as the videos play either in the background screen inside the studio or as a split-screen with the talking heads. CNN International Correspondent Nic Robertson responded to one of Lemon's questions during the segment by claiming: "Anyone who sees these videos... will certainly feel a huge urge to act about what they've seen."[54] Within minutes, however, Robertson begins to explain that the videos "focus on medical evidence that gives the strongest indication of what's happening in Syria, such as dialted pupils, vomiting, convulsing, etc."[55] This discourse treats the Syrians depicted in these videos not as human beings, but nameless victims or virtual patients to be examined as such for the sake of the viewer's right to know.

Now let us look more closely at the last seven of the films and how they were discussed and presented in a different hour of CNN Newsroom with anchor Fredricka Whitfield. Tapper offers an obligatory warning to the viewers, then shows video number eight of thirteen. "It appears to show a man frothing at the mouth next to a boy." He moves on to number nine and ten: "... this shows a boy with an oxygen mask on his face. In a second we will see him struggling to sit upright, and crying... Adults are trying to

[53] "New Videos Released of Gas Attacks in Syria; Former U.N. Weapons Inspector Assesses Evidence Sarin Gas Used in Syria," Television, *CNN Newsroom* (CNN, September 7, 2013), http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1309/07/cnr.05.html.
[54] "Videos of Syrians Affected With Sarin Surfaced," Television, *CNN Newsroom* (CNN, September 7, 2013), http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1309/07/cnr.07.html.
[55] Ibid.

give him oxygen and water... A lot of these victims, obviously, were children." I use Tapper's descriptions[56] of the videos here to highlight the discourse being used to explain what is being shown on screen. Again, we have an emphasis on unnamed victims of a sarin gas attack. Videos eleven and twelve feature the dead bodies of Syrians, many of them children. In Arabic we hear various religious iterations or prayers and references to Bashar Al-Asad as a dog (understanding my own). Other times in the video people exclaim, "look what they've done to innocent people." Video number 12 is only 28 seconds, but shows the conclusion of an attack as hundreds of bodies wrapped in shrouds are prepared for burial.

Returning to the news transcripts, Don Lemon introduced the breaking news story earlier in the day with the following remarks:

> This breaking news involves pictures and video from Syria that show some very graphic images. It's of men, women and children... suffering from a sarin gas attack. And, again, you're about to see some graphic video so please, be prepared for this.[57]

Then, he simply says: "Here it is. Syrian people of all ages dead or dying or convulsing." This moment recalls Lawrence Douglas' description of the unprecedented use of film in a juridical setting at the Nuremebrg Trials. Douglas poses a crucial question and pursues it with compelling narrative force in his essay: What exactly did the Tribunal see when the prosecutors screened *Nazi Concentration Camps*? The transcripts from the trial provide no clues. They simply record: "[The film was then shown] ... That concludes the

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[56] "New Videos Released of Gas Attacks in Syria; Former U.N. Weapons Inspector Assesses Evidence Sarin Gas Used in Syria."
[57] "Videos of Syrians Affected With Sarin Surfaced."

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presentation.[58] Douglas shows in detail how even the visual faltered in the face of such horror: how "the camera was confused, confounded, embarrassed – in a word, unsteadied."[59] Similarly, in the end, the horrible videos of children shaking violently in pain, men foaming at the mouth, and rooms full of shrouded bodies – all broadcast through various media channels for weeks – failed to prompt diplomatic, legal, or military intervention against the Syrian regime. Although a deal was eventually reached to rid Syria of all its chemical weapons, visual evidence had only a small role to play in this task; in its place came the "eye-witness" testimony of the Nobel prize-winning group of weapons inspectors that travelled to Syria to conduct an independent analysis several months after the attack. The moving-images also failed to indict the Syrian regime in what UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon called "the most serious chemical weapons incident since Saddam Hussein's attack on the Halabja region of Iraq, and the worst use of weapons of mass destruction in the 21st century."[60] Despite clear and convincing biological, physiological, visual, and narrative evidence that chemical weapons were used in Syria on a relatively large-scale thus constituting a war-crime in international law, Bashar Al-Asad remains in power.

Several months later, when the eyes of the world have shifted away from Syria, it is important to ponder why these videos failed so miserably? The inhospitable Syrian mediascape helps explain, at least in part, why the visual faltered in the wake of the

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[58] Derek Gregory, "Emergency Cinema," *Geographical Imaginations: War, Space, & Security*, October 5, 2012, http://geographicalimaginations.com/2012/10/05/emergency-cinema/.

[59] Lawrence Douglas, "Film as Witness: Screening Nazi Concentration Camps before the Nuremberg Tribunal," *The Yale Law Journal* 105, no. 2 (November 1, 1995): 449–81.

[60] UN News Service, "'Clear and Convincing' Evidence of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, UN Team Reports," *United Nations*, September 16, 2013, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45856#.U17Q5Sjf2C0.

unimaginable horror of the 21 August 2013 chemical weapons attack. More importantly, however, the case-study confirms that image-evidence does not "speak for itself" as John Kerry told reporters in regards to the Senate montage.[61] Rather they rely on film strategies and contextual narrative to aid in the production of meaning. Images are important, but footage alone is not enough. For film to function as witness, they must transform images and testimony into powerful human stories. The reworking of footage obtained, as in the case of the Senate montage, "suggests the inadequacy of curiosity as an ethic."[62] The raw images prompted rearrangement and modifications in hopes of converting curiosity into knowledge: title screens indicating date, time, and place were added, and the videos combined into one montage. Interestingly, however, no sub-titles translate the diegetic chatter or direct addresses of the people filmed. The Senators behind this video acknowledged the limits of raw footage but failed to provide adequate textual additions to make the atrocity image comprehensible enough to engage witnesses.

