

PART II

ATMOSPHERES OF DOUBT

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06 ON UNCERTAINTY AND THE QUESTION OF JUDGMENT

The proliferation of websites disseminating purported news; the ease with which digital photos can be doctored; the accelerated cycles in which “news” gets circulated, absorbed, and then superseded by the next catastrophe; the tension between rival discourses registering moral outrage from different angles—all play a role in how we apprehend the condition of generalized uncertainty that is evolving and metastasizing throughout the networked world today. And although it is easy to point to instances of direct manipulation, there are also less overtly directed forms of uncertainty and doubt—ones that come into circulation acephalously, independent of propagandistic strategy. Competing images, rumors, and conspiracy theories, alongside the divisive testimony of “eyewitnesses” regarding real or alleged events, make for a consequential if sometimes unwitting collusion between commercial media outlets and political regimes.

This chapter takes the example of war-torn Syria as a window into our contemporary world of epistemic murk. In Syria, we see the media’s demand for sensational content driving both regime supporters and well-meaning citizen-journalists from the opposition to massage (if not manufacture) purported evidence of all kinds, leaving Syrians at home as well as observers abroad doubting the validity of what otherwise might be regarded as authoritative news reports or the claims of international fact-finding missions. We also see in the post-March 2011 example of Syria that such conditions of generalized uncertainty significantly aided the frayed state’s counterinsurgency campaign—not so much by helping it maintain credibility in its own version of events as by casting doubt on all

reporting, enabling the regime to seize critical advantage in an oversaturated high-speed information environment.

My argument about ideology and its relation to judgment bears on the concerns of this volume in the following three ways. First, and this is a lesson that citizen-activists learned at tremendous cost: too much information can generate the very uncertainty that circulating it is intended to allay. Over the course of the uprising, the Syrian state's ideological apparatus, no longer able to brand the regime as a kinder, gentler version of autocracy, learned how to use conditions of fear and insecurity to counter human-rights activists' and citizen-journalists' attempts to document "the truth." By disseminating its own claims and counterclaims, and by exploiting the political inexperience of the fractious opposition, the regime has not always been able to establish its own authority over the facts, but it has been repeatedly successful in sowing doubt among a variety of possible addressees regarding the nature of evidence and the credibility of oppositional narratives.

Second, as scholars of American politics have pointed out, information overload and the uncertainty it generates may induce people to seek out opinions reaffirming their own; and this tendency toward balkanization can lead to polarization (see, for example, Sunstein 2001, 11–21). Internet users (taking an oft-used, contemporary example) tend to isolate themselves into echo chambers, relishing the sound of stories they are telling themselves anyway—and the stories they tell themselves about the stories they tell themselves. The atmosphere of uncertainty cultivated by an excess of information can create siloed publics, where the confinement of debate within narrow communities of argument allows interlocutors to take pleasure in exclusively encountering views that confirm their own.¹

Third is a possibility that the Syrian conflict illuminates especially well: conditions of generalized uncertainty make it easy for people to find alibis for avoiding commitment to judgment at all. In circumstances of information oversaturation, and perhaps particularly when feelings of present danger extrude a "remainder of surplus threat" (borrowing Brian Massumi's formulation), uncertainty can provide a potent rationale for inaction in situations where action might otherwise have seemed morally incumbent (Massumi 2010, 60). Over the course of the intensifying violence of the Syrian uprising, reasons for hunkering down and staying safe overwhelmed. But at the beginning, this recourse to nonjudgment had consequences. It put what came to be referred to as the "gray people" (*al-ramadiyyin*)—moderates, or those in the "silent middle"—at odds with

activists and ultimately with the project of political transformation. An atmospherics of doubt nurtured a self-satisfied ambivalence, which justified political paralysis and withdrawal. This political resignation mattered in the early years of Syria's neoliberal autocracy, as I have noted elsewhere (see Wedeen 2019, especially chapters one and two). In the context of outright protest, the professional, managerial elite's silence in particular helped the regime navigate the changing circumstances of its rule.

As the product of novel technologies of information dissemination and the not-new circumstances of war, this generalized uncertainty exists in the Syrian context alongside certainties that are well entrenched—sometimes cleaving along demographic lines and sometimes registering something more on the order of a mood or position within a single person. My effort here is to move beyond a commentary on the paradoxical effects of the so-called digital revolution by demonstrating how the opening in Syria to reflexive questioning, the supposed hallmark of the liberal public sphere which defined experiences of civic solidarity at the beginning of the uprising, got shut down as a form of revolutionary mobilization.² Syrian activists were under no illusions as to whether the regime itself was liberal, and they were adept readers of the structuring guidelines for public speech and action that characterize autocratic rule. A great many Syrians did, however, share the expectation that their own work would help bring into being a world of public debate and reflection. This chapter is about those expectations and how they were stoked and then extinguished, managed and then deferred—or in some cases recalibrated in exile. It is also more generally about the logics of autocratic retrenchment and how they converge with market mechanisms of social control.

In contrast to one common conception of authoritarianism, in which it is the withholding of information that enables domination, Syria exemplifies a regime exploiting an excess of information and accelerated conditions of dissemination for authoritarian political gain.³ But the Syrian case does more than that. It invites a renewed exploration of the always fragile relation between truth and politics, exposing in particular how the specter of immediate danger works when danger has, in fact, become immediate. By way of getting at these matters, I want to unpack two exemplary moments. The first involves an extended controversy about who might have been responsible for the murder of a prominent local singer, whose mutilated body had been left on the bank of the Orontes River in the city of Hama, presumably as a warning to activists—unless, that is, the victim was someone else entirely, or, as was conceivable at one point

in the twisting tale, no one had been murdered at all. The story marks an important turn in the uprising, when it became apparent that activist expressions of countrywide solidarity, outrage, and creativity were starting to encourage forms of rhetorical overreach, exaggeration, a willingness to rush to judgment, and people's eagerness to express clear political positions based on the murkiest of facts.

The second moment is the seemingly incommensurable example of the chemical weapons attack in eastern al-Ghouta in August of 2013, a devastating event in which the "evidence" seemed to point in different directions, stirring a global debate, with politicians, activists, and scientists all weighing in on what might actually have happened and who was to be held accountable. These conflicting accounts in the Western press also circulated in Syria, where they were often translated into Arabic or excerpted in Arabic on Twitter and Facebook. At the same time, local eyewitness accounts, rumors, and images appearing on Arabic websites were being translated into English and circulated accordingly. The effect was to polarize Syrians whose positions were already firm, even while intensifying uncertainty for others less sure of their commitments. Bringing these two examples together allows us to see in events local and world historical the ongoing speculative reproduction of an affective and epistemic insecurity, the operation of which conduced to favor the beleaguered Asad regime's counterinsurgency project—contributing substantively to its survival.

