



Of Representation and Reclamation: The Political Appropriation of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus under Al-Sharaa

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Abstract

Mirroring the model of Garroum Pla, in this analysis the urban space of Damascus is not understood as a reduced matter of streets, squares, and buildings, but rather as full with meaning and resonance, integral to the construction of identities, their modes of expression and the information of ordinary life.¹ More specifically, and following Charles Tripp, public spaces like streets, mosques and squares are read as key spatial nodes of state power.² Occupying public spaces has formed part of the strategy of oppositions against regimes during the Arab Spring; most famously on Tahrir Square in Cairo. In Syria, the occupation of public spaces by protesters, including the Umayyad Mosque, did not prove to be a viable long-term option as Assad's regime early and violently suppressed such civil disobedience. The surveillance and crack down of protesters were particularly prevalent in Damascus, at the heart of the power of the regime.³ When protesters shouted anti-Assad slogans outside the Umayyad Mosque in March 2011, they were quickly dispersed by security forces and orchestrated counter protesters.⁴

1 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, Foreword by Vivienne Jabri.

2 - Tripp, "6 - The Politics of Resistance and the Arab Uprisings."

3 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, 126.

4 - Slackman, "Syrian Troops Open Fire on Protesters in Several Cities."

The Umayyad Mosque:

A Site Full of Meaning and Resonance

In more than twelve years of war between regime forces, secular groups and Islamic factions, Damascus never fell into the hands of the opposition; it turned out true that, as Garroum Pla writes, "whoever holds Damascus holds Syria".⁵ Only on 8 December 2024, when a coalition of armed groups led by Hayat Tahrir Al-Shams (HTS) advanced into Damascus, the regime fled and declared defeat. The Assad family and their cronies no longer held Syria.

5 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, 146.

The Umayyad Mosque is one of the capital's most monumental buildings. With Damascus, the monument changed hands of power. On 8 December 2024, HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known under his *nom de guerre* Abu Mohammed al-Golani, gave the victory speech in the mosque. Choosing a place that represents the zenith of the Islamic empire, Al-Sharaa asserted power by addressing the people.

Power in this analysis is understood in a Foucauldian sense as hidden, masked, and concealed in order to be acceptable. Power is asserted through practicing discipline in disciplinary spaces; "in this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by

arranging objects".⁶ As power is exercised with invisibility and discretion, it provokes little resistance from the subjugated subjects.⁷ Typical disciplinary spaces in Foucault's work are prisons, schools, hospitals, and the army.⁸

Importantly, power assertion in spaces of domination is a universal phenomenon. While this paper analysis a disciplinary space in the Arab world, the dynamics of power are by no means restricted to a certain location, culture, or ethnicity. This work is explicitly not an attempt to orientalize and draw a line between the Western and the non-Western other. Rather, the patterns of hegemony in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus could be located anywhere.⁹

The Architecture: Built in the Umayyad Period to Constitute a Monument

The Umayyad Mosque is a masterpiece of architecture. As it is one of the largest mosques in the world and one of the oldest sites of continuous prayer since the rise of Islam, it constitutes an important social, cultural, and artistic development.¹⁰

In 661 AD, caliph Muawiyah rose to power and named Damascus the center of the Islamic empire. In the late 8th century, the Abbasids moved the capital of the Islamic Empire to Baghdad and Damascus turned into a relatively neglected provincial capital.¹¹ In the 100 years in between, when Damascus was blooming, caliph Al-Walid commissioned the Umayyad Mosque. It was built between 705 and 715 AD by craftsmen and workers from all over the Umayyad Empire.¹²

Al-Walid also commissioned the mosque of Medina and the Al-Aqsa mosque. The series of congregational mosques constitute the result of caliphal patronage at a defining stage in the development of Muslim culture and at the apogee, the peak of power and glory, of Damascus.^{13, 14}

The mosque forms a quadrangle and contains a large open courtyard on the north side.¹⁵ Around it an arcade of arches are supported by columns. The hall of worship stretches along the south side of the mosque and is divided into three aisles by columns and arches. An octagonal dome is located in the middle of the prayer hall. There are three doors to the mosque and three minarets. Marble grilles cover the windows and mosaics decorate different parts of the mosque such as the western door.¹⁶

The Umayyad Mosque has not only held a religious role but also a social cultural, educational and political one as a seat of rule during the Islamic period. It was the place where the caliph received high-ranking guests, held assemblies, and judged people.¹⁷ For example, in the 8th century AC, caliph Sulayman ibn 'Abdal Malik greeted the conquerors of Spain, Musa ibn Nusayr and Tarek ibn Ziyad, in the mosque.¹⁸ The palace of the caliphs was located next to the mosque to ease the movement between the location of dwelling and the location of ruling.¹⁹

6 - Foucault, *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* , 99.

7 - Ibid., 114.

8 - Ibid., 8, 66.

9 - Said, *Orientalism*.

10 - UNESCO, *Ancient City of Damascus*.

11 - Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture In The Arab States Renaissance of a Region* , 99, 10.

12 - George, *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus Art, Faith and Empire in Early Islam*, 15, 19 117.

13 - Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture*, 10.

14 - Ibid., 3.

15 - George, *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus Art, Faith and Empire in Early Islam*, 8, 9.

16 - Bahnassi, *The Great Omayyad Mosque of Damascus The First Masterpieces of Islamic Art* , 131, 149, 156.

17 - Ibid., 177, 178.

18 - Ibid., 178.

19 - Ibid., 177.