Here we may also turn to the legal realm for insight. I make reference Lawrence Douglas (2006) essay throughout this section to highlight the "power of legal discourse to frame our understanding of visual images."[63] Anglo-American jurisprudence qualifies admissible filmic proof on the doctrine of the authenticating witness. In essence, this legal rule asserted that the mere picture "cannot be received except as a non-verbal expression to the testimony of some witness competent to speak to the facts

[61] Reuters, "Kerry, Asked about Assad Denial, Says Evidence Speaks for Itself," *Reuters*, September 8, 2013, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/08/us-syria-crisis-assad-kerry-idUSBRE9870E020130908.
[62] Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 83.
[63] Douglas, "Film as Witness," 453.

represented."[64] Thus, in this sense, film-as-evidence was conceptualized as dependent upon the corroboration of eyewitness testimony. None of the Senate chemical weapons videos feature eye-witness testimony, nor names, nor even the ages or numbers of victims being depicted. In fact, from my research it seems very little first-hand testimony exists about the nature of the trauma experienced in late August 2013. Most often, "commentary" comes in the form of medical experts explaining the physical signs of a sarin gas attack. For example, CNN Chief Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Guptaexplains the chemical nature of sarin gas, its effect on the body, the most likely cause of death from exposure, etc. time and time again in the segment discussed above. This type of medical commentary further emphasizes the victims on screen as bodies affected by sarin gas, not individuals experiencing pain.

For a news gathering organization like CNN, "objectivity provides a legal safeguard against libel... [and] helps differentiate documentary from fiction."[65] This institutional objectivity that Nichols speaks of "requires a accuracy of description, not interpretive acumen."[66] The videos discussed in section one present only factual information about the time and place of filming then, in their dissemination, receive ex post facto commentary from the global news media. Together these two facts work to devalue the human side of the experience depicted on screen. In the case, the failure of the video images as evidence was caused by their expropriation from any sort of narrative context and their delivery in a sterile and objective news environment on television.

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[64] Ibid., 466.
[65] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality,* 188.
[66] Ibid.

Prioritizing the evidentiary status of the images precluded the Senate from portraying anything but nameless victims of distant atrocity. In recirculating the videos and playing them on repeat for weeks upon weeks, CNN and other media organizations were also made complicit in this well-intentioned, yet ultimately voyeuristic portrayal of violence as spectacle.

Section Two: Documentary-as-Witness

In contrast to the U.S. Senate or CNN, The Syrian Abounaddara Collective comprises a host of local individuals with not only the capacity to bear witness, but to do so in creative ways accessible to a global audience. Far from the morbid and violent eye-witness videos that proliferate online and flooded our various screens in the wake of the August chemical-weapons attack in Syria, the "emergency cinema" project developed by Abounaddara gives rise to a new visual literacy that negotiates the technical and aesthetic difficulties in representing war, and offers a new means of witnessing distant suffering. This section theorizes the connection between "emergency cinema" and witnessing through a close-reading of several representative examples of Abounaddara's films. The analysis suggests that Abounaddara bears witness to conflict in Syria – as opposed to simply recording visual facts about it -- by providing a filmic venue for the presentation of criticism, testimony, commentary, and obituary related to the Syrian revolution. These four categories – criticism, testimony, commentary, and obituary – organize the selection of videos analyzed in the next section.

As context for this visual analysis, we must at least briefly return to the literature related to witnessing. Lessons from the Holocaust initiated a paradigm-shift in thinking about ability of the image to capture ethically and responsibly the magnitude of suffering of trauma victims. Guerin and Hallas explain: "When the Allied forces went into the camps and filmed the survivors as they walked around like skeletons, unable to speak for themselves, the resultant images were offensive, disrespectful and transgressed the

integrity of the human subject."[67] More generally, history confirms that victims of trauma do not have access to the production of their own images. Instead, survivors of trauma find recourse in the delivery of testimony on the audiovisual interface. John Durham Peters argues that since the end of World War II, the survivor-witness has been encouraged to take an active role in the narration of individual stories of trauma. Words have been prioritized in this struggle to "give voice" to the image because, in Peters estimation, "seeing is a passive activity whereas saying is active."[68] Words, therefore, more closely align with the subjective communication of feeling and experience as opposed to the objective presentation of factual knowledge. Guerin and Hallas explain: "Surivior testimony locates its truth value precisely in its subjectivity, in its production of embodied knowledge."[69] As we will see, the social act of testimony permits the survivor to "*speak to a public*, whether to condemn or accuse the perpetrator, memorialize the suffering, or to teach as a warning against repetition [emphasis mine]."[70]

This encounter with a public 'other' represents a central aspect of my use of the term witness throughout the report, but especially in the discussion of Abounaddara. The act of bearing witness constitutes a specific form of address to an other expressed in the literature by the relationailty between two different types of witness: the survivor-witness and the listerner-witness. As Guerin and Hallas write: "For a witness to perform an act of bearing witness, she must address an other, a listener who consequently functions as a

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[67] Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, Nonfictions (New York ; London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 7.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Guerin and Hallas, *The Image and the Witness*, 8.
[70] Ibid., 8.

witness to the original witness."[71] The interrelation between these two actors frames the act of bearing witness as a performative speech-act. We will see how this plays out in Abounaddara's films after a brief discussion of the origins of the group's name and the "emergency cinema" project they founded.