Throughout, the chapter is informed by the thinking of Hannah Arendt and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the closing pages, I briefly engage with the work of the Syrian collective Abounaddara, whose work attempts to unsettle the conventions of documentary representation; I put its cultural production into conversation with Arendt and Wittgenstein, drawing out mutual points of relevance for our understanding of politics. These artistic efforts bypass the impasse produced by an intensified atmospherics of doubt. In an overly saturated information environment, no preponderance of evidence becomes credible enough to convince those whose minds are already made up that an alternative account might be the right one. Nor does more or better information serve to allay the ambivalence of those in the "gray area," whose ideological investments become framed by forms of nonjudgment encapsulated by the famous phrase of disavowal "I know very well, yet nevertheless . . ." ²⁴ By producing works that are orthogonal to expectations associated with conventional documentary film, artists such as these acknowledge uncertainty without succumbing to political

paralysis—allowing ambiguity, contingency, and competing views to thrive, and thereby reopening possibilities for political judgment—for the considered reflection in and ongoing assessment of complex political circumstances.

ATMOSPHERICS OF DOUBT

In the early days of the uprising, a new anti-Asad song became a political phenomenon, widely recorded on cell phones and uploaded on YouTube. Marked by a catchy rhythm, the song's simple rhyming lyrics enjoined Syria's president to step down and leave the country. Stanzas opened and closed with the repeated chorus "Go on, leave, O Bashar" (*Yalla irhal ya Bashshar*), while the song zeroed in on familiar allegations of first-family corruption. Exhilarating in its irreverence and leveling crude insults directly at Bashar, Bashar's notoriously brutal brother, and his venal cousin, the song was at once angry and joyful, challenging the self-evidence of tyranny while paying homage to lives lost. By performing a newfound sense of solidarity, the lyrics invited popular participation, which came in the form of extemporaneous add-ons expanding and adapting the song—giving license to each singer, writer, and listener to act in concert with the acoustics of revolutionary change. The proliferating stanzas surpassed the abstractions of typical, more elitist political songs, not only perpetuating defiance but working to air publicly what had hitherto been predominantly private grievances (see Abdo 2013).

Initially, it was widely thought that the song's original singer had been one Ibrahim Qashush (or Qashoush), a firefighter in Hama, who was said to perform occasionally with another local, 'Abd al-Rahman Farhud, or as he was more popularly known, Rahmani (or sometimes Rahmuni). On July 4, 2011, Qashush reportedly turned up dead, his corpse left on the bank of the Orontes River with the larynx carved out. Many understandably interpreted the murder in terms of the crude symbolism, presumed at the time to have been the work of regime thugs who had punished the subversive singer in the most graphic way possible.

In making these assumptions, people were probably wrong. First of all, the singer of the song was most likely Rahmani, not Qashush; and Qashush, far from being a beloved singer of subversive tunes, may have been a police informant. In (likely) being mistaken about who Qashush was and what role he may have played in the events in question, a multitude

of Facebook postings, featuring new songs and videos made after his supposed demise, ended up paying tribute to a possible double-crosser, whose body it may or may not have been that was found, missing its larynx, by the side of the river. Moreover, as suspicions spread that Qashush was guilty of traitorous complicity, the matter of whether responsibility for the mutilated corpse indeed lay with regime thugs was also cast into doubt. Stories quickly emerged claiming that vigilante activists had executed Qashush (or someone else) for collaboration.⁵ Finally, as if scripted, sightings of Qashush surfaced in 2013, accompanied by articles and Facebook photos attesting to his continued well-being in exile, and culminating in a GQ article in 2016. This piece, reported a few days later in Arabic, purported to reveal that the “real singer” was not Qashush but Rahmani—the latter still alive and well in Spain. The article stated that Qashush had, in fact, been slain on the bank of the Orontes River, and that he had been a guard (not a firefighter) at the fire station. He was not the singer of revolutionary songs or, for that matter, of any songs at all (Harkin 2016).⁶ The article dealt with issues ranging from the circulation of rumors to sins of omission (by both Rahmani and opposition outlets); to an effort by the late Anthony Shadid of the *New York Times* to report the factual truths; and tellingly, to the failure of Shadid’s story to “stick” in the context of the “avalanche of new media propaganda.” The Qashush story thus exemplifies a conflict in which truth claims, rather than accumulating into a collection of established facts, recall something more like a shifting kaleidoscope of putative alternatives—registering both the uprising’s complexities and the multiple efforts to paper over them.⁷

The regime not only helped produce these conditions of uncertainty—for example, by barring professional journalists from entering the country—but also repeatedly capitalized on them, seizing on moments of exaggeration and misrepresentation to discredit opposition positions, polarize communities of argument, and disorient worlds in which truth claims might have led to action. That is, the regime’s advantage lay not in its exercise of strict control over an ideological state apparatus but in not having to be believable in order to be powerful. From the inception of the uprising, the burden of proof lay on activists taking the moral high ground, in calling for an end to tyranny and advocating for dignity and a civil state. It fell to citizen-journalists to provide a discursive corrective to autocratic dissembling, whether in the blatantly fictitious terms reminiscent of the cult of personality surrounding Bashar’s father, Hafiz al-Asad,

or in the subtler forms of market-oriented spin characterizing the urbane élan of Bashar and the glamorous first lady.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1972) teaches us that “the truth of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frames of reference. When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual support*” (12e, para. 83, emphases in original). What we have seen in Syria is the collapse of these frames of reference and, at the same time, the annihilation of truth in Wittgenstein’s sense—not the truth of philosophical a priori principles but the political truth of empirical propositions, by which I mean what counts, for purposes of politics and political discourse, as fact. Wittgenstein’s insistence that what allows our beliefs to make sense is the relational system in which they are embedded points to the difficulty that was involved in judging evidence or ascertaining the nature of truth-claims circulating in Syria’s “media wars” since the uprising began in March 2011. In this respect, the story of Qashush is more than an isolated incident of mistaken identity. The mystery about who might have murdered a well-known singer or indeed whether he was a well-known singer or even dead, his contradictory deployment as a symbol of oppositional courage and regime brutality, and then later as a symbol of regime co-optation and opposition revenge—all this is but a single complex example, both symptomatic of and contributing to an entire economy of uncertainty that works to dilute moral outrage among addressees who otherwise might be available for political activation. This economy of uncertainty causes what would be political judgments to come unmoored from the conceptual systems in which they are situated.

