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Emergence, Development, and Impact of Population Displacement in Damascus During Syria's Civil War

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ABSTRACT

Although displacement has been an important feature of many contemporary conflicts, this has not been accompanied by a sustained recognition or acknowledgement that it is an active or ongoing dimension of conflict, with the result that it, more often than not, has been viewed and discussed as a consequence of conflict; that is, as something that occurs as a result of armed conflict. Although the manipulation of civilian populations for political purposes has been discussed and recognized by counter-insurgency theorists, this has not yet informed nor produced a full and complete understanding of displacement, or more precisely its strategic dimensions, in the contemporary context. In other instances, the specificity of displacement more generally has been ignored, with the result that it has been equated with ethnic cleansing. This article seeks to contribute to an enhanced understanding of displacement by showing how it became part of the Syrian regime's attempts to re-establish control of suburban areas of Damascus. In doing so, I break the practice into its specific components, which include siege operations, extensive use of aerial bombardment and the use of weapons likely to produce massive civilian casualties, including chemical weapons, 'earthquake' and 'vacuum' bombs and unguided munitions with wide-area effects. I conclude that in these areas of the capital, Regime actions most closely approximated to the depopulation model of strategic displacement.

In the Syrian Civil War, Damascus was a centre of Regime strength, from which it projected military strength with the aim of re-establishing its control over the country, and the city also was a key focus for the Opposition, which controlled parts of the city just a few miles from the key centres and institutions of Regime power. From the 2011uprising until 2017, when the Regime re-seized eastern and southern neighbourhoods in the city, Damascus was foregrounded in the country's Civil War. The Regime's use of displacement in order to achieve its military and political aims and objectives, which I henceforth refer to as 'strategic displacement,' emerged over the

course of the conflict. In other words, the outlines of a strategy only took root as the Regime struggled to adjust to losing control of substantial parts of the country and sought to re-establish its political authority from a position of military weakness. Although there were regional and local variations in the use of displacement, it was nonetheless possible to discern the outlines of a clear strategy that was applied in the expectation that it would produce political and military gains.

This article does not propose to consider the general unfolding of events in the city in this period, but instead proposes to focus specifically on the question of displacement in this urban context, with the intention of demonstrating, reiterating and underlining a more general Regime strategy that was applied across the country over the course of the country's Civil War. The implications of this analysis are not restricted to the Civil War, as they extend more generally to the analysis and discussion of displacement in other contexts which, for various reasons addressed in this article, have been engaged insufficiently engaged or even ignored entirely. This situation only relatively recently has begun to be addressed in the emergence of a literature on strategic displacement (discussed below in the section 'Strategic Displacement in Civil Wars: Analysing Regime-Driven Population Movements'), which this article is intended to contribute to and complement by contributing to an improved understanding of displacement, both in the Civil War and more generally.

This is particularly important and imperative because there is an ongoing predisposition, among both policy actors and researchers, not only to focus on form, but effectively to regard it as synonymous with displacement more generally; accordingly, in viewing displacement as something that results from conflict (or 'collateral damage'—see (Lichtenheld and Schon 2021), both researchers and policy actors have reinforced the (already strong predisposition to view it as a consequence of military activity or as a consequence of conflict-affected individuals seeking to remove themselves to other places, where they can find a greater degree of security or even sanctuary. Alongside this, observers also may refer to opportunistic displacement, in which the fleeing of populations either is linked with or seen as the consequence of looting or property theft.

However, this results in an oversight, and associated neglect, of strategic displacement ('civilian displacement that is provoked, directly or indirectly, by one or several armed groups'—Steele 2017), meaning that displacement has been viewed insufficiently and engaged as a rational activity that different conflict actors undertake in pursuit of clear political and military aims and objectives (Hoover 2016). In acknowledging this sustained oversight, which has resulted in displacement being both misunderstood (i.e. assigned characteristics it does not necessarily have) or ignored entirely, this article proposes to examine three types of strategic displacement that the Syrian Regime applied over the course of the Civil War.

The first strategic displacement is depopulation, which involves the wholesale removal of a population and is carried out through indiscriminate, rather than collective, targeting, meaning that everyone in a village or town is targeted for removal, regardless of guilt or political affiliation (Balcells 2011). The second displacement is cleansing which, as has been noted, involves the deliberate expulsion or 'pushing out' of an ethnic, political or social group (Gutiérrez and Wood 2017). The third displacement is forced relocation, which primarily has involved the voluntary relocation of

populations to Idlib, in Syria's far northwest. As I will demonstrate, the three types are distinguished by referring to their targeting, intended duration and general orientation (Bell 1999).

This article focuses specifically on conflict-related displacement and therefore does not consider, for example, displacement that occurs because of security force activities, including arrests, interrogation, and various acts of intimidation (Downes 2007, 3). Similarly, it does not consider displacement by armed groups (including ISIS and Kurdish groups based in the north of the country) because the Regime has been responsible for most instances of strategic displacement.

I specifically focus on Damascus City because the political dynamics in the governorate were different in the post-2011 era. Before the uprising began, the capital exerted a strong economic and social influence over the governorate, which was a refuge for Palestinian refugees displaced by the Israeli army in the 1967 and 1973 wars. Although the governorate was pro-Regime before the war, this changed in 2011, when it shifted to supporting the Opposition – as I will demonstrate, the uprising in the capital's suburbs and south-east was different for several reasons.

There are various reasons why displacement activities in Damascus and the country more generally are poorly understood, but perhaps the foremost one is the extent of the Regime's security grip on the city, which has extended to prohibiting NGOs from operating within the city. I had a clear advantage in this respect, as I had pre-established links with researchers in the city and also knew how they worked around the various obstacles that the Regime placed in their way. In this article, I consider how large-scale and indiscriminate violence was part of a wider war strategy. However, I deliberately and consciously challenge the proposition that displacement can be conflated with 'cleansing.' Accordingly, I will focus on what Greenhill (2010) refers to as 'coercive engineered migration' or the deliberate creation or manipulation of population movements for strategic gain.