The Collective's adopted name, Abounaddara, makes several explicit references to visuality, the documentary tradition, and political activism. In Arabic, Abounaddara is the nickname for a man with glasses. On their website, the group explains that they chose it "based on its use in Arab cities where ordinary people are identified by [names associated with] their professions."[72] The name also serves to "sound [a] rallying cry for the world republic of documentary cinema, one of whose earliest pioneers, Dziga Vertov, called himself the man with a camera." Like the films of Vertov, the videos produced by Abounaddara are shot with portable cameras using natural lighting, recording everyday events rather than planned-out scenarios. As Ziter explains quite beautifully: "From the material of the everyday, the group unearths the impulse to resist and imagines a future free of violence – regardless of how removed that future might feel from the current situation."[73] In my research, I discovered further that in 1877, the journalist Yaqub Sanu (also known as James Sanua) founded the first satirical newspaper in Egypt, which he titled Abou Naddara. Sanu wrote such trenchant criticism of the ruling elites that the newspaper was soon suppressed. Sanua was forced into exile in France, but continued to

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[71] Guerin and Hallas, *Image and the Witness*, 10.
[72] See *www.abounaddara.com/about* (Accessed April 25, 2014)
[73] Edward Ziter, "The Image of the Martyr in Syrian Performance and Web Activism," *TDR: The Drama Review* 57, no. 1 (2013): 128.

publish the paper for several more years.[74]

The Abounaddara Collective formed before the uprising but now focuses exclusively on the effects of violence on everyday life. As such, their project is emblematic of the time. The group is working hard and fast with very few means to "salvage whatever can be saved of this image of Syrians" – an image that "seen through the lens of geopolitics and religion" pits a "gentleman dictator against ugly jihadists."[75] Reacting to such constructions of the uprising, Abounaddara states they had no choice "but to use the aesthetics of cinema to produce a form of counter-information."[76] Hence, as a spokesperson for the group explained: "We don't film the revolution, but its counter-shot."[77] In this way, Abounaddara's films intervene deliberately and artistically into contemporary representations of Syria as a bloodbath or sectarian minefield.

The group's focus on the revolution's "countershot" translates into a highly reactionary aesthetic that makes a concerted effort to show the "exceptional resistance" of the Syrian people by protecting them from any kind of "stereotyping or prefabricated media pigeonholing."[78] Their films featuring interviews highlight a wide range of voices and all are filmed with empathy and closeness. Syrians are never represented as numbers or nameless victims, but rather individuals with compelling testimony that needs to be shared. Each of the short or very short films adopt a very particular cinematographic

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[74] Alaa Al-Aswany, "Egypt's Ancient Snark," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/14/opinion/aswany-egypts-jokers-wont-be-gagged.html.

[75] Ellie Bramley, "The Guardian: Film Blog," *Film Blog: Behind the Scenes with Syria's "Emergency Cinema,"* March 26, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/mar/26/abounaddara-collective-syria-cinema.

[76] Ellie Violet Bramley, "Behind Scenes," 3.

[77] Donatella Della Ratta, "Creative Resistance Challenges Syria's Regime," *Aljazeera*, December 25, 2011, sec. Opinion, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/12/20111222162349451619.html.

[78] Grant & Sloniowski, ed., *Documenting the Documentary*, 150.

language adapted to the urgency of the situation. The group released what was to be its very first short weekly film on 7 May 2011. Entitled *The Infiltrators* – recalling an expression used by Bashar Al-Asad to refer to anti-regime demonstrators – the film was made with existing footage from a year earlier and heralded two important changes in Abounaddara's visual style: "a shorter format, [and] a more polished style that favors static shots, practically eliminating all camera movement."[79] From this humble beginning, and overcoming many obstacles associated with working in a conflict zone, today the group's online archive of films comprises 227 episodes ranging from 26 seconds to 6 minutes in length. The 15 films selected for analysis may be organized into four distinct categories on the basis of informing logic or argument: a) critique media portrayals of the Syrian uprising; b) provide a venue for the attestation of local testimony; c) comment on the long-term effects of violence on society, especially children; and/or d) honor martyrs.[80] I analyze several representative examples of each category below.

a) Critique media portrayals

Quickly imposing its own codes and appropriating citizen-uploaded videos to a particular format, Abounaddara claims television "managed to create a distorted image of the revolution by portraying it as just another conflict, with its set of clichéd images of suffering and bloodshed."[81] In other words, the television news media divested the revolution of its authenticity for the sake of the viewer's right to know. This criticism

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[79] Syrian Collective Abounaddara, Emergency Cinema: An Interview with Syrian Collective Abounaddara, interview by Cecile Boex, Article, trans. Susannah Dale, October 5, 2012, http://www.laviedesidees.fr/_Boex-Cecile_.html.
[80] For a more detailed breakdown of the films analyzed, see Table 1 in Appendix.
[81] Syrian Collective Abounaddara, Emergency Cinema: An Interview with Syrian Collective Abounaddara.

comes to the fore in one of Abounaddara's most insightful film released just a few weeks after the 21 August 2013 chemical weapons attack and entitled: *2 MINUTES FOR SYRIA / with images of Syrian Citizens* (Figure 1a). Following the title page, sound of ambient chatter gradually builds as the close-up shot of a mummified head (Figure 1b) comes slowly into focus. The opening sequence focuses exclusively on the shrunken heads and skulls inside display cases, each of which bears a number for curatorial purposes. The sound of a camera shutter opening and closing accompanies each shot within the museum: a European man photographing the morbid exhibit (Figure 1c), tourists gawking at the skulls and shrunken heads in display cases, the group meandering towards the exit until the room is empty (Figure 1d), then fade to black. White text flashes on the screen in conjunction with the loud slam of the door: Stop the spectacle! / There is another way you can help the Syrian People. The film is replete with references to the many trappings of the modern-Western experience: museums, spectators, mummified heads on display, the sound of the camera. All of these reference points shed light upon and critique the violence-as-spectacle model characteristic of media portrayals of distant conflict.