Interestingly, and in stark contrast, the Assad palace was built far away from the Old Town on Mount Mezzeh in the western part of Damascus. It symbolically stands for the increasing alienation and divorce of Bashar Al-Assad from the Syrian people that culminated in the 2011 upheaval. Commissioned by Hafez Al-Assad to Kenzo Tange and Mohammad Nofal in 1974, the palace is conceived as an acropolis in a contemporary architectural idiom with a large outside area, that "creates a feudalistic architecture and makes little attempt to be in harmony with the traditional Islamic way of life".²⁰

Physical Interventions over the Centuries

The Umayyad Mosque underwent numerous restorations and suffered depredations as a result of fires in the 1069, 1401 and 1893 AD.²¹ Yet, the basic outline of the early eighth-century scheme and some of its decoration has been preserved. In the 20th century, various restorations took place; in 1928 and 1929, when Syria was a French colony, the mosaics were cleared and restored. In the 1960s after Syria's independence, the mosque was restored again, including the Bayt al-Mal and the facade of the prayer hall, two of the most celebrated parts of the mosque. Marguerite Van Berchem, a Swiss archeologist who developed a plan during the French mandate period to train local workers to conduct conservation, described these restorations as a "massacre".²² President Hafez Al-Assad commissioned further restoration in the late 1980s which were completed in 1994.²³ At this point, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) observed the intervention with an argus eye as the Old City of Damascus, and with it the Umayyad Mosque, acquired the status of World Cultural Heritage in 1979.²⁴ In 1992,

UNESCO expressed concern over work being done on the western wall and requested a comprehensive and updated documentation of the restoration including specification of the type of intervention (consolidation, restoration, renovation or reconstruction).²⁵

Four years later, the same organization again expressed "grave concern with regard to the serious damage sustained to the authenticity of this exceptional monument, the Omeyyades Mosque through the inordinate use of reinforced concrete, plaster and marble, and by the demolition and reconstruction work carried out without sufficient scientific studies and without taking into account international standards."²⁶ In 1996, Syria suspended the work at UNESCO's request.²⁷ Since 2013, the Old Town of Damascus has been on the list of world heritage in danger.²⁸ The engagement of UNESCO with the Umayyad Mosque has drastically decreased after the mid 1990s. For example, in UNESCO's reports from 2007 and 2008 on the Old Town of Damascus, the mosque is mentioned cumulatively only four times, on all occasions to help the reader locate surrounding streets and buildings.²⁹ The onset of the civil war in 2012 contributed its part but fails to fully explain the disengagement in the first decade of the current century. The stop of large-scale work on the mosque and the re-direction of attention by Syrian authorities to the restoration of other parts of the old city of Damascus, may offer some explanatory value.

25 - World Heritage Committee Twentieth Session Yucatan Mexico 2 -7 December 1996, *World Heritage Committee 16th Session Santa Fe United States of America* 7 -14 December 1992.

26 - World Heritage Committee, *Decisions World Heritage Committee Twentieth Session Yucatan Mexico* 2 -7 December 1996, 19.

27 - World Heritage Committee, *Report World Heritage Committee Twentieth Session Yucatan Mexico* 2 -7 December 1996, 47, 48.

28 - World Heritage Committee, WHC-13/37.COM/20., 107.

29 - Pini et al., *Mission Report Ancient City of Damascus*. Pini and Miglioli, *Mission Report*.

20 - Kultermann, *Contemporary Architecture In The Arab States Renaissance of a Region* , 101.

21 - Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture* ., 12.

22 - Ministry of Culture of France, *Restoration of Mosaics in the 20th Century*.

23 - Islamic Architectural Heritage, *Great Mosque of Damascus, Umayyad Mosque*.

24 - UNESCO, *Ancient City of Damascus*.



Figure 1 The Umayyad Mosque embedded in Damascus' urban fabric. Notice the solar panels on the roof in the left corner.³⁰

30 - HAND Human Aid & Development, *The Pulse of History: The Maintenance of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus by HAND*.

The mosque did not remain without physical interventions in recent years. Comparing satellite images of 5 December 2022 with 28 April 2023 reveals that solar panels were installed on the roof of the northern side during that time period.³¹ Furthermore, shortly after the fall of the regime and the assumption of power of al-Sharaa, the US-registered NGO HAND Human Aid & Development, whose CEO is from Aleppo, began “upgrading” the Umayyad Mosque between January and March 2025. Coordinating with the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museum as well as with the Ministry of Islamic Endowments, the NGO’s team renewed bathrooms, restored solar panels, painted interior and exterior walls, replaced interior carpets and installed more than 100 (!) security cameras, among other interventions.³²

31 - Google Earth *Umayyad Mosque in Dasmascus, Syria* .

32 - Talass, “Behind the Scenes in Post-Assad Syria with

In the Middle of the Old Town: Its Situationality in the Urban Fabric

The Umayyad Mosque has always stood at the heart of the city. It is situated in the northwestern part of the Old Town, bordering the quarters al-‘Amara in the north, Souq al-Harir in the south, and Souq al-Hamidiyah in the west.³³

Each quarter acquired an identity of its own shaped by the activities, confessional sect and the socio-economic status of its dwellers. Urban Damascus shows the co-existence of traditional and modern spaces; inside the historic city walls with its seven historic gates lays the

the \$300,000 Maintenance Masterplan to Preserve the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus.”

33 - George, *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus Art, Faith and Empire in Early Islam*, 117, 150, 180.

