

Beyond genocide: Towards an improved analysis and understanding of the Syrian regime's mass atrocity crimes in the Syrian Civil War

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Abstract

In the course of the Syrian Civil War, prominent former Syrian Regime politicians, human rights observers, and foreign observers have accused the Syrian Regime of committing genocide against the country's Sunni majority. This article views these accusations as part of a wider politicization of genocide, and instead progresses beyond them to outline the case for an alternative “framing” of large-scale atrocities committed against civilians. It accordingly proposes strategic displacement, or the deliberate large-scale uprooting and dispersal of established communities for tactical and strategic purposes, as a preferable and more sustainable framework of engagement and analysis, and seeks to more clearly distinguish it from “ethnic cleansing” with the aim of demonstrating and underlining its unique contribution to the analysis and understanding of violent conflict. This has two benefits—first, it provides a different basis for conceptual and theoretical engagement that makes it possible to view mass atrocity as a tactical innovation in response to conflict exigencies; and second, it draws attention to internal displacement, an aspect of the conflict that has been repeatedly overlooked by international observers.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Displacement in the Syrian War has been insufficiently acknowledged and, when it has been recognized, has tended to be misunderstood. It has therefore been analyzed as something else (cleansing) or has been interpreted and discussed in terms of its immediate impact, rather than broader implications and significance. And one aspect of displacement (external displacement) has often been emphasized at the expense of another (internal displacement). As a direct result, the international response has shown a number of shortcomings and deficiencies—for example, particularly egregious *shabiha*¹ massacres have been condemned, but without an accompanying acknowledgment of their purpose and intended outcome.

The Syrian Civil War was effectively the death knell of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm and the point at which western interventionist zeal in the cause of military humanitarianism evaporated into thin air. It soon became clear that the “West” would not intervene to halt the Syrian Regime’s indiscriminate use of violence and torture nor seek justice and retribution on behalf of the hundreds and thousands who have been arrested, tortured, or sexually assaulted. Indeed, indiscriminate bombing, massacres, (partial and total) siege, and starvation continued, in the clear expectation that this would not elicit substantial external intervention. Quite clearly, this had crucial implications for not just the sustainability, but also the very existence, of R2P (al-Oraibi, 2021).

However, as this article will demonstrate, this “failure” was not just practical, and also extended to how observers think and speak about mass atrocities committed in conflicts. For example, the idea that massacres had a sectarian premise and justification predisposed observers to believe that it was appropriate to speak and think in terms of “cleansing,” in accordance with the model already established in the Balkans in the 1990s. However, this insufficiently acknowledged that in this case, conflict actors were not just concerned with “pushing out” but also with “pulling in.” Lichtenheld (2020), therefore, observes that “[d]isplacement is therefore used not only to remove the undesirables or the disloyal. It is also used to help identify the undesirables or the disloyal in the first place” (p. 4). Displacement is, therefore, more concerned with legibility, or “sorting” the population, and is to this extent not solely concerned with “driving out.” Had outside observers acknowledged this from the outset, then presumably more appropriate and effective responses may well have been forthcoming.

“Reconciliation” agreements that removed fighters and their families to Opposition-controlled parts of the country, and most notably to Idlib Province in the country’s north-west, were not, therefore, part of an attempt to acknowledge or accommodate the Opposition, but were instead part of the Syrian Regime’s military and political strategy, and could therefore be more accurately described as “surrender” agreements concluded in anticipation of future military hostilities. Here it is instructive to refer to 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” (Lichtenheld, 2015). In this regard, displacement is linked into the territorialization of political identity, in which physical location, rather than objective identifiers, such as religious group membership, establish the boundaries and contours of future violent conflict (Lichtenheld, 2015).

The concept of “cleansing” fails to acknowledge the sophistication of the practice or the purposes, and specifically the strategic logic, that guides its application. However, if this concept is deeply problematic, then so too is genocide, which the Syrian Regime has been accused of since the start of the conflict. For example, Riad Hijab, a Sunni Muslim who served as Assad’s prime minister, accused the Syrian Regime of committing genocide after fleeing to Jordan on August 5, 2012 (AFP, 2012), and this was echoed by Shaul Mofaz, Israel’s former vice-president (Irish Times, 2012). Genocide was also implicitly invoked when observers discussed non-intervention in the conflict by referring to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

This article ultimately views such debates as something of an unproductive “dead-end,” and instead proposes that it is more fruitful and worthwhile to engage Syrian Regime violence by applying a strategic displacement framework. The Syrian Regime’s displacement was reactive, proactive, and evolved over time. However, precisely because it was also intentional, organized, and repetitive, it could be viewed and understood as “strategic” (Valentino, 2004, p. 377). This was recognized by both international and local observers. For example, in January 2023, an independent UN commission on Syria observed that strategic displacement had been “undertaken by Government forces pursuant to an organizational policy” (United Nations, 2023) and in 2013 had recognized it as “a crime against humanity and/or a war crime” (United Nations General Assembly, 2013). In addition, General Philip Breedlove, a NATO commander, echoed this by claiming that the Syrian and Russian governments were “deliberately weaponizing migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve” (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

One SACD interviewee observed that the “[d]emographic change that the Syrian Regime is undertaking seems not to be based on religion, but on the basis of political affiliation and loyalty to the rule in order to build its own supportive society, his ‘useful Syria’” (Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, 2020). He believed this confirmed there was “a systematic policy to achieve strategic goals set out by Bashar Assad himself.” The term “Useful Syria” can be traced back to the French Mandate, when it referred to economically and strategically important parts of the country. Assad reinvented this term by introducing new borders and spheres, and mixed ideology with strategy. In his hands, the term does not refer to the Syrian “food basket,” cotton and mineral wealth nor oil and gas fields but rather to key provinces, including Latakia, Tartus, parts of Homs, Hama, and Damascus. Assad attached particular importance to Homs because it links the main strategic areas between Damascus and the Damascus countryside, and also links Russian military bases in Damascus to the naval military base in Tartus, Hmeimim military forces, and Latakia air base (Bakkour, 2023).

However, despite its growing prominence in this and other conflicts, the importance and significance of strategic displacement have tended to be repeatedly overlooked or misunderstood. For example, when displacement has been acknowledged, it has repeatedly been viewed and treated as a protection challenge (Bakkour, 2023). This again reiterates and underlines the need for a framework of analysis that views violence as rational and grasps how, in this and other instances, it is directed towards clear and precise military and political aims. This is particularly important because it will orientate the observer away from scaled-up violence rooted in sectarian or other ideological justifications. One of the central contributions of this article is, therefore, to provide an alternative framework of conceptual and theoretical engagement that provides an improved basis for the analysis of mass atrocities committed during the conflict. This will make it easier to understand how political uncertainty influences government behavior during conflict and will also provide insight into the different calculations that governments make as they balance types of costs.

The key question that this article seeks to answer is “how has the Syrian Regime applied and developed strategic displacement during the Syrian Civil War?” It argues that a strategic displacement framework is preferable to alternatives and seeks to demonstrate this by clarifying it and distinguishing it from other forms of collective violence, including genocide, which has been increasingly invoked in other conflicts, and “ethnic cleansing.”

1.1 | Genocide

In common with displacement, sectarianism in the Syrian civil war has frequently been misunderstood and misrepresented, with the result that the Syrian Regime's actions have been interpreted as the concrete expression of primordial hatreds and resentments. This closely resembles, and indeed recalls, a model of “ideological genocide” in which the destruction of a group is an attempt “to implement a belief, an ideology, or a theory” (Fein, 1984, p. 31). And also brings to mind an “institutional genocide” guided by a clear intention (Smith, 1987, p. 27)—Leo Kuper invokes this “model” when he notes that genocide is most likely to occur in states based on “two-tier domination” in which one-ethno class in effect rules over a subordinate counterpart (Kuper, 1981), while Harff and Gurr anticipate a different line of analysis by relating the potential for genocide and repression to the presence and size of discriminated, rebellious, or privileged “minorities of risk” (Harff & Gurr, 1989, p. 33). In the discussion of genocide, such accounts have increasingly been superseded by alternatives that present genocide and politicide as adaptations to an ongoing situation (Israel et al., 1982).

In this literature, it is acknowledged that governments that face collapse and possible annihilation are most likely to resort to genocide and politicide (Colaesi & Carey, 2008, p. 44). This is consistent with a growing recognition that genocide and politicide are strategic tools that governments use to help achieve their goals when there are strong incentives and killing costs are low (Midlarsky, 2005). Semelin, (2002), for example, has suggested that genocide is a strategy of war (Semelin, 2002: 440). And Harff and Gurr (1988) developed the work of Lasswell to demonstrate how the “coercive state's” police institutions were established and expanded as a direct result of wars and civil wars (Lasswell & Stanley, 1997). Here, we may also refer to McNitt (1995) finding that the state used torture and detentions to a greater extent when the external threat was greater (p. 100).

These contributions acknowledge the need to develop new theories of genocide and politicide that can account for the government's choice of violent tactic. To some extent this is already a consolidated and embodied conceptual and paradigmatic “shift”—for example, contributions to the genocide literature and studies of civilian victimization already consider how governments use atrocities to achieve military victories by inflicting high costs on the opposition's supporting population (Demeritt, 2015, p. 450). Moreover, the broader conflict bargaining literature already acknowledges the value of violence in helping parties reach a range of settlements to their conflicts. In future, bargaining theory developed in an interstate context could also be adapted to rethink genocide and politicide as responses to severe threat (Harff, 2003, p. 55). Thinking in these terms makes it possible to understand how the strategic use of atrocity can decimate the supporting population and make it possible to achieve power through military victory.

These innovations are all the more important because the politicization of genocide has become a central, and even defining, feature of various contemporary conflicts. In contemporary Kosovo, the terms of indictment (of Serb military and paramilitary forces

during the 1998–99 conflict) have gradually shifted away from “ethnic cleansing” to “genocide” (Çollaku, 2015). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, meanwhile, “genocide politics” has long framed political contestation between nationalist political elites, and instilled a deeply adversarial and grievance-rooted mode of political conduct (Chandler, 2000). There are numerous other contemporary examples, including both Darfur and Ukraine.

These developments were presaged by the Humanitarian Intervention (HI) and R2P (Responsibility to Protect) debates, when “genocide” emerged as the foremost violation that was deemed to necessitate external intervention. Indeed, the development of HI, in both abstract and material terms, was crucially orientated by the historical precedent of the Holocaust (“never again”) and contemporary genocides in northern Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Rwanda. In these instances, accusations of “genocide” framed and oriented the basis on which external actors engaged with the conflict and considered external intervention (Kaldor, 2013).

A government commits genocide or politicide when it attempts to destroy a specific communal or political group, rather than govern that population in the future (Serneels & Verpoorten, 2015, p. 564). Verdeja (2002) identifies five factors that contribute to genocide, specifically an extremely fractured society with profound social cleavages, rapid and distinctive social change, an exclusivist political ideology, state capacity, and international (in) action. Genocidal policies are typically directed at specific groups within a country and are based on some identifiable group characteristic. They seek to remove distinct groups, whether ethnic, racial, and/or religious, from the larger population (Harff & Gurr, 1988, p. 370).

Politicide is more precisely targeted at those who are believed to threaten the Syrian Regime’s stability. Although genocide and politicide are often conflated with each other, they have different goals. The architects of genocide seek to destroy a specific group within a society on the basis of communal characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, or religion (Freeman, 1991, p. 99). Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (United Nations, 1948) refers to the killing of members of a group, the infliction of serious bodily or mental harm on group members, the imposition of birth prevention measures on a group and attempting to bring about the physical destruction of a group, whether in part or in its entirety (Oh, 2003). Politicide is the eradication of any part of the population that the government views as threatening (Cribb et al., 2001, p. 239), and the boundaries of who or what is subversive shift during politicide. The Syrian Regime seeks to stop unrest from developing into civil war by preventing the formation of organized resistance groups, and it does this by terrorizing cross-cutting segments of the civilian population with mass killings (Uzonyi, 2016, pp. 315–334).

The key difference between politicide and genocide is the intent and focus of killings.² While they can both include murder, torture, sterilization, and deportation, the focus of politicides tends to be much broader than that of genocide and extends to individuals from various groups that oppose or threaten the incumbent government (Harff & Gurr, 1988, p. 372). Genocide is perpetrated on particular national, ethnical, racial, or religious groups (Midlarsky, Fagin Jones, et al., 2005, pp. 907–934), while politicide is much broader as it extends to all those who oppose the government (Harff & Gurr, 1988, p. 378). Many of the identifying ethnic or religious markers used to help perpetrate the genocide of a group are absent during periods of politicide. Instead, threats are perceived throughout the country’s population, and politicides target individuals from various groups and cross-cutting segments of the population. Researchers have previously tended to focus on genocide at the expense of politicide (Auvinen & Nafziger, 1999, p. 269). A further distinction arises in the insight that genocide is often the

result of the dehumanization of a communal group (Mirkovic, 2000, p. 373). Unlike politicide, which is a government response to developing unrest, genocide is the culmination of government policies. Discrimination becomes mass murder when the government manipulates the population's hatred of the minority group to the point where violence against it becomes permissible (Cribb et al., 2001, p. 237).

Both Samantha Power (2013) and Mary Kaldor (2013) have presented genocide as a challenge to the international community that must be met. However, there are various complexities involved in meeting this challenge, which are not merely practical but also relate to its definition in the first instance. For example, the 1948 Genocide Convention does not sufficiently clarify if genocide that occurs in the absence of intent is to be regarded in the same terms as genocide that occurs with it. While clauses (a) and (b)³ are both consequentialist (and therefore describe outcomes that could occur as a *consequence* of conflict), clauses (c), (d), and (e) all refer to actions of volition (i.e., that are willed).⁴ In addition, this is of particular concern precisely because it is the special intent threshold (*dolus specialis*) that distinguishes genocide from crimes against humanity and war crimes. Furthermore, the foremost examples of genocide in the twentieth century were clearly intended.

It should also be remembered that the Convention was initially a response to crimes of the utmost gravity that were, by definition, exceptional. The increase in the number of alleged genocides therefore has important implications for the sustainability and application of the Convention and even the concept of genocide. When the Convention establishes that genocide is the murder, harming or transferring of individuals “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such” (United Nations, 2017), this appears as less of a definitive conclusion and more as the starting point in a debate where the terms of reference are increasingly contested and disputed. The politicization of genocide is, therefore, particularly ironic because it is increasingly appealed to on the basis of its exceptionalism, but this could potentially dilute and potentially even undermine this feature. In addition, the presumption that this will produce a military response is far from clear, as the Convention is ambiguous on this point.⁵ David Scheffer further proposed that “genocide” should be replaced with “atrocities,” on the grounds that the former has been distorted by what he describes as “encumbered, charged, and largely dogmatic (sometimes unproductive and stagnant) debates” over the groups that are actually protected by the 1948 Convention (Scheffer, 2006). In 2001, the political scientist Scott Straus claimed there are approximately 21 different definitions of the term “genocide,” which clearly lends support to the proposition that it is an essentially contested term (Straus, 2001, p. 366).

1.2 | Defining displacement

In seeking to distinguish displacement as a separate framework of analysis, we should first acknowledge the argument that displacement and genocide are linked by attrition, which was first put forward by Helen Fein, whose efforts to explain killing via indirect methods sparked a new branch of atrocity research (Fein, 1997, p. 13). She emphasized the rationality of perpetrators and presented them as weighing opportunities, costs, and sanctions before perpetrating atrocities, and she also presented war as an opportunity for genocide (Fein, 1979, p. 9). However, most of this branch of the literature overlooks the specific role of displacement in atrocities, which is doubly unfortunate because this was its original *raison d'être*. In purely legal terms, there are grounds for arguing that Article 7 of the Rome Statute should be

expanded to encompass crimes against humanity by permitting lethal displacement to be incorporated into a new understanding of “extermination.” Article 7(1) (b) of the Rome Statute, for example, already acknowledges that “extermination” includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, including “the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population.” However, while Article 7(1) (d) on deportation or forcible transfer of population ostensibly appears to invoke extermination via displacement, closer inspection instead shows it more closely resembles the displacement or cleansing of a people from a territory (United Nations, 1998).

This is one of the main objections to placing displacement activities (DA) under the more general heading of “ethnic cleansing.” Others include the fact that “cleansing” entails the removal, rather than wholesale destruction, of a population. In this regard, DA appear to “shade into” genocide,⁶ whereas cleansing is a distinct activity. Second, there are multiple, nebulous definitions of ethnic cleansing—accordingly, while it has been referenced in some ICTY (United Nations, 2017) cases, it still lacks legal applicability (Naimark, 2001). While a number of the crimes listed under Article 8(2) (a) (b) (e) of the Rome Statute could be argued to refer to displacement activity crimes, they do not directly and/or explicitly refer to it. Article 8’s prohibition of war crimes could be objected to on the grounds that it is too broad (United Nations, 1998). Moreover, although Article 6 (c) alludes to the use of starvation and disease to create conditions intended to bring about the destruction of a group, it would be significantly improved by an acknowledgment that such activities are undertaken with the aim of achieving political goals. In each regard, a legal acknowledgment that DA is a distinct activity would considerably improve the Convention and Rome Statute.

However, such amendments would be open to the charge of legalism. From the 1990s debates of Humanitarian Intervention (HI) onwards, contemporary studies of human rights violations and atrocities tended, for understandable reasons, to focus on the prevention and punishment of crimes. The discussion of HI, for example, related almost entirely to the ability of the established international legal order to prevent and punish such crimes. This meant that the killing processes themselves, and more specifically the selection of some killing methods over others (Lieberman, 2012, p. 154), tended to be overlooked and were even afflicted by a relative neglect.

In developing the concept of displacement, we could, therefore, initially hypothesize that a government’s choice of violence is determined, in part, by the “distribution of power between its forces and the rebels.” This distribution, along with the expected costs, will need to be acknowledged and taken into account as belligerents seek to settle a conflict. Other scholars have also linked power to atrocity and, in so doing, have reiterated that it is desperate and weak governments that opt for mass killing (Downes, 2008). Valentino (2004) has, for example, argued that there must be an external motivation because mass violence has, in comparison to other severe human rights abuses, higher psychological and political barriers. Krain has, in these terms, spoken of threats as “big opportunities” for genocide and politicide (Krain, 1997, p. 334).

In civil wars, (selective, indiscriminate, and/or collective) violence is inflicted on civilians with the aim of achieving ideological, military, and/or political goals (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2017, p. 40). Selective violence targets specific individuals and groups on the basis of their behavior; indiscriminate violence usually involves the targeting and bombing of residential centers, irrespective of behavior or identity (Stathis, 2006), and collective violence targets groups that share certain identifying characteristics, such as ethnicity (Steele, 2009, p. 429). At the end of 2018, almost 68 million people across the world had been uprooted by

conflict and violence across the world, the highest number recorded since World War II (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). Displacement has historically been equated with conflict-affected populations who, in fear of violence or even death, voluntarily leave their homes and seek safe haven, whether inside or outside the country. However, since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the international community became increasingly aware of involuntary displacement, and as a result the term “ethnic cleansing” became an established part of the international vocabulary. This is no doubt the precedent that Hakovirta (1986) has in mind when noting the centrality of violence in forced displacement.

This article proposes that the term “forced displacement” best describes the Syrian Regime’s different forms of violence. This type of displacement can be categorized into three types. The first is collateral or unintentional displacement, which is the consequence of military battles and/or a pre-emptive decision to flee areas affected by military activity (Schon, 2015, p. 467); the second is opportunist, which involves intentional but irregular displacement, and is usually the automatic result of group interactions or individual preferences, such as pillage or property theft (Green, 2016, p. 632); and the last is strategic displacement, which has been defined as one of the branches of forced displacement. This is a deliberate, systematic, and coercive movement that is (directly or indirectly) provoked by one or several armed groups and applied to fighters and/or civilians (Balcells, 2018, p. 250). Broadly speaking, displacement is strategic if it is deliberate, organized (even to a low level), coordinated, recurring, and systematic. It applies a broader political or military logic, and can take the form of cleansing, depopulation and/or forced removal. Displacement combines spatial (Martin, 2015), temporal (Rifkin, 2017), and volitional (Richmond, 1993, p. 14) (insofar as it, to varying degrees and extents, retains some degree of agency) dimensions.

Strategic displacement is a subset of forced displacement, which has been defined as “civilian migration that is provoked, directly or indirectly, by one or several armed groups” (Steele, 2017). It is carried out through explicit threats, evacuation orders, or the destruction of property (Bulutgil, 2016) (it should not be assumed that it is fully formed or carefully calculated well in advance, as this is not necessarily the case). It can also be a form of collective punishment (Toft & Zhukov, 2012, p. 788)—“disloyal” populations can be expelled or incarcerated en masse, which inflicts pain and raises the costs of their presumed resistance. It can be contrasted with opportunistic displacement, which is deliberate but not systematic, and is usually the spontaneous result of group interactions or individual preferences (Green, 2016, p. 632). Forced relocation involves a deliberate and focused effort to (re)move those uprooted to identified locations that are geographically closer to their place/s of origin (Downes & Greenhill, 2015).

It can also be distinguished from the “natural” response to flee from violent conflict, which has been discussed by Zolberg et al. (1989) and Moore and Shellman (2006). Studies of civilian flight in Syria have, for example, found that IDPs tend to go “where there are people with similar political or ethnic characteristics,” and have identified that those “supporting the [Syrian] Regime generally go to [government] areas” while those opposing the [Syrian] Regime “tend to move to opposition-held areas” (Humanitarian Trends Analysis Unit [HTAU], 2015). The causes of this displacement challenge a number of preconceptions that we might otherwise entertain about “discriminate” and “indiscriminate” violence. The former implies a precisely focused and targeted whereas the latter implies mass killing (Valentino, 2014, p. 89) and large-scale brutalization (De Waal, 1991). However, the Syrian Regime’s displacement tactics are simultaneously precise (and therefore directed towards a clear aim) and indiscriminate (by virtue of the fact that they do not just fail to distinguish between, but actually target,

combatants, and noncombatants). In other words, the Syrian Regime seeks to utilize indiscriminate violence for very specific and precise (rather than sectarian) political purposes.

External observers have occluded the actual nature of displacement by referring to it as “ethno-sectarian cleansing” or “demographic engineering,” which have both had the unfortunate effect of perpetuating sectarian connotations and insinuations (Balanche, 2015). Although there are broad overlaps between ethnic cleansing and displacement, it is important to note one distinction. In ethnic cleansing, the primary preoccupation is to remove “undesirable” groups. This clearly contrasts with displacement, where the objective is not just to “push” out, but also to “pull” in. As military success in irregular wars depends on civilians, the detection of disloyalty in the local population emerges as a key preoccupation and priority. Displacement is often used to sort through the civilian population, not get rid of it. It has a clear precedent in counter-insurgency doctrine, which has long established that the uprooting of the population is a way of “draining the sea” of opponents. The difficulties that are inherent in distinguishing the enemy from the local ‘population’ means that there is a certain utility in removing the entire population, as this deprives rebels of their civilian resource base.

1.3 | (Mis)Understanding displacement

International observers have evidenced a series of misunderstandings in engaging with displacement in the Civil War. The first is to fail to sufficiently acknowledge internal displacement in the first instance (Bakkour & Sahtout, 2023). This has also been a feature of other conflicts, and it is shown, to take one example, the fact that the legal regime for refugees is considerably more enhanced than for IDPs (Moore & Shellman, 2006). Indeed, despite the large numbers of internally displaced (most notably in Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion of the country), internal displacement remains comparatively insufficiently acknowledged and addressed. Faye Donnelly therefore observes that IDPs have received ‘surprisingly’ little attention in security and securitization studies and have even, she contends, “failed to enter into mainstream securitization studies” (Donnelly, 2018).

In addition to this persistent tendency to overlook the existence of IDPs, there is also a tendency to overlook their strategic significance and importance—in other words, their strategic importance and value to different conflict actors as they make strategic calculations (HTAU, 2015). Both the manipulation of IDPs themselves and their movement across different conflict theaters could potentially contribute to military strategy (Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, 2020). Indeed, outside observers are more predisposed to view IDPs as a protection challenge, and, therefore, to approach and engage them from within a humanitarian framework (United Nations General Assembly, 2013).

International observers have also struggled to distinguish between collateral and strategic displacement. In the first instance, displaced individuals and populations flee upsurges of conflict, and their movement therefore occurs as a consequence of conflict (HTAU, 2015). However, this is fundamentally different from strategic displacement, in which armed actors deliberately target civilian populations with the aim of producing large-scale population movements that impose additional burdens on adversaries and also contribute to the realization of military and political objectives (Lichtenheld, 2020). The difficulties of distinguishing the two are further exacerbated by the fact that they can occur simultaneously.

Displacement has also been repeatedly conflated with “cleansing,” with the result that it has been ascribed sectarian connotations and implications that it does not necessarily possess

(Balanche, 2015). Indeed, observers have generally failed to grasp that displacement is qualitatively different, and is undertaken with very different intentions in mind. The fundamental difference has already been noted in the distinction between “pushing out” and “pulling in,” and the associated insight that strategic displacement is more closely linked to political territorialization than to objective identifiers, including sect or group membership (Lichtenheld, 2020).

International observers have also failed to identify how different displacement activities feed into and help to sustain an overall displacement strategy. Instead, in the case of the Syrian Civil War there has been a tendency to focus on individual “excesses” (most notably massacres), which have not been understood and engaged in terms of their significance in a wider military and political strategy (Khader, 2019). For example, sieges, as a form of indirect violence, are effectively underpinned by the same rationale as the deliberate slaughter and mutilation of civilians—namely to create terror and empty contested areas. However, the international response has not acknowledged this. Ultimately, to develop an effective counter-strategy, it is first necessary to acknowledge that the Syrian Regime is effectively acting strategically when committing atrocities.

And finally, the international engagement with displacement has all often proceeded on the basis of the misunderstanding that violence is fundamentally sectarian (this links into the preceding observation that displacement has frequently been mischaracterised as “cleansing”) (Mabon, 2019). This misunderstanding has also been evidenced in other conflicts (most notably the Bosnian War in 1992–95), where it has also resulted in both the war itself and specific developments being misunderstood and misrepresented (Rabi & Friedman, 2017). In the first instance, it is necessary to understand sectarianism in its specific political context and, to be more precise, to grasp how different conflict actors have deliberately manipulated it for their own ends; (Rabi & Friedman, 2017) in the second, it is also essential to acknowledge that the Syrian Regime’s displacement practices have not only been applied to the Sunni majority, but also in minority-populated areas.

This article was conceived in response to a number of these misunderstandings and oversights, and it has been developed in the hope and expectation that it will contribute to them being challenged and ultimately overcome.

1.4 | The benefits of displacement

From the perspective of perpetrators, there are a number of reasons why displacement is a preferred option. First, in contrast to direct violence, it can be perpetrated by comparatively smaller groups. Humans can survive up to 30 or 40 days without food, but this is only if they are hydrated. If they are not, and if they are being physically exerted, then the body degrades at a significantly faster rate (Peel, 1997, p. 829). Furthermore, when hope of survival is lost, resilience and endurance are negatively impacted, and this process will be further accelerated (Berko et al., 2014, p. 14). DA also enables perpetrators to achieve a certain psychological “distancing” from their actions, by distinguishing “dying” (an endogenous naturalness) from “killing” (an exogenous act that causes death at the hands of another) (Stevenson & Waite, 2011, pp. 398–399), which serves to mitigate some of the mental stresses that direct killing would otherwise produce. DA crimes, in weakening social bonds and networks in a manner consistent with Feierstein’s “genocidal social practices” also make atrocities easier to commit (Feierstein, 2012, pp. 18–36). The separation of men and women does not just proceed,

but is an essential accompaniment to, subsequent atrocities. More generally, “social disruption” rips individuals away from their homes, familiar places, and people, and strips them of all authority over their own lives. Relocation also decreases opportunities for targets to escape death; if they escape the displacement, they are in the middle of unfamiliar terrain and often face death because they struggle to survive. Concealment is also an important aspect of DA, as the occurrence of crimes outside of densely populated areas reduces the likelihood that bystanders, including even “true believers,” will become saviors/rescuers, objectors, or reformers. When the crimes are perpetrated in vast and open spaces, they gain an added layer of deniability (Staub, 2003, p. 400).

In terms of analysis, engagement through a DA crimes perspective can produce a number of benefits by focusing attention on a defined targeted group, responsibility for deaths, displacement over a large territory, the distinction between indirect and direct killing, and the necessary and sufficient variables that need to be in place for a DA label to apply. By engaging from within a DA perspective, we gain insight into how perpetrators exploit the fragility of the mind and actively work to degrade the body, deprive individuals of vital human needs, compel massive physical exertion, and attempt to psychologically destroy their targets. Similarly, a focus on DA crimes also emphasizes indirect methods of killing, to the point of treating direct counterparts as a secondary feature of atrocity perpetration. Indirect killings can theoretically be described as practices that do not include physical violence from perpetrators against victims, but rather systemic deprivations that bring about destruction. They include, but are not limited to, starvation and/or dehydration; creating conditions conducive to the spread of disease; exposure to natural world elements (both the heat and cold); and inhumane maltreatments that lead to eventual death (e.g., deaths resulting from exhaustion on forced marches) (Fein, 1997, p. 13). For those engaged in killing, DA also has a number of ‘benefits’. While indirect killing requires a considerably greater “investment” of time to kill one person, DA provides a more cost-effective way of destroying a population. Although DA can be justified on the grounds that they reduce (as indicated by the fact that their selection can be a response to financial constraints), their balancing with direct methods can also produce a certain “economy” of killing.

1.5 | Displacement in the Syrian Civil War

Displacement accelerated rapidly in the Syrian civil war. At the end of 2011, it was estimated there were 170,000 IDPs (ECB, 2011) and 12,400 refugees in neighboring countries (IDMC, 2011). By the end of the following year, this had soared to 2.5 million IDPs (IDMC, 2012), and around 568,950 refugees in neighboring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq) (HIU, 2012). By 2013, at least 9500 citizens were displaced each day, and in June 2014, the UN claimed almost half the country's population had fled their homes (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). The numbers subsequently fluctuated: in 2015, more than 1.6 million Syrians were displaced, declining to 929,534 (UNHCR, 2016, December 2016) in the following year and then increasing to 1,173,042 in 2017 (UNHCR, 2017, November 2017).

Abu Hashem (2021) cites IDMC data that shows Syria has the largest number of internally displaced (6.6 million) in the world, and the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program (HNAP) observes that the burden of this displacement has weighed on the country's northwest (Idlib and West Aleppo) and rural Damascus, where 30% of the country's population are concentrated (HNAP, 2019, September 2019). In 2020, UNHCR estimated a total of 5.7 million

refugees had fled the country (HNAP, 2019). In the initial stages of the civil war, displacement activities were not pronounced and nor were they especially “political,” as the Syrian Regime instead relied on more conventional methods to suppress demonstrators. The Syrian Regime, therefore, only gradually engaged and adapted displacement tactics and strategies. In the early stages of the war, displacement also occurred in religiously mixed, and enclaves without a Sunni majority, where it was used to acquire or consolidate control over a territory. The mass uprooting and relocation of populations was not just a consequence of conflict but was also a desired objective, as confirmed by an independent UN commission on Syria which found that population displacement had been “undertaken by Government forces pursuant to an organizational policy” and was “a crime against humanity and/or a war crime” (United Nations General Assembly, 2013). External observers often referred to such actions as “ethno-sectarian cleansing,” despite the fact that sectarian identity more often functioned as a proxy for political identity/allegiance than a motivation in its own right (Üngör, 2020).

In the Civil War, the uprooting of established communities was an established Syrian Regime practice. Displacement is not just used to demobilize or immobilize noncombatants, but also to mobilize them for military purposes (this is the crucial distinction between active and passive displacement) (Czuperski et al., 2017).

For armed groups, civilians are potential assets in wartime, not just burdens or threats, as they provide information and other services. Scott (2009) therefore observes how displacement makes the population more “legible” and simplifies some of the core tasks of state-making and war-fighting, including taxation and conscription. It can therefore operate as a way of extracting resources, including economic rents and soldiers. The Syrian Regime has used civil registration and property claims to screen and filter implacable opponents of the Syrian Regime (Middle East Monitor, 2019), and to prevent them from returning. The entire displacement process, extending from the initial “movement,” to temporary relocation and onto resettlement, has enabled the Syