

**Documenting the Erased:
Peace Photography and Oral Testimonies in Remembering the
Hama Massacre**

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Historical Context

In February of 1982, the Syrian Arab Army besieged the city of Hama, resulting in the deadliest attacks in Syrian history. Known as the Hama Massacre, in only 27 days, the government committed a genocidal mass killing against innocent citizens in order to quell an uprising by revolutionary group, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamist political and social movement that endorses implementing Islamic law across all domains of society. Initially founded in Egypt in 1928, their causes spread to most Arab countries throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Following Syria's independence from France in 1945, the Muslim Brotherhood was established. The Muslim Brotherhood strongly opposed the Ba'ath party which has controlled the Syrian government since 1963, and their fight to establish an Islamic Republic in Syria eventually led to the Islamist resistance, which lasted from 1976 until 1982—or the end of the Hama Massacre. Many of these armed revolts and protests took place in Damascus, Syria's capital, but more notably in Hama. Hama, a city of 180,000, has historically been home to conservative Sunni Muslims; it was fitting that Hama became one of the Muslim Brotherhood's strongholds because of its religious and cultural significance within Syria. Belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood became punishable by death beginning in 1980; however, the Syrian army ultimately crushed the rebellion during the Hama Massacre by surrounding the city with over 12,000 troops (Seale, 1989). While the government attacks seemingly intended to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood, their extreme aggression and brutality affected every single citizen in Hama, regardless of whether they were affiliated with the movement or not. British journalist Patrick Seale said of the massacre that

“every party worker, every paratrooper sent to Hama knew that this time Islamic militancy had to be torn out of the city, whatever the cost” (Seale, 1989).

The Hama Massacre is considered the “single deadliest act” of violence by an Arab state against its own people in the history of the Middle East (Wright, 2008). At the time, the attacks were entirely undocumented as then-president and dictator Hafez al-Assad of the Ba’ath party ordered the city to seal off the city from the outside world. The city was put under a physical military siege as well as a full media blackout—thus, no one could leave or enter the city. This also limited citizens’ access to electricity and food supply. As a result, the death toll is highly disputed because of the restrictions on independent media and the lack of transparent reporting by government sources. The number of civilians killed varies widely: some early estimates reported only 1,000 casualties, while later investigations and accounts suggest the actual number could reach 40,000 people.

In this paper, for the sake of clarity and consistency, I will use data from the Syrian Human Rights Committee (SHRC) and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) to estimate the casualties of the Hama Massacre. Given their extensive documentation and credibility in human rights reporting, specifically in Syria, these resources offer a reliable framework for understanding the scale of the massacre. SHRC and SNHR report that the number of civilians killed by the Syrian government is 40,000 people (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2022). Additionally, Hama faced mass destruction surpassing deaths: about two-thirds of the city was destroyed, and an estimated 17,000 civilians who were missing still have not been found as of this present day. While the modern-day Syrian

government has never acknowledged these numbers, it is also worth noting that al-Assad's brother, Refaat al-Assad, boasted about killing 38,000 people (Friedman, 1989). Nevertheless, though Refaat's claims provide a grim parallel to SHRC and SNHR's reports, it is crucial to recognize that his statements, made from a position within the Assad regime, were possibly politically motivated. Therefore, while his accounts emphasize the severity of the Hama Massacre, they cannot alone verify the accuracy of casualty figures reported by independent and credible human rights organizations.

However, it is critical to note that the impacts of the Syrian government's mass killing of their own civilians extend beyond just a number. It is easy to be desensitized to the magnitude of lives lost and overlook the traumas inflicted upon people in Hama because of the sheer magnitude of violence that was unreported. Al-Assad's media restrictions in documenting civilian deaths also extended to photographic and journalistic coverage of the genocidal attacks, which cut off the rest of the world from Hama. Because the Hama Massacre was severely under-reported by mainstream Western media outlets, we must rely both on civilian photography and survivor testimonies to document the killings. Despite this extreme lack of concrete evidence, many survivors of the massacre are alive today, and a few images have recently, in the last decade, come into circulation. These unique visual and oral sources are a stark reminder to the world of the horrors endured by the people of Hama. This paper centers on the few images that exist from civilians and oral histories from survivors to curate a picture of Hama in 1982 while preserving the dignity and resilience of the Syrians who lived through it.

