



Invitation

ZMO Work-In-Progress Talk

Tuesday, 5 March 2019, 2 pm

Shabbiha: Assad's Paramilitaries and Mass Violence in Syria

Lecture by **Dr. Uğur Ümit Üngör** (Utrecht University)

Venue

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient
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This paper offers a conceptual discussion of paramilitarism, as well an examination of paramilitary violence in the Syrian conflict. During the ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, pro-state paramilitary units appeared in Serbia, Chechnya, and Turkey, and committed mass violence against civilians. These groups maintained close links with political elites, including heads of state, and they were significantly drawn from the social milieu of organized crime. In the literature on paramilitary units, they are generally depicted as irregular armed organizations that carry out acts of violence against clearly defined individuals or groups, and in doing so, undermine the state's monopoly of legitimate violence, while at the same time creating a breeding ground for criminal activities. This view, while not entirely inaccurate, is also limited. Rather, I argue that paramilitary units are the result of a complex process of temporary subcontracting or outsourcing mass violence by the state, which profoundly transforms conflicts and states intentionally and unintentionally. Second, this paper analyzes the emergence and transformation of pro-state paramilitarism in Syria in the context of the uprising and civil war. It focuses on the Syrian government's deployment of the *Shabbiha* (later renamed 'National Defense Forces'), irregular paramilitaries dressed in civilian gear and committing a broad spectrum of violence, including torture, kidnapping, assassination, sexual violence, and massacres. Based on 7 years of ethnographic fieldwork including 80+ interviews with victims, perpetrators, and other eye witnesses, I suggest that the *Shabbiha* phenomenon manifests a fundamental complexity in its appearance, identity, motives, cleavage, and regional varieties. To unravel some of these complexities, the paper looks at the micro-dynamics of Shabbiha violence in the city of Homs as a particularly instructive example of pro-state paramilitarism.

Uğur Ümit Üngör is Associate Professor at the Department of History at Utrecht University and Research Fellow at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam. His main areas of interest are state formation and nation formation, with a particular focus on mass violence. His most recent publications include *Genocide: New Perspectives on its Causes, Courses and Consequences* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016, ed.), *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (Continuum, 2011) and the award-winning *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He is an editor of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, and coordinator of the Syrian Oral History project at NIOD. He is currently leading an NWO-funded research project on paramilitarism and completing the monograph *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2019).