The articles cover several phases, which are delineated by the use of consistent terms, that are used and applied largely for purposes of convenience, meaning that I do not mean to infer or imply that different terms are somehow inappropriate or even unacceptable. First, I refer to the 'uprising,' in which a broad-based popular movement emerged within Syrian society in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings in other countries across the region and sought to challenge Regime power and authority. This covers the period of March-April 2011. I view and treat this uprising as an essentially internal process that was non-violent in character. The Regime responded to popular protests and calls for freedom, democracy and justice with violence, and, ignoring external calls for restraint and compromise, began to use varying degrees of force to crush the uprising, beginning in April 2011. This then resulted in the emergence of armed groups in the country and the establishment of an armed Opposition, which included both secular and religious/jihadist elements, which then confronted the Regime militarily and seized territory and key economic, political and strategic parts of the country. By July 2011, armed insurgency had broken out, marking the onset of Civil War in the country.

Although the Syrian uprising initially was a unifying force within Syrian society, as shown by the fact that participants included Alawites, widely spoken of as the ruling minority in post-independence Syria, religious and sectarian differences eventually

became more pronounced, not least because of the active efforts of the Regime to exploit sectarianism for its own purposes, with the result that a previously cohesive opposition movement began to fragment. The Syrian Opposition fragmented into a disparate array of groups, priorities and contending interests. International influence also became more pronounced, especially from 2015 onwards when Russian and Iranian intervention (including Iran's close ally Hezbollah and various Shi'i militias drawn from across the region) effectively saved the Regime with economic and political assistance and direct military intervention. By this stage, the Civil War, to all intents and purposes, had taken on the appearance of, or even become, a proxy war. This process, which alternately can be spoken of as an 'internationalisation' of the Civil War, has been documented extensively by such observers as Patrick Higgins (2003), who has discussed the role of U.S intervention in the Civil War (see also Matar and Kadri 2018; Phillips 2022).

In any case, this article acknowledges the fragmentation of the Opposition, growing sectarianism and heightened international involvement and engagement as important and even determining facts, and my consistent use of 'Opposition' and 'Civil War' throughout this article by no means is intended to occlude, understate or even deny their importance; rather, both are used for purposes of convenience, and should be read and understood in the full understanding that 'Opposition' does not denote a cohesive or even coherent entity, and the 'Civil War' was in fact highly internationalised, to the point where it took on many of the identifying features and attributes of a proxy war. In this article, I do not engage the governorate's post-2011 political dynamics because they are complex, extensive (the governorate emerged as a centre of anti-Regime activity from an early point) and deserve an article of their own. On 15 April 2011, protestors sought to transfer civil protests from rural areas to Damascus City, with the intention of emulating the Egyptian and Tunisian Arab Spring 'model.' However, this failed because of Regime repression that included the killing of protesters. As a result, most of Damascus City remained relatively peaceful and stable for the whole war.

I will refer to several reports published by United Nations organizations, such as the reports from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). I also refer to the documentary output of NGOs, including the Internal Displacement Monitor Centre (IDMC), and specifically its researcher publications and news media reports. I will draw on interviews conducted with displaced persons that I used to obtain supplementary details. In the period September 2021- December 2022, I carried out 15 informal interviews using social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and Skype. I identified the interviewees through social media, and to ensure confidentiality, they remained anonymous without any recorded personal details, including their current country of residence. This precaution was crucial, particularly for activists seeking asylum in foreign nations. The interviews varied in duration, ranging from 45 min to 2 h. The interviewees, aged between 30 and 50, previously had lived in Damascus and its rural areas, also known as 'Damascus Rurals.' All participants had a history of involvement in anti-regime political activism, with some having been associated with the Armed Opposition.

The article's central argument is that strategic displacement was a central part of the Regime's Civil War strategy in Damascus. In highlighting this by referring to different applied displacement practices, it seeks to demonstrate this, and in so doing, contribute to a broader appreciation and understanding of strategic displacement more generally by highlighting and underlining the strategic intentions of displacement activities (see below sub-section 'Unravelling the Regime's Strategy of Population Resettlement and Reconstruction: 2017 Onwards') After reading the article, I believe that observers will have a more complete and full understanding of strategic displacement, both in the Syrian context and more generally. The article's key contribution is to assist the development of an improved understanding of strategic displacement in armed conflict, which continues to be both under-researched and insufficiently understood.

The Tapestry of Damascus: Demographics and Displacement Dynamics Amidst the Syrian Civil War

From the start of the uprising, Damascus City, along with the 'heartland' governorates of Latakia, Tartous, Homs and Hama, figured prominently in the Regime's political calculations, in large part because it contains the Alawite elite and more than half of the country's army and elite Republican Guard units. The Regime knew that if Damascus fell, it would fall alongside it. From the outset, it therefore endeavoured to combine coercion with a pre-established co-option that included the 'partial revival of Sunni Islam within state-accepted circles,' which extended to the establishment of 'friendly and eventually rather cosy relationships with moderate Sunni leaders, who were duly installed in positions of authority' (Lister 2016).

Damascus City is the oldest inhabited capital in the world (Bakkour 2024), whose population of 1,754,000 (2010 estimate)[1] was dispersed across 16 neighbourhoods.[2] This population was overwhelmingly Arab (95%), with Armenians (4%) and Turkmen, Kurd, Circassians and others (one percent) accounting for the remainder (Bakkour 2024). It was also overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim (90%), but also included Alawites (5%), Christians (3%), Shiites (1%), Druze (0.3%) and Ismailis (0.1%) (Qutrib 2016). The Syrian Civil War produced significant demographic change on top of previous influxes, including the 230,000 Iraqi refugees who moved to the capital after the disastrous 2003 U.S-led invasion of their country (Ash and Obradovich 2019), along with the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who 'migrated' from rural areas after climate changes significantly impacted agricultural output in the period 2006–2009 (Selby et al. 2017). They and other new arrivals relocated to informal and marginalized neighbourhoods that subsequently played a crucial role in the protest movement that swept through Damascus in 2011(Bishara 2013).

