Conflict, Security & Development

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccsd20

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To cite this article: Samer Bakkour & Gareth Stansfield (2024) Sectarianism, indiscriminate violence and displacement in the Syrian Regime's Civil War strategy, Conflict, Security & Development, 24:3, 203-226, DOI: 10.1080/14678802.2024.2349057

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2349057

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Published online: 07 May 2024.

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CONFLICT, SECURITY & DEVELOPMENT
2024, VOL. 24, NO. 3, 203–226
https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2024.2349057

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Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

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Sectarianism, indiscriminate violence and displacement in the Syrian Regime's Civil War strategy

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ABSTRACT
In the Syrian Civil War, external observers have often misunderstood and misrepresented the nature and significance of indiscriminate violence that drives displacement, with the result that it has been (mis)understood as being driven by primordial sectarian hatred. This is of course far from the only contemporary civil war in which sectarianism has been ascribed without due care and consideration. While this article acknowledges sectarianism as part of the conflict; however, it treats it as less of a natural 'outgrowth' and more as part of a calculated and deliberate 'coercive counterinsurgency' strategy that the Regime has applied across the country. The article suggests that indiscriminate violence, which we might otherwise be predisposed to view as an 'excess', should be understood as part of a strategy, and more specifically a 'coercive counterinsurgency'. Therefore, the article identifies four population displacement strategies (bombings, blockades, starvation and massacres) that the Regime has applied in four parts of the country and brings out their strategic features in clearer detail. Ultimately, the reader will come to understand how sectarianism, indiscriminate violence, and displacement function as part of an integrated 'coercive counterinsurgency' strategy that the Regime has developed and applied over the course of the Civil War.

KEYWORDS
Bombing; blockades; displacement; massacres; sectarianism; starvation; Syrian Civil War

Introduction

Displacement has frequently tended to be overlooked in the Syrian Civil War, and when it has been acknowledged, its significance has been misunderstood, resulting in it being frequently characterised as an outgrowth of sectarian enmities. There is accordingly an ongoing need, which this article addresses, to reconceptualise displacement in the Syrian conflict, and to bring out its strategic dimensions and implications in clearer perspective. The ultimate intention of this article is therefore to contribute to an acknowledgement of the role and significance of strategic displacement in the Civil War. In challenging the pervasive tendency to equate this displacement with cleansing, this article will seek to demonstrate how the Syrian Regime's uprooting of populations enabled it to work towards established military and political goals.

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Although other parties in the conflict have also used strategic displacement, this article focuses exclusively on the Regime because it has applied it much more extensively in the Civil War. In building on this insight, it demonstrates how the uprooting of civilians has functioned as a part of a more general Regime strategy.[1] Although the Regime has used various methods, including indiscriminate bombing, blockades, and starvation, to achieve strategic objectives, this article zooms in on three specific Regime displacement practices, namely bombardment, blockade/siege and massacres.

Blockade, which can take different forms, is combined with bombardment and/or starvation, and is applied in pursuit of a of range different goals. On some occasions, it is primarily used to isolate enemy forces and make them less dangerous; and on others, it is used to exert additional pressure on defenders with the aim of coercing surrender and ultimately conquering territory. When combined with starvation, it offsets the need to enter, and fight within, densely populated areas,[2] and also offsets the need to incur high attacking force casualties. Blockade requires a military force possessing an ample number of personnel, and which is disciplined and has a clear organisational structure,[3] which is perhaps the main reason why siege tactics are more likely to be applied by conventional armies than by insurgents or terrorist groups.[4] Its application is also considerably assisted by natural geographic barriers such as mountains. In the Civil War, sieges have been used to impose 'reconciliation agreements' that are effectively unconditional surrender.[5] The application of starvation in blockades does not merely relate to the deprivation of food but also to the restriction of the ability to acquire food, and therefore extends to destruction (e.g. of food stores) and restriction and obstruction (of those seeking to find food). Other deprivations are also part of blockades, including the deliberate degrading of public health, the disruption of access to clean water, forced congregation in unhealthy conditions and the destruction of health facilities.

In conflict situations, the restriction of access to food almost never occurs in isolation from wider deprivations, which serves to reiterate it can be used to direct control or expel populations. However, its use can be counterproductive – for example, self-sustaining militias may diminish the authority of the central government and also contribute to famine.[6] In addition, while the use of starvation does not require specialist equipment or expertise, and could therefore be argued to be 'low-cost', this does not apply if defending forces have significant food supplies, as it would then be necessary to deploy a considerable number of troops over an extended duration.[7]

Massacres have historically combined direct coercion with volition, as populations flee in fear for their lives in such circumstances, it becomes much harder to distinguish strategic and collateral displacement. As with other aspects of the Regime's 'coercive counterinsurgency', massacres create fear and terror with the intention of driving mass population movements. Associated acts (including sexual violence and the mutilation of bodies) are not just intelligible in terms of their immediate consequences but also in terms of the wider psychological effects they seek to produce.

This article argues that the widespread application of indiscriminate force as part of a displacement strategy was not primarily concerned with 'cleansing' (expelling 'undesirable' or disloyal populations) but was instead part of a clear military and political strategy. This clearly recalls and resembles Adam Lichtenheld's observation that 'in many cases, the strategic displacement of civilian populations are not static, one-off events, but dynamic processes whereby political actors continuously seek to regulate people's

physical locations and movements'.[8] It also brings to mind accounts (see Stathis Kalyvas's *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*[9] and Christopher Cramer's *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing*)[10] that seek to engage and understand violence in rational terms.

These contributions subvert the distinction that we might otherwise be tempted to draw between targeted (or discriminating)[11] and indiscriminate violence.[12] The latter presumes guilt on the basis of association or collective identity and produces brutalisation[13] and mass killing[14]; and has alternately been described as a form of mass violence,[15] the irrational consequence of a particular ideology,[16] the product of the 'adrenaline of war zones'[17] and/or revenge on a defenceless population.[18] Presented in these terms, it might be presumed to occur as a result of a lack of self-control and/or a yielding to frustration and stress. However, as this article will demonstrate, this does not apply to the Regime's Civil War strategy, where indiscriminate violence is applied in pursuit of clearly defined aims and objectives.