In this context, the curious lack of follow-up articles and interest by opposition activists initially so invested in the song and in the purported singer’s purported murder could be read ungenerously as indicating a cover-up of journalistic failings. Or it could be seen as indicative of reading and writing habits cultivated in conditions of high-speed eventfulness and information overload. But this silence relative to the commotion caused by the initial discovery of the corpse by the river also speaks to a collective disappointment born from the uprising’s ongoing-ness, the forms of depredation that have squelched revolutionary exhilaration. The song had originally beckoned ordinary people to take part in something momentous, to participate in events charged with the embrace of political

responsibility, to sing what they meant. New forms of sociality made possible in the moment, the resonances embodied in the musical invitation to action, and the fleeting sense of political promise worked together to summon into being what Kathleen Stewart (2007, 20) in a different context calls “a solid ephemerality,” a sense of something graspable, temporary, promising—a potential something.⁸ This potentiality is precisely what had dissipated even before questions of mistaken identity or sightings of a healthy Qashush made their lackluster appearance. The revolutionary idea of Qashush had already “been assassinated,” as one activist put it, taken down not only in conditions of uncertainty but, in part, by them.⁹

POLITICAL IMPASSE

The chemical weapons attack on August 21, 2013, in eastern al-Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus was a devastating event. My purpose in revisiting the incident here is to extend our exploration of the work uncertainty does by looking at a particularly dramatic and painful case in which the whirl of excessive information called into question prevailing relational systems and their frames of reference. A pared-down timeline of the attack looks like this: In the early morning of August 21, Syrians in the area began to report mysterious deaths. Circulating on social media were stories of children whose faces had turned blue, who were foaming at the mouth, or who had stopped breathing; entire families being discovered dead; and still other civilians suddenly falling ill, with eyewitness accounts proliferating as the day went on. On August 24, Doctors without Borders confirmed that three days earlier, on August 21, staff had observed at least 355 deaths from “neurotoxic symptoms” at three medical centers in eastern Damascus. On August 25, regime forces agreed to a cease-fire to allow inspectors from the United Nations (already in Syria examining cases of an earlier alleged use of chemical weapons) to conduct on-site investigations; these took place during a series of five-hour periods from August 26 to 29.¹⁰

It was during this period of cease-fires that US Secretary of State John Kerry issued a statement seeming to commit the country to some form of direct military intervention against the Asad regime, which in Kerry’s narrative was the undoubted perpetrator of the atrocity. Unsurprisingly, given recent instances of high-level US officials lying to the American public and in testimony before the UN Security Council, Kerry’s statement

would itself generate doubts and speculation about cynical US motivations. It was in attempting to forfend just such a reaction that Kerry described his certainty about the regime's responsibility as "grounded in facts," but "informed by conscience and guided by common sense." He also alluded to classified information that would settle the matter, once and for all, which he promised would be revealed in due time (see Kerry 2013). This statement was translated into Arabic and circulated widely through multiple media outlets within Syria and across the Middle East. Four different kinds of warrants—the factual, the moral, the *sensus communis*, and the classified—converged to produce what Kerry claimed was "undeniable" evidence. But as time wore on, Kerry's failure to produce decisive proof generated the very conditions of deniability that his assertions of incontrovertibility sought to discount.

Despite Kerry's insistence on certainty, or perhaps in some instances because of it, what was supposedly "already clear to the world" became increasingly difficult to discern amid the inundation of claims and counterclaims prompted by the secretary of state's statement. And as more information emerged, the more it seemed to generate uncertainty both in and outside Syria. Many reports basically confirmed Kerry's allegations—citing eyewitness accounts, relying on the circulation of information and images on social media sites, and producing a plethora of articles translated from Arabic into English and vice versa.¹¹ Other reports attempted to complexify what counted as the Syrian regime. An example here would be Phil Sands's (2013) article in the Abu Dhabi daily *The National*, claiming the following:

There were indications that some of the army officers involved had tried to distance themselves from what happened, and insisted they were not told the rockets they were firing were loaded with toxins. "We have heard from people close to the regime that the chemical missiles were handed out a few hours before the attacks," said a source from a well-connected family, with contacts both with the opposition and with regime loyalists. "They didn't come from the Ministry of Defence but from air force intelligence, under orders from Hafez Makhoul [a relative of President Asad's]. The army officers are saying they did not know there were chemical weapons. Even some of the people transporting them are saying they had no idea what was in the rockets—they thought they were conventional explosives."

Barely a week later, however, a counternarrative began to emerge, one that placed ultimate accountability with the opposition.¹² As ‘Adnan ‘Ali in the opposition-oriented magazine *Al-Araby Al-Jadid* pointed out in a 2016 article looking back on the massacre, the regime typically operates in ways consonant with such a dynamic: it first denies that anything has happened; then, when news stories attesting to the occurrence of an event achieve a certain prominence, it fabricates evidence and manipulates images to blame the opposition for what has occurred (Ali 2016). Although early reports accusing the opposition of the chemical attack lacked the more obvious authority or credibility of sources like the ones holding the regime to account, they nevertheless became increasingly susceptible to uptake. These latter reports were less a way of anchoring an alternative certainty than of questioning the empirical propositions on which existing frames of reference relied. Some expressed uncertainty about who was behind the attacks; others engaged in heated exchanges of polarized beliefs; and still others justified inaction or suspended judgment on the grounds that the truth of what happened was impossible to know.¹³

The story took a technical turn on September 4, 2013, with the publication of an article in the comparatively reputable (if sometimes wrong) *New York Times*. Entitled “Rockets in Syrian Attack Carried Large Payload of Gas, Experts Say,” the report drew on a study by Richard M. Lloyd, an “expert in warhead design,” and Theodore A. Postol, a physics professor at MIT (Broad 2013). The study promised a scientific resolution of the accountability question by addressing a previously unnoted problem at the heart of the investigation: How could what were initially thought to be rockets with minimal carrying capacity deliver enough gas to kill so many people over such a large area? Basing their analysis on photographs publicly available on the internet, Lloyd and Postol concluded that the munition in question was designed to carry “about 50 liters (13 gallons), not the one or two liters (about half a gallon) of nerve agent that some weapons experts had previously estimated.”¹⁴ The question of the quantity of gas involved in the attack was significant because it raised technical issues about prevailing US government assertions of clear-cut culpability. Lloyd claimed that the opposition, not just the regime, had the capacity to manufacture the rockets used, while admitting that it remained unclear (at the time) how the rebels might have acquired that much nerve agent (again, as reported by William J. Broad in the *Times*). Other experts interviewed were explicit about their doubts that the opposition could have acquired so much gas, in effect advocating on behalf of the opposition

while producing an even greater sense of uncertainty that largely benefited the regime (Broad 2013).