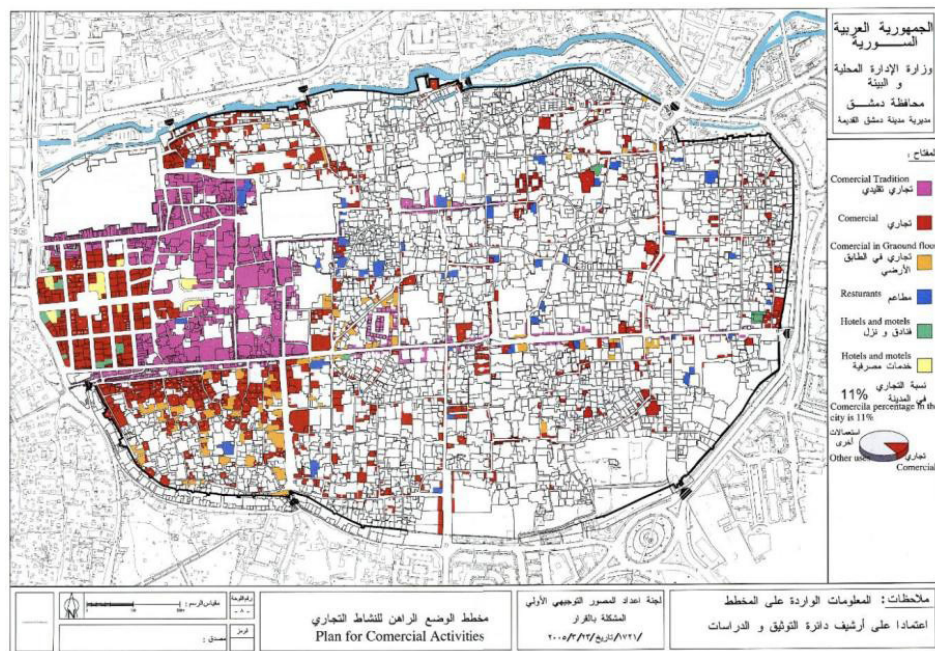


Figure 2 2008 Plan of the Old Town of Damascus. The Umayyad Mosque is the large white rectangle right of the area in pink. Pini et al., *Mission Report Ancient City of Damascus*, 15.

Old Town and outside are the modern neighborhoods.³⁴ Damascus is surrounded by the peri-urban and rural areas of Ghuta, which was the site of one of the most brutal air strikes by the regime during the civil war.³⁵

The urban fabric of the Old Town is characterized by the long Midhat Basha souq, the economic core of the Old Town, the three vertical streets Al-Sakkakin-Bzourieh, Al-Ameen Street and Babtouma Al-Kishleh axis, as well as alleys of various widths offering protection and shade from the sand and wind. In 2006, around 60 per cent of all land use was residential, highlighting the importance of housing within the Old Town.³⁶ A general lack of maintenance has led to housing decay which poses major challenges besides poor condition of infrastructure, traffic congestion with no separation between different types of mobility, and no regulation of shops' external

appearance creating non-homogeneous interactions between buildings.³⁷

In 1968, the French architect Michel Ecochard developed a Master Plan for Damascus at the demand of the government, which has remained the only official planning instrument.³⁸ This plan put forward a pattern of wide roads, including around the wall which isolated the Old Town from the rest of Damascus. It also included the clearance of surroundings of monuments which resulted in the demolition of entire groups of buildings around the Umayyad Mosque. Ecochard was convinced that historic sites ought to stand in open space.³⁹

Protests Around the Mosque in the Early Days of the Arab Spring

Mirroring the examples in Cairo and Egypt, in the early days of the Arab Spring civilians in Syria gathered in public spaces to protest. On 15 March 2011, people

34 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, 146, 150.

35 - Ibid., 146.

36 - Rajab, "Damascus - 'The Jasmine Vision': Towards a Sustainable Rehabilitation for the Old City.", 182.

37 - Ibid., 183, 184.

38 - Ibid., 177, 185.

39 - Ibid., 182.

assembled in Souq al-Hamidiyah next to the Umayyad Mosque. Ten days later during the “Friday of Dignity” rally, protesters marched from the Umayyad Mosque to Al-Marjeh square. Regime forces dispersed the rally and detained protesters.⁴⁰ Inside the Umayyad Mosque, some men were reported to rise from prayer and chant “God, Syria and freedom only”, a counterpoint to the pro-government slogan of “God, Syria and Bashar only”.⁴¹ As of April 2011, security measures tightened drastically in Damascus putting demonstrators at the imminent risk of arrest and violence. Consequently, anti-regime mobilization was relocated outside of the historic city walls into the popular quarters like Al-Midan, suburbs such as Qabun, Jobar, Barzeh, and Harasta, as well as into towns within rural Damascus like Al-Mo’adamiya and Daraya.⁴²

Political Reclamation of the Mosque by Al-Sharaa

On 8 December 2024, coalition of armed groups led by HTS with allied opposition groups overthrew the Assad regime and reached Damascus. HTS-leader Al-Sharaa delivered the victory speech in the Umayyad Mosque on the same day. Crowds gathered, cheered and listened to their new leader. He asserted that with hard work Syria would become (again) a “beacon of the Islamic nation”.⁴³ The first Friday prayer after the victory of the revolution was led by interim Prime Minister Mohammed Al-Bashir at the Umayyad Mosque.⁴⁴ Under Assad, government-vetted imams led the prayers. At the first anniversary of the victory of the revolution, Al-Sharaa led the prayer and delivered again an address inside the Umayyad Mosque, wearing the same military uniform as

a year before.⁴⁵

There is an important observation to be made here. The choice of the location is anything but arbitrary. Using the vocabulary of Vivienne Jabri, Al-Sharaa choose the Umayyad Mosque with full knowledge and conscience of its symbolic meaning, the resonance it creates for many Syrians, and the integral value it holds in constructing the identity of the Sunni majority population.⁴⁶

