13 The logics of violence

'Bring back the chaos'

A recurring theme that emerged as an unintended and unexpected finding from the study concerns the various ways in which violence itself is justified and rationalised by interviewees. There are many examples of very graphic violence in the narratives. The fact that interviewees condone, support or even commit such violence begs the question of how generally sane and rational individuals can come to justify such acts. This aspect can be considered as a result of a purely inductive analytical process, for no preconceived concepts and theories surrounding the justification of violence were imposed on the data in this regard.

The graphic nature of violence includes attacks on people that cause severe injury and death, sometimes multiple deaths at once. Salim, for instance, describes his complicity in a suicide bombing on Israeli soldiers with enthusiasm

> I was arrested several times…but that time it was because I had collaborated in an attack. The attack took place afterwards…Believe me, it was amazing. It was an amazing operation. The group Islamic Jihad executed it and it killed…maybe 15 soldiers. They used the double suicide attack tactics…you know where the first one goes in and blows himself up…then when everyone has gathered around that place, the second goes and blows himself up… Back then, these operations were successful because there was unity between the people…we were professionals. Now they are all sell-outs. They start working with the Israeli intelligence service. The son of your country easily becomes a traitor these days.
>
> (Salim, Canada)

Mansour states that, following the attacks on the two mosques in Tripoli, he wished there would be more violence against Jabal Mohsen

> At that time…I was hoping that more people would go and blow themselves up, up there. But there was no one I could trust…And sometimes, I still feel like that. Like I want to get my rifle, go down to the street and kill two soldiers. Do you see what I mean? Or go up to the Jabal and shoot at a café. But at the same time, I feel like I can't do that because these people might not have anything to do with it. So, in a way, I feel like I want chaos,

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> so I can kill them. So, I can kill again, to get off my heart what is so stuck in it.
>
> (Mansour, Lebanon)

Violence as a necessary evil

Although the descriptions of these acts of large-scale violence are sometimes accompanied by emotions that seem out of place or even pathological, such as enthusiasm, generally speaking, violence is described as a necessary evil. Interviewees insist that they would not be fighting if the circumstances were different, if it weren't to prevent suffering and protect the innocent, or if they weren't directly threatened

> I try to avoid the anger and the rage as much as possible. Because I have a family…the conditions are difficult. Nobody likes the war, believe me. We were forced to fight.
>
> (Walid, Lebanon)

Violence as a necessary evil is a common theme. However, it must be analysed in the light of the persistent tendency to downplay enjoyment, thrill-seeking and adventurism for the sake of emphasising the rational need for and the ultimate inevitability of violence. The narratives on violence as a necessary evil also include self-critical appraisal of the use of violence

> That's the term: Necessity. I don't like combat; I won't look for violence. I have never liked that. But I want to be ready. And to be able to use it if necessary. There is a very pragmatic side to this. To me, finding myself in combat and not being ready, that's too late. We live in a society where there is violence. […] But you have to be self-critical. It's all very exciting, being in these situations. They're incredible sometimes. But it shouldn't be violence just for the sake of it. […] If you are just guided by your own desires, it merely becomes another manifestation of self-centredness.
>
> (Richard, Switzerland)

Strategic violence

Here, Richard also alludes to the dangers of falling into a narcissistic and self-centred use of violence and action, an aspect discussed above. A common theme among the interviewees who resort primarily to non-violent action is the need to be strategic when it comes to violence. Although not refusing violent tactics *per se*, they should be avoided when they don't serve the struggle in the long run and only satisfy a personal desire for action. Ziad explains this as follows:

> the perspective of the Marxist was like…look: Individual terrorism in this context only really helps the state and oftentimes it is actually an agent