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[1]By the end of 2023, the city's population had increased by 23 percent, rising from the 2011 figure of 1,754,000 to 2, 292,000. By the end of 2016, internal displacement increased the city's Sunni population from 1,583,000 to 1,867,000. The number of Shiites increased by 11 percent (24,000), rising to 271,000. Meanwhile, the percentage of Christians (from 3 percent to 2.7 percent), and Alawites (from 5 to 4 percent) declined (Qutrib 2016).
[2]Damascus Neighbourhoods: Damascus, Al-Shaghour, Sarouja, Al-Qanawat, Jobar, Al-Midan, Dummar, Barzeh, Rukn Al-Din, Al-Salihiya, Al-Qadam, Kafar Sousa, Al-Mazzeh, Al-Muhajireen, Al-Yarmouk and Al-Qaboun) - see Map 1.
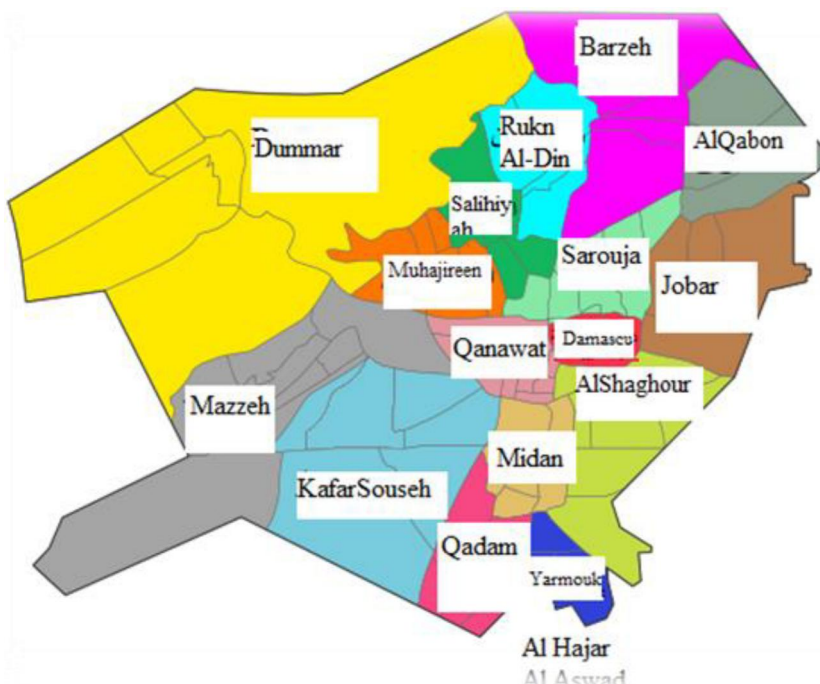
Map 1. Damascus city neighbourhoods. p. 8. Damascus Map, written by Samer Bakkour, clarifying the locations of Easter and Southern Damascus Neighbourhoods, 2023.

Regime violence in the Civil War was largely indiscriminate and applied without any apparent consideration of the implications for future governance (Schutte 2017). Cities, entire towns, villages, suburbs and neighbourhoods therefore were besieged and subjected to extensive and indiscriminate violence (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2017) that effectively demolished them (Bakkour and Sahtout 2023). Interestingly, this 'barbarism,' or use of approaches that flagrantly violate international law, is something of an exception, and has only been observed in one-fifth of asymmetric conflicts (Downes 2007).

After this violence escalated, displacement in Damascus subsequently grew slowly over time–in August 2013, the capital accounted for 14% of the country's displaced population; 18% in February 2014; and 23% in October 2014. In mid-2015, the 410,000 IDPs in the city accounted for a substantial part of the overall population of around 1,862,000. Of this figure, 1,277,000 were classified as 'spatially stable,' and 585,000 (who had been displaced from up to 12 governorates) as 'unstable' (Al-Akhbar News 2018). There was also huge outward migration in this period as Damascenes sought refuge in Europe, Turkey, and other countries in the region, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. In the first four years of the war, the city lost about 520,000 residents, almost a third of its population (Bakkour 2024).

Over the course of the war, residents were displaced from areas in the line of fire (Al-Tadamon, Al-Qaboun, Barzeh, Jobar, and Al-Yarmouk) to safer areas such as Jaramana, Qudssaya and Al-Mazzeh, but were physically prevented by Regime forces

from entering majority Alawite neighbourhoods such as Ish Al-Woror. The Regime benefitted from the emptying of opposition enclaves, as it was able to regulate and monitor movements to ensure they did not benefit the armed opposition (Bakkour 2024).

In the period 2012–13, the city and its surrounding area remained safer than other parts of the country, which meant they were far removed from fighting and that there was no fighting within them – this applied to almost three-quarters of the city during the conflict. In these areas, the Regime was strong, and this dissuaded residents from rising or participating in the Uprising – this was one of the reasons why Opposition advances were limited to geographically marginalised parts of the capital. The concentrated and localized character of violence in the city was further confirmed by the fact that civilians were displaced here from other cities, including Homs and Deir ez-Zor (Bakkour 2021), with the result that there were an estimated 250,000 IDPs in the governorate by April 2013 (OCHA. 2013).

In the first year of the uprising, Regime repression in the Damascus countryside, Darra and Homs caused IDPs to relocate to the capital, albeit in limited numbers. By the end of 2011, it was estimated that thousands had made this journey). The armed opposition responded with bomb attacks, including the Al-Midan neighbourhood bombing of January 2012 (BBC. 2012a), and the Al-Qazzaz bombing of May 2012, which targeted a military security branch (BBC. 2012b). However, it was the bombing of a Regime crisis cell on 18 July 2012, which killed key Regime members,[3] that proved to be the key event in the ongoing escalation within the city. This was followed by a bomb attack on army headquarters in September 2012 (France 24 24, 2012), and then a further bomb attack on the Al-Iman Mosque in Al-Mazraa neighbourhood, which killed more than 40, including Sheikh Al-Buti, a Regime loyalist and prominent public figure (France 24 24, 2013).