Furthermore, three parallels can be drawn. First, Al-Sharaa imitates and mimics the caliphs’ political use of the Umayyad Mosque. The caliphs received guests, held assemblies, and judged people there. Similarly, Al-Sharaa speaks to his people in the mosque in an exercise to assert power and control this space that represents the most glorious period of the Islamic era. In Foucault’s logic, Al-Sharaa asserts power through practicing discipline in this space of domination. Al-Sharaa dominates through arranging the Syrian objects: in other words, the new hegemon allows the victorious people into the Umayyad Mosque in a controlled and surveilled manner after opposition was suppressed inside and around the space for decades.

Second, the political reappropriation of the Umayyad Mosque mirrors earlier practices of Al-Sharaa as the former leader of Jabhat Al-Nusra, a Sunni Islamist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the predecessor of HTS; “[...] early on in the conflict, Jabhat Al-Nusra concentrated on reopening mosques and appointing new imams to disseminate its political vision and strengthen control over local communities. The homogenisation of discourse through religious spaces was a staple throughout rebel-controlled Syria”.⁴⁷ Al-Sharaa did not adopt a new disci-

40 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, 155.

41 - Slackman, “Syrian Troops Open Fire on Protesters in Several Cities.”

42 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, 155.

43 - Aljazeera, ‘New History Written’ Says HTS Leader al-Julani in Syria Victory Speech.

44 - Al-Aswad and and Hilton, “Crowds Flock to Umayyad Mosque for Syria’s First Friday Prayers after Assad.”

45 - The Syrian Observer, *In His Symbolic “Victory Uniform”, President al-Sharaa Declares from the Umayyad Mosque: ‘We Will Rebuild a Strong, Unified Syria from East to West.’*

46 - Garroum Pla, *Urbicide in Syria : A Postcolonial Understanding of Civil War*, Foreword by Vivienne Jabri.

47 - Baczko et al., *Civil War in Syria Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*, 190.

plinary tool when addressing the public in the Umayyad Mosque. Rather, he repeated what he practiced in years of civil war; reappropriating public spaces and reshaping them with a symbolic and ideological discourse.

Third, the physical intervention at the Umayyad Mosque contrasts with the neglect of the mosque under the late Assad regime. The CEO of the NGO HAND Human Aid & Development that led the effort believes the neglect was intentional. He comments that "it's as if the mosque's history was being buried inside of it. I think the previous regime was striving to bury the old history of Syria and for people to be attached only to the regime's history."⁴⁸

The referred "old history of Syria" encompasses the pre-colonial Islamic period, stretching from the caliphates of the Rashiduns to the Ottomans. In this sense, Al-Sharaa initiated a revival of the Islamic heritage by physically opening up the Umayyad Mosque to the *umma*, the Muslim community after access was controlled, policed and denied for decades under the quasi-secular, tyrannic Assad reign. Ultimately, this is an attempt by the new hegemon to fill the void, created by a failed nation-state, with a religious identity derived from a pre-colonial nostalgic past. This phenomenon is described by theologian Mohammad Arkoun as the religious confusion of the modern time.⁴⁹ The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus was a symbol of power during the Umayyad period.⁵⁰

Reappropriating it, Al-Sharaa metaphorically installs himself on the seat of rule. He asserts power of the new Syria and controls a space that is a great piece of architecture and represents the glorious Islamic past, proving that he is in harmony with pre-colonial life unlike his

predecessor. The mosque has become not only a key spatial node of state power but also a symbol of the new sheriff in town.

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48 - Talass, "Behind the Scenes in Post-Assad Syria with the \$300,000 Maintenance Masterplan to Preserve the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus."

49 - Jamaledine, *From the Nation State to the Failed State* 95.

50 - Bahnassi, *The Great Omayyad Mosque of Damascus The First Masterpieces of Islamic Art* , 178.

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Spatialization of Guilt: Sound, Architecture, and the Reconstruction of Terror

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Abstract

In 2015 Amnesty International, in collaboration with Forensic Architecture, began researching and interviewing survivors of Saydnaya Prison to recreate and spatialize their memories, reconstructing the architectures of their imprisonment and the experiences of captivity. Each prisoner was kept in conditions of near total sensory deprivation, with their vision severely restricted, and interaction with other detainees forbidden. Sound would become the primary cognitive instrument of memory. Inmates would develop an attunement to the acoustic information of the prison's architecture, its resonances, the sound of an impact, and how waves would be absorbed. From this experience, each prisoner would have their own embedded sensorial understanding of the architecture of the prison and would become a piece in reconstructing its tectonic of power and the acts that occurred there.