In demonstrating the strategic significance of displacement in further detail, this article refers to case studies of Daraya (bombardment), Aleppo and Al-Zabadani (starvation and siege) and Homs (massacre) Considering the application of displacement across each context makes it possible to identify an underpinning logic that cuts across specific acts of indiscriminate violence, which is brought out in more detail in the 'Strategic Significance of Displacement' sub-section and the Conclusion.[19] The case studies are based on a series of reports published by international organisations, international NGOs and regional research organisations. These reports do not tend to focus on displacement and are instead concerned with other aspects of the conflict, which is consistent with a more general tendency to discuss displacement as a sub-theme. One of the main contributions of the case studies is therefore to engage this material from within a displacement framework and to situate individual testimony within a broader strategic framework of reference.

These reports, along with the referenced media reports, were however produced under extremely tight Regime controls that included severe restrictions on freedom of movement. In order to provide additional insight, I also refer to 15 interviews with activists who produced journalistic material on the war in the period September 2021–December 2022. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on Regime violence and internal displacement during the Civil War. Interviewees were identified over social media, including Facebook and Twitter, and were not informed of the questions beforehand. The case studies also refer to material taken from a book that I currently working on with Syrian researchers that is being supported by the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies.[20]

Unveiling the displacement in the Syrian Civil War as a political and military strategy

At the end of 2011, it was estimated there were 170,000 IDPs[21] and 12,400 Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.[22] By the end of the following year, there were 2.5 million IDPs inside Syria,[23] and around 568,950 refugees.[24] By 2013, at least 9,500 Syrians were displaced each day and by June of the following year, almost half the country's population had fled their homes.[25] In 2015, more than 1.6 million were displaced,[26] declining to 929,534[27] in

the following year before increasing to 1,173,042 in 2017.[28] Sustained conflict, especially in the country's northeast and northwest, displaced 120,000 each month,[29] producing the world's largest number of IDPs (6.6 million),[30] and concentrating almost a third of Syria's population (30 per cent) in the country's northwest (Idlib and West Aleppo) and rural Damascus.[31]

In the Civil War, displacement inevitably occurs whenever one actor replaces another or when there is a (often well-grounded) fear of retribution as a result of political change. This article focuses on forced or strategic displacement, which involves the targeted and untargeted use of violence,[32] is systematic[33] and is applied with the aim of weakening, fragmenting or destroying Opposition forces in politically important parts of the country.[34] It does not therefore concern itself with collateral displacement, which is when individuals make a rational decision to flee in response to threatened or actual violence, which has already been extensively engaged by other researchers, including Hakovirta (1986),[35] Stanley (1987),[36] Zolberg,[37] Moore and Shellman (respectively 2004, 2006, and 2007).[38]

Both collateral and strategic displacement have produced significant change, reducing the Sunni majority from 64 per cent to 61 per cent of the country's overall population,[39] and shifting the country's ethno-sectarian balance in favour of minority groups, such as Alawites, Shia, Christians, Druze and Ismailis,[40] who have largely remained pro-Regime throughout the Civil War. International observers have only gradually recognised that these changes have, in substantial part, been driven by an integrated military and political strategy. This is despite the fact that strategic displacement has been part of the conflict since a relatively early stage of the Civil War – for example, in 2012, 200,000 were displaced from their homes in Aleppo, when security forces destroyed 1,500 properties in 'an obviously deliberate' and 'premeditat[ed]' attack.[41]

In January 2023, an independent U.N. commission on Syria[42] observed that displacement in the country had been 'undertaken by Government forces pursuant to an organizational policy' and was 'a crime against humanity and/or a war crime'.[43] General Philip Breedlove, a NATO commander, claimed the Syrian and Russian governments were 'deliberately weaponizing displacement in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve'. He added imprecise but deadly barrel bombs were intended to 'terrorize, [to] get people out of their homes and get them on the road and make them someone else's problem'.[44]

However, this largely considered displacement in terms of its immediate military impact and failed to acknowledge the longer-term political implications, including demographic engineering. Other observers made the same error when they viewed and treated displacement as a protection challenge. And here it should be remembered that Assad has openly welcomed demographic change – in one speech, he observed the country had "lost the best of our young people and an infrastructure ... but in return, we have gained a healthier and more harmonious society'.[45] This sentiment was echoed by Major General Jamil al-Hassan,[46] the head of the country's air force intelligence and one of the country's most senior security chiefs, who said: 'A Syria with 10 million trustworthy people obedient to the leadership is better than a Syria with 30 million vandals'.[47] Both were however referring to outward migration, whereas this article is more concerned with the question of how internal displacement within the country has been used to reinforce and strengthen the Regime's authority.

International observers have tended to focus on outward population flows, which reflects the fact that displacement has important implications for international security, and can therefore impact ongoing conflict, neighbouring states and receiving communities.[48] Displacement can, for example, internationalise a civil war by generating large cross-border refugee flows, as noted by Loescher, who observes: '[L]arge-scale population movements across national frontiers can, in certain circumstances be perceived as so destabilizing that they constitute a threat to international peace and security, and therefore warrant military intervention by external forces'.[49]

For various reasons, international observers tended to focus on refugee outflows at the expense of internal displacement and, as a result, also overlooked the extent to which this targeting was deliberate and intended to further specific political and military aims and objectives within the country. This was perhaps surprising because the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian population for strategic purposes has become an increasingly recognised aspect of civil wars, as recognised by Berti and Sosnowski, who refer to instances where 'civilians are deliberately targeted as a strategic choice in order to win wars.[50] Kelly Greenhill has also identified 'coercive engineered displacement' as an important aspect of contemporary internal conflicts.[51]

Sectarian manipulation and coercive counterinsurgency in the Syrian Civil War

In the Syrian Civil War, the Regime has frequently resorted to indiscriminate violence, as Human Rights Watch (HRW) has recognised in a report. In discussing a Regime attack on Idlib, this report observes:

> 'The repeated Syrian-Russian alliance attacks on civilian infrastructure in populated areas in which there was no apparent military objective suggests that these unlawful attacks were deliberate. The intent may been have been to deprive local residents of the means to sustain themselves, to force the civilian population to flee and make it easier for Syrian ground forces to take territory, or simply to instil terror in the civilian population as a way to achieve victory'. The Syrian-Russian alliance *apparently intended to fulfil these aims with little regard for international law* [my emphasis].[52]

In mischaracterising this indiscriminate violence as 'ethnic cleansing' observers have reinforced the misconception that it originates in, and is sustained by, sectarian enmities.[53] They have also, in common with other accounts,[54] implied that the establishment of ethnically homogenous territories is a desired outcome. Even more nuanced treatments of sectarianism, such as the one provided by Straus, who proposes that targeted group violence arises from elite-promoted 'founding narratives' that uplift a particular subnational group while excluding others from state authority,[55] are problematic in the Syrian case because they suggest that group identities precede, and therefore stand outside of, the conflict.