Contemporary displacement in the city must be understood in the wider context of long-standing attempts to re-engineer the city's demographic composition. Here it is instructive to refer to the literature on urban Ethnocracy, which is concerned with how the (re)construction of urban geographies strengthens and enhances an ethnic group's power. Yiftachel and Yacobi (2003), amongst others, frame this in terms of urbanization, planning and class relations that frame the city's peace-time development, and propose that 'the making of urban space [is] inseparable from the ongoing contestation between social and ethnic groups (Fearon 2003).

Forename Ismail, in considering how '[s]tate practices of co-optation, incorporation and exclusion are operative in the reproduction of societal forces and their constitution of political agency' (Ismail 2013), proposes to examine how Damascus's 'socio-spatial patterning' or the 'reconfiguration of urban space' has influenced the development of the Uprising (Bakkour 2024). Historically, the country's Alawite community was concentrated in the west of the country as a result of institutionalised state persecution. Under the French mandate, the French administrators responded to sustained Sunni-Alawite conflict by establishing an Alawi state along the country's western coast, and sustained Alawite urbanisation only began after it was reintegrated

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[3]The bomb killed Daoud Rajha (Defence Minister), Assef Shawkat (Rajha's deputy), Hisham Ikhtiyar (head of the National Security Office) and Hassan Turkmani (assistant vice-president) (Bakkour 2024).

into the state from 1936 onwards – however, just over a decade later, four-fifths of this community remained concentrated in the coastal mountains (Balanche 2015, 7). After the Baathists seized power in 1963, land reforms, housing construction and Hafez Al-Assad's seizure of power expedited Alawite urbanization. Coastal cities, including Latakia and Tartous, became Alawite majority within just two decades as the country's Mediterranean coast became 'Alawite territory.'

Hafez al-Assad once said '[h]e who controls Damascus controls the country,' and he consequently endeavoured to undertake Alawite urbanisation in the capital, which largely was achieved through public sector expansion. This included the establishment of an Alawite 'belt' around the city and the construction of informal military barracks near the city's presidential palace (Balanche 2015, 8–10). Ismail (2013, 882) notes that the influx of Alawites from coastal regions resulted in many residents of the Old Quarter, which historically had been at the heart of the city's political life, relocating to rural Damascus. She notes that 'these new quarters represent a form of urban settlement based on regional origin and sect membership, as well as their links to the military and the state.'

Economic liberalization reforms (Hinnebusch 2012) that Bashar Assad introduced after he came to power in 2000 also produced a series of political realignments while increasing poverty, disadvantaging the vulnerable and failing to significantly benefit the city's middle class. Bishara (2013) describes how privatization led to economic and financial corruption and also established a basis for a new alliance between the city's rich, including the Al-Shalah, Al-Kuzbari, Al-Attar and Griwati families. This in turn resulted in the emergence of new economic elites and companies whose positions and prestige were essentially 'political' (Bishara 2013, 63). This alliance established a basis for the Regime's ambitious development projects, including the especially egregious 'New Damascus' project[4] that dispossessed owners, provided them with minimal compensation and then constructed commercial malls on 'their' land (Barout 2012), and the development project in the Mazzeh neighbourhood in the city's Basateen Al-Razi area (Enab Baladi 2016).

Strategic Displacement in Civil Wars: Analysing Regime-Driven Population Movements

The escalating issue of displacement presents a significant concern for the global community. As of the conclusion of 2018, nearly 68 million individuals worldwide had been displaced due to conflict and violence, marking the highest yearly total since the end of World War II, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 2018. Displacement historically has been regarded as an almost 'natural'

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[4]At the end of 2012, the Syrian government issued a decree that proposed to replace informal settlements in the capital with new cities, of which Marota and Basilia City were the most notable. The former is an urban project located in the Mazzeh area of Damascus, whose planned development includes several skyscrapers and large commercial centres, large park areas, universities, schools, and various cultural facilities. The Government has marketed it as a 'global smart city'. Basilia City, which will be located in the Qadam area of Damascus, will also include large towers and commercial centres and has been pitched as an aspiring 'global smart city'. Both projects have attracted the attention of many Syrian businesspersons, including Rami Makhlouf, Mazen Al-Tarazi and Samer Fawz (Arabisc 2021).

phenomenon, and international observers only relatively recently have begun to consider the proposition that it can be strategic in character (Hakovirta 1986).

In the Syrian Civil War, one study found that just over one-third (36 per cent) of IDPs and refugees cited aerial bombing as the most important factor in their displacement (Handicap International 2017). The Regime only gradually came to appreciate the potential value of displacement as it confronted multiple adversaries across several fronts. Over time, however, it consolidated and became an established part of its military and political strategy. In January 2023, an impartial U.N. commission on Syria acknowledged that the actions were carried out by government forces in accordance with an organized policy. The commission identified these actions as either a crime against humanity or a war crime, as documented in the United Nations General Assembly in 2013.

Displacement in civil wars frequently occurs when populations affected by conflict escape the threat of violence and potential harm, seeking refuge in alternative locations (Green 2016). It is more likely to occur when there is a physical threat of violence, a danger of being caught in the crossfire or a fear of abduction. Conflict is well-established as the strongest driver of forced displacement across the world (Moore and Shellman 2004), and this link has been well-established and recognised for almost 40 years (Hakovirta 1986). In civil wars, displacement has a particular appeal for government actors who possess the ability to uproot whole populations (Schmeidl 1997). There is a clear consensus within the literature that state actors have a clear incentive to adopt displacement, and this appears to be because they possess the firepower, organizational capabilities and logistical resources needed to facilitate mass population movements (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003). Valentino (2013, 377) affirms that opposition insurgents are less able to kill government supporters in large numbers and to defend their own supporters against displacement. Accordingly, this article will focus on Regime displacement in the Syrian Civil War.