Methodology

The methodology of my research aimed to answer the question: How do we preserve the history of the Hama Massacre with the limitations of photography and documentation while also ensuring the dignity of survivors? Through my research and its methods, I intended to create an archive of photography and testimonies from the Hama Massacre that accurately represents the Syrian people with a sense of dignity. Another research objective was to define peace photography and its importance in understanding the Hama Massacre. In part one of my research, I conducted a visual analysis of a series of photographs from the massacre obtained by a survivor of the killings. This collection is one of the only existing records of the events, making it an integral source in my research. In part two of my research, I planned to focus on and collect oral histories from survivors of the Hama Massacre. This section aimed to demonstrate that the true preservation of the Hama Massacre relies solely on the narratives of survivors who lived to share their stories today. Analyzing a visual record in tandem with an oral one helped compile a comprehensive history of Hama in 1982, which is especially important as no such documentation exists today.

Many survivors of the Hama Massacre live in America, where there is a sizable Syrian population. A large sector of my own community in the Chicagoland area also lived in Hama during the events of 1982. Thus, I implemented snowball sampling, a method where participants refer others who meet the study criteria, to recruit participants for interviews. Snowball sampling proved effective in finding survivors as Syrians are

closely linked in their social communities in the diaspora. In order to capture survivor's authentic accounts, I adopted a semi-structured interview format. This approach is a combination of predetermined questions alongside ones that the interviewer may think of during the interview. Semi-structured interviews were especially critical as they allowed me to engage with survivors at a more in-depth and personal level and fully understand their stories. As the interview subject of the Hama Massacre deals with very heavy and sensitive topics, interviewees were given a set of questions before the interview began in order to provide them with an opportunity to prepare mentally and emotionally. Ensuring survivors' comfort, privacy, and respect was the highest priority throughout the interview process.

About 15 fundamental questions guided the data collection and interview process, in addition to several follow-up questions, which depended on each individual interview. These questions focused on understanding where survivors were at the time of the massacre and how it affected them. In the questions, I observed participants through their stories and understanding of the events in a conversational manner. Due to the ongoing political climate in Syria under the Assad regime and the aftermath of the 2011 Syrian Revolution, censorship surrounding the Hama Massacre remains severe. Thus, protecting survivors' identities was an extremely important factor to consider. A critical part of interviews was approaching them in an environment where the participant felt comfortable speaking without fear. Prior to conducting interviews, NYU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) evaluated and approved both the ethics and principles of my methodology. This included consent forms, which were necessary in order to begin

research. Additional protections included the anonymity and confidentiality of all interviews. Each survivor completed these forms before interviews so that they were aware of the ethicality and protections when participating in the study. I aimed to conduct all interviews in person in order to preserve both the private nature of the subject and the authenticity of responses. With permission, I recorded participants on an external microphone in order to transcribe the interviews later. Interviewees were aware of all procedures before the interview process began and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study and pass on questions.

Peace Photography

One way of understanding the civilian photographs from Hama is through the concept of peace photography: the practice of humanizing subjects who have historically not been represented with this humanity effect. Peace photography does not aim to capitalize on the subjects or the conflict at hand but rather to tell the stories of these underrepresented people and inform the public about the human cost of violence. Due to the limited media representation of the Hama Massacre, its photojournalism can be categorized as peace photography. Most of the photographic evidence of the Hama Massacre that does exist is not like traditional coverage of conflicts. Instead, it consists mainly of images that were taken with smuggled and hidden cameras, taken at the extreme risk of victims who faced the brutality of their own government. These photos are a sign of resistance from the Syrian government. Therefore, we can make the argument that the photography of the genocide that does exist can be classified as peace

photography. The images gave agency to the victims and served as a form of resistance against Al-Assad's repression and attempts to silence the truth about the atrocities committed during the Hama Massacre. The role of peace photography is critical when understanding the Hama Massacre, as it visually captures the devastation behind the unreliable numbers. The photographic remains represent the Hama Massacre in a dimension beyond the disputed numbers by immortalizing the anguish, resilience, and humanity of those affected. Such photos were taken from the civilian lens rather than the international photographer perspective that dominates media today.

Hama native Abu Aljude was only 16 years old when Al-Assad ordered troops to suppress the uprisings and bomb the city. Before fleeing for safety, Abu Aljude collected photos from neighbors and friends while taking his own. Compared to the high quality and professionalism often associated with photojournalism, these pictures are grainy and blurry, reflecting the horrific and urgent circumstances under which they were taken. However, they also are some of the only accounts of visual evidence that the massacre happened. 30 years after the attacks, NPR published Abu Aljude's collection of ten photographs, taken on 35mm film, that give only a tiny glimpse into the horrors the people of Hama faced (Amos, 2012). Due to the ongoing violence in Syria today, most of Abu Aljude's selection lacks context regarding the locations or the photographers involved in order to protect the identities of Syrians who still live in Hama. The government still poses a major threat to those who speak out or provide evidence against their genocide, even over 40 years later, making it necessary to anonymize the details of

the photographs. Thus, it is up to audiences to piece together the fragmented narrative of the Hama Massacre based on the rare visual testimony that Abu Aljude presents.

