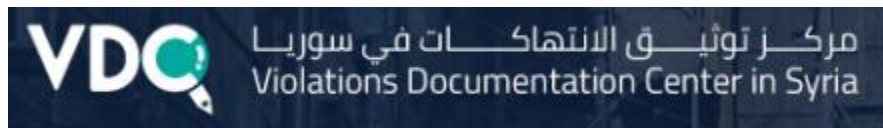


Organizing Syria's Dead: Violations Documentation Center in Syria



A Case Study for INFO 202, Fall 2016

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Overview.

Since 2011, war has ravaged the country of Syria through conflict waged among Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, non-state groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat Al-Nusrah, dozens of separate opposition groups, and state actors including Russia, the United States, and Turkey¹. By 2012, the situation in Syria evolved into a recognized armed conflict and introduced the applicability of the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law upon its combatants¹. Due to the war's difficult conditions to observe and document when violations of those standards occur, international bodies rely upon data collected by a small number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Syria². One such organization, the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) in Syria is a non-profit NGO that has documented individual victims in Syria since 2011³. Unlike other NGOs, VDC also maintains a publicly accessible information architecture, available in Arabic and English, enabling visitors to its website to search and retrieve information from their dataset⁴.

What is being organized?

VDC organizes digital records of victims from the Syrian war, specifically description resources of persons killed, detained, and kidnapped by participants in the conflict within Syria. The system's scope includes civilians and opposition combatants, yet excludes combatants of the Syrian regime and its allies despite VDC's claims that their researchers "document violations from all sides and regardless of the perpetrators"³. Still, members of opposition groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL are listed among the casualties, despite being considered by the United States government and others as terrorist groups⁵, as objectivity and impartiality are considered key principles within the domain of human rights documentation⁶.

VDC includes information for up to 28 resource descriptions pertaining to the victim's biographic information, circumstances related to their death or detainment, and multimedia (photographs or videos) of the victim. Each victim is entered with a unique number identifier which can be referenced by URL since common identifiers such as name, national identification numbers, or passport numbers may not be known. While VDC's mission is the documentation of "violations", they do not describe these records by particular laws being violated, leaving the qualification of violations to the user.

Why is it being organized?

The information architecture serves as a publicly available archive and a reference for media and advocacy groups seeking accountability and justice for the over 150,000 victims listed. As mentioned



Figure 1. Partial Display of a 'Killed' Person Record.

previously, victim records are organized to support search and retrieval of information pertaining to specific individuals or categories of individuals. These interactions enable media outlets like the New York Times⁷ or advocacy groups like Amnesty International⁸ to report on the impact of this war on civilians, which can inform policymakers or support future prosecution of perpetrators in the International Criminal Court.

While the site does not enable bulk export of records, researchers, through webscraping or other coordination with VDC, combine this data with other non-public records collected by other organizations in Syria⁹. Using the frequency of duplicate reports across datasets, analysts from organizations like the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) use multiple systems estimation to account for selection bias (VDC cannot document all violations due to dangerous conditions or the lack of willing witnesses) and provide more accurate estimates of civilians killed in Syria¹⁰.

When is it being organized?

The first stage of organization is the selection of resources and collection of resource descriptions by the center's researchers from "field hospitals, cemeteries, casualties' families and some of the media centers"³. The information is sent to the website administration team who creates the digital record. Next, any photos, videos, or additional details found on social media or elsewhere on the web will be added to a victim's record. The third stage is the verification of the data by field researchers. With all the center's collected information for a particular casualty, the researchers will review the information with local sources to ensure that the resources are properly described and categorized in the organizing system.

Users of VDC's information architecture further organize information 'on the way out.' A faceted classification scheme (Figure 2), with enumerative facets such as cause of death, province, or civilian status, allow the users to recall victims belonging to selected categories. For more precise queries, a user can enter information in text fields such as 'Name' or 'Mother's Name', although the lack of smart matching or wild card use can severely limit recall due to wide variation of Arabic-English name transliterations ('Mohamed' versus 'Muhammad' versus 'Mohammed').