In reality, sectarianism is in many respects an artificial feature that has been deliberately grafted onto the conflict – from an early stage in the Civil War, the Regime deployed an openly sectarian political discourse with the aim of ensuring that minorities (Alawites, Christians, Druze and Shiites) would either stand by or support the Regime, which then established a framework that other actors were obliged to

operate within.[56] By implication, sectarianism was not a 'natural' outgrowth of the conflict that stood outside of the wishes and manoeuvres of conflict actors. This was clearly shown in Homs City, for example, where sectarian violence was effectively 'imported'.[57]

There were also various instances where sect or religious group identity functioned as a proxy for political loyalty. 'Cleansing' was therefore effectively a way in which the 'identification' problem (distinguishing 'friend' from 'enemy') was overcome in mixed areas[58] and was not therefore 'sectarian', in the conventional meaning and implication. A closer examination of Regime targeting in the conflict also supports the conclusion that location, rather than group membership, was a better predictor of Regime violence – for example, Eline Bostad claims that in these heterogeneous territories, 'sectarian identities served as particularly potent proxies for the [O]pposition'.[59]

Primordial accounts of sectarianism also overlook the fact that the Revolution initially cut across social and religious boundaries, as shown by the fact that many participants and demonstrators were members of minority communities, including the 'ruling' Alawite sect, whose members have historically been the 'backbone' of the country's key military and political institutions. The Regime responded to the first protests by invoking fear, and the state media depicted the Opposition as sectarian Islamists, locking most of Syria's minorities (and Sunni secularists) into a security dilemma that strengthened as extremists such as Al-Nusra and ISIS became more prominent in the Opposition.[60] Similarly, in the Homs region, which is a gateway that leads onto its Alawite 'heartland', the Regime deliberately weaponised the 'ancient hatreds' narrative.[61] Here the Regime specifically sought to alter the demographic balance between Sunnis and Alawites. Homs became a specific target for regime massacres due to its strategic location between the coast, Damascus and rural Damascus, and also its location in supply lines extending from Lebanon. In addition, the governorate was also part of the Regime's long-established 'useful Syria' project.

At the beginning of 2011, Homs governorate had a population of 2,147,000.[62] Most residents were Arab, although Circassians, Dagestans and Turkmens were also present in smaller numbers.[63] Sunni Muslims accounted for around two-thirds (65.5 per cent) of the population, and were mainly based in the city centre and surrounding areas.[64] Alawites (20 per cent) and Christians (12 per cent) were significant minorities.[65] Shiites, in contrast, accounted for no more than one percent.[66] In large part as a result of the Regime's displacement activities, the governorate's population decreased from 1,803,000 in 2011 to 1,052,000 five years later, a fall of more than 42 per cent. The governorate's demographic profile also changed dramatically – the Sunni population fell by more than half (from 43 per cent to 19 per cent) and the Shiite (seven-fold increase), Alawite (from 25 per cent to 37 per cent), Christian (from 8 per cent to 13 per cent) and Ismaili (from 0.2 per cent to 0.3 per cent) population increased.[67]

In rejecting the Regime's depiction of sectarianism, which was often thoughtlessly reproduced by external observers, this article insists that sectarianism should be understood 'as a function of authoritarian politics and not irreconcilable theological differences between Sunnis and Shias'.[68] It therefore aligns with Rabi and Friedman (2017) and Mahon (2019),[69] who have respectively developed the concepts of 'weaponized sectarianism' and 'Sectarianization'. It also comes into the orbit of Sami Zubeida's work, and more specifically his concept of 'sectarian entrepreneurs', which foregrounds the insight

that sectarian divisions are produced through 'political manoeuvring by state actors and sectarian entrepreneurs'.[70]

These important contributions present sectarianism as an instrument that is used in pursuit of particular political aims and objectives. In contrast, when observers such as Abdo speak of tensions being 'reawakened'[71] they overlook the essential point that sectarianism does not 'exist' outside the conflict but is instead directly implicated in military and political strategies[72] applied by the Regime and, to a lesser extent, by ISIS, al-Qaeda affiliates and foreign Shia militias.[73] This article argues that displacement has become a defining feature of Regime strategy, both during the initial stages of the uprising and then during the conflict itself.[74]

This 'instrumental' sectarianism can be elaborated by referring to counter-insurgency doctrine, which has long recognised the crucial role of civilians as a valuable resource in civil wars who can directly aid and abet rebels, including by providing sanctuary and/or material support. Rebels who are militarily weaker seek refuge among the population, creating a series of counterinsurgency challenges.[75] The Regime did not seek to elicit the population's cooperation and instead used various degrees of force, both direct and indirect, to achieve its political and military aims, which is why I speak of 'coercive counterinsurgency',[76] in preference to the more conventional 'counterinsurgency'.

Examining the Regime's calculated displacement tactics

Bombardment

Darayya region is strategically significant because it is close to the Republican Palace, the Army Fourth Division and the Mazzeh military airport.[77] After popular protests against the Regime broke out in March 2011, most residents in the towns of Western Ghouta in the Damascus rural governorate joined them. The Regime responded by bombing most of the towns, hitting both residential buildings and civilian infrastructure.[78] Bombing was part of the Regime's 'scorched earth' campaign in Darayya that was waged with Russian support in Sunni majority or mixed areas with the aim of uprooting the resident population, as part of a 'biting the limbs' approach that sought to isolate Darayya from Damascus and other regions. Strategic bombing was first used in Darayya City, where civilians paid the highest cost.[79] The entire population, estimated at 250,000, was forcibly displaced by barrel bombs, missiles, cylinders, and rockets, resulting in the destruction of nearly the entire city (90 per cent).[80] Indiscriminate air attacks became a regular occurrence as 'the most significant instrument in the [R]egime's efforts to displace populations',[81] destroying at least 40 per cent of the country's infrastructure and substantially impacting displacement patterns across the country.[82] In a 2017 HANDICAP International survey, just over one-third (36 per cent) of respondents cited aerial attacks as the most important factor in their decision to relocate[83]

As the Civil War developed, aerial assaults completely replaced ground offensives,[84] and Darayya City was subsequently renamed 'barrel bomb city' after it was subjected to heavy bombing, including with barrels, burning napalm, chlorine gas, 'elephant' ground missiles, explosives, gas cylinders (loaded with incendiary and high explosive materials), shells and vacuum bombs. These assaults aimed to undermine the Opposition's governance capacity by damaging vital infrastructure, fostering divisions between rebel factions

and the local populace, and undermining Opposition efforts to establish a functional counter-state,[85] and were therefore underpinned by a clear strategic rationale and justification. These attacks destroyed just over three-quarters (80 per cent) of Darayya city's infrastructure, displacing most inhabitants.[86]

The Syrian military, and the army, police, security forces and NDF (National Defence Forces) in particular, repeatedly launched indiscriminate attacks on densely populated opposition-held urban areas.[87] In Daraa (southern Syria) the Regime razed large sections of rebel-occupied neighbourhoods, again displacing residents, some of whom had already been displaced on multiple occasions.[88] Indiscriminate bombardment often used 'imprecise and unguided munitions with wide-area effects'[89] and therefore offered an economical way of capturing or annexing territory, removing the need to worry about traditional counter-insurgency requirements, such as eliciting compliance from non-combatants.[90] Chemical weapons were also used in these attacks.[91] In August 2013, the Regime allegedly launched a Sarin gas attack on Ghouta that killed more than 1400 civilians,[92] sparking international condemnation and raising the prospect of international intervention.

Bombardment of civilian areas occurred in both Sunni majority and mixed areas, which underlined that targeting did not purely reflect sectarian identity. Aerial bombardment essentially aimed to depopulate Opposition-held areas, with the aim of separating Opposition fighters from the general population. This was reiterated by the fact that, in some cases, bombardment occurred in the apparent absence of an immediate military justification. Bombardment actually therefore basically served as a filtering mechanism, in which it was presumed those who remained were, by virtue of their failure to flee in the face of bombardment, Opposition supporters and sympathisers. In other words, as the work of Lichtenfeld makes clear, bombardment was effectively an adjustment to the exigencies of conflict situations, which was made in response to the difficulties of distinguishing 'friend' from 'foe'.

Siege/starvation

The Regime found siege to be a logical choice, as it demanded fewer resources and a reduced number of trained military personnel. After 2012, Aleppo was divided between a Regime-controlled west and an Opposition (including the FSA and various Islamist groups)-controlled east.[93] In November 2015, Regime and Regime-allied forces imposed a partial siege on the east of the city, which at the time had a population of 250–275,000, depriving it of food, medicine and other essential supplies.[94] The Regime's strategic focus eventually came to rest on provincial capitals and other strategic population centres in the governorate. In September 2016, with the support of the Russians and pro-Regime militia, it turned the partial siege of Aleppo into a total siege. In this final period of the siege, almost 37,000 civilians were crammed into around 2 km of the city.[95] By December 2016, The Regime controlled most of Aleppo's eastern neighbourhoods.[96]

After the Opposition seized control of various cities across the country, the Regime responded by broadly applying siege tactics.[97] Approximately 2.5 million Syrians, equivalent to over 10 per cent of the pre-war population, experienced living in siege or siege-like conditions at some stage during the civil war.[98] Whereas in some locations, the Regime imposed a 'tight' siege, in others it imposed 'partial'

sieges that allowed some residents (not men of military age) to leave and supplies to enter. This variation in siege techniques mapped onto a broader variation in which patterns of Regime violence varied in accordance with the level of resistance encountered.

The initial significant sieges commenced in 2012 with the establishment of Regime checkpoints that aimed to methodically manage and govern the movement of people and goods into specific neighbourhoods, and these restrictions were gradually tightened in the following year.[99] Russia's entrance into the war in September 2015[100] resulted in further tightening, producing severe starvation. Siege tactics were also combined with artillery and aerial bombardment that effectively levelled entire neighbourhoods,[101] serving to again reiterate that the emptying of contested areas was a key Regime aim and objective.

Explosive shelling and concussive missiles were directed at heavily populated zones, as well as water facilities such as the Bab al-Nairab station and the water company in the Suleiman al-Halaby neighbourhood, along with critical transformers essential for power supply.[102] In March 2017, the World Bank claimed that between half and 80 per cent of the public and service sector in Aleppo, Hama and Idlib was out of service.[103] However, as Todman notes, the deliberate targeting of public infrastructure emerged as a relatively 'late' development in the Regime's siege strategy – in the initial stages of the Civil War, the Regime appeared content to merely 'contain' populations, in the expectation they would turn against armed actors.[104] This and other variations in the Regime's use of indiscriminate violence confirmed its ability to adjust in response to conflict exigencies.

In the Syrian Civil War, starvation has mainly occurred in cities, which have been the most contested locations.[105] In developing its 'Kneel or Starve' policy, the Regime incorporated starvation into its siege tactics in both Zabadani and Madaya.[106] While the tactic of starvation was primarily employed as a favoured substitute for direct intervention, it was also sometimes used for revenge. Although it was applied in all of the country's governorates, its use was most obvious in rural Damascus and, in particular, in the Zabadani region, which is no more than 45 km from Damascus – its western, southern and northern border Lebanon, and it is a major Hezbollah supply line.

The first demonstration in this part of the country occurred on 25 March 2011, in response to mass Regime arrests.[107] Al-Zabadani[108] was the first city in the countryside to the west of Damascus to be liberated from Regime control (in February 2012) and was also the first city to the west of Damascus that was FSA-controlled.[109] The Regime tried to deter others from following its example[110] and deliberately used starvation to collectively punish the resident population[111] and prevent civilians from leaving besieged areas, which are both war crimes under international law.[112]The Regime used starvation to contain the targeted area, and burned surrounding crops, a particularly callous and cruel action in an agriculture-dependent area.[113] In strategic terms, this tactic would however make it possible to minimise Regime casualties and extract concessions from Opposition fighters trapped in the city. The government also blocked the entry of electricity, fuel, medicine, and water. Inhabitants had no other option but to eat grass, weeds, and cats,[114] resulting in malnourishment and, in the most extreme cases, death.[115] Hezbollah forces besieging the camps ignored requests for assistance and/or evacuation. The cost of basic food items soared, and new-born babies died because their mothers were unable to breastfeed them.

Aid distribution in both al-Zabadani and Madaya became politicised as the Regime insisted that aid should arrive simultaneously in besieged (Regime-held) Foua and Kafarya at the same time. Aside from failing to acknowledge the established rights and entitlements of the besieged populations, the Regime therefore effectively used them as a bargaining tool[116] In the first six months of the siege of Madaya, for example, aid was only delivered once.[117] While opposition groups also used starvation as a tool of war (including in Deir Ez-Zor), the Regime was responsible for the majority of sieges across the country and therefore also, by implication, the majority of instances where starvation was used as a weapon of war.

Although the level of cruelty involved in Regime sieges of predominantly Sunni areas could easily give rise to the assumption that it was grounded in sectarian enmities, it should be remembered that siege actually had a clear strategic logic for a Regime that was confronted on multiple fronts and that was forced to rely on external assistance from Iran and Russia in order to sustain itself against multiple enemies. Starvation was used as a tool of war because it provided a low-cost and convenient means of exerting pressure on besieged populations and creating divides between the civilian population and armed fighters. Variations in the arrangements and instruments of siege tactics, further underlined that, in this case, strategic calculations predominated over sectarian motivations. Indeed, it was actually population swaps in the aftermath of sieges that appeared to have a stronger sectarian rationale and justification.

Massacres

Homs was one of the first governorates to rise against the Regime, and in 2011 was even dubbed as ‘the capital of the Syrian revolution’,[118] which increased the likelihood that it would be targeted by Regime violence.[119] Acts of ‘cleansing’ were predominantly executed through direct violence, involving both individual and mass executions, beatings, and physical intimidation.[120] Murder, mutilation, rape and torture were inflicted on bodies, and left deep and lasting psychological scars. These attacks were carried out by Regime-allied militia and, of the three forms of violence, it was the one that had the clearest and most obvious sectarian overtones.

In mid-October 2011, many demonstrators were indiscriminately killed in the Jandali neighbourhood. Meanwhile, in the Khalidiya neighbourhood massacre on the second of February 2012, at least 100 inhabitants were killed and 500 injured.[121] On 11 February 2012, in a massacre in the Sabil neighbourhood, *Shabiha* stabbed whole families to death.[122] In the Karm Alzaytoun massacre on 9–11 March 2012, 47 civilians were killed and militia used knives to mutilate their bodies.[123] And in the Bab Amr neighbourhood massacre on 3 February 2012, Regime forces besieged a few farmers for a month before then killing them and destroying most buildings in the area.[124] The Regime used heavy artillery to indiscriminately bomb entire Sunni neighbourhoods, and, in just two months (January – February 2012), between 50,000–60,000 were displaced from Homs City.[125] Some of this displacement was consistent with cleansing,[126] including, for example, the use of militias (*shabiha*)[127] and, more specifically, the Regime’s clearly demonstrated desire to use them to stoke sectarian tensions.[128] The Regime’s armoured vehicles, tanks and troop carriers supported the *Shabiha* and armed Alawites when they carried out massacres.

The Houla (Tel Taldo) massacre occurred on 25 May 2012. Regime security forces killed 108, including 39 children (under ten-years-of-age) and 32 women. The massacre sparked international outrage, and the U.S. and some European countries[129] expelled Syrian ambassadors.[130] Sexual violence also emerged as an important feature of subsequent *shabiha* massacres.[131] The massacres in the city predominantly took place in Sunni neighbourhoods that were adjacent to Alawite enclaves,[132] and observers noted that they appeared 'to be conducted as part of a state policy' that deliberately sought to displace civilians.[133] The decision to flee was typically driven by fears for security and even survival.[134] In almost every case, Sunnis were targeted. In contrast to the other two forms of violence, massacres were underpinned by a clear sectarian logic and deliberately targeted a particular group (Sunni Muslims) on the basis of a pre-established identity. In the other two cases, the fact that Sunnis were disproportionately affected essentially reflected the fact that they were disproportionately represented in the Opposition.

In the case of massacres, however, the Regime deliberately sought to create an atmosphere in which communities turned against each other, and minorities were effectively forced to side with the Regime. In such instances, massacres more closely correlated with the logic of 'ethnic cleansing' than in the other instances. However, even here it must be stressed that sectarianism was not an 'organic' outgrowth of the conflict but was instead artificially cultivated by a specific actor. In massacres, the violence was far cruder (than in the other two displacement practices), including extensive sexual violence and the mutilation of dead bodies. The Regime's intention was to inculcate a sense of fear and terror, with the aim of undermining popular support for the opposition. In the cases of both bombardment and siege, in contrast, the loyalties and sentiments of the civilian population were effectively irrelevant, as by remaining in place, they were presumed to be opponents of the Regime, and therefore as appropriate targets for indiscriminate violence.

Beyond destruction: exploring strategic significance of indiscriminate violence

Bombardment, siege/starvation, and massacre should not be viewed in isolation but should instead be understood as part of an integrated military and political strategy that sought to depopulate key strategic areas before then incorporating them back into the Regime's sphere of control through "reconciliation agreements", which involved members of besieged areas agreeing to surrender in exchange for safe evacuation. These agreements were then formalised in laws and regulations that will severely inhibit displaced former residents from returning to their homes and communities.