None of these images are graphic and do not represent direct acts of violence inflicted upon civilians. They do not feature the piles of dead bodies, the indiscriminate bombing, or the torturous acts the government committed on those held in captivity. Instead, they focus on the destruction of buildings and the remains of the city's infrastructure, serving as haunting reminders of the devastation inflicted upon Hama and its people. While it is essential to understand the full extent of brutality and war crimes that Al-Assad committed, these photos give control to the people of Hama. Thus, we can classify these images as peace photography—they represent Syrians as people with homes, belongings, and stories. The people of Hama are not reduced to the human eye as lifeless, mangled bodies. Instead, they are portrayed as resilient individuals with agency. Yet, the photographs still display the full extent of trauma that civilians of Hama faced. Through Abu Aljude's intentional array of images, audiences are exposed to the atrocities and mass killings of the Hama Massacre without exploiting the suffering of the victims.

One of the images collected by Abu Aljude was taken by his neighbor, Leilah Barazi (Amos, 2012). The image features mass destruction of buildings piled up in a heap of rubble and debris, representing the scale of devastation inflicted on Hama's cityscape (Fig. 1). There is not much context behind the photo besides the story of Barazi giving Abu Aljude before he fled with his family to Saudi Arabia. Like most of the images of the Hama Massacre, it is unclear to decipher when, where, and how the photo was taken. When I first viewed the photo, I wondered about the story behind these buildings: Were

they homes? Who lived in these buildings? Were there people in the buildings when it was bombarded? Although we may never know the answers to these questions, the image still stands on its own based on what we do know: the photo was taken by an innocent civilian who faced enough trauma to witness the total obliteration of their own homeland. The mass destruction of homes, historical sites, places of worship, schools, and many other buildings must be acknowledged when understanding the massacre. According to the Syrian Human Rights Committee, “the destruction process took place in three stages: random bombardment, bombardment focused on specific targets, and destruction by detonating or bulldozing buildings” (The Syrian Human Rights Committee, 2006). While the photograph only depicts fallen buildings, it is also a representation of the violence and devastation inflicted upon innocent civilians by Al-Assad and his corrupt military. Though it does not feature dead civilians or even alive ones, it is still a testament to the human cost of 40,000 lives lost by the genocide without the dehumanization of Syrians. This representation of the Hama Massacre offers a level of empathy and dignity that conveys the extent of the destruction, thus categorizing these images as peace photography.

Another image Abu Aljude showed in his collection features a street which is filled with rubble and wreckage, along with two figures who are walking in the distance (Fig. 2). Little is known about this photograph—in the NPR article, the vague caption reads, “Hama residents walk through a badly damaged part of the city” (Amos, 2012). This is a weak description to portray the full extent of extreme destruction in the picture. However, beyond the caption’s failure to capture the massacre’s severity, it also does not

tell viewers the important context of where, when, and how the photo was taken. Additionally, it is unclear whether or not Abu Aljude captured the image or if he only collected it. These critical facts surrounding the lack of information in this singular photograph mirror the debate on the accuracy of historical documentation of the Hama Massacre as a whole. Regardless, the image is also an example of peace photography. The two lone figures juxtaposed with the emptiness of where the assumed homes used to emphasize the impact of the devastation both on a community and individual level. In this picture specifically, the residents of Hama feel a sense of loss and displacement as they navigate through the ruins of their city. As a result, audiences can understand the magnitude of the massacre beyond just the loss of life but also through the disruption of people in Hama. Viewers can empathize with the figures in the photo even though they cannot discern who the figures are. The two people walking in a rubble-strewn landscape add a human element to an unseen genocide that resulted in the loss of 40,000 Syrians.