Subsequently, Lloyd and Postol published a second report, this time casting doubt on UN and US calculations of rocket trajectories, rather than carrying capacity, and further generating skepticism about the regime's role in the attack. Based on photographs of the remains of what appears to have been the wreckage of rockets that had delivered the toxic nerve gas to al-Ghouta on August 21, Lloyd and Postol now argued that the rockets could not have been launched from regime-held territory, because from that distance they could not have reached the target. All these findings appeared also in Arabic translation. As C. J. Chivers (2013) of the *New York Times* wrote in a sober update on December 28, "The new analysis [of Postol and Lloyd] could point to particular Syrian military units involved, or be used by defenders of the Syrian government and those suspicious of the United States' claims to try to shift blame toward rebels."

Memorable among those participating in what became a discursive jostling with high-stakes consequences bearing on foreign direct military intervention, and thus on regime survival, was the Syrian presidential spokesperson Bouthaina Sha'ban. In a statement given on September 4 to Sky News (2013; in English and then reiterated on many Arabic-language sites), Sha'ban held the opposition responsible for the attack: "They kidnapped children and men from the villages of Lattakia and they brought them here, put them in one place, and used chemical weapons against them. That's the story that the villagers in these villages know."

In this narrative, the ones killed were, by implication, 'Alawis from areas supportive of the regime, not the opposition. At the cost of concocting a narrative involving the transport of pro-regime victims to opposition territory, a five-hour bus trip away from home, Sha'ban accounted for what would seem to be the central problem the regime had in telling its story: Why opposition forces would victimize civilians in territories they controlled. Especially interesting in our context, however, is how Sha'ban—who had just offered "the villagers in these villages know" as definitive evidence for her claims—concluded: "But why don't you leave it to the UN Commission to investigate, to analyze?" Or again, "Western countries are always very scientific, they go by the law, they investigate. Why when it comes to something concerning our countries, they say 'it is believed that the Syrian government used chemical weapons'? Why don't you wait for the specific, scientific results of a neutral UN committee that is investigating?" (Sky News 2013).

The incoherence of her appeals and the sheer outlandishness of the story nevertheless produced its own rejoinders, including reports noting that the regime's kidnapping scenario would have required a large caravan of buses passing unhindered and unnoticed through a large number of enemy checkpoints. In other words, the story could be simultaneously dismissed and addressed, with each new interpretation producing its own extended labor of fact-checking efforts, which themselves contributed to the work uncertainty does in turning what could be the object of ethical-political judgments into confusion, with implications for global actors as well.

One more aspect of Sha'ban's preposterous statement is worthy of note: namely, her appeal to science. And here, too, science worked less to establish truth (or falsify fallacious claims) than to convert what might have been provisionally consensual knowledge into entrenched political conviction, including the conviction that we can never know what happened. The scientific democratization of expression personified by internet activists such as the famous opposition-oriented Eliot Higgins (who previously wrote under the pseudonym Brown Moses) operated alongside the views of experts like Lloyd and Postol whose MIT-authorized science backgrounds were also tarnished by a history of questionable speculations. And in this case, everyone was operating in a world saturated by conflicting claims. These were not conspiracy theories of the caliber that Sha'ban and others brought to the fore, but their very existence as disagreements enabled those whose minds had been made up in advance of circulating evidence, which was itself confusing, to stay that way.¹⁵

US President Barack Obama's prime-time speech on September 10, 2013, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's *New York Times* op-ed the following day looked like a matched-set throwback to Cold War politics, in which political posturing trumped all curiosity. Facts, already hard to adjudicate, became pared down to an acknowledgment that something bad had happened—a chemical attack—while attributions of responsibility broke along classic political fault lines, with Obama assuring the American people that the Syrian regime was behind the attack and Putin (2013) recommending caution by placing the blame on the opposition: "No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists. Reports that militants are preparing another attack—this time against Israel—cannot be ignored." Putin's

invocation of Israel may have been a cynical attempt to curry favor with American readers, given their particular Middle Eastern commitments and anxieties. More interestingly, his closing rhetorical gambit provided a more plausible motive than Sha‘ban’s for why the rebels, if they were the ones accountable, had timed the attack when they did. In doing so, he demonstrated how privileged access to state knowledge (even when the specific knowledge of a case does not exist or is not supportive of the claims being made) can be used to convert uncertainty into an anxiety that then reproduces another set of certainties—that is, these militants must not be supported.

The UN’s own authority as a fact-finding team and its careful language regarding what it could and could not ascertain was undercut by past mistakes. Its reputation as a partial international body, as opposed to an objective arbiter of truth claims, produced doubts about its conclusions—however tenuous and carefully worded they might have been. And in some cases, appeals to science and skepticism about the UN’s neutrality could converge, as in MIT researcher Subrata Ghoshroy’s (2013) September 26 analysis, “Serious Questions about the Integrity of the UN Report.” Ghoshroy charged that there had been “communication between the UN team and the analysts outside, which prejudiced the UN’s report.” That report supposedly confirmed various aspects of the divergent analyses by Lloyd and Postol and by Higgins. Additional expert assessments were released after the end of the UN inspection but before the publication of the UN’s report, suggesting some sort of leak. Ghoshroy continued, “Secretary of State John Kerry dismissed the UN inspectors as irrelevant because they would not bring to light any new information that the US did not already know. He was right. The purpose of my analysis is not to prove or disprove anything. The sole purpose is to raise questions about the integrity of the UN team’s report. Decisions on war and peace depend on it.” Ghoshroy also accused Higgins of “interspersing” photographs and video from another area where a chemical attack had occurred with images of the massacre in al-Ghouta, not to demonstrate that the same sorts of munitions were used in both cases but to deliberately “mislead” the reader.¹⁶

The December appearance of Seymour Hersh’s “Whose Sarin?” in the *London Review of Books* raised additional doubts. In this investigative report counteracting Obama administration claims, Hersh (2013) contended that the president “failed to acknowledge something known to the US intelligence community: that the Syrian army is not the only party in the country’s civil war with access to sarin, the nerve agent that a UN

study concluded—without assessing responsibility—had been used in the rocket attack.” Faulting various studies circulating online and through conventional news channels, Hersh maintained that it was known that the opposition force and Al-Qa’ida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra had access to the necessary ingredients to make sarin and had demonstrated interest in using it. In a follow-up piece published in April 2014, Hersh went further, suggesting that Turkey was in fact behind the al-Ghouta attacks. These claims then showed up in Arabic-language media and made up the bulk of what a reader received when she Googled in Arabic (in Chicago but also Beirut), “Who is responsible for the Ghouta chemical weapons attack?”¹⁷ This remained the case until April 2017, when arguably, the attack on Khan Sheikhoun (Khan Shaykhun), the most devastating one since 2013, supplanted queries about responsibility for the earlier massacre. And importantly, a similar logic of regime denial characterized this attack—sowing doubts about the timing of chemical spread, alleging doctored images of damage, and shifting ultimate responsibility to the opposition by claiming that the devastation was not caused by an “air launched chemical attack.”¹⁸ Aided by its Russian allies claiming that the deadly chemicals were dispersed as a consequence of a preemptive strike on a munitions factory controlled by the opposition group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra), the regime could reproduce ambivalence among those who remained uncertain about the murky facts while stoking loyalist claims. Ardent supporters, like the official Russian statements, came to justify the attack on the grounds that the opposition would have otherwise used these weapons against innocent civilians. Such reliance on a form of hypothetical, anticipatory reasoning to explain state violence had been a strategy of regime management from the start.¹⁹