The imperative "stop watching" finds a prominent place in another of Abounaddara's documentary episodes entitled *Syria Today*. As the film opens, a distant train barrels ahead blaring its horn (Figure 2a). Rounding the bend, the train begins approaching the foreground. At the exact moment it reaches the audience, the shot cuts to black and white text instructs the viewer: "Stop Watching! We Are Dying!" (Figure 2b). The stock footage of a moving train used in the film recalls a fascinating anecdote in the 'folklore' of cinema history. Bottomore summarizes it as follows: "an audience in the

early days of the cinema is seated in a hall when a film of an approaching train is projected on the screen. The spectators are anxious, fearful – some even panic and run."[82] This unsettled reaction has been called the 'train effect' and speaks to the great power film had over these early audiences. Abounadarra uses the train here to recall these early encounters with film and turn our attention again to the power of film to shock audiences into action. Both films offer critical insights into the nature of audiovisual testimony in the twenty-first century "era of the witness."[83] The imperative "stop watching" challenges the practices of seeing that dictate how we experience the world today. They call attention to the viewer's position as spectator and invite action: "There's something else you can do to help the Syrian people." Neither film provides factual information about or actual footage of the events unfolding in Syria. To the contrary, like many of the films produced by Abounaddara, the films are open-ended, demanding continued contemplation.

A final film that discusses media portrayals deserves mention. It features commentary from an anonymous interviewee, his face completely blacked out by shadows to protect his identity. "The documented human rights violations are enough to being down at least three regimes," the anonymous man begins. "Isn't that enough?" he asks as the title screen rolls: *Media Kill*. The title here summarizes and supplements the argument made by the interviewee. "The media have their politics... I know that now," he continues, explaining that in the early stages of the revolution the opposition was happy

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[82] Stephen Bottomore, "The Panicking Audience?: Early Cinema and the 'Train Effect,'" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19, no. 2 (1999): 177–216, doi:10.1080/014396899100271.
[83] Sarkar, *Documentary Testimonies*, 13.

to see images of martyrs broadcast on television: "We felt we were doing something useful... I don't feel that anymore." He then asks rhetorically if the media are trying to stop the massacres, answering himself: "Not at all. They'll cover a massacre; they'll show it... it's in their interests. More money for them." The man explains that he and his counterparts want to prevent such massacres, not film it for TV. He concludes the interview saying: "But it doesn't suit the media if there's no massacre." These powerful words help reinforce many of the points made about the Senate chemical weapons videos in section one.

b) Provide venue for local testimony

The desire to provide a venue for the reception and distribution of local testimony in hopes of expanding the narrative record of conflict for history represents a second characteristic of Abounaddara's films. These films that feature stand-alone and emotionally gripping interviews speak to the effects of violence on individual citizens. In *Nothing but Light* – a strange translation of the original Arabic that reads "Confession of the citizen Hussein" – a Syrian refugee explains that he needs to do more for his country. Sitting in a dim-lit room in Finland, he speaks about the opposition website he has run since 2005, but says that even at 4,000 hits a day the impact if his site pales in comparison to those who die fighting the Assad regime. At just over three minutes, this film is emblematic of the ethnographic, interview films produced by Abounaddara. They characteristically contain one continuous close-up shot and feature no camera movement at all. In another, *After the Image*, a young adult Syrian man speaks about watching an online video of a mass killing of 19 people at a checkpoint (Figure 3). He says that he

watched this particular video like he watches all the other videos of massacres, never thinking it had anything to do with him. But we learn next: "I found out around 5 ocklock in the evening... and I knew I had to go back to that video." Continuing as the title screen rolls, he says: "Then I watched it, and I saw him in the crowd." While we do not know who "he" is to the interviewee, throughout the remainder of the film we gain insight into the confusion and despair the witnessing of death through the media.

The next two films feature the testimony of soldiers speaking about the trauma of committing violence. In the film entitled *The Unknown Solider (*Part 3) an anonymous solider speaks about his experience killing. At a particularly poignant moment, the distraught solider claims: "My hand cut his throat and my soul wept" (Figure 4). Of all the interviews with citizens I watched in research for this project, this line moved me the most. Only 46-seconds long, with no soundtrack, and one static shot, the short-film Of God and Dogs features two words: "I killed" (Figure 5). Surprisingly enough, out of a record 8,161 shorts submitted to the Sundance Film Festival this year, 66 were selected for screening. In the end, *Of God and Dogs* took home the Grand Jury Prize. These films do not show the moment of death, but instead feature narrative reflections of regular Syrians that were forced to commit acts of violence. In contradistinction to the ubiquitous online videos of death and destruction caught unawares, in both of these films textual narrative renders the account of violence knowable. We know little to almost nothing about the circumstances of the conflict that led the individuals to kill, and this fact alongside the few words of testimony allow the viewer with "a space in which to consider

the enduring effects of the moment."[84] Of God and Dogs accomplishes this in only 45 seconds, nicely demonstrating Abounaddara's affinity for very-short formats.