One of the only images from Abu Aljude's collection that features a clear photo of a civilian from Hama is of a young boy (Fig. 3). He is standing in front of a shutter that was pierced with bullets. "This scene is a very common one [in] Hama," said Abu Aljude. "You can tell if shops are old or new depending on whether they have bullet holes" (Amos, 2012). The little boy is unidentified, but viewers can assume he is probably around age seven. He stands in the center of the old shop as he faces away from the camera. His arms are crossed, and his face sits in a frown. It is unclear who he is, what he is looking at, or exactly where the photograph was taken in Hama. However, his solemn expression and defensive body language give context to how the massacre

impacted the tens of thousands of children who lived in Hama. The photographer, who is unidentified by Abu Aljude, reframes the visual narrative by capturing the innocence and vulnerability of a young boy amidst the backdrop of destruction. This juxtaposition emphasizes and creates the human element of Syrians who survived the genocide rather than reducing them to a number. Though viewers only see one boy, the image is a representation of the broader suffering endured by the people of Hama during the massacre. We can classify this image as being a part of peace photography as it urges people to understand the massacre with a level of empathy rather than sensationalizing or dehumanizing the suffering of the Syrian people. Children are not depicted as lifeless bodies on the street. Instead, rare photos represent Syrians as humans with emotions, experiences, and stories. Beyond the killings of humans and wreckage of buildings, which civilians of Hama experienced and witnessed, audiences can understand the mental traumas when they can see children like the boy in the image.

Oral Histories

The visual record that Abu Aljude offers to the public is invaluable for understanding the atrocities Al-Assad and the Syrian government committed during the Hama Massacre. However, it is also crucial to look at oral testimonies in order to gain a comprehensive understanding, mainly because the attacks were not documented. Thomas Friedman, an American journalist who specializes in Middle Eastern relations, visited Hama only two months after the massacre—he was one of the first people to enter the city after it was besieged. After seeing Hama for himself post-massacre, he wrote the chapter “Hama Rules” about the government’s indiscriminate killings as a part of his

1989 book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. After Amnesty International published a 1983 report of the massacre, Friedman was one of the first to acknowledge the attacks in depth beyond how it was depicted in the media. By coining the term “Hama Rules,” Friedman “offered a blow-by-blow account of the massacre” to describe Al-Assad’s “overwhelming force to confront opposition without regard for collateral damage or loss of civilian life” (Phillips, 2020). Additionally, Freidman recalled seeing one of Hama’s iconic landmarks differently than he remembered as he first stepped into the city: in the Orontes River, which features Hama’s signature water wheels or norias, the blood of the Syrians who were killed at the hands of their government still lingered in the water, leaving a grim imprint that streamed through the city.

Many Western journalists like Friedman have visited Hama to better understand the massacre and in order to discover the truth of what happened in February of 1982. However, the most important anecdotes are the ones from survivors. These testimonies are often rare to find as most Syrian civilians still live in fear of retribution from the current regime if they speak out about their experiences, which makes victim interviews even more invaluable. Maha Mousa, who was only a young adult during the attacks, can recall the Syrian military’s occupation of her home in Hama during the massacre. She recounts one strike on Hama’s Mas’oud Mosque, which killed 60 men. Beyond the death toll of the brutal assault, government forces “cut off their fingers and placed them along the mosque’s walls... for around two years after the massacre, no one dared remove the fingers. They were so frightened,” said Mousa (Amnesty International, 2021). This grim account of one of the many horrors that Syrians experienced is extremely valuable in

understanding the extent of the massacre. While there are no images to document this specific atrocity, it is crucial to acknowledge it, especially in the scope of peace photography. How many more brutal attacks did Al-Assad commit that are undocumented and thus denied even having happened? How can we preserve the humanity and dignity of Syrians who faced some of the most appalling war crimes against humanity? Peace photography is critical to humanizing survivors of extreme acts of violence, especially in the context of the Hama Massacre, where victims are often reduced to inaccurate numbers and statistics. However, it is an injustice in itself to try and associate the idea of peace with these gruesome and sensational acts of violence. Thus, there is a level of separation between Abu Aljude's images and accounts like Mousa's: they are both invaluable in confronting the disgusting lack of media coverage. However, they must be treated and understood in different contexts for the dignity and humanity of Syrians. What we do not have pictures of matters as much as the rare photographic evidence we possess.