In situations where regimes confront formidable, widespread guerrilla insurgencies, traditional policing and selective targeting of civilians are unlikely to be effective. Consequently, resorting to mass killing becomes an appealing option (Bakkour 2023, 310–313) as it offers a means to eliminate adversaries and establish firm control over territory (Kalyvas 2006). When resources are stretched, whether as a result of fighting multiple groups or simultaneously operating across different battlefronts, it is preferable to territorial occupation. Accordingly, this article will proceed based on an understanding that displacement is adopted as a tactical or strategic innovation in response to changing adversaries. Rebel adversaries have a clear advantage in conflicts because they can select the terms of engagement, and this ability to avoid decisive confrontations is one of the main reasons it is difficult to defeat a large, well-organized guerrilla army. Indeed, this is one of the defining features of irregular or 'guerrilla' wars. Rebels also hide among the civilian population, which creates an 'identification problem' for counterinsurgents (Kalyvas 2006).

Displacement can help to overcome this problem, and Kalyvas (2006) therefore notes it is likely to be conducted when information is sought, but group-level identifiers are absent. After the relocated are obliged to indicate their loyalties, they become more 'legible' and their movement can be used as a continuous indicator of allegiance

(Scott 2010). Displacement makes it possible to 'sort' and 'capture' and also can be used helpfully to illustrate the various 'costs' that civilians will incur if they support an adversary (Balcells and Kalyvas 2014, 1390 – 1418). It also can be conceived, understood and justified as part of a 'securitization' process, which reimagines and reinterprets civilian populations as security threats (Buzan, Waver, and Wilde 1998, 25). Accordingly, the literature on displacement leads us to believe that displacement makes it possible to 'filter' populations and present them in clearer and more complete perspective.

Rethinking of Displacement: Unveiling Strategic Dimensions in the Conflict

Displacement often is understood and engaged because of violent conflict (Lichtenheld and Schon 2021), and this means that its strategic significance is considered insufficiently or overlooked entirely. More broadly, international actors only have acknowledged displacement relatively recently and, in so doing, primarily have conceived it as a humanitarian issue or protection challenge. For example, Betts (2011) observes that displacement has become a concern for both international and local observers, and notes this has created a number of costs, including those associated with operating in a globalized news environment, which must now be factored into any prospective displacement strategy.

Other studies, including by Al Ibraheem et al. (2017), focus too narrowly on the health situation of IDPs and therefore fail to acknowledge the wider political context that frames displacement activities (Lichtenheld and Schon 2021). Meanwhile, Aburas et al. (2018) fails to acknowledge how IDPs impacted the broader war (Aburas et al. 2018). However, it should not be presumed that IDPs will be acknowledged and engaged in the first instance. As Donnelly observes, IDPs have received 'surprisingly' little attention in security and securitization studies and even, she contends, have 'failed to enter into mainstream securitization studies' (Donnelly 2018). Indeed, displacement is more likely to be engaged as part of a discussion of other actions or activities.

Displacement also often is assumed to be driven by sectarian motivations, with the consequence that the term often is omitted entirely and replaced with 'ethnic cleansing' (Balanche 2015). For example, when an independent U.N. commission on Syria referred to population displacement as 'a crime against humanity and/or a war crime,' this reinforced the (mis)perception that such activities originated within, and were driven by, group identity (Hokayem 2016).

The role and precise nature of sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War, as in the case of the Bosnian and Northern Irish precursors, has been misunderstood. This can intrude on the analysis of displacement when it is purely understood in terms of a desire to 'push out' that is rooted in sectarian motivations. This is an important distortion precisely because displacement also seeks to 'pull in' populations and bring them under control – this is, for example, stressed by Scott (2010), who presents it as a means of collective punishment that also serves to make populations more legible.

When 'disloyal' populations resist, they are expelled collectively, to increase the costs (Toft and Zhukov 2012).

In stressing and underlining the strategic character of displacement in conflict, I do not deny that the Regime has engaged in acts that are sectarian or that have sectarian overtones or implications. Obvious examples include the Regime's deliberate attempts to alter the demographic profile of some areas by providing citizenship and housing to Shi'a foreigners, including militiamen,[5] and the Syrian Iranian Supreme Council's establishment of a southern suburb in the countryside that lies adjacent to the Set Zaynab Shi'i shrine, which was visited by tourists and Shi'i pilgrims from Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Pakistan throughout the year (Enab Baladi 2020a). In addition, I do not deny the overlap with other mass atrocity crimes (Valentino 2013, 377) – for example, Bakkour and Stansfield (2023) observe displacement can 'shad[e] into' genocide, as part of a collective attempt to eradicate, and Krain and Myers (1997) observe that genocide and politicide are significant predictors of forced displacement.

The Southern and Eastern Damascus Suburbs: 2011–17

The 16 suburbs that surround Damascus City are similar in size but have a very different demographic profile. In the eastern and southern suburbs, such as Barzeh, Al-Qaboun, Jobar, Al-Yarmouk, Al-Qadam and Al- Hajar Al-Aswad, residents are mainly employed in low-skilled labouring work. The transient population includes many Palestinian refugees and Syrians displaced in the 1967 and 1973 wars. There is high crime and pervasive insecurity and these areas do not make an important contribution to the city's economic and social life. They are poor because of Regime neglect and because economic wealth and privilege and key educational and social institutions are concentrated in the capital's west and centre (Testimonies July 2021).

Yarmouk Camp, whose population was estimated to be 800,000 in 2010 (650,000 Syrians and 150,000 Palestinians (Bitari 2013), was one of the first outlying areas to revolt against the Regime in 2011. After the Free Syrian Army (FSA) seized the Camp on 15 December 2012 (OCHA. 2013), the Regime responded with indiscriminate violence, hitting both the Al-Husseini Mosque and the UNRWA Fallujah School, killing and injuring dozens of displaced civilians (YouTube 2012). The violence was intended to force the Camp residents visually to demonstrate their political loyalties, which is consistent with Lichtenheld's notion of an 'assortative' displacement, which seeks to identify and extract the politically 'loyal' (Lichtenheld 2019).