Moreover, the still popular question of who bore responsibility for these attacks, not to mention so many others like them, is made to order for conspiracy theorists, who view seemingly disparate happenings as connected, as intentional products of a force whose interests are ultimately served by and organized through another’s victimization or ruin. And they are not always wrong, as this volume stresses. Hersh’s investigation into the 2013 attack was potent because it was plausible (at least to some). So, too, were reports suggesting that Hersh had been hoodwinked by his contacts in the Pentagon—to help avoid direct military intervention or to limit the US mission to eliminate the Islamic State (Saliha 2014). In struc-

turing arguments in terms of what some scholars have termed a “paranoid” functionalism that posits effects as the product of purpose,²⁰ the question as to who was responsible for the chemical weapons attack in al-Ghouta was easily harnessed to a familiar regime narrative of national vulnerability and threat—in which the “national” becomes, once again, coterminous with regime-oriented.

Questions of “who is behind” a specific act need not reduce to a conspiratorial narrative, of course. For others, the very posing of the question conveyed a sense of collaborative unknowability in which doubt could modulate affective registers like outrage and disgust, along with the political judgments that might ensue. Phrasing like the following was typical: “The chemical weapons attack was sickening. But who was responsible? Was the regime really worse than the opposition? They were both awful, of course.” The regime and opposition groups could plausibly deny responsibility—at least for those open to skepticism. It was not simply that camps were polarized, with staunch loyalists and people in the “gray area” following regime-oriented sites and tracking investigative reports such as Hersh’s, while official opposition sources called for US intervention because the regime clearly had “crossed [Obama’s] red line.” As young people identified with the uprising became increasingly disillusioned by both regime and opposition, as the impossibility of adjudicating truth claims came to apply to virtually continuous acts of unspeakable cruelty, some in exile sought to redefine and radicalize the terms of debate, conceding to a situation in which facts were especially vulnerable and everyone might lie.

A surplus of information, even better information, it turned out, did not necessarily lead to truth. Circulating truth claims were vulnerable to counterspin from the get-go, generating difficulties of adjudication that augured poorly for the establishment of anything like a democratic or revolutionary consensus. A combination of autocratic politics, outside intervention, and high-speed news dissemination had worked to cultivate forms of uncertainty that were unlikely to be resolved by any amount of reporting conducted in accordance with standards of journalistic evidence suitable for political deliberation. In conditions of violence and discursive disorientation, the very conceptual projects of verifiability, eyewitness reporting, and objectivity had themselves become grist for the mill. And meanwhile, more people had died—notwithstanding the technical debates and political posturing of all involved.

FROM IMPASSE TO BYPASS: MAKING OPENINGS

The loss of what Arendt in various writings calls “a common world” is dramatized in Syria by the relentless soul-crushing violence, but it is also characterized by an atmospherics of doubt in which recourse is made to forms of certainty that polarize some people based on what they think they already know while providing others with the grounds for disengagement and disavowal—in that they know that they do not know. Such a situation profoundly complicates possibilities for political judgment. We see in Syria today the constellation of mutually related rules, propositions, experiences, techniques of reasoning, everyday practices, and mental images through which we are “trained” to judge—in Wittgenstein’s sense—having been undermined by a world in which information is paradoxically both incomplete and overwhelming.

This is not simply von Clausewitz’s proverbial “fog of war,” where military commanders know exactly what they would say given perfect information, which is made impossible by the fog. Rather, this is a condition in which what is lost is faith in the efficacy of what until then had been understood as valid informational currency. As Arendt (2006a, 227) acknowledges in her rich essay “Truth and Politics,” the “politically most relevant truths are factual”—and they are, as Linda Zerilli (2016, 135) underscores, also the most easily imperiled, the most vulnerable to “human mendacity” and to the “pursuit of [narrow] political interests.” Politics is a domain of plural contingent opinions, argues Arendt, where the understanding of freedom is rooted in an appreciation of the human capacity for speech and other kinds of action. Intriguingly, even lying for Arendt is expressive of a kind of freedom, although it cannot be the freedom of an affirmative politics; for prerequisite to the political in a salutary sense is a contingent, open-to-revision factual truth-telling that helps establish a common world.²¹ We have already seen from Wittgenstein how such a world is made up of frames of reference that are subject to collapse. Some Syrian filmmakers share this appreciation, showing us the death of politics that occurs when a common world in formation is crushed by dissimulation and violence.

The work of the anonymous film collective Abounaddara, made up of “self-taught and volunteer filmmakers” engaged in “emergency cinema,” likewise suggests that when the conventions of the documentary are challenged, something radical or at least out of the ordinary might

happen in their stead.²² For the most part, the collective's short films hint at prospects that are left vaguely defined, gesturing toward experiences of self-assertion as well as of self-dissolution and unpredictability, offering accounts of events or situations in which there may be room for reclaiming judgment as a political activity.

One powerful example is *The Trajectory of an Unknown Soldier* (Abounaddara 2012), a four-part series of two- to three-minute films chronicling the evolution of a soldier fighting for the opposition—his decomposition in the face of gruesome wartime intensities and his ultimate struggle (in part 4) to recalibrate his relation to the world. Filmed with the soldier always in silhouette, the visual in-shadow effect not only protects his anonymity but underscores, like a photograph's negative, how light reveals darkness and darkness, light. The clanging of unseen pots and pans contributes to a low-key, ambient ordinariness, the sound an invitation to reinhabit the familiar in marked contrast to the soldier's story of violence and, until part 4, despair. Part 1 establishes the soldier's first realization that he is capable of killing. Faced with the need to take another's life, he is scared, but he feels that he has no choice. That refrain—that he has no choice—provides the central animating theme of this short, a testimony to judgment's suspension, or at least compromise; to the simultaneous recognition and evasion of responsibility; to an emotional catastrophe that leaves the social fabric torn. He has to protect his family. He knows it is wrong to kill. But he has no choice. He fears God but he has no choice. The regime has left him with no choice.

Part 2 describes his experience entering a home and finding children who had been lying dead for some days. There is no obvious cause of death. The soldiers were looking for food and water and just happened into the dwelling. In describing his search through the house, he bears witness to a mother's love for the son she "holds against her"—both dead. He tells us that the buildings behind the house, where he and others had been fighting, were besieged by the regime army, and he cries as he recalls the terrifying experience, part of a relentless nightmare in Syria's central city of Homs. It is a war that is both disorienting and suffocating. The remaining inhabitants of that embattled area were "as afraid of us as they were of the Syrian [regime] army," he admits, wiping tears from his eyes and noting how "truly frightening" it was. Residents could not open a window for fear of being shot; there was literally and figuratively "no breathing allowed."

In part 3, the soldier has become self-consciously "dissociated" or "split" (his word, *infisam* means both in Arabic) from himself. Here he recounts

killing “someone” by cutting the person’s throat. In the soldier’s retrospective lamentation, he notes that while his body slaughtered the victim, his soul was crying. Now he can scarcely imagine himself having done it. No level of resentment or desire for revenge can make that “legitimately right.” The filmic strategy is to narrate the dissociation while at the same time diagnosing it as such, to suture the diegetic and the extradiegetic in an effort to repair cinematically what cannot be healed practically. Politically, the soldier begins by saying that he does not want to be like the other soldiers in the Free Syrian Army, an opposition military force. But then he confesses that he has indeed acted like them. This acting of the body in violation of the soul suggests a specific horror of wartime, an experience of splitting in which an otherwise moral self is cleaved from his orienting ethical world. His anonymity, like that of the victims he encounters, or the ones he kills—or Abounaddara’s insistence on its anonymity as a collective, for that matter—suggests a kind of national substitutability, in which each soldier or victim is both fungible and exemplary, as is each director. This gesture of interchangeability also suggests an interpretive generosity in which the soldier appeals to multiple audiences, perhaps including regime soldiers themselves.

Part 4 shows the haunted soldier’s effort to regain a sense of the world that might make politics possible again. He prays to God for a secular state, the seeming contradiction not really one at all but rather an assertion of the right to private piety and a public “civil state.” He identifies himself as Sunni but champions a multisectarian Syria, claiming half-jokingly even to like “Christians more than Muslims.” He is careful, when speaking of ‘Alawis, to qualify his willingness to generalize by underscoring that it is only “some” ‘Alawis that oppress. And he treats as ludicrously unpatriotic the idea that Syria would be “dismembered,” carved up into sectarian enclaves. In short, he recovers himself by imagining politics that make good on the regime’s vision of national integration and multisectarian accommodation—indulging in the hope that despite the bloodshed, or perhaps because of all the sacrifice, dictatorship can be, indeed must be, replaced with a liberal, tolerant, Asad-free nation-state. This hope is not offered in the register of the uprising’s early days of exhilaration. The soldier is deflated, but not fully destroyed. And in his worries and wishes for Syria’s future, there is something tentative and stale, exhausted.

But not only that. There is also an acknowledgment that any politics going forward will necessarily involve mutual engagement between

those who fought for the regime and those who fought for the opposition. Recorded in 2012, the soldier's address is shockingly early, for members of the opposition tended not to register criticisms of their own actions until 2014–15. That prescience is part of what makes the soldier's gesture of self-scrutiny so important. And although, like the rest of the Abounaddara corpus, its circulation was initially limited—the audience made up mainly of western and Syrian intellectual types sharing an interest in activism and film—the shorts live on, accessible on Vimeo to anyone who wants to watch and reflect. In making unfashionable judgments about the conflict, the soldier and the filmmakers are modeling interpretive generosity for adversarial counterparts (among activists and regime soldiers) in the apparent hope of inducing reciprocity. Adumbrated in this effort at reciprocity is an aspect of what Arendt (2006a, 237) called “representative thinking,” to be myself in a place where I am not.²³ This is a call to a kind of political judgment that is based neither on an overidentification with suffering others nor on conformity to a popular position. It is an instance—and there are so many—of creative estrangement that operates inside ideology but at a distance, opening up imaginative possibilities for reclaiming some kind of ameliorative agency in the world.

In distinction to official opposition and regime proponents alike, with their polarizing answers always at the ready, the collective embraces the ambiguity of the situation—extending it even to questions of what the national community might look like, given what the war has done to what could conceivably be Syria. In doing so, Abounaddara gives up on a certain kind of knowing, without giving up on judgment and political intervention as such.²⁴ Whereas both the regime and the multiple oppositions demand that people take sides for or against, the collective's commitment to complexity is not the same as the frame-breaking uncertainty that provides an alibi for nonjudgment. On the contrary, the recognition of the fragility of subject positions allows viewers to embrace a temporal lag between perception and action without abandoning the latter, to counter the temptations of ideological disavowal, to be humble and befuddled without being abject—an invitation to revitalize judgment with the full albeit paradoxical knowledge that nothing is ever fully known.

CONCLUSION

The forms of discursive oversaturation described in this chapter come from what I have called the temporality of “high-speed eventfulness,” or the sheer velocity with which information is transmitted and apprehended in the internet age. The unceasing whirl of (over)information makes it easy for people to move on to something new the instant a favored narrative fails. The Ibrahim Qashush controversy brings into bold relief the conundrums for judgment posed by these new conditions, showing how the Syrian regime’s media manipulations—a shorthand here for both direct propaganda efforts and an ability to exploit issues put into circulation by others (whether Russian diplomats, investigative reporters like Seymour Hersh, or scientists such as Lloyd and Postol, or for that matter, missteps by the Obama administration)—interfered with activists’ capacity to maintain or develop a revolutionary narrative. This means that stories were easily knit into the narrative fabric of stories people were already telling themselves, or that political exuberance was flattened, the latter ending up, like Abounaddara’s unknown soldier, mired in doubt and disillusion. In the context of heightened uncertainty, both ambivalence and oppositional deflation thrive. Such an atmospherics of doubt is part of what Slavoj Žižek (2008, 9) calls “systemic violence,” which in the Syrian case operates in cahoots with other forms of overt regime brutality to extinguish or dampen what began as incendiary political excitement. In this context, the artistic efforts showcased here in Abounaddara’s shorts are like embers: a trace of light and heat, a past-bearing invitation to begin anew.

NOTES

- 1 The online organizer Eli Pariser calls this phenomenon the “filter bubble.” For him, the problem lies less with consumers and more with web companies that tailor their services, including news and search results, to personal predilections, limiting exposure to alternative ways of seeing the world. See Pariser (2012).
- 2 For some striking parallels with the digital revolution in another authoritarian context, see Humphreys (2012).
- 3 For conventional political science examples of authoritarian disinformation practices, see King, Pan, and Roberts (2017); on China, and on Russia, see MacFarquhar (2016); and Ostrovsky (2016).

