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## The act of forgiving (and forgetting)

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*Forgive (Verb):*

- Stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence, flaw, or mistake.
- *No longer feel angry about or wish to punish (an offence, flaw, or mistake).*

[Oxford online dictionary]

For six years Assad has waged a campaign of extermination against a people who rose for freedom. His crimes have been so well documented, by both testimony and photographic evidence, that the international community is left in little doubt that this man, and his regime, have perpetrated atrocities on such a scale that they amount to crimes against humanity.

Yet today there are few voices within the international community that are calling for Assad's departure. The focus is now on regime preservation, 'stability' and the ever-expanding 'War on

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Terror'. It seems that the crimes of the tyrant can be forgiven, forgotten, erased from history. That he can keep the throne he destroyed a country for.

We shouldn't be surprised that those in power protect the interests of the powerful. Or that there was never any real support for a popular movement that brought a state to its knees. Even those 'Friends of Syria', who spent millions on their five-star conferences as the country burned, were only ever motivated by their own interests and agendas. Welcome to the theatre of the absurd.

But forgiving, and forgetting, are luxuries not afforded to those who have lost everything. It's much easier to be a 'neutral observer' from the outside. For millions of Syrians, the political is personal and the wounds of war will not be easily healed. Memories forged from pain are not so easily effaced.

You forget. The brutality of this regime did not begin in 2011. The totalitarian state was founded by Assad père. It was he who built the Kingdom of Silence and Terror where all dissent was ruthlessly crushed. Thousands of political opponents disappeared into the Syrian gulag. Many never got out. Those that did were often a shell of their former selves, ghosts amongst the living, broken by the torture, by the horror. And then there was Hama, the city razed to the ground in 1982 to quell an insurgency. Thousands – mainly civilians – lost their lives at the hands of Assad's army. The viciousness of this repression kept Syrians silent, humiliated, until Mohamed Bouazizi – a Tunisian – ignited the hopes of a new generation.

When Bashar inherited the dictatorship from his father little changed except for the cosmetics of discourse. 'Modernization' and 'development' were the new buzzwords – but the regime kept people impoverished politically, economically and culturally. Bashar's neo-liberal reforms benefited the crony capitalist class – who amassed their wealth through connections and corruption, pillaging and plundering a country they saw as their own personal fiefdom – holding the masses in perpetual contempt. Bashar had

no wish to reform the fascist nature of the Syrian state. Imprisonment of regime critics, torture and enforced disappearance remained wide-spread. Syrians will not forget.

The revolution fostered such great hopes for change. And those hopes were crushed and shattered into a million pieces mirroring the fragments of a bleeding nation that descended into chaos and war. The regime's barbarisms – and new barbarisms – were unleashed on a scale no one could have predicted and no one could contain. And in the international community's acquiescence to the Syrian regime's crimes, obscene levels of violence meted out by a state against rebelling citizens have become normalized. The ramifications will be felt not only by Syrians, but by all.

What does forgiveness look like for a mother who has pulled her child – piece by bloodied piece – from the ruins of her smoldering home? What does forgiveness look like for those who struggled to identify the tortured corpse of a loved one? For those who will now live a life of poverty and exile, severed from their homeland, their memories, and their dreams? Will forgetting come easily? Or will they be consumed by grief, rage and a desire for revenge?

Dreams are haunted by friends and heroes that are no longer here. What were their thoughts in their dying moments? Did they regret daring to dream that the impossible was possible? Did they cry out for their mothers as their bodies were racked by pain and cast aside? How did they feel as they were being brutalized – transformed from a human being – with all their hopes and fears – into just another statistic? Is it possible to forgive, to forget?

There is one thing that unites all Syrians, regardless of their political views: a feeling of immense pain and loss. And no doubt some element of forgiveness will be necessary to heal the wounds of a fractured nation. But it is hard to see how the country can move forward when the man and the regime responsible for this horror remain in place. The political leaders who presided over and directed this descent into barbarity must be held accountable for their crimes. As the slogan has it, 'no justice, no peace'.