Regime and PFLP (Popular Committee for the Liberation of Palestine) forces then besieged the Camp (DW Channel 2013) as part of a carefully applied depopulation strategy. The Camp lies approximately (1 km) from the centre of the city and the Regime wanted to encourage outward movement to the eastern part of Ghouta to pressurize opposition military factions in Eastern Ghouta. As the Regime tightened

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[5]No accurate figure exists for these Shia foreigners, who included thousands of militiamen from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan, and who served in the Revolutionary Guards, Harakat al-Nujaba, Fatemiyoun, Zainabiyoun, Division 313 and the National Defence. They were part of an Iranian settlement project that sought to engineer demographic change in a few Syrian towns (Bakkour 2024).

its control, residents were reluctant to leave and pass through Regime and PFLP lines, meaning that any future movement could only be achieved through relocation agreements.

The besieging forces closed the area except for a single crossing (the 'Rafah Syrian Crossing'), (Testimony with Abo Zayed 2022), which is located at the entrance on the Camp's Al-Zahra neighbourhood side. Residents were deprived of the necessities of life such as food, drink, electricity, fuel, and medical materials (Testimonies July 2021), with the intention of creating a divide between civilians (elderly, children, and women) and armed elements. As the siege tightened, only civilians left the Camp, as armed fighters refused to pass through enemy lines because they feared they would be arrested or even killed. The Regime increased its indiscriminate attacks as civilians left the Camp (Bakkour 2024). Residents also were forced to flee to eastern Ghouta and the neighbourhoods adjacent to Yarmouk, and by February 2013, there were only around 150,000 left (USAID 2013). Two months later, 37,000 Palestinians left for Lebanon (OCHA. 2013), and more than 5,000 to Jordan in the following month. In the middle of the year, it was estimated that Palestinian Damascenes accounted for 90% of the 200,000 Palestinians who had fled their homes across the country (OCHA. 2013).

The Regime also applied similar tactics to areas that did not have clear political loyalties. This was shown when ISIS seized Al Hajar Al Aswad, a suburb which is next to Al-Qadam and Al-Yarmouk neighbourhoods. Its population of 60,000 lives in an economically disadvantaged part of the city with a high population turnover. Although its (only) train station is one of the main logistical hubs used to transfer food into the city, its only other strategic value derives from the fact that it leads down to western and eastern Ghouta (Bakkour and Stansfield 2023). It is otherwise politically insignificant, marginalized and neglected and continued to be so during the initial stages of the uprising—up to about six months after the beginning of the uprising, its residents had not decisively aligned with the opposition nor engaged in significant anti-Regime activity. This only changed when demonstrations broke out in surrounding neighbourhoods and ISIS agents began to infiltrate from eastern Syria and Babila (east Damascus) from mid-2013 onwards. As the Regime continued to besiege the south of the capital (Al-Tadamon, Yarmouk Camp, Taqaddam, Al-Qadam and Asali) and the neighbouring southern Damascus countryside (Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, Yalda, Babila, Beit Sahem and Sbeneh), ISIS was able, with the support of defecting Al-Nusra fighters, to establish itself in Al-Hajar Al-Aswad (Violations Documentation Centre 2013).

ISIS's growth was not entirely surprising, as these parts of the capital were economically, socially, and politically excluded and suffered from an extensive history of Regime neglect. Phillips (2016) accordingly presents Al-Hajar Al-Aswad as an 'incubating environment' characterised by large 'slum areas,' a marginalized population, and the consequences of uneven modern urbanisation (Bakkour and Stansfield 2023). When ISIS seized it (The New Arab 2018), it took control of the Camp's western side (Al-Jazeera 2015), producing large-scale population displacement to neighbouring regions and towns. In the Al-Tadamon neighbourhood, which is just next to Al-Yarmouk Camp, the Regime applied siege tactics after the FSA seized it in the first

months of 2012, incarcerating residents (who numbered 200,000 in 2010) after Arabs and Turkmen from the Golan FSA later relocated here and established several battalions, including the Ansar Al-Islam Front, the United Sham Front, the Damascus Revolutionaries Brigade and the Tahrir Al-Sham Division (Enab Baladi 2015). Regime and *shabiha* forces imposed a siege (Al-Jazeera 2014), cut off the electricity and water, and then displaced most residents to other neighbourhoods in the city, leaving around 2,000 residents behind (Enab Baladi 2015).

Jobar neighbourhood was another suburb that was bombed and besieged with the aims of preventing the Opposition from advancing on the city and besieging Eastern Ghouta (Al-Jazeera 2016). It lies in the northeast of Damascus, close to the presidential palace, and is close to Abbasid Square and Bab Touma and adjacent to the Zablatani area. After its 300,000 residents were 'liberated' by the FSA in late 2012, they were subjected to a sustained siege by Regime forces who deployed chemical weapons (in attacks in April and May 2013) and cluster, 'earthquake' and 'vacuum' bombs (Human Rights Watch 2013).

The Regime's repeated use of the siege strategy clearly demonstrated its acknowledgement of the fact that it was one of the most effective ways to eliminate protests, uproot opposition forces and prevent Opposition pockets from emerging. It had a particular utility in built-up urban areas, where any incursion likely would result in substantial military losses and was a low-resource technique that did not require highly skilled or trained military personnel or substantial resource expenditures (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic 2018).

While the Regime extensively utilized overt violence such as airstrikes, barrel bombs, and intense shelling, it was indirect violence that proved to be the most pivotal tool in its endeavours to displace populations (Human Rights Watch 2015; Holliday 2013). This included the deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, including bakeries, hospitals and schools, and the use of 'imprecise and unguided munitions with wide-area effects' (Bostad 2018). Their failure to flee and/or physical location were deemed to confirm the resident population's guilt. This is consistent with studies of civilian movement in the Syria War that have found IDPs tend to go 'where there are people with similar political or ethnic characteristics'(HTAU. 2015) and that those 'supporting the Regime generally go to [government] areas' while those opposing the Regime 'tend to move to opposition-held areas' (HTAU. 2015).