> provocateur backed by the states encouraging you to do it…but first off what is violence? like I don't consider that violence it's like you know it's property destruction and the state really likes to equivocate that with when for example they took out the eyes of multiple kids in Montreal in 2012…that's real violence! these kids lost their eyesight…that's real violence…there's no comparison between that and a couple, of couple of misguided kids breaking things or burning a car because a cop undercover told them to…and made it sound cool you know. I will never put those on the same equivalence but at the same time we shouldn't be doing things the cops want us to do.
>
> (Ziad, Canada)

Also, in light of careful and strategic handling of violent tactics, interviewees who are at some distance from contexts affected by conflict tend to argue for controlling one's anger and rage, and using it more constructively than simply through individualistic violence

> I still feel that rage, but I use it in a more positive way.
>
> (Souhail, Switzerland)

In Daniel's case, being strategic about violent action has meant that he had to change his engagement and support for the cause. It is sometimes more important to build the structures to support revolutionary change in the long run, than to engage in the fighting oneself

> I see the logics of agitating, of making noise. But I also see the importance of building something for the aftermath. That doesn't mean I am abandoning violence. I am financing the efforts over there, and part of that is violence, of course. If it's necessary that I do it myself, I will do it with pleasure. I get up every day asking myself whether to go back or not. The only reason I'm not going is that they told me I have another role to play. They've told me a thousand times. We don't want you to die over there, we have enough young men. No, we need the structures, the synergies, the solidarity, that can be useful in the future. That's a real need, and even if I don't like it, even if it's less glorious…if I want to be effective, that's what I have to do. That's my engagement today. In a way, I have abandoned the violence myself to support it more effectively. I am not denying the violence, on the opposite: I want to intensify it. But to intensify it, I need to detach myself from it, in a way.
>
> (Daniel, Switzerland)

The quote of Daniel above illustrates very clearly how the non-violent personal engagement is competing with the violent engagement, which he associates with *glory*, that is more appealing on an emotional level. There is a constant tension between rationality and emotionality when the use of violence is discussed by individuals who are engaged in revolutionary causes but choose to do so from a position of relative privilege. Proper analysis of Daniel's narrative reveals that he

is trying to convince himself that giving up immediate participation in combat is the rational thing to do, although, emotionally, he is longing for the battlefield. It is telling that, as I found out later, a few months after our interview, Daniel travelled back to Syria.

Violence as self-defence

While violence is presented as a necessary evil, the main rationale for actually using violence is systematically structured around notions of *self-defence* and retaliatory action. Violence is then seen as a form of *doing* justice, when nobody else would step in to do justice, when there is a *revolutionary void*. Because of a previous attack, a present attack or a likely imminent attack, violence is justified as a means of self-preservation. This is the main rationale that is closely tied to the logics of *jusqu'au-boutisme*, the revolutionary void, combat masculinity and jihad. Grievance-based politico-ideological action is in itself, by essence, framed and understood in retaliatory terms. Defence, however, as has been touched upon earlier, is an elastic notion. While violence is certainly a social fact and a phenomenon that affects human beings in the most direct ways, the perception of what is an attack that merits a counterattack is the product of a highly subjective appraisal. Who exactly is the attacker and therefore a reasonable target for a counterattack? Until when is a counterattack justified? Who and what determines whether an attack is imminent? The elastic notion of defence and retaliation, especially regarding the time and the potential targets, can be subject to abuse and manipulation. However, this applies equally to state and non-state actors. It is not reasonable to expect precision and restraint when it comes to non-state actors' construction of what a self-defensive attack is, if it is acceptable that states engage in the very same action, with substantial vagueness as to timing and targets (see Chapter 10).

Violence as revenge

There is, as the findings demonstrate, a very thin line between self-defence and revenge. Sometimes, the same act can be framed as self-defence or as *revenge*. Crucially, however, the two notions can be placed once again within the tension field between rationality and emotionality: While self-defence is a rational and widely accepted concept, revenge is understood as highly emotional and the outcome of blind anger and uncontrolled rage. Both are understood as defensive and as righteous violence, but revenge is less easily justified as a reason for violent action.

For instance, Halim, whose mother was shot and injured in front of his eyes, explains his desire for revenge

> there was Abu Omar for example, he was teaching us. I told him I wanted to become a sniper. I really wanted that, I downloaded games on my phone to train as a sniper. He asked me why. I said I wanted to do to them what they

> did to my mother, I was hoping one day. I was ready to kill. When I started shooting, my only thought was that I wanted to take revenge.
>
> (Halim, Lebanon)

Revenge is sometimes used to deal with sadness in a more action-oriented manner. By providing a sense of agency as well as bravado, taking vengeful action can convey a feeling of being able to do something about the pain, as Adnan and Yahya explain

> Another boy was hit while he was sitting on a chair. In our neighbourhood. The whole street was crying. I came down and I motivated everyone…to fight. I said we can't keep crying. Instead of crying let's go get our revenge. And we went and God gave us success with five…dead. From the group that shot them. We knew them.
>
> (Adnan, Lebanon)

> This was my friend…my closest friend…we were together all the time! We spent all our time together. I missed him a lot when we died. So, when he died, I had to go and fight. To take revenge…Yes, when I would kill someone, I could be at peace.
>
> (Yahya, Lebanon)

Revenge can also refer to actions that lie far in the past. The same mechanism that enables vicarious victimisation, i.e., feeling impacted by the suffering endured by others, is at play when it comes to taking revenge on behalf of others. In Tripoli, for instance, interviewees feel like they can take revenge for what their parents and their relatives had endured during the civil war. Asked whether he ever felt remorse, Zakaria answers

> No [very quick answer]. No, never. I was convinced of what I was doing. I mean, our elders told us what they had done to the people here in BT, how they had tortured and killed the kids, and how they raped the women. And of course, we wouldn't allow this to happen again. And don't think that now… because the fighting is over, everything is forgotten. It was over once, and it came back. And we will be down in the streets again. It is in our blood now.
>
> (Zakaria, Lebanon)

Similarly, Justin feels like he is still fighting to avenge the suffering that Maronite Christians had endured during the Lebanese Civil War and even before, during centuries of living as a minority in the region, or Daniel's involvement in armed internationalist solidarity is a form of continued retaliation against the suffering endured by Chileans under dictatorship. Their identification with a collective identity and collective memory, and the fact that their narratives display a connection between past suffering and present engagement, provide the rational foundations for revenge on behalf of others who suffered in the past.

Violence as emotional liberation

The emotional driver behind violence as a form of revenge for injustice suffered can also be found in another framing of violence, namely *violence as emotional liberation*. In this form, violence resembles a Fanonian understanding of violence, where violence itself becomes a cathartic, purifying and liberating process for the colonised and oppressed, as it is a means to restore dignity and self-determination (Fanon, 2002). Especially in Tripoli, but also in other places, where interviewees are not directly impacted by armed violence, violence is sometimes explained as an emotional outburst, the only way to break out of the oppression they are facing personally or the grievances they are experiencing in relation to people suffering elsewhere. This dimension is not as much justified rationally as it is presented as a natural human reaction to the suffocating condition of oppression. It is also described as the culmination of a gradual process, as Nassim explains

> And if we go back: It was all because of the injustice. Had there not been injustice, there would have been no need for a revolution. But with the injustice, you start blowing me up until I explode and want to take revenge. In the end, you either destroy your house or hurt your wife or someone else.
>
> (Nassim, Lebanon)

As this quote indicates quite clearly, the emotional liberation, when impossible to direct against those perceived as the cause of the suffering, may end up hurting those people that are closest and dearest. Some interviewees explain how the fighting could become an outlet for grievances related to the Syrian conflict

> The Syrian story had a huge impact on Lebanon, especially BT. When someone was angry, he would go down and shoot.
>
> (Bader, Lebanon)

The link between the Syrian and the local suffering and the way it increases the emotional pressure on individuals to the point of wanting to hurt others or themselves is well captured by the following quote

> My heart inside is so swollen from the pain inflicted by Bashar al Assad and Rifaat Eid. Until now, now as I am talking to you, I have pain in my chest [points to his chest with his fist], I swear. There is something squeezing my heart. I don't know what it is. I feel like I have to smash my head into something. I feel like I have to get my anger out.
>
> (Mansour, Lebanon)

When individuals feel stuck in a situation of oppression that they cannot escape using legal means, violence becomes liberating because one feels like not having to simply endure the violence and humiliation, as Kevin explains well. His quote also reveals the rebelliousness elaborated on earlier (see Chapter 10)

> It's true…when I hit a police officer, I feel a sense of liberation…because you feel that constant mental charge, that weight…you feel like you can empty it somewhere…and also, you're not obliged to simply endure this violence, you can do something about it…you don't simply have to accept your victimisation, you don't allow them to play you as they like. This feeling is powerful. It's as if somebody wanted to rob your wallet and instead of saying 'yes take it', you say 'no, I'm not giving it to you'. That feeling. Only that here it's the state, so you have to justify yourself.
>
> (Kevin, Canada)

This feeling of emotional liberation as a means for personal catharsis in the way explained by Kevin is frequently expressed in relation to state violence. In the context of Tripoli, the environment is so heavily securitised that many interviewees say they would prefer it if chaos broke out again. Because in peacetime, security forces could act with impunity and one could not attack them. During wartime, however, people could regain a sense of agency, safety and freedom because they are able to react to injustice instead of having to keep their mouths shut and swallow their indignation. The following excerpts illustrate this well

> Sometimes, I wish there would be fighting, there would be chaos. Because at least I was eating. I didn't get a salary. But we weren't afraid as much as we are now. During the chaos, we would feel more secure than now. We would at least know we protect each other. I swear. There was even more work!
>
> (Bader, Lebanon)

> I swear, if I have to die, so be it, but I have to stand up against this. I can't let myself be humiliated anymore. […] Because, in the end, the fighting might even be better. So, let the fighting come back. People can't do anything here. They can't work, they live in poverty, they can't get treatment. They humiliate you. At least, when there is fighting, there is some autonomy and freedom.
>
> (Walid, Lebanon)

Violence as teaching a lesson

A theme that I encountered less frequently, at least in the explicit manner demonstrated below, is the idea of *violence as teaching a lesson*. Underlying that theme is the perception that violence is effective. Compared to the other forms of rationalising violence, which are all defensive, this one is more explicitly offensive. It may well be that this dimension is more frequently present in interviewees' minds but not mentioned because it may have less narrative appeal since it is less connected to grievances. Punitive rationalisations of violence are, however, likely to be present, especially during the phases of fighting. Fahad describes this as follows

> During my incarceration, my religious beliefs changed. I read a book, the one which impacted me most, which is the 'politics of the prophet Mohammed PBUH' it shows how acute Mohammed was politically – for 13 years, he wouldn't raise the sword in Mecca, only after 13 years he would start using force. It's like with a child, you have to explain for a long time without violence, but at some point, force is necessary.
>
> (Fahad, Lebanon)

In a similar manner, but in a different context, Kevin also explains that his use of violence makes sense to him because he sees it as effective

> It's true, I often use violence, because it carries results. That's my experience. For example, with toxic people, infiltrators…if you beat them up, they run away. Once, we attacked a police station and I realised that we were really able to scare them. They realised we had the means to intimidate them. I could see the fear in the eyes of the police officer. I saw a police officer get beaten up, a door bashed, the fire run through the station, windows shattered, police officers cry…in that moment you realise that violence can be effective.
>
> (Kevin, Canada)

A moral codex

In sum, physical armed violence is usually presented as a necessary evil, and as an inevitable human reaction to great injustices. It is primarily framed in defensive terms. The notion of self-defence is sometimes blurred with expressions of revenge, and with descriptions of violence as a means of emotional liberation. The tension between rational and emotional arguments for violent action, a theme that is recurring throughout the narratives and other aspects related to grievances discussed above, can be identified in the narratives. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that, in principle, the interviewees tend to condemn indiscriminate violence against civilians. There seems to be a moral codex that guides fighters even in the harshest of times when they are most blinded by rage, which dictates that women and children, or old and unarmed men must not be attacked, or that you must not steal, for example. As Naseem claims, virtuous behaviour is important during wartime as well

> I killed many people, hurt many people, I haven't left anything undone, but I never stole nor raped anyone. But there were people who were stealing. But we didn't do this. […] I never had the heart for that. Three-quarters of the people here like me a lot, because they know I am righteous.
>
> (Naseem, Lebanon)

Adnan describes a situation where he refused to steal money and explains that under his command it was not allowed to attack non-combatants

> Once, a guy was injured in a ranger in front of me. It was clear that he was dying [imitating how he could barely breathe]. I put him in the trunk. The guy had 24 million LBP in the ranger. The guy next to me said let's take the money and nobody will notice. […] I refused…We didn't touch any of it. […] I mean, tomorrow this may happen to me. We had red lines in our street. No woman, child, or old man, or unarmed man was allowed to be shot. That was a red line that no one crossed in my street.
>
> (Adnan, Lebanon)

Similarly, Nidhal describes the different profiles of Hezbollah fighters that he knows personally, of whom some are too guided by rage and thereby forget to stick to moral principles

> Listen there are really different profiles. There are those who go who want to fight the terrorist and you know…he beheaded people, and destroyed the tombs...and you confront him, you might be driven by your hatred and your rage. And there is the other one who sticks to the principles, for example, I hear about people who when they see injured people from Daesh, people from Hezbollah…they shoot at them, because the hatred wins over their hearts, another one just leaves them, and another one brings them to the hospital. The mentalities are really different. Depending on how much you can control yourself, how much is in your head, how you can adapt to the situation.
>
> (Nidhal, Lebanon)

Following the bombings of the two mosques, a group of people from BT planned a suicide bombing attack on JM. Mansour was part of the group and the discussions, but he described that there was a clear rift between those who would accept to kill innocent people and others who would not

AA: So, that was the plan [the suicide bombing]?

Mansour: Yes, but be careful, I didn't agree. Because I don't want to kill people who don't have anything to do with it. I accept to kill people who want to kill me. Or someone who hates me. But I am against killing anyone randomly. That's what Rifaat Eid did. Not us, I was against their ideas. There was a lot of arguing, even with the guys who went an ended up blowing themselves up. They would consider us as unbelievers, traitors. We're not traitors, but we don't want to kill people who don't have anything to do with this! Why should we do what our enemies are doing?

On the other hand, Halim, who wanted to take revenge for the injuries that his mother suffered, explains how he came to justify even killing unarmed women, old men and young boys. This example also indicates, however, that when such logic was suggested, it was closely tied to a form of blind rage resulting from great pain, in Halim's case the fact that his mother was shot at and injured

Figure 13.1 The logics of violence

> I thought to myself: the kid, he will become old and shoot us as well. And the old man? He was probably fighting us in the 80s. They were doing the massacres. And the women? They are giving birth to the kids. So, everyone! [he starts laughing, noticing that this sounds a bit absurd. But then he says in a more serious tone:] because when they shot my mother, they didn't make a difference either. They didn't think about the fact that she was old, that she could barely walk.
>
> (Halim, Lebanon)

In sum, the different logics of violence can be summed up and illustrated as follows (see Figure 13.1). It is important to remember that these are not rigid categorisations and that these logics often overlap. However, they all explain – individually or in combination – the rationale for employing (or not) violence to a degree that can cause injury or even death, sometimes of unarmed civilians.

References

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