In the Civil War, various population exchanges followed sustained bombardment, sieges, and massacres, and were intelligible not just in terms of their immediate military contribution but also as part of a broader project of demographic engineering. There are various historical precedents for this in the wider Middle East, including the Peel Commission's (1937) proposals for population 'swaps' between proposed Jewish and Arab states in Historical Palestine.[135]

Hinnebusch and Imady observed that, in the Syrian Civil War, the arrangements put in place by reconciliation agreements tended to reflect the level of resistance encountered – for instance, in areas where the Regime had to fight hard, the entire population

was removed.[136] This is consistent with Berti's and Sosnowski's observation that such agreements had 'de facto impaired the possibility of political opposition to the state'.[137] They also had an important socio-economic dimension, as it has been claimed they sought to benefit Regime supporters, such as "the Sunni bourgeoisie and upper-class [l]oyal to [A]ssad".[138] Rollins, for example, has claimed that Darayya's poor population was expelled with the intention of building luxury flats and villas.[139] Meanwhile, in Zabadani and Madaya, the displacement of former residents appeared to have a more political purpose, as this will enable the Iranian Regime to exert increased influence on both towns and the surrounding countryside.[140] Displaced former residents observe that 'the Syrian regime and its allies, Russia and Iran, have adopted a policy of demographic engineering of the country by adopting the policies of siege, starvation and military escalation in the areas revolting against it, which led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from their areas'.[141]

In April 2015, the Opposition agreed a ceasefire with the Regime, leading to the evacuation of the remaining Al-Zabadani residents.[142] Under the agreement, over 2000 residents were relocated to the nearby towns of Madaya and Bukain.[143] Between October 2015 and April 2016, approximately 25 families, who were unwilling to be resettled in areas controlled by the Regime, were assembled in Bludan and Zabadani towns. They were subsequently transported by military vehicles to Madaya and Bukain towns, and then later transferred to Idlib governorate.[144] On 28 March 2017, the sectarian 'Four Cities' agreement[145] was signed. It transferred Sunnis in Bludan and Zabadani to Idlib, with the apparent intention of replacing them with Shiites from Idlib Province (Al-Fouah and Kafarya).[146] Meanwhile, Daraa City's remaining population was forcibly removed and remaining areas razed to the ground, with the apparent intention of preventing their return.[147]

In Aleppo, a pact between Russia and the Opposition laid the groundwork for relocating the remaining residents of East Aleppo,[148] who were to be scattered in the countryside west of the city and the Idlib Governorate.[149] This served two objectives for the Regime: firstly, to remove persistent opponents[150]; and secondly, to enlist those entering its territory into the army[151] over 4,000 Sunni men who crossed from East to West Aleppo in December 2016 were conscripted into the army and sent to the frontline with little training.[152] Otherwise, the Regime sought to permanently expel residents, including by levelling their homes, and did not try to encourage them to relocate to 'its' territory. Clerc observes:

> 'UN reports on war crimes document cases in which Government forces and affiliated militia intentionally burned and destroyed the homes and businesses believed to belong to suspected anti-Government activists and their supporters during raids. Overt destruction included burning, the use of explosives, and could inflict damage beyond repair. Looting was a frequent precursor to destruction'.[153]

Clerc claims that Regime efforts to alter the demographic balance within urban areas began as early as Spring 2012. This served to reiterate that demographic engineering was not merely a punishment, but was also part of urban renewal,[154] and included the large-scale destruction of public areas and basic utilities. While most destruction occurred in informal areas that produced many of the Revolution's original participants, such activities were focused on principal cities, including Damascus, Homs and

Aleppo.[155] The Ministry of Housing, which was established in 2012, and whose responsibilities included urban planning, subsequently committed itself to 'reconstruction work'.

'Reconciliation agreements' were followed by legislation that empowered the State to confiscate the assets of State adversaries and transfer them to State ownership, as part of what Clerc describes as the 'weaponization' of urban planning and associated laws.[156] This 'weaponization' encompassed laws such as (the counter-terrorism) Law No.19, Law No.22, and Decree 23 (which allows the State to operate beyond legal constraints when seizing property), which were all issued in 2012. Laws No.66 and 40 (also issued in 2012) gave the Regime the authority to refurbish old buildings. Meanwhile, Law No.23 (introduced three years later) granted the Regime the right to seize property without offering any compensation, replacing the previous arrangement in which it paid less than the actual price. Additionally, Law No.10 and Act No.1 (both issued in 2018) enabled the Regime to confiscate the property of residents who had fled and were unlikely to return.[157] In Basatin Mazzeh and Kafr Sousse in Damascus, resident properties were seized under Decree 66 (2012), as part of the Marota City project. Daraya, Al Qadam and Al Qanawat were also affected[158]

The relocated residents of Qaboun have also expressed concern that, as former inhabitants of informal areas, they will lose the property rights they had previously possessed. Such fears are well-grounded, as the Qaboun Industrial Plan, in citing Law 104 (2019), has proposed the area should be transformed for residential (including residential towers) and commercial service purposes.[159] Similar 'development' has also occurred in Homs, Al-Waer neighbourhood, Eastern and Western Ghouta, Al-Qalamoun, Moadamiya, Qudssaya, Al-Qusayr, Eastern Aleppo, the Jobar neighbourhood in Damascus, Idlib countryside, Hama, and elsewhere across the country.[160]

Conclusion

The sectarian character of the Syrian Civil War has frequently been taken-for-granted by external observers and so have a number of related beliefs, including that indiscriminate violence is inflicted on adversaries on the basis of sect or religious group membership/identity. Amongst other things, this reinforces the belief that this violence is an irrational 'excess'. This article has sought to challenge this (mis)representation by demonstrating how indiscriminate violence and sectarianism have become established as part of a Regime 'coercive' strategy that seeks to uproot and relocate whole populations in key strategic areas across the country. This strategy simultaneously seeks to 'pull in' and 'push out'. Massacres instil fear and terror and cause residents to flee in fear for their life, while sieges concentrate residents in tight and confined spaces where they experience both direct (bombardment) and indirect (starvation) violence. This Regime strategy does not engage with populations as a resource and nor does it seek to elicit information from them; rather, it takes their guilt for granted and equates them with the 'enemy' that is to be destroyed. Merely by failing to flee, they are presumed to have indicated their loyalties and are accordingly punished.

As a key part of this strategy, a 'weaponised' sectarianism has been mobilised and instrumentalised in key areas of struggle for very specific political purposes. This underlines the 'artificial' character of this sectarianism, and, by implication the fact that it has

been manipulated, and to a substantial extent generated, by assorted conflict actors (predominantly, although not exclusively, the Regime).