Introduction

The artist and an interviewer on this investigation, Lawrance Abu Hamdan, understood the nuances of this acoustic knowledge, and would develop a methodology entitled *Earwitness Testimony*; a forensic practice that would use sound to aid in reconstructing the spatial logics of its formal structure, while simultaneously revealing how its tectonics could produce, amplify and distribute suffering as a technology of control. Through this expanded practice, the building would be understood less as a setting for torture, but an instrument. Abu Hamdan's practice operates as a method in dialectic opposition to the orientalist representation in the production of power and architecture in the middle east, the acoustics spatialization of political violence, and the emergence of the art world as a site of juridical and epistemic counter production. His work explicates the colonial machineries of knowledge, identified by Edward Said as Orientalism and traced by Ziad Jamaledine into the specific history of architectural representation, that continues to render middle eastern bodies and spaces legible only through

western visual and categorical frameworks. Abu Hamdan and Forensic Architecture's sonic reconstruction of Saydnaya is the counter claim to this western gaze and its orientalist gaze. Through its multi-sensory reconstruction space because alive, sound becomes essential and the act of forensic listening uses the acoustic traces of violence to inform a nuanced spatial knowledge, that the architectural plan, its survey and the standards of proof were structurally designed to ignore.

Before introducing the complexity of atmospheric sound¹, Abu Hamdan would explore the complexities of speech analysis and the voice as a site of juridical complexities. In the ongoing research project, entitled *Aural Contract*, first shown at London's, *The Showroom*, the artist built a sound archive containing audio extracts of his own work, as well as those of the trials of Sadd-

1 - In this case, atmospheric sound is used to differentiate between oral and other sources, such as percussive, mechanical, and environmental.

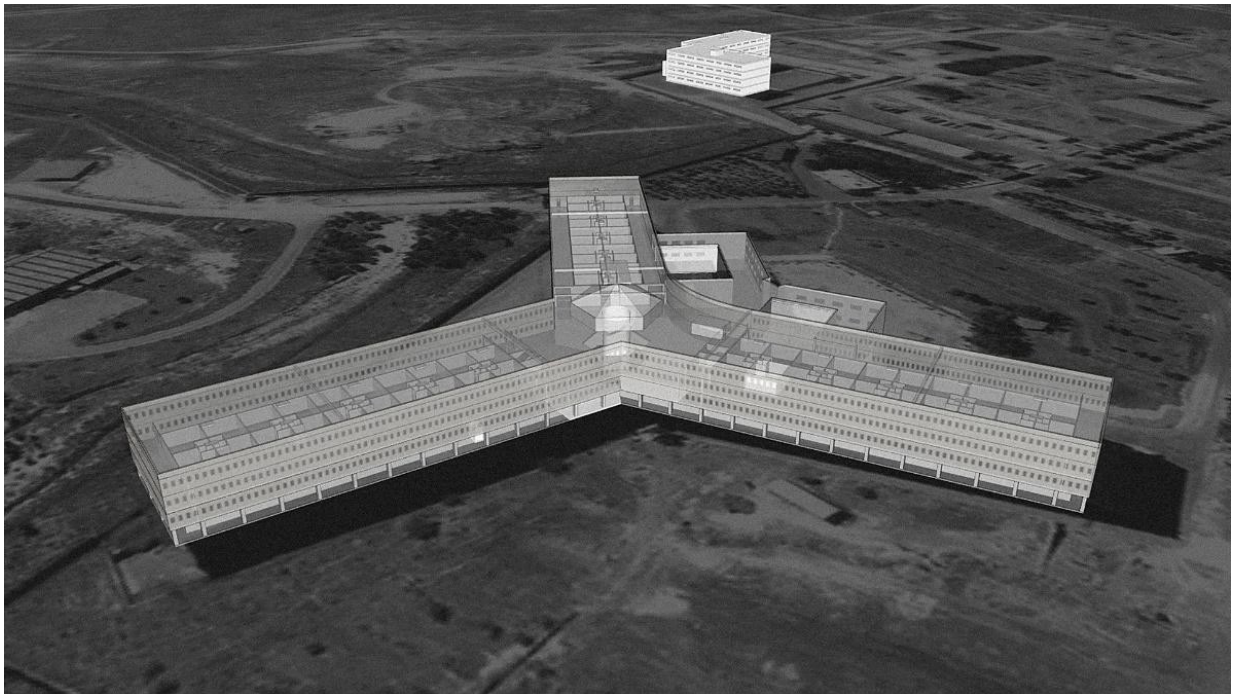


Fig.1 - Forensic Architecture, *Torture in Saydnaya Prison*, Building Render, 2016

am Hussein, and UK Police Evidence Tapes. Through this research, Abu Hamdan identifies a deeper entanglement between sound and law. In bringing audio into the legal space, he observes, “drew upon, brought to the surface, and professionalized a way of listening to the voice specific to political and legal forums,” (Abu Hamdan, 2011-Ongoing) suggesting that rather than offering a neutral reception of acoustic testimony, legal institutions developed particular ways and metrics of hearing that privileged certain modes of evidence over others. In this way, the testimony of a survivor may have a level of distortion,² and embedded in the memory of a sound, as opposed to visual proof, does not necessarily conform to the standards of level proof that courts and media normally deem adequate. In this case, Abu Hamdan begins to challenge the notion of its imprecision and the framework entirely, illuminating exactly why testimony from Saydnaya was difficult to be received. The ques-

tions these investigations begin to ask, are not whether acoustic testimony is valid, but how, through its reconstruction of space from sound, the forms of power that organize that space become increasingly less opaque and begin to render these larger architectures of control.