c) Comment on the effects of violence on children

The short-film entitled *Soldiers of Assad Were Here* offers commentary on the enduring effects of war and violence on the new generation. At only 38 seconds, it also ranks as one of Abounaddara's shortest films to date. The film includes one shot of a close-up shot of a woman's pregnant stomach (Figure 6a). Distant gunshots inform the soundtrack until, in the final moment, three elements come together: a loud gunshot sounds, the woman lowers her shirt covering her belly, and the film fades to black revealing the title screen (Figure 6b). Placing the title screen last in this film matters a great deal. It forms the implied argument indicting the Assad regime in the murder of Syrian women and children.

The film *They're Playing* – best described as a photo-montage set to a popular Fayruz song of the same name – also plays on the theme of children. The song begins: "The children are playing / under the blue sky they play" accompanied by an image of two young boys in the foreground holding real guns (Figure 7a). As Fayruz continues – They're lost in their beautiful games / They run without tiring – the next shot appears: a picture of a young boy lying in a hospital bed holding his gun to the air and smiling (Figure 7b). When the song returns to the refrain "They're playing" the film introduces three photos of bombed out classrooms. Fayruz repeats the line in the present-tense – "They Play" – and the final shot reveals a wooden marker with the number "474" visible

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[84] Ibid., 211.

upon it. The film not only mourns the death of the children presumably among the hundreds suggested by the number 474, but also considers the effects of continuous on Syria's young generation.

In *Children of Halfaya* Abounaddara takes a more ethnographic approach to the topic of children and war. The film features around four minutes of footage from a tent full of child refugees in Lebanon. The first boy interviewed explains how his family ended up in the camp: "There are so many refugees in Lebanon, we can't find an empty house." Around the same time this video was posted in April 2013, the United Nations confirmed that the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon passed the one million mark.[85] This makes the film a timely testimonial addition to the sheer magnitude of suffering revealed by the statistical data. After panning around the room to other children playing, the camera returns to the first boy interviewed. In another particular disturbing moment, he describes how his friend Marwan had his head chopped off during the breadline massacre of Halfaya: "Ten days later," he continues, "people went on the roof to hang laundry and found burnt heads and hands all around them."[86] What makes these remarks ever more poignant is their delivery by a young boy unaware of the lasting effects these traumatic events may play in his life and others in the future.

Another more recent film that speaks to the growing Islamicization of the conflict and the possible influence that may play on children is entitled *Over the Toys*. The film, posted in January 2014, opens with a shot of legos being poured onto the ground (Figure

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[85] Jethro Mullen, "Number of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Passes 1 Million, U.N. Says," *CNN*, April 3, 2013, sec. World, http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/03/world/meast/lebanon-syrian-refugees/index.html.
[86] Bramley, "Behind the Scenes with Syria's 'Emergency Cinema.'"

8a). The camera slowly rotates to reveal close-up shots of children playing with the toys, laughing, and drawing (Figure 8b). A transition shot featuring only text – a few miles away (Figure 8c) – leads to the next shot of a group of rebels from the Isalmic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) sing a revolutionary song about plans for an Islamic state in Syria (Figure 8d). As the song continues in the background, the frame reveals a still-image of children standing in a doorway. In context the image seems to serve as the "counter shot" to the Islamic rebels singing thus pointing to the influence of this type of ideology on young minds.   The final screen relays further textual commentary: "On December 28th, 2013 the children of Kafrnabel discovered that the road to the Islamic State passed over their toys" (Figure 8e). Like other films discussed above, this text serves as the argument of the film.

d) Honor fallen martyrs

In a highly insightful article, Edward Ziter writes about the image and the martyr in Syrian performance and web activism. He claims that in Syria we find an outpouring of images and videos representing the most somber and serious figure of the uprising: the martyr. These online representations of martyrs extend far beyond the recording of names and circumstances of death and contribute to an "online martyrology" that is "emotional, expansive, and widely enagaged."[87] Several Abounaddara's films fall into this category.

I will cross tomorrow is possibly Abounaddara's most well-known film and by far the most viewed before *Of God and Dogs* won at Sundance – it still stands a confident second in terms of numbers of plays on Vimeo. The three-and-a-half-minute film is

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[87] Ziter, "The Image of the Martyr in Syrian Performance and Web Activism," 117.

dedicated to the sniper that killed fellow Syrian filmmaker Bassel Shehadeh (1984-2012) who returned from a Fulbright scholarship in the US and settled in the besieged town of Homs to film and train citizen journalists.[88] The film is composed of composed of three shots, each recorded with a handheld video-camera. The first is a night scene where a young soldier taunts a sniper on the streets by shouting "Freedom forever, angering you Assad." A shot rings out. The man contemplates the sniper's unreasonable hostility towards the word freedom [huriyya] saying: "If I was armed and shot at him, he wouldn't shoot back. But if I shout 'Peaceful' he shoots." By way of example, he calls out again and the promised gunshot echoes.