This article has therefore asserted that three aspects of the conflict need to be reassessed and reconsidered. First, sectarianism, which has been inaccurately portrayed as a 'natural' feature and 'driver' of the conflict. Second, indiscriminate violence, which has been misconceived as an 'excess'; and third, displacement, which in being equated with collateral displacement, has largely been engaged and treated as a consequence of violent conflict, with the result that its strategic dimensions and attributes have been consistently overlooked. This produces three important analytical shifts – first, sectarianism is implicated within the conflict, and therefore understood as a resource or instrument that is exploited by different conflict actors; second, indiscriminate violence is viewed as targeted and defined in relation to the aims and objectives that it seeks to achieve; and third, displacement is assessed and understood in the wider context of a military and political strategy.

In engaging on this basis, we come to see that each of the three displacement practices should not be understood in isolation but should instead be engaged and considered in terms of their ultimate object – that is, uprooting and relocating whole communities through direct and indirect violence. Each practice is therefore not intelligible on its own terms or its immediate consequences but should instead be assessed and understood in terms of its potential to contribute to long-term demographic change that is enabled and initiated by 'reconciliation agreements'.

In its engagements with the Civil War, the 'international community' too frequently focused on individual 'excesses' in isolation, including specific chemical weapon attacks or large-scale massacres of civilians, resulting in the strategic significance of such actions, including their links with long-term demographic reconfiguration were persistently overlooked. This has been clearly indicated on a number of occasions including, for example, when international observers, in welcoming ceasefire agreements as a prelude to 'negotiated' settlements, failed to acknowledge that any 'agreement' preceded by sustained bombardment, siege and starvation, could hardly be anything of the sort. Ultimately, this attested to a broader failure and oversight, in which observers consistently failed to acknowledge the political and military significance of the Regime's indiscriminate violence against civilians in the Civil War.

Notes

1. Nahlawi, *In Armed Conflict and Forcible Displacement.*
2. Fearon and Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War'.
3. Stathis and Balcells, 'International System and Technologies of Rebellion'.
4. Hägerdal, 'Starvation as Siege Tactics', 1–23.
5. Lichtenheld, 'Explaining Population Displacement Strategies in Civil Wars'.
6. Ibid., 699–722.
7. Hägerdal, 'Starvation as Siege Tactics', 1–23.
8. Lichtenheld 'The Identity Politics of Displacement in the Middle East'.
9. Kalyvas, *the Logic of Violence in Civil War.*
10. Christopher Cramer, *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing.*
11. Ibid., 174.
12. See note 9 above.

13. DeWaal, 'Evil Days'.
14. Benjamin, Huthe and Lindsay, 2004. 'Draining the Sea', 375–407.
15. Kalyvas and Balcells, 'International System and Technologies of Rebellion', 415–429.
16. Bakkour, *The Syrian Alienation.*
17. Fair, 'The Media of Conflict', 176.
18. Paggi, *Storia e Memoria di un Massacro Ordinario.*
19. Zhukov, 'Population Resettlement in War', 1155–85.
20. See note 16 above.
21. ECB, 'Syrian Arab Republic'.
22. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 'IDP News Alert'.
23. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 'Disaster Needs Analysis'.
24. HIU, 'Syria: 2012 Population Displacement'.
25. United Nation General Assembly, 2016. 'Report of the Special'.
26. Ibid.
27. UNHCR, 'Flash Update in Syria'.
28. UNHCR, Flash Update on Recent Events'.
29. Humanitarian Needs Overview, 'Syrian Arab Republic'.
30. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, The Global Report on Internal Displacement.
31. HNAP, '*Syrian Socioeconomic'.*
32. Azzam, and Hoeffler, 'Violence against Civilians in Civil Wars'. 461–85.
33. Stanton, *Violence and Restraint in Civil War.*
34. Caselli and Wilbur, 'On the Theory of Ethnic Conflict'.
35. Hakovirta, *Third World Conflicts and Refugeeism.*
36. Stanley, Economic Migrants or Refugees from Violence.
37. Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, *Escape from Violence.*
38. Moore and Shellman, 'Refugee or Internally Displaced Person'.
39. Balanche, 'Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria's Unity'.
40. Genive, 'The New Sectarianism'.
41. Amnesty International, '*We had nowhere else to go Forced Displacement'.*
42. United Nations (UN), 'A humanitarian and Economic Crisis of Epic Proportions in Syria, and a Political Solution is not imminent'.
43. United Nations General Assembly, 'Protection and assistance to Internally Displaced Persons: Situation of Internally Displaced persons in the Syrian Arab Republic'.
44. Senate Armed Services Committee, 'Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States European Command'.
45. BBC, 'Syrian President Bashar al-Assad'.
46. In 2009, the Regime appointed Jamil Hassan, an Alawite, as head of Air Force Intelligence, which is considered to be the most elite of the country's four security agencies. He later played a prominent role in Regime repression and retired after almost a decade; an international arrest warrant has since been issued against him. See Al-Jazeera, 'General Jamil Hassan played a Brutal Role'.
47. Chulov, 'Syria: The Endgame'.
48. Bohnet, Cottier and Hug, 'Conflict-induced IDPs and the Spread of Conflict', 691–716.
49. Loescher, Refugee Movements and International Security'.
50. Benedetta Berti and Marika Sosnowski (2022) 'Neither Peace nor Democracy: The Role of Siege and Population Control in the Syrian Regime's Coercive Counterinsurgency Campaign', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33 (6), pp.954–72.
51. Kelly, *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement.*
52. Human Rights Watch HRW, 'Targeting Life in Idlib" – Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure'.
53. Balanche, 2015. 'Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria's Unity', 26.
54. Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing.*
55. Scott, *Making and Unmaking Nations.*
56. Bakkour, 'Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Revolution', 1–18.