Instead of preparing the ground for subsequent ground offensives, aerial assaults started to supplant ground offensives completely. This shift occurred as attacks on civilians in disputed areas intensified (Bakkour and Sahtout 2023). Martínez and Eng (2018) note the Regime's utilization of aerial bombardment to undermine the opposition's governance capacities by damaging critical infrastructure and thwarting attempts to establish an efficient counter-state. They also highlight its effectiveness in fostering divisions between rebel groups and the local population. This strategic approach is noteworthy as it reflects a deliberate and explicit strategy. However, this strategy, which featured extensive Regime repression and violence, could not prevent protests from expanding in other Damascus neighbourhoods, including Al-Qadam, Barzeh (Mazur 2020), Al-Zahira, Al-Mazzeh (YouTube 2011b) and Al-Midan (YouTube 2011c).

This indiscriminate violence functioned in the service of laws that enabled the State to seize the property of the State's opponents. These include (the counterterrorism) Law No.19, Law No.22 and Decree 23 (which permits the state to operate extralegally when seizing property), which were all issued in 2012. Laws No.66 and 40 (also both issued in 2012) give the Regime the authority to renovate old buildings. Law No. 23 (which followed three years later) enabled the Regime to seize property without providing any compensation, altering a previous arrangement in which it had paid less than the actual price. Under Law No.10 and Act No.1 (both issued in 2018), the Regime seized the property of residents who had fled and probably never would return (the Syrian Lawyers Association 2020).

Unravelling the Regime's Strategy of Population Resettlement and Reconstruction: 2017 Onwards

At the beginning of 2017, the Regime combined force and reconciliation agreements to reseize the capital's eastern and southern neighbourhoods before removing the displaced to neighbouring regions and towns (UNHCR. 2015). The Regime reached agreements that enabled the defeated parties to relocate to Opposition-controlled areas of northern Syria. It seemed to pursue dual goals. Initially, it aimed to remove steadfast adversaries, including rebel combatants, civilian leaders of the opposition, and activists. Additionally, it sought to provide an opportunity for civilians who were neutral or loyal to redeem themselves (Shimale 2017). This engineered displacement is clearly more complex and sophisticated than counterparts that seek to gain a military advantage over an adversary by disrupting or destroying its command and control, logistical or movement capabilities (Kelly 2008).

The first agreement was signed in Qaboun neighbourhood on 14 May 2017, and resulted in 1,500 citizens being relocated to Idlib (Assistance Coordination Unite 2017). It was followed by a later agreement that relocated 500 citizens of the Tishreen neighbourhood to the same location, although at least one observer claimed that the actual figure was closer to 3,090 (Response Coordinators Unite 2018a). On 29 May 2017, around 3,000 Barzeh neighbourhood residents were relocated to Idlib governorate and the Jarabulus region of Aleppo governorate (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022). After the residents were relocated, the Regime razed their homes to the ground and constructed new ones in their place, with the aim of preventing them from ever returning (Human Rights Watch 2014).

In Jobar, the Regime launched a massive military operation to control the neighbourhood (YouTube 2011a) and was able to enter the neighbourhood in March 2018 and concluded an agreement sponsored by Russia with the Rahman Corps, which stipulated the exit of those who wished from the Jobar neighbourhood, the city of Irbin, and the towns of Ain Tarma and Zamalka, before removing an estimated 7,000 to Opposition-controlled parts of northern Syria (Bakkour 2024). After the end of eastern neighbourhood's displacement, the Regime wanted to re-control the Yarmouk neighbourhood and the south of the capital. It then, with the support of Iran and Turkey signed ceasefire agreements (2017–2018) with Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra that would apply to the towns of Al-Fu'ah and Kafarya (Shiite) in Idlib governorate

and Al-Zabadani and Madaya (Sunni) in Damascus Rural governorate, west of the capital (Bakkour and Sahtout 2022). This established the basis for what were effectively population 'swaps,' as residents of both villages were then relocated to Damascus and other governorates.

Bebela, Beit Sahem and Yalda, the last Opposition controlled parts of the southern capital, were returned to the Regime by a relocation agreement in mid-March 2018 that relocated 9,250 residents to the city of Jarabulus in Aleppo and the western countryside of Idlib governorate (Response Coordinators Unite 2018a). The Regime then retook Al-Qadam neighbourhood and imposed a displacement agreement that relocated 1,055 residents to Aleppo countryside and Idlib governorate (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed 2018). On May 21, 2018, a separate agreement removed ISIS from Al-Hajar al-Aswad, its last southern Damascus stronghold, and transferred 1,500 of its fighters to the Syrian Badia, near to As-Suwayda governorate (Al-Arabiya 2020), restoring the whole of the city to Regime control for the first time since 2012. By the end of 2019, the city's population was about two million, including an estimated 1.27 million residents and around 650,000 IDPs (EU Asylum Support Office 2020).

In Yarmouk Camp the destruction was extensive, and it was estimated three-quarters of the Camp would need to be rebuilt (*The Economist* 2018). However, the Regime actively sought to prevent people from returning with the aim of reducing support for the rebels and removing an unwanted population Richard and Gent 2006. The Regime cited a range of flimsy pretexts, including unremoved rubble, the continued presence of explosives and a lack of housing capacity. It also passed general laws that prevented residents from constructing temporary accommodation (Enab Baladi 2020b).

This was also the experience of Barzeh residents, whose property was repossessed by the state if they failed to establish ownership (Shimale 2017). The relocated residents of Qaboun have also expressed concern that, as former inhabitants of informal areas, they will lose their rights to their properties. They have considerable grounds for these fears, as the Qaboun Industrial Plan, in citing Law 104 (2019), has proposed the area should be transformed for residential (including the construction of residential towers) and commercial service purposes (The Levant 2019).