The image shows a web form titled "Filter by" with a red header. It contains several sections of filters:

- Province**: A dropdown menu with "Show All" selected.
- Sex**: A dropdown menu with "Show All" selected.
- Marital Status**: A dropdown menu with "Show All" selected.
- Status**: A dropdown menu with "Show All" selected.
- Display**: A dropdown menu with "Show All" selected.
- Start Date**, **End Date**, and **This Date**: Three empty text input fields.
- Cause of Death**: A list of checkboxes with labels: Explosion, Shelling, Field Execution, Shooting, Kidnapping - Execution, Kidnapping - Torture, Kidnapping - Torture - Execution, Detention - Execution, Detention - Torture, Detention - Torture - Execution, Un-allowed to seek Medical help, Warplane shelling, Other, Chemical and toxic gases, Siege, and Unknown.
- Actors**: A section with three rows of text input fields:
 - Row 1: Name, Mother's Name, Area \ Place of birth
 - Row 2: Occupation, Notes, Martyrdom location
 - Row 3: Age, Rank / Military situation, Type of Weapon
- Submit**: A large button at the bottom.

Figure 2. VDC's "Killed" list classification scheme.

How much is it being organized?

The resources are organized at the individual level and, while this level of abstraction does not allow specific mass casualty events to be organized, the degree of organization has increased as the war has progressed. Since 2012, the number of resource descriptions has increased from 18 to 28 while four additional categories were added to classify resources¹¹. The added granularity has been driven by two factors: the compliance to international standards and adding category coverage to match the evolution of the war. (See Case Study Artifact) Resource descriptions such as 'the source' and 'date of birth' (only the victim's age was included previously) were added as part of a late 2016 redesign to conform to the institutional context of international documentation standards. 'Chemical and toxic gases' and 'Siege' categories were added under 'Cause of Death' after large number of casualties resulted from those types of attacks, creating needed granularity for the casualties whose deaths would have previously been classified as 'Other'.

How or by whom is it being organized?

The resources are organized by VDC's staff of 35 researchers who select, describe, and categorize the data across the major conflict areas of Syria. VDC claims that its "activists are sometimes directly targeted by the Syrian government"³ including an incident in December 2013 where the director and three other staff members were kidnapped never to be seen again. This dynamic creates a trade-off between the protection of personnel and the provenance of the information as reflected in the site's architecture. Absent from resource descriptions are identities of persons who provided, entered, or verified the information.

Where is it being organized?

While relatively safer than warzone where the data is collected and verified, the digital domain of the information architecture features threats such as the Syrian Electronic Army, a group of hackers that have targeted international organizations opposing the Assad regime¹². As HRDAG stresses¹³, human rights organizations like VDC need to emphasize data security and encryption to avoid the theft of sensitive information regarding victims, researchers, and sources while multiple backups are needed to prevent the data's destruction.

References:

1. <http://www.rulac.org/countries/syria>
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3. http://vdc-sy.net/Website/?page_id=849
4. <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs/>
5. https://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_nusrah_front.html
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7. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/14/world/middleeast/syria-war-deaths.html>
8. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/death-everywhere-war-crimes-and-human-rights-abuses-in-aleppo>
9. <https://hrdag.org/2013/04/23/how-we-estimate-casualties-in-syria-part-1/>
10. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/19/why-only-counting-the-dead-in-syria-wont-bring-them-justice-hrdag-pattern-analysis/>
11. http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs/
12. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/computer-hacking-conspiracy-charges-unsealed-against-members-syrian-electronic-army>
13. <https://hrdag.org/coreconcepts/>

Additional Reading:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/syria-stories-behind-photos-killed-detainees>

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/05/14/eight-problems-with-amnestys-report-on-aleppo-syria/>

<http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/counting-under-fire-untold-story-syrias-casualty-data>