This larger machinery of control and how it works at the human scale is revealed by the artist in describing Mohamed, a Palestinian Asylum seeker, who was examined during the Aural Contract research. Mohamed was ultimately denied entry and asylum status into the United Kingdom, after being subjected to an accent analysis by the immigration authorities after losing his documents. Through their analysis, they determined that Mohamed was lying about him being from Palestine, based on the way he pronounced the word for Tomato. This single vowel, Abu Hamdan writes, “the sound that provides the UK Border agency with the apparent certainty of Mohamed’s Syrian origin: A country only 22 Kilometres away from his hometown of Jenin in Palestine.” He continues, “locating this Syrian Vowel in the speech of a Palestinian surely proves nothing more than the dis-

2 - Distortion is the modulation of sound, in this case, how the memory of sound could be more complicated when it includes atmospheric sound.

placement of the Palestinian themselves.” (Abu Hamdan, 2011-Ongoing) In this case, the relationship with Saydnaya is a structural one. However, both begin to reveal a framework of classification that claims absolute truth based on a western understanding of a region. It is a simplification that ignores the complexities of sound, its nuances, and even more the instabilities of accents and its traces after generations of displacement throughout the region. Instead, the western framework that is in place serves to classify and produce the middle eastern body according to its standards, ultimately flattening the individual into an administrable identity. The cross sensory and distorted spatial memories of the survivors of Saydnaya, with its auditory subjectivity and embodied experience, complicates this categorical cultural production and the structures that it is embedded in.

The western framework that classified Mohamed is the operation that Edward Said identified as Orientalism. Rather than understanding the person as complicated and unique, this process instead misrepresents the east according to its own aims revealing the exact power structure that continues to produce the east as a knowable, classifiable, quantifiable and governable object through western disciplines and institutions. Said argues that one cannot entirely understand “the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage- and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively.” (Said, 1978) This cultural production has been absorbed into the very institutions, its legal frameworks, its military structures and the geopolitical arrangements that govern it. This is the very framework that, when distilled, categorize and flatten asylum seekers like Mohamed, into a knowable and organizable entity. However, to understand it more completely, it must be understood within the legacy of colonialism. Gwendolyn Wright points to the institutional genealogy of the colonial administration who designed its structure, its sociologists, anthropologists, and legal scholars of the colonial apparatus, whose expressed professional, if not “unspoken purpose of their discipline was to defend and justify European colonization.” (Wright, 1991) These historic systems of classification, surveillance and spatial

control, were entirely embedded into the colonial history and apparatus’ that have been inherited, adapted and, in many cases, intensified by the west as well as the post-colonial regimes that followed in situ. It is within these longer histories of colonial and orientalist production that Saydnaya Prison must be understood. It could be seen both as an aberration produced by a singular brutal dynastic and authoritarian Assad Family, as well as an extreme contemporary expression of a set of spatial and political logics whose genealogy runs directly through to the colonial apparatus that Said describes.

These colonial spatial logics that categorize Saydnaya are the same operation into the specific history of architectural representation that architect Ziad Jameleddine seeks to expose in his text *Drawing the Isolated Mosque*. In this text, he examines how the orientalist gaze renders eastern architectural practices according to a scientific and quantifiable framework, presenting itself as objective. Jameleddine argues,

“Western scholars’ analysis and representation of mosque architecture were heavily shaped by orientalist visual constructs (Bozdoğan, 1988) Archeologists, architects, and historians produced orthographic and axonometric drawings that methodically surveyed the forms of the mosques they studied. Illustrating them as technical objects, these drawings abstracted their subjects, severing them from their context and dissecting them into component parts.” (Jameleddine, 2024)

The orthographic plan did not capture the nuances of Islamic architecture, and instead deliberately rendered these images as classifiable, knowable and above all, static. What these plans systematically excluded were the acoustic life of the building, the bodies that move within its walls, and the residue of inhabitation that ages it. These traces of an eastern life were precisely what could not be captured in two dimensions. Isenstadt and Rivzi argue that the architecture of the middle east was constantly presented in “purely formal terms- metonymic, fragmentary representations in two-dimensional and decontextualized settings.” (Isenstadt, Rivzi, 2008)

The built environment of the region was rendered knowable through a framework organized around the fixed and measurable of the orientalist gaze, a framework that produced space as an object of classification rather than a living, inhabited and sounding condition. What the Earwitness Testimonies of Abu Hamdan solicit, is something diametrically opposed to this western tradition. While the orthographic plan flattens space into a legible and silent diagram, the acoustic reconstruction of Saydnaya Prison through survivor testimony generates an entirely new tectonic and multi sensorial understanding of the prison architecture itself. It is an understanding that space is no longer fixed, but a field of forces, of waves, frequencies, vibrations and relationships between three-dimensional surfaces, bodies and sound.

Where the U.K border control misheard a vowel and categorized their identity, the earwitness testimony heard stories and produced a powerful auditory tectonic capable of exposing these instruments of control.

When conducting research into the Saydnaya Prison, Forensic Architecture interviewed 5 survivors over the course of 7 days, where Abu Hamdan solicited what he termed *Earwitness Testimony*, a forensic practice that be capable of reconstructing the tectonics of the Saydnaya Prison from the acoustic memory of the interviewees. The prison walls are something that each detainee comes to know with great intimacy.

However, in the case of the Saydnaya prisoners, it was their auditory qualities. Abu Hamdan writes in, *Walled Unwalled*,

“With these walls becoming the limits of their visual world, they had to train their ears to surpass them, listening to every sonic sign and signal to try and gather as much information about the place in which they were incarcerated, the people who were incarcerating them, and the forms of torture they were being subjected to.” (Abu Hamdan, 2018a)



Fig.2 - Forensic Architecture, *Torture in Saydnaya Prison*, Interview with a Survivor, 2016

With the absence of sight and visual registers, listening would become the primary instrument of creating a spatial knowledge of the architecture that surrounded them.