57. Phillips, ‘Sectarianism and conflict in Syria’, 357–376.
58. See note 9 above.
59. Bostad, ‘Regime Crackdown in Syria’.
60. Bakkour, ‘The Significance of ISIS’s State Building in Syria’,126–145.
61. Bakkour and Sahtout, ‘The Dimensions and Attributes of State Failure in Syria’, 1026.
62. The Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria, ‘Statistical Group’.
63. Ibid.
64. Multiple Interviews.
65. This was the country’s oldest established historical Christian community, who first moved to the city when Hafez al-Assad encouraged them to settle by handing them government and military jobs. Ibid.
66. Al – Fares, *Homs: The Great Siege*, 19.
67. Qutrib, ‘Useful Syria” and Demographic Changes in Syria’,19.
68. Balanche, ‘Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria’s Unity’.
69. Mahon, ‘De Sectarianization: Looking Beyond the Sectarianization’.
70. Zubeida, ‘Sectarian Dimensions’, 318–322.
71. Abdo, ‘The New Sectarianism’.
72. Droz, ‘State of Barbary (Take Two)’, 33–58.
73. Xavier, *Les Nations du ProphètE’*.
74. Berti, and Paris, ‘Beyond Sectarianism’.
75. Kalyvas, *the Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 198.
76. Berti and Sosnowski, ‘Neither Peace nor Democracy’.
77. Sosnowski, ‘Ceasefires as Violent State-building’, 273–292.
78. Bakkour, ‘Beyond Genocide’,1–21.
79. Al-Jazeera, ‘Daria: The Struggle of Death for Life’.
80. Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, ‘Signs of Darayya Exodus’.
81. Holliday, ‘The Assad Regime’.
82. HANDICAP INTERNATIONAL, ‘Everywhere the Bombing followed us.
83. Ibid.
84. See note 80 above.
85. Martínez, and Brent, ‘Stifling Stateness’, 235–253.
86. Bakkour, ‘Daraa and the Altered Trajectory of the Syrian Revolution’, 1–18.
87. UN, ‘35 Report of the Independent International Commission’.
88. See note 85 above.
89. See note 80 above.
90. See note 33 above.
91. Gause and Gregory. ‘Beyond Sectarianism’. 1–27.
92. Sanders, ‘What You Need to Know About Chemical Weapons Use in Syria’.
93. See note 59 above.
94. Amnesty International, ‘*We Leave or We Die*’, 45–47.
95. Ibid., 45.
96. Ibid.
97. Todman, ‘Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses’.
98. Ibid.
99. Syrian Network for Human Rights, ‘The Syrian Regime Has Dropped Nearly 70,000 Barrel Bombs’.
100. Lund, ‘Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict’.
101. See note 93 above.
102. Assistance Coordination Unit, (2016).
103. Koolaee et al., (2016).
104. Todman, ‘Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses,13.
105. See note 56 above.
106. Harmon Centre, ‘Starvation and Siege in Syria’.
107. Orient, ‘This is how the Regime planned to displace’.

108. Its 2010 population was 60,000. Multiple Interviews.
109. See note 106 above.
110. Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies 'Is the Syrian Revolution facing a New'.
111. Al-Modon, 'Syria: Al-Zabadani Truce Suspended'.
112. In February 2014, a unanimous UN Security Council resolution on Syria clearly stated that '[t]he use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare, is prohibited under international humanitarian law'. ACU, 'The Besieged Areas in Damascus'.
113. Multiple Interviews with Author and Syrian Refugees resettled in UK under UK Resettlement Plan, 2020.
114. Ibid.
115. Zaman Al Wasl, 'Western Damascus Ghouta'.
116. Gasser, 'Syria Conflict: Siege Warfare and Suffering in Madaya'.
117. Carrié, 'Anatomy of a Siege: the Story of Madaya'.
118. Al Radwan, '*The Memory of the Hour's Massacre'*.
119. Khaddour, and Mazur, 'The Struggle for Syria's Regions'.
120. See note 58 above.
121. Zaman Al Wasl, 'A Complete and Quick Report on the Khalidiya Massacre'.
122. Zaman Al Wasl, 'Part of the Details of the Karm al-Zaitoun Massacre'.
123. See note 63 above.
124. Human Rights Watch', Razed to the Ground: Syria's Unlawful Neighbourhood'.
125. The Baba Amr neighbourhood was the first part of the city that experienced huge 'forced displacement', and this was because it was the first besieged neighbourhood that resisted the Regime. In the city, displacement subsequently became a driver of conflict. Enab Baladi, 'Five Areas depleted by Forced Displacement in Homs'.
126. Holliday, 'The Struggle for Syria in 2011'.
127. PAX, 'No Return to Homs'.
128. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 3–12.
129. The UN Secretary-General denounced the massacre as a 'flagrant violation of international law', and a U.S spokesperson condemned it as 'despicable'. William Hague, the British foreign secretary, demanded a strong international response and the French president Francois Hollande said the military option could 'no longer be excluded'.
130. Khader, 'Seven Years after the Houla Massacre'.
131. Ibid.
132. See note 58 above.
133. Ibid.
134. Adhikari, 'Conflict-Induced Displacement'.
135. Robson, *States of Separation*, 2.
136. Hinnebusch and Imady, 'Syria's Reconciliation Agreements'.
137. Berti and Sosnowski, 'Neither Peace nor Democracy', 55.
138. Yahia, 'Syria's Regime is changing the Country's Urban Planning Laws'.
139. Rollins, '*Decree 66'*.
140. SACD, 'Displacement of Madaya and Zabadani, Compound Crime and the Horizon of Return'.
141. Anon Authors, 'Displacement of Madaya and Zabadani, Compound Crime and the Horizon of Return'.
142. OCHA, 'Syria Crisis'.
143. ACU, 'The Besieged Areas in Damascus'.
144. Bakkour, 'Exclusionary Strategy and Political Sectarianization in the Governorate of Idlib', 81–97.
145. Between Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), Ahrar al-Sham Movement representatives and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah.
146. Bakkour, 'The Last Jihadist Battle in Syria',1098.
147. Ibide,4.
148. Khaddour, 'Consumed by War'.

149. Ibid.
150. Adleh and Favier, 'Local Reconciliation Agreements in Syria'.
151. Harpviken., and B. Yogev, 'Syria's Internally Displaced'.
152. Czuperski, 'Breaking Aleppo'.
153. Ibid.
154. Clerc, 'Informal Settlements in the Syrian Conflict', 34–51.
155. Ibid, 13.
156. Ibid.
157. A Research Paper for the Syrian Lawyers Association in cooperation with the Legal Experts Group (the Syrian Lawyers Association), 'Real Estate Ownership and the Constitution'.
158. Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, 'Demographic Change', 4.
159. The Levant, An Organizational Plan for Qaboun and Harasta'.
160. Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, 'Demographic Change: "The Ultimate Goal of the Syrian Regime's Policy of Forced Displacement',4.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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