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf

Describing Syria’s Dead. The table below charts the use and modification of the Violation Documentation Center in Syria’s resource descriptions and vocabulary over time.						
Original Vocabulary	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Current Vocabulary
Name (Free Text)						Name (Free Text)
Province (Enumeration)						Province (Enumeration)
14 Syrian Provinces (Damascus, Homs..)						14 Syrian Provinces (Damascus, Homs..)
Other						Other Nationalities
						Unknown
Sex (Enumeration)						Sex (Enumeration)
Adult – Male						Adult – Male
Child – Male						Child – Male
Adult – Female						Adult – Female
Child – Female						Child – Female
Status (Enumeration)						Status (Enumeration)
Civilian						Civilian
Non-Civilian						Non-Civilian
Mother’s Name (Free Text)						Mother’s Name (Free Text)
						Date of Birth (Date Input)
						Number of kids (Integer)
Age (Integer)						Age (Integer)
Family Status (Free Text)						Marital Status (Free Text)
Area (Free Text)						Area / Place of Birth (Free Text)
Occupation (Free Text)						Occupation (Free Text)
National Number (Free Text)						National Number (Free Text)
ID Card Number (Free Text)						ID Card Number (Free Text)
Date of Death (Date Input)						Date of Death (Date Input)
Martyrdom Location (Free Text)						Martyrdom Location (Free Text)
Cause of Death (Enumeration)						Cause of Death (Enumeration)
Explosion						Explosion
Shelling						Shelling
Field Execution						Field Execution
Shooting						Shooting
Kidnapping – Execution						Kidnapping – Execution
Kidnapping – Torture						Kidnapping – Torture
Kidnapping – Torture – Execution						Kidnapping – Torture – Execution
Detention – Execution						Detention – Execution
Detention – Torture						Detention – Torture
Detention – Torture – Execution						Detention – Torture – Execution
Un-allowed to seek Medical help						Un-allowed to seek Medical help
Warplane Shelling						Warplane Shelling
Other						Other
						Chemical and toxic gases
						Siege
						Unknown
						Direct Cause of Death (Free Text)
						Method of Execution (Free Text)
						Actors (Free Text)
						Type of Weapon (Free Text)
						Brigade Name (Free Text)
						The Source (Free Text)
						Caesar File (Boolean)
						Link (URL)
Rank (Free Text)						Rank / Military Situation (Free Text)
Notes (Free Text)						Notes (Free Text)
Videos (URL or File)						Videos (URL or File)
Photo (URL or File)						Photo (URL or File)

Describing Syria's Dead.

This artifact reviews the changes in vocabulary of the Violations Documentation Center in Syria used to describe persons killed in the Syrian Civil War and discusses the context in which those changes occurred.

Cause of Death.

Chemical and Toxic Gases. Siege. Unknown.

On December 23, 2012, the first allegation of chemical weapons use in the Syrian Civil War was reported after civilians in Homs were killed by a "poisonous gas" used by the Assad regime. VDC soon added a 'Chemical and toxic gas' category to add granularity to the 'Cause of Death' category coinciding with tremendous international pressure on the Syrian Regime to cease chemical weapon use. 'Siege' and 'Unknown' categories were previously included in 'Other' until April 2016. The difference in semantics between 'Unknown' and 'Other' may seem slight, but, in the domain of historical documentation, separating deaths due to ambiguous or unknown circumstances can lend credibility to the dataset.

Province.

Other Nationalities. Unknown.

An ambiguously named resource description, 'Province' refers to the casualty's origins. An 'Unknown' category was created in August 2013, adding coverage to classify resources when the information was unavailable, while 'Other' is used to describe foreign casualties with their country of origin listed under 'Area/Place of Birth.' Important for describing the large number of foreign fighters in groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), 'Other' was renamed to 'Other Nationalities' in October 2016 most likely for the sake of clarity.

Actors.

Actors, Rank / Military Situation.

Since March 2011 when Syrian government security forces shot and killed unarmed protesters, 'Syrian government and affiliated militias' was the only non-empty value for 'Actors', a description for the perpetrator of a victim's death, until Nov 2015 when ISIL is specified. This lack of description persisted despite the increasing involvement of major actors in the Syrian conflict such as ISIL (declared a "caliphate" in June 2014), a United States-led coalition (September 2014), and Russia (September 2015). While alleged perpetrators other than the Syrian government were instead listed in 'Notes', 'Russian forces', 'International Coalition Forces', 'Not identified', and other forces are not listed as an 'Actor' until April 2016. 'Rank' was renamed 'Rank / Military Situation' in 2012 likely to account for forces such as ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra lacking a traditional rank structure.

2016 Redesign.

The Source, Date of Birth, Type of Weapon, Number of Kids, Link, Brigade Name, Caesar File, Direct Cause of Death, Method of Execution

In October 2016, VDC announced a major redesign of their organizing system and introduced new resource descriptions to "comply with International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights standards." Some descriptions such as 'Date of Birth', 'The Source', 'Direct Cause of Death' signal obvious movement towards categories derived from an institutional context. Others like 'Brigade Name' and 'Caesar File' can be attributed to the specific context of the Syrian War: opposition forces are typically identified by 'Brigade' and "Caesar" refers to the codename of a Syrian military defector who smuggled photographic evidence of 6,786 detainees who died in Syrian government detention or soon thereafter.

Violations Documentation Center in Syria dataset: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs>

Timeline Constructed from: http://web.archive.org/web/20161014211202*/http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995> <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/syria-stories-behind-photos-killed-detainees> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>