Each prisoner would utilize the echoes and reverberations that they heard to gain a cognitive understanding of the space that surrounded them, mapping surfaces, recording walls and corridors, as well as to reconstruct specific incidents that happened within them. These sounds and its reverberations worked “just like sonar, ‘the sounds of the beatings illuminated the spaces around them.’” (Weizman, 2017) The cross sensory nature of these testimonies would become central to the process of the architecture’s reconstruction. The building would become both the technology of their torture, but also the method in which they could register its traces long after they survive.

What the Earwitness Testimony and its forensic listening would uncover was that the material architecture would play an active and deliberate part in how the building would conduct sound. Within Saydnaya, its corridors, the composition of its walls and even the positioning of the ventilation system would each create a distinct resonance within the harmony of sounds. Abu Hamdan describes the acoustic condition of Saydnaya with forensic precision, “There was one sound, however, that wherever it occurred, all the cells in each of the three wings would hear it. This was the sound of the thick green plastic plumbing pipe striking a human body.” He would continue,

“A muffled low-mid frequency booms through the prison at 250 Hz, the exact frequency at which the walls of Saydnaya are built to Vibrate...and so the building’s design is such that when one wall resonates with the sound of the pipe’s strike, all the walls in every cell shake vibrantly in response, creating the illusion that the sound is emanating from within the walls themselves.” (Abu Hamdan, 2018a)

Here we understand the building not as merely an instrument, but a confluence of material and sonic properties

that congeal to be exploited only to create an omnipotent sound of terror. The very tectonic properties that may seem entirely neutral, are themselves deliberately utilized and as a tool to propagate this experience of fear. Where Guards would position acts of torture next to shafts and pipes, so that these sounds would enter into the tectonic materials, spatializing and mixing these traumas into the very mortar of the building. Here it is seen as a complete technology of control and an instrument of violence as it conducts terror sonically through its walls. Yet this very technology has a specific colonial genealogy. The acoustic prison typology that Saydnaya is in lineage with, was developed in the East German Republic, “building a prison where the walls were used as weapons; creating prisoners who see nothing but where everything.” (Abu Hamdan, 2018a)

These architypes of sonic torture would be transferred from the Eastern bloc to Syria, where its precise three-pronged star architectural formations would be deployed at Saydnaya. This prison is less an aberration than a transferred typology of acoustic control, with a specific genealogy of colonial spatial logics developed by the U.S.S.R in East Germany before being implemented by the Assad regime. Its violence becomes legible through its acoustic residues and the memories and trauma left in the bodies of those who had survived it.

In the investigation of Saydnaya Prison, the most radical counter epistemological claim the earwitness methodology advances is that the distortion of sound experienced by the prisoners in their retellings, is not a failure of traditional testimony, but a nuanced and transdisciplinary mode of remembering. The Forensic Architecture report is explicit,

“Errors, contradictions, and lacunas are enriched with information, because they reveal something of the experience of a detainee and their psychological condition. Such distortions thus contain more information than a measured architectural rendering and could themselves be considered as evidence in their own right.” (Weizman, 2017)

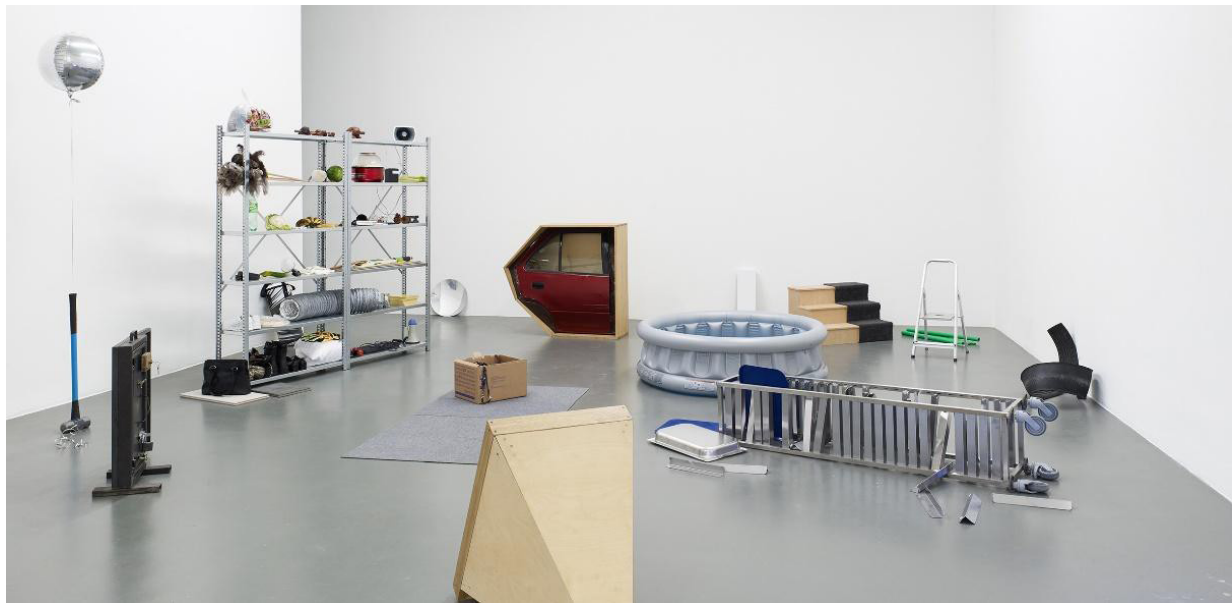


Fig.3 - Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Earwitness Theatre*, Installation View, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2018

Perhaps these multi-sensorial experiences relay and reveal deviations in memory, layers of data producing a simulacrum of events, rather than their exact visual copy. One survivor described a rectangular corridor as circular, but the report instead explains, "This lapse might thus testify to the violence of Saydnaya more precisely than any faithful architectural description." (Weizman, 2017) The contradiction of this circular geometry is not an error of recollection, but rather a sensorial disorientation of tectonics when the body is subjected to extreme violence. It is these altered memories, not of facts, but the alteration of felt experiences, of events, of sounds and of architecture, that begin to reveal truths.