The next shot shows a side-view of an empty roadway. Outside the frame, a man's voice explains that you have to say your prayers then make a run for it and, God willing, nothing will happen. The camera tilts upward as the camerman begins running across the street. For the rest of this shot, the image is shaky and out of focus but we see glimpses of the man's hair, the horizon, then telephone lines indicating his proximity to the other side of the roadway. We also hear his panting and the sound of distant explosions. The third and final shot features footage of a crowd of people carrying a shrouded body at night. Flashlights and camera flashes provide the only light in the video. The soundtrack features the non-diegetic sound of an old man singing a song unaccompanied. As the song ends, the screen fades to black and the following obituary appears: "Camera / Bassel Shehadeh / Assasinated in Homs, May 28th 2012."

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[88] Syrian Collective Abounaddara, Emergency Cinema: An Interview with Syrian Collective Abounaddara, n3.

The film's argument, once again, is only revealed at the final moment. The film is more than a tribute to Bassel. The title implies that the simple act of crossing a street may mean crossing into the world of martyrs.[89]In the song lyrics the martyr is the "key" for our passage to hope in man – notably, not hope in victory, only in humanity. The film makes a connection between viewer and martyr by listing Shehadeh as camera in the sole credit. This identification with the martyr is further enhanced by the use of the first person in the song – "my life is freedom's ransom" – just as the title asserts "I will cross tomorrow."[90] Shehadeh was only one of many individuals who were shot and killed while trying to document demonstrations or shellings on camera. Ziter reminds us the violent nature of such footage does not qualify it as dramatic or powerful. These videos could just as accurately be titled "videographer drops her camera." Rather, Ziter claims the film succeeds in presenting a powerful perspective by forcing the viewer into the subject position of the martyr. The spokesperson for Abounaddara says the group presented the film as a "posthumous letter from the filmmaker to his killer, its substance saying the words, 'You can kill me, but my images will always be there as a witness.'"[91]

Abounaddara's shortest film, only 26 seconds, also honors a fallen martyr albeit in a much more concise way. Entitled *Starvation* opens with two loud middle-register piano notes as an image of a white body bag flashes simultaneously on the screen (Figure 9a). The bag bears the name of the martyr – along with information about the time and place of death – in green Arabic script. The repeated piano note continues to fade until

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[89] Ziter, "The Image of the Martyr in Syrian Performance and Web Activism," 131.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Syrian Collective Abounaddara, Emergency Cinema: An Interview with Syrian Collective Abounaddara.

around 12 seconds into the film when a loud higher-pitched strike on the piano introduces the following obituary: Reem Abed Rahim / starved to death on 01/15/2014 / in Yarmouk Refugee Camp / besieged by Assad's forces (Figure 9b). The film embodies documentary in the most rudimentary form. Aesthetically speaking, it uses only three tools: a photograph, the sound of piano strikes, and text all of which are edited together into a 26 second film. The argument comes in the obituary: Reem Abed Rahim died because Assad's forces besieged the Yarmouk Refugee Camp. The very-short film bears witness to the starvation of a single martyr. This film in particular demonstrates Abounaddara's affinity for documentary treatments that operate on the individual, micro-level.

Still other films in the collection bear witness to the collective resilience and dignity of the Syrian people. The final two films under consideration were made for those who support the regime. In an interview, Abounaddara's spokesperson said: "We try to involve people who are distrustful or hostile by bringing them back to the sphere of pure humanity."[92] This is why, he explains further, Abounaddara has always tried to portray Hafez Al-Asad (former President and father to Bashar) with a certain amount of dignity. This message is clearly present in a film entitled "The End," which glorifies the martyrs lost in the revolution. The opening shots reveal the following text: "This is a film like any other / But it's heroes are unique / They are the men and women who dies so that freedom may live in Syria / The End." The film then opens to a static shot of a famous mural glorifying the eternal leader Hafez al-Asad. A black curtain closes in on the mural,

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[92] Ibid.

signaling the end of an era, while the names of "those who died for freedom" scroll down the screen set to a dirge interpreted by Fayrouz (See Figure 10).

Another film entitled *Apocalypse Now* uses a similar narrative technique to honor the Syrian people. It features existing video footage of a dead man being dragged down the street as the shaky camera phone records the bloody details. It is perhaps the Collective's most violent film. In the next shot, footage shows lines of grown men carrying shrouded bodies to a mass grave. Fayruz informs the soundtrack throughout. The final three shots include the following text in white on a black screen: Here, the People of Syria lived / Here, the People of Syria died / Here, the People of Syria rose again! (See Figure 11). The concluding message of the film serves to justify the presentation of the violent video footage. More important, however, these last two films dignify the Syrian people lost by poetically witnessing to their collective loss.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

My analysis of these 15 films show that it is possible to use documentary in ways beyond the evidentiary (in the legal sense), and which deliberately avoid showing the horrow, yet remain committed to offering a powerful and critical perspective.[93] These films feature no victims and react against the violence as spectacle model. The emergency cinema project, in many respects, may be described as a studied indictment into the ways in which the media construct conflict.

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[93] Gregory, "Emergency Cinema."