As this research paper aims to preserve the history of the Hama Massacre amidst the restrictions in photography and documentation, primary interviews were conducted with survivors of the attacks. These interviews, including accounts from my own community members who lived through the tragedy, provide the priceless experiences that illuminate the human toll and lasting collective trauma of the Hama Massacre. These firsthand accounts are critical insights into the enduring impact of the Hama Massacre on individual lives and collective memory that is extremely relevant in understanding the Syrian political landscape today. While personal connections exist with the interviewees,

efforts have been made to maintain objectivity in documenting these narratives, and to capture the full and unbiased truth of their accounts. However, as there are few existing testimonies available, interviewing my own community members who witnessed the massacre unfold in front of their eyes provides a crucial opportunity to capture accounts that might otherwise be lost to history. Prior to interviewing survivors, an institutional review board evaluated and approved my methodology's ethics and principles. Additionally, I ensured the anonymity of all subjects in order to protect their identities—this was especially important considering that the Hama Massacre is still deemed as a threat to the Syrian regime today. Many Syrians live in fear and paranoia, often repeating a common sentiment: “The walls have ears...If we talk about what happened in Hama, they might come for us and kill us too” (McEvers, 2012). These interviews were collected over the course of two weeks, where I adopted a set of semi-structured interview questions to about five survivors of the massacre.

When examining any medium of documentation of the Hama Massacre, we must approach it with sensitivity and responsibility, considering survivors and the emotional toll of recalling the painful traumas they endured. “I wonder if dying then is less painful than surviving it and living the memories,” said Abu Aljude (Amos, 2012). However, it is equally important to recognize the human cost behind these records—this is why peace photography and oral histories balance capturing the truth of historical events and respecting the dignity of those who lived through them. It is up to Syrians who lived and survived the massacre to share their witness and testimony in order to confirm that their own government committed these acts against humanity.

Because of suppression during the Hama Massacre, it is essential to emphasize that many forms of media that exist from Hama capture the aftermath of the attacks. Therefore, it is also essential to understand the historical and political implications of censoring the massacre. Syrians across the world in the diaspora are fully aware of the Hama Massacre, yet many rarely acknowledge the full severity of the brutality. As many Syrians live in fear of the regime, the massacre is simply and euphemistically referred to as *Al'ahdath*, or “the events,” in Arabic. The Syrian revolution that began in 2011 had been widely covered throughout Western media. However, in order to understand Syria’s current landscape, we must recognize the government’s 1982 genocide—through the lens of peace photography and oral histories that exist. Though the two movements came from different backgrounds, the Islamist uprisings of the ‘70s and ‘80s helped pave the way for protesters in the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings with the common motive of rejecting an authoritarian and dictatorial regime. Gregory Stanton, the founder of Genocide Watch, an organization to prevent and punish genocide, published a report in February 2012—40 years after the massacre. Stanton’s analysis was a warning against Bashar Al-Assad’s mass atrocities and the grave human rights violations that continue to unfold under his rule, echoing the brutal repression that his father committed during the Hama Massacre. Additionally, Stanton classified “prior unpunished genocidal massacres, such as those perpetrated by Assad’s father in Hama in the 1980s,” as an early warning sign of genocide (Genocide Watch, 2012). Since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011, about 700,000 people have died in Syria, many at the hands of the government, which parallels the atrocities committed during the Hama Massacre.

Peace photography's, in tandem with survivor testimonies, role in the little visual documentation that does exist gives survivors some dignity by representing the death toll as a part of the broader narrative of suffering and resilience rather than just the number 40,000. It also records the horrific history of the massacre. Over 40 years after the genocidal attacks, the Hama Massacre is still rarely acknowledged in the Arab world and beyond. However, some progress is being made. The former Syrian Vice President Rifaat Al-Assad was indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity recently on March 11, 2024 (TRIAL International, 2024). This is a significant advancement for Syrians who have long sought justice for the government's atrocities committed during the Hama Massacre. It is the first step towards accountability in confronting the horrific history that the Syrian government has tried to erase. The photos and testimonies that we do have are a form of resistance, giving autonomy to civilians. An anonymous survivor from Hama under the name 'Mohamed' said, "The media is the regime's greatest fear; that is why the biggest crime in Syria now in the regime's opinion is supplying information to foreign media... we live in dignity or die" (Amnesty International, 2021).



Figure 1: By Leilah Barazi. Courtesy of Abu Aljude, 2012.

[https://www.npr.org/2012/02/01/146235292/30-years-later-photos-emerge-from-killings-i
n-syria](https://www.npr.org/2012/02/01/146235292/30-years-later-photos-emerge-from-killings-in-syria)



Figure 2: Courtesy of Abu Aljude, 2012.

[https://www.npr.org/2012/02/01/146235292/30-years-later-photos-emerge-from-killings-i
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Figure 3: Courtesy of Abu Aljude, 2012.

[https://www.npr.org/2012/02/01/146235292/30-years-later-photos-emerge-from-killings-i
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