- 4 *Je sais bien mais quand même* (Mannoni 1985).
- 5 An article, published in October 2013 by the opposition website hunasotak.com, claims that the singer was not Qashush, but Rahmani, and that he was killed by the regime. The GQ article by James Harkin (2016) discussed later in this chapter supports some key assertions of this earlier—but generally unknown or ignored—report.
- 6 See this Arabic-language piece reporting on Harkin's GQ article: Syrian Press Center, "What Is the Degree of Truth about the Nightingale of the Syrian Revolution Being Alive" [Ma Sihhat Khabar Wujud "Bulbul" al-Thawra al-Suriyya 'ala Qayd al-Hayat?] Markaz al-Sihafa al-Ijtima'iyya, al-Markaz al al-Suri Social Press Center, December 29, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y889bbuz>.
- 7 See also Zaina Erhaim's (2022) account of the challenges facing Syria's independent media outlets. She suggests that "perhaps the biggest lie of all since the uprising" began is "the story surrounding the killing of Ibrahim Qashoush."
- 8 Conjuring up Walter Benjamin, Stewart (2007, 21) notes that "potentiality is a thing immanent to fragments of sensory experience and dreams of presence. A layer, or layering to the ordinary, it engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things."
- 9 Phone conversation with Yahya al-'Abdallah, July 2016.
- 10 For a more detailed timeline, see Wedeen (2019, ch. 3).
- 11 See Wedeen (2019, ch. 3). See also the opposition-identified Syrian Observatory for Human Rights' extensive reports. See also "The Office for Documenting the Syrian Chemical Attack: The Regime Has Not Handed Over Any Shipments in a Month," [Maktab li-Tawthiq al-Kimawi al-Suri: al-Nizam Lam Yanqul Ayy Shahna Mundhu Shahr], April 3, 2014, <https://www.syriahr.com/%d9%85%d9%83%d8%aa%d8%a8-%d9%84%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%83%d9%8a%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%88%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%86%d8%b8%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%84%d9%85/19600/> and "The Russian Campaign in the Security Council to Change the Story of the Chemical Attack" [Hamla Rusiyya fi Majlis al-Amn li-Taghyir Riwayat al-Kimawi], December 17, 2013, <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%8A/16436/>. Previous URLs have ceased to work but these were accessed on May 7, 2023. Thanks are owed to Jeson Ng for his research help.

An article a year later reiterates these findings: "One Year after the Chemical Massacre: What Do Syrians Remember and What Do They

Forget?" [‘Am ‘ala Majzarat al-Kimawi: Madha Yatadhakkar al-Suriyyin wa], Madha Yansawn?], *Orient News*, August 17, 2014, http://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/80599. A comprehensive list with short introductions to most of the reports/articles/videos and images accusing the Asad regime is available at “Al-Asad Perpetrates Genocidal Crime, Killing 635 People with Poison Gas” [Al-Asad Yartakib Jarimat Ibada Jama’iyya wa-Yaqtul 635 Shakhsan bi-l-Ghazat al-Samma], *Muntada Madinat Tumayr*, <https://tinyurl.com/y7ttkf74>.

For official responses to the attack from various sides, see “Response to the Chemical Bombing of Aleppo by Asad’s Troops,” [Rudud al-Fi’l ‘ala Qasf ‘Isabat al-Asad Halab bi-l-Kimawi], *Markaz al-Sharq al-‘Arabi li-l-Dirasat al-Hadariyya wa-l-Istratijiyya, al-Mamlaka al-Muttahida, Landan Arab Orient Center for Strategic and Civilization Studies London*, <https://tinyurl.com/yceduff4m>, last accessed May 7, 2023. The Violations Documentation Center, a human rights website well regarded by opposition activists, produced a report on August 22, 2013, one day after the attacks. This circulated vigorously among Syrian- and Arabic-language global activists on social media outlets and is available here: Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria, “A Special Report on the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Province of Rural Damascus, Eastern Ghouta” [Taqrir Khass hawl Istikhdam al-Silah al-Kimawi fi Muhafazat Rif Dimashq, al-Ghuta al-Sharqiyya], August 22, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/y9nmmz98>.

An archive of videos and commentary from human rights activists, as well as some comments accusing both parties of the atrocity, is available through the Internet Archive: “The Ghouta Massacre 21 August” [Majzarat al-Ghuta 21 Ab], *Al-Mindassa al-Suriyya The Syrian Infiltrator*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160917170322/http://the-syrian.com/archives/102020>, last accessed May 7, 2023.

- 12 See the regime-oriented “Al-Ghouta Chemical Weapons: How Three Armed Factions Came into Possession of Chemical Weapons” [Kimawi al-Ghuta: Hakadha Imtalakat Thalathat Fasa’il Musallaha Asliha Kimiyya’iyya Mundhu Sanawat], *Almersad*, October 31, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/y9p75emt>. For a similar but less detailed account, see “Three Years after the Chemical Attack on al-Ghouta: The Secrets of the Massacre” [3 Sanawat ‘ala Kimawi al-Ghuta: Khafaya al-Majzara], *Ad-Diyar*, August 23, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y7qrnxaz>.
- 13 See “Bandar ibn Sultan Is Responsible for the Chemical Weapons Attack in al-Ghuta” [Bandar ibn Sultan Mas’ul ‘an al-Hujum al-Kimawi fi al-Ghuta], *Associated Press/Damas Post*.

The following link no longer works: <https://tinyurl.com/y9de7mwe>; it was last accessed successfully in November 2014 and was defunct as of December 4, 2018. But it is now available by way of the Wayback Machine, accessed on May 7, 2023: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130903070334>

/https://www.damaspost.com/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9
/D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8
%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B1
-D8%A8%D9%86-D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86
-D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84-D8%B9%D9%86-D8%A7%
D9%84%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%
8A%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A-D9%81%D9%8A-D8%A7%D9%84
%D8%BA%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A9.htm.

My claims here are also based on ongoing conversations with Syrians in exile from August 2013 through August 2022.