CONCLUSION

Returning to ideas first expounded upon in the literature review section, the analysis of Abounaddara's "emergency cinema" suggests both rupture and continuity with the documentary film tradition. Historically, the work of Abounaddara returns the documentary form to an earlier tradition of "radical filmmaking." As early as 1934, Leo Hurwitz, chief ideologue of the movement, identified three priorities radical filmmakers: 1) Mass access via commercial distribution; 2) Development of new "synthetic film forms," which would facilitate more "inclusive and implicative comment," and could "reveal best the meaning of the event," and 3) more profound political analysis.[94] The first goal of new radical films sought to recover the social function of documentaries by assimilating the strategies of European and Soviet avant-gardes. "We must learn," Hurowitz argued in a manifesto of the early 1940s, "to think of documentary as requiring a wide variety of styles – all for the purpose of maximum expressiveness and conviction."[95] The new synthetic forms would facilitate more inclusive and implicative comment and could reveal best the meaning of the event."[96] "Earlier films," Hurwitz claimed, were "just seeing things, not understanding."[97] Whereas news-reel tell us where-when-what, the documentary tells us why. The deeper approach to documentary proposed by Hurowitz aimed at "penetration of the facts... achieving a real interrelation between the particular and the general."[98] Films in the tradition of cinema verite or Nichols'

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[94] Grant & Sloniowski, eds., *Documenting the Documentary*, 140.
[95] Grant and Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary*, 139–140.
[96] Ibid., 140.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.

expository form refuse to engage the element of subectivity in the representation of tragedy and suffering, opting instead to simply report the facts. As Errol Morris explains, "cinema verite set back documentary twenty or thirty years [by promoting] documentary as a sub-species of journalism."[99]

Considering Hurowitz proposed these ideas in the early 20th century, his priorities warrant additions or modifications suited for the unique circumstances of modern day life and warfare. In addition to synthetic film forms, global access, and heightened interpretive acumen, the emergency cinema model developed by Abounaddara advocatyes uses several other technical and aesthetic strategies to anchor atrocity and create meaning: a) shorter format, b) adapt for smaller screens, c) distribute weekly, d) react to established media narrative, and e) focus on individual stories. These five points represent only a starting point for the re-envisioning of documentary-as-witness.

While more research is needed, this report concludes that by aspiring to less objectivity, locally-produced, collaborative projects such as Abounaddara's liberate local conflicts from ossified media-narratives and invest the documentary form with a much-needed sense of renewed relevance and power. Creativity fuels all cinema, including documentary, and precisely for this reason documentarians continue to push the boundaries of "acceptable" in the representation of reality. In the Griersonian expository documentary tradition, convention promotes a "pretense to objectivity and lower emotional temperature."[100] In stark contrast, many experimental films intentionally blur the boundaries between reality and representation and deliberately incorporate a higher

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[99] Quoted in Grant and Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary*, 123.
[100] Grant & Sloniowski, eds., *Documenting the Documentary*, 183.

degree of emotional temperature towards the "shared aim of allowing the viewer to look at something in a new or different way."[101] Abounaddara's films incorporate poetic imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to make sense of events as opposed to simply reporting on them. These cinematic tools move documentary representation beyond the pretense of objectivity and more towards subjective intervention in present-day events. The amazing success of Abounaddara's film project in the worst of circumstances shows us that "cinema should allow itself to aim high. It even has a responsibility to do so, to protect the revolution from snipers and from television, which both share a tendency to aim low."[102]

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[101] Grant, *Encyclopedia*, p. 97.
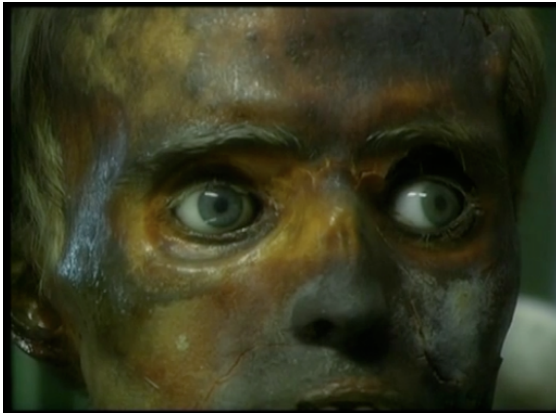[102] Boex, "Interview"

Figures Referenced

Figure 1a

Figure 1b

Figure 1c

Figure 1d

Figure 2a

Figure 2b

Figure 3

My body cut his throat, and my soul wept.

سيرة جندي مجهول – الجزء الثالث The Unknown Soldier - Part Three

from abou naddara PLUS 1 year ago

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6a

من هنا مر جنود الأسد

Soldiers of Assad Were Here
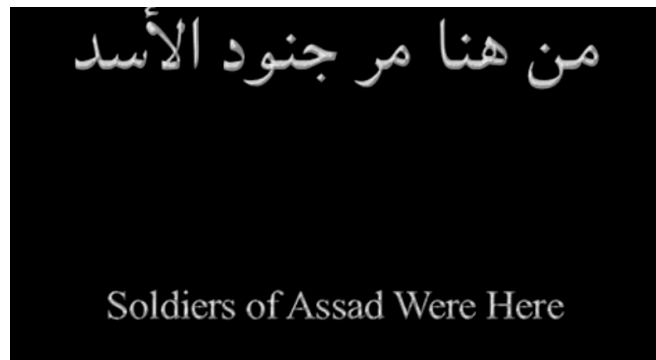
Figure 6b

Figure 7a

Figure 7b

Figure 8a

Figure 8b

على بعد بضعة كيلومترات ...
a few miles away...

Figure 8c

Figure 8d

في 28 كانون الأول 2013 ، اكتشف أطفال كفرنبل
أن الطريق إلى الدولة الإسلامية يمر من فوق ألعابهم .