It is from these distortions, these altered spatial memories and cross sensorial traces, that Abu Hamdan's practice begins to construct something larger than a forensic record. What his practice produces is a new and more expansive understanding of how space, sound and power are mutually constitutive, what this essay terms *the Auditory Tectonic*. When one survivor described the sound of torture traveling through the walls of Saydnaya and becoming a felt sense, "It doesn't sound like something is hitting a body, it feels like someone is demolishing a wall." (Abu Hamdan, 2018a) Within this practice,

this is not a poetic observation, but a physical condition. The moment at which sonic violence and architectural tectonics become literally indistinguishable, where these sounds of torture, transmutates into a material vibration; from a heard experience to a felt one. Here, the built environment no longer acts as a container, but a transmitter, conducting and becoming, in the process, a participant in the act. The *Auditory Tectonic*, names this forensic condition, not simply as the observation that sound and architecture are entangled, but the understanding that sound, when listened to with precision, actively spatializes power, making the architectures of control legible. This is a form of knowledge that the orthographic plan, organized around the fixed, silent and classifiable, is incapable of rendering. Abu Hamdan argues in *Aural Contract* that jurisdiction is itself a sonic condition. Dividing the term reveals that *juris* as a legal authority and *diction* as speech and enunciation, suggests that "the law itself operates as a speech-space in which those within its range of audibility are subject to its authority." (Abu Hamdan, 2014) The Saydnaya Prison is such a space, a jurisdiction exercised through sound, in which the range of audibility extending through every material of its being, determines its range of power. To reconstruct its acoustic architecture is therefore

not only to document a crime, but to spatialize its very jurisdiction, building through sound a precise auditory tectonic of an otherwise invisible power.

Where does this knowledge go, and how is it displayed? The art world, with its exhibition space, the biennial, and the gallery become the domain in which Abu Hamdan's practice would sit, not as an aesthetic display but a provisional alternative juridical forum.

The testimonies that emerged from Saydnaya were at times too nuanced and unmeasurable for the courtroom and too embodied for journalism. As Abu Hamdan reflects,

"I still felt as though there was all of this inadmissible information that could neither really enter the news and nor could it enter the law court...It seemed to me that it was really important to use the space and language of art as a way to deal with this stuff that had slipped through the cracks." (Abu Hamdan, 2018b)

The artworld would instead become a proto court for the performance of this inadmissible knowledge, acquiring cultural legitimacy, and constituting a form of counter pressure on the institutions and frameworks that stood against it. The art world is the space that can refuse and challenge these frameworks, they can explicate them in plain view, insisting on the public presentation of evidence that the legal system has organized itself to ignore. As Tine Destrooper observes in their essay *Moving Beyond Formal Truth Practics and Forensic Truth in the Syrian Conflict*, "artistic practices can 'presence' that which was previously neglected or invisible, articulate absences, and draw attention to suffering caused by invisibility." (Destrooper, 2023) Abu Hamdan's audio investigations have been used as evidence at the UK asylum and Immigration Tribunal and as advocacy with Forensic Architecture for organizations including Amnesty international, demonstrating that the boundary between the aesthetic and the juridical does not exist in Abu Hamdan's Practice. In fact, it is an important threshold across which this inadmissible knowledge and information begin to acquire his unique aesthetic qualities and cultural force.

Saydnaya Prison was designed as an architecture of terror and control. Its detainees were rendered voiceless, unlocatable and absorbed into the framework of its tectonic of power. The building itself housed and conducting terror through the vibrations felt in its wall, corridors, and its material makeup, distributing it so thoroughly that no single source could be identified and its organization so thorough that no conventional form of evidence could be gathered. What Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Earwitness Testimony* produced, in collaboration with Forensic Architecture, was not to simply counter archive the events that took place, but produce a counter architecture, an auditory tectonic of power that had organized itself, spatially and institutionally, to remain unseen. Through this multi sensorial reconstruction of space from survivor interviews and found recordings, these forms of power, of coloniality and of authoritarianism, became less opaque.

The buildings would become instruments of their own comprehension. The orthographic plan had long since frozen the built environments of the middle east into a timeless and classifiable body. The juridical space declared the testimonies of these survivors as too strange, too unmeasurable to count as truth. Each of these operations belong to the same colonial logic and Abu Hamdan's Practice refuses both simultaneously. What his *Earwitness Testimony Methodology* insists on, and what the Saydnaya Investigation with its forensic precision, is that the auditory tectonic is not a supplementary form of architectural knowledge, but rather a complete record of the tectonic and organizational powers that tried to remain entirely invisible.



Fig.4 - Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Walled Unwalled*, Video Installation, 58th Venice Biennale, Italian Pavillion, Venice, 2016

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