These relocation agreements were clear examples of demographic engineering that involved effective population transfers and exchanges. However, to date they have occurred on a relatively small scale. The Regime anticipated that these agreements would consolidate its control over key strategic areas and also would strengthen defensive areas under its control. The agreements only were introduced from 2017 onwards and therefore may be viewed as the culmination of various other displacement activities, including siege and indiscriminate attacks on opposition areas. Furthermore, the relocation plans and subsequent demolitions should not be misinterpreted as limited punishments of individuals who had opposed the Regime but should instead be viewed as the prelude to reconstruction that will be undertaken with political purposes in mind.

The implications of these measures therefore extended far beyond the affected individuals. In 2018, the Regime abolished the 'Local Committee of the Yarmouk Camp' and issued Law 71, which placed the Camp under the administrative authority

of one of the governorate's service departments. This meant it was subject to the governorate's organizing laws (especially laws no 10 and 32) and henceforth would be regarded and treated as a Damascus City neighbourhood. Similarly, in Qaboun, officials issued a planning decision on July 2019, which would topple buildings and lanes and remove around 140 industrial facilities (Bakkour 2024).

Conclusion

During the course of the war, displacement involved the wholesale removal or 'depopulation' of communities deemed to be disloyal, and accordingly, there was little or no attempt to 'filter' or distinguish adversaries from the general population. This distinguished the Regime's displacement from counter-insurgency doctrine and its associated proposition that the civilian population is a resource on which to draw. Rather, guilt was assumed based on location and retribution was indiscriminate. To understand the reasons behind the Regime's decision to implement displacement, it is essential to recognize that it wasn't initially adopted as a tactical or strategic choice. Instead, it arose as a response to a series of setbacks in southern and eastern Damascus during the early stages of the war. The adoption of displacement evolved over time and became intertwined with broader political objectives. According to an interviewee from the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD), the demographic changes initiated by the Assad regime appeared to be driven not solely by religious factors but by political allegiance and loyalty to the ruling power. This interviewee emphasized that the regime aimed to shape a supportive society, referred to as a 'useful Syria,' through a deliberate and systematic policy designed to achieve strategic goals outlined by Bashar Assad himself in the view of the interviewee (Bakkour 2024).

Throughout, the Regime's approach remained somewhat crude, disproportionate, and unsophisticated. It placed, for example, a stronger emphasis on creating divides between rebels and the civilian population than on engaging on a psychological level with non-combatants. 'Scaled-up' displacement sought to depopulate target areas through relocation agreements and then profoundly alter their social and physical appearance, as was most clearly demonstrated in Yarmouk Camp. In the absence of alternatives, displacement appeared as a somewhat clunky and ill-fitting tool that nonetheless achieved the desired goal in the end. Furthermore, several of its most undesirable features, including its unsophisticated and somewhat rudimentary character simultaneously could be reimagined as strengths, including the fact it is straightforward and low-cost to implement.

Of the three types of strategic displacement, the Regime's displacement most closely resembles depopulation, which involves the wholesale removal of a population. The extensive use of airstrikes, barrel bombs and heavy shelling was not undertaken on the basis of a strictly military rationale but instead sought to inflict mass casualties with the aim of forcing civilian populations to flee and actively dissociate themselves from adversaries. Cleansing, in contrast, is a less optimal 'fit' for this displacement because expulsions occurred in areas that rebels used to launch attacks and appeared to reflect political loyalties than sectarian identity more closely (Human Rights Watch

2014). Strictly speaking, it was location and not group identity that provided the primary justification for displacement activities, which serves, at least in terms of displacement, to highlight the limitations of a sectarian framing, such as the one offered by Balanche (2015).

Remaining in an opposition area that had been subjected to sustained Regime attack was presumed to indicate the guilt of inhabitants and it was on this basis, rather than an objective identifier such as religious identity or sect membership, that punishment was applied.

Here it is possible to draw a clear distinction between the Baathist policies (and French Mandate) 'sectarian' policies that sought to re-engineer demographic realities in the pre-war period and the Regime's displacement strategy. As Lichtenheld (2019) has observed, the Regime's main priority was to identify 'friend' and 'enemy' in the first instance: indiscriminate punishment was therefore inflicted on those who were presumed to have identified their 'guilt,' or more precisely their sympathy for the opposition, by remaining in place (Lichtenheld 2019). It is certainly possible to identify instances of sectarian engineering (see ibid, p. 8, final paragraph), including population swaps. However, such activities to date have been relatively limited, which quite clearly does not rule out the possibility that the Regime will henceforth seek to undertake demographic engineering on the model of Yiftachel's and Yacobi's (2003) urban ethnocracy.

Finally, the concept of forced relocation only can be applied problematically to 'agreements' that were self-evidently not 'voluntary' or indeed 'agreements' in the strict sense of the word, as they only were achieved through the extensive use of direct and indirect violence. In any case, forced relocation only became an active consideration in the war from 2017 onwards and to this extent more accurately could be described as the desired end outcome of other displacement activities – accordingly sieges were implemented in the full knowledge that they were only likely to end through relocation agreements; similarly, indiscriminate bombing was not undertaken in the expectation that it would produce an outright military victory, but ultimately would result in agreements such as the ones ultimately put into effect in both the Damascus suburbs and southern Damascus. Forced relocation therefore more accurately could be described as the desired end-product or outcome of displacement.

In the Introduction, I proposed that displacement is a means through which a range of conflict adversaries can 'pull' civilian populations into their conflict strategies and assign them to pre-established categories. State actors, it was noted, have a clear advantage in this regard as they have the ability and resources to uproot entire populations, and this justified the article's focus on Regime displacement (other armed actors also used displacement during the war). In referring to different displacement activities, including sieges, the deliberate targeting of civilian populations with a multitude of munitions and extensive aerial bombardment, we identified that displacement functioned as a way of ascertaining and identifying guilt in the first instance: those who remain in the aftermath of aerial bombardment, chemical weapon attacks and the deprivation of the most fundamental human needs are presumed to indicate their guilt and are condemned to suffer and die alongside 'terrorists.' The

oldest inhabited city in the world was depopulated through means and mechanisms that condemned innumerable civilians to a wretched non-existence and a multitude of unimaginable sufferings.

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