- 14 The quote is from Broad (2013); the original report seems to be available only as a PowerPoint presentation.
- 15 For a fuller account of Higgins's investigations, see Wedeen (2019, ch. 3). Human Rights Watch also holds the Syrian regime responsible in a report that is accessible in Arabic at <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2013/09/10/256469>. Subsequent articles in newspapers, on television and radio, and on internet sites likewise implicate the regime. This one from Al-Jazeera is typical: "Ghouta: The Planned Attack" [Al-Ghuta: Al-Hujum al-Mudabbar], *Al-Jazeera*, August 23, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/y9sho8z7>.
- 16 The UN Mission released its final report on December 13, 2013, addressing wider claims of chemical weapons use: "United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," December 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/pkzrbey>. For a list of all the cases under scrutiny, refer to the discussion in Wedeen (2019, ch. 3).
- 17 See Hersh (2014). For opposition sources presuming the regime's culpability and decrying the world's inaction, see below, and see also Wedeen (2019, ch. 3).
- 18 See, for example, the following article from the state-owned international news and current affairs television network based in Paris: "Bashar al-Asad: The Khan Shaykhun Chemical Attack Was Fabricated 100 Percent" [Bashshar al-Asad: al-Hujum al-Kimiya 'i 'ala Khan Shaykhun "Mufabrak Mi' a fi al-Mi' a"], *France 24*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20170413-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A>.

See also Asad's interview claiming that the attack was a conspiracy against his regime: Presidency Syria, "President Asad Interview with the French Press," YouTube, April 13, 2017, video, 23:28, <https://tinyurl.com/lkd8wkz> (no longer available as of September 2018).

Additional Arabic-language articles from *Russia Today*, in its typical short format: Arabic RT, "A Former US Intelligence Officer Determines Who Is Responsible for the Khan Shaykhun Chemical Attack," April 20,

- 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9c3y8yd>. The following *Russia Today* article is based on information from a purported CIA expert: Arabic RT, "CIA Director: We've Gathered Compelling Evidence on Khan Shaykhun in One Day!" [Mudir CIA: Jama 'na Adilla Damigha Hawla Hujum Khan Shaykhun Khilal Yawm Wahid!], July 12, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybbrfrfp>. See also a recent UN report accusing the Asad regime of responsibility: Enab Baladi, "UN Declares the Regime Responsible for Khan Shaykhun Massacre" [Al-Umam al-Muttahida Tajzim bi-Mas'uliyat al-Nizam 'an Majzarat Khan Shaykhun], September 6, 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/171441>, last accessed May 7, 2023.
- 19 See, for instance, "Russia Says Syria Gas Incident Caused by Rebels' Own Chemical Arsenal," *Reuters*, April 5, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yb3kcpfp>; Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Syria Chemical Weapons Attack Toll Rises to 70 as Russian Narrative Is Dismissed," *Guardian* (US edition), April 5, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/m9lh8q8>; Ole Solvang, "Russia's Claim on Alleged Chemical Attack in Syria," *Human Rights Watch*, April 6, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/yb6mkmge>; Danielle Ryan, "Why Is US Media Ignoring All Dissenting Expert Voices on the Khan Sheikhoun Attack?," RT, April 20, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9gp3hre>; and Ammar Abdullah, "Chemical Incident in Khan Shaykhun Deliberately Staged by Militants, Syrian Probe Finds," RT, August 17, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y7rlby93>. Accounts of the attack that place the onus on an aerial bombardment include well-regarded opposition sites: an article from the online bulletin all4syria is available through the Internet Archive, "Chemical [Attack] Kills the Children of Khan Shaykhun: Victims in the Hundreds While Those Counting the Dead Stand By Helpless" [Al-Kimawi Yaftuk bi-Atfal Khan Shaykhun . . . al-Dahaya bi-l-Mi'at wa- 'Addadat al-Mawt Taqif 'Ajizatan], April 4 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171029121408/http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/400043> in all4syria, last accessed May 7, 2023; another is "Hundreds of Victims without Blood in a Chemical Bombing on Khan Shaykhun" [Mi'at al-Dahaya bi-La Dima' bi-Qasf Kimawi 'ala Khan Shaykhun], *Step News Agency*, April 4, 2017, available via the Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170404121650/https://stepagency-sy.net/archives/139340>. There was also horrifying video about the same brutal event: Assi Press, "Scenes from the Chemical Massacre in the City of Khan Shaykhun Caused by the Regime's Aircraft by Targeting the City with Chemical Gases [Mashahid min Majazrat al-Kimawi fi Madinat Khan Shaykhun Alladhi Sabbabahu Tayran al-Nizam bi-Istihdaf li-l-Madina bi-l-Ghazat al-Kimawiyya]," YouTube, April 4, 2017, video, 0:40, <https://tinyurl.com/y6wafjhc>. Some videos chronicled the death of an entire family: Assi Press, "Chemical Bombardment of the City of Khan Shaykhun by the Syrian Regime," [Qasf bi-l-Kimawi 'ala Madinat Khan Shaykhun min Qibal al-Nizam al-Suri], YouTube, April 3, 2017, video, 0:51, <https://tinyurl.com>

/y83s76wr. A helpful timeline was produced by Eliot Higgins, “Summary of Claims Surrounding the Khan Sheikhou Chemical Attack,” *Bell_{ing}cat*, July 4, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y94gadcfc>. Higgins refuted Hersh’s efforts to sow doubt about this attack, claiming that he had been hoodwinked: Eliot Higgins, “Will Get Fooled Again—Seymour Hersh, Welt, and the Khan Sheikhou Chemical Attack,” *Bell_{ing}cat*, June 25, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybaxukm2>.

- 20 See Hofstadter (1964); and Harper (2008). Harper argues, much like James Scott, that conspiracy theories and rumors are “weapons of the weak.” See Scott (1985). But Michael Rogin’s early work on the McCarthy era, as well as his subsequent analysis of political “demonology” in the American context, suggests otherwise. See Rogin (1967, 1987). For recent work in this vein, see Masco (2014).
- 21 For a discussion of the difference between Arendt’s and Wittgenstein’s view and Jürgen Habermas’s notion of communicative rationality or reason, see Zerilli (2016).
- 22 Abounaddara, Vimeo profile, <https://vimeo.com/user6924378>; see Abounaddara 2012. The collective’s name is commonly transliterated as Abounaddara and I have followed that convention here, although the Vimeo profile is about naddara.
- 23 For a more in-depth discussion of “representative thinking” and for an account of other Syrian films that operate in this mode, see Wedeen (2019, esp. ch. 4).
- 24 Others, such as the site Takkad [Verify, <https://verify-sy.com>], are attempting anew to produce journalism with professionally recognized standards of objectivity. Their work has generated some important retractions, including from BBC Arabic. See also Brian Whitaker’s investigative journalism, including a self-published book entitled *Denying the Obvious: Chemical Weapons and the Information War in Syria* (2021); and Stefan Tarnowski’s illuminating work (which is in conversation with arguments made here and also deals with both Verify and Abounaddara), “Struggling with Images: Revolution, War, and Media in Syria” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2022). As Arendt (2006a, 236) has also pointed out, facts are not only fragile, but also stubborn, and this obstinacy might be a source of political hope in the context of ongoing challenges posed by conditions of epistemic murk.