On December 28th, 2013, the children of Kafranbel
discovered the road to the Islamic State passed over their toys.
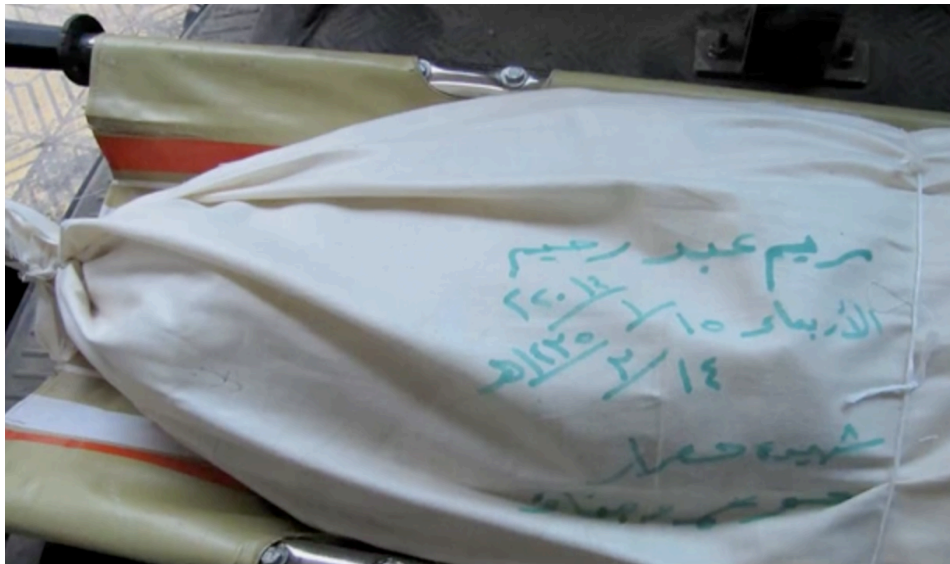
Figure 8e

Figure 9a

Reem Abed Rahim
starved to death on 01/15/2014
in Yarmouk Refugee Camp
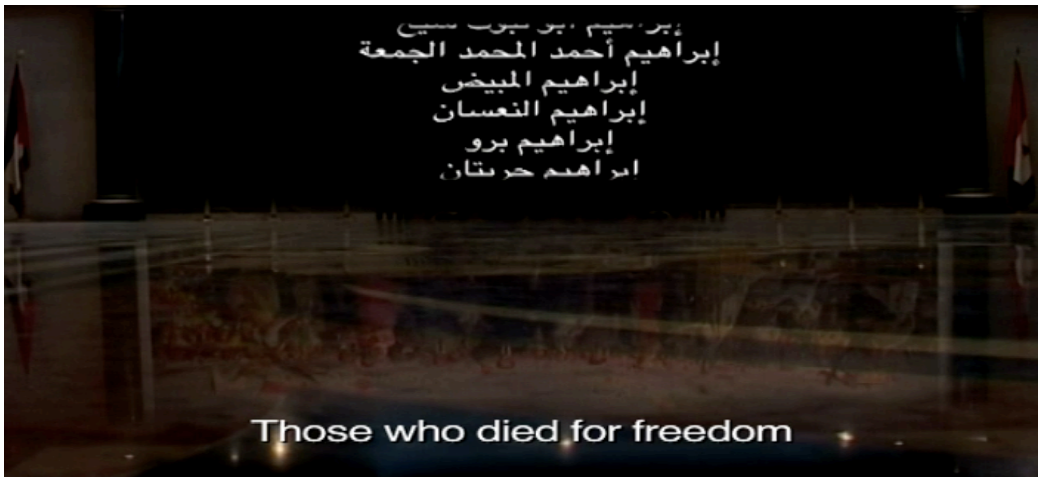besieged by Assad's forces

Figure 9b

Figure 10

Figure 11

Tables: Video Charts

15 Abounaddara Films Analyzed[103]

Title	Date Posted	Length	# of Plays
1. Two Minutes for Syria	09/13/2013	01:26	1,213
2. Syria Today	01/27/2013	00:53	2,676
3. Media Kill	08/07/2012	02:06	380
4. After the Image	09/20/2013	02:45	426
5. Nothing But Light	04/20/2012	03:48	417
6. The Unknown Solider, Part 3	12/07/2012	02:20	990
7. Of God and Dogs	11/26/2013	00:45	11,500+
8. Soliders of Assad Were Here	12/21/2012	00:38	636
9. They're Playing	06/22/2012	01:07	1,106
10. Children of Halfaya	04/26/2013	04:17	786
11. Over the Toys	01/10/2014	01:41	770
12. I will cross tomorrow	01/03/2014	03:53	7,602
13. Starvation	01/17/2014	00:26	5,355
14. The End	09/07/2011	03:03	2,157
15. Apocalypse Here	09/21/2012	02:28	3,492

13 Senate Videos Analyzed

Stated Location	Time-stamp	Date Uploaded
1. Jawbar	01:49 GMT	8/21/2013
2. Eastern Ghuta	03:56 GMT	8/21/2014
3. Duma	09:39 GMT	8/21/2014
4. Darayya	07:03 GMT	8/21/2014
5. Eastern Ghuta (2)	09:06 GMT	8/21/2014
6. Ayn Tarma	02:17 GMT	8/21/2014
7. Kafr Batna	11:50 GMT	8/21/2014
8. Mu'addamiya	13:00 GMT	8/23/2014
9. Mulayhah	07:09 GMT	8/21/2013
10. Kafr Batna	10:41 GMT	8/21/2013
11. Kafr Batna (2)	06:05 GMT	8/21/2013
12. Duma (2)	09:53 GMT	8/21/2013
13. Eastern Ghuta (3)	00:50 GMT	8/21/2013

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[103] This information last updated April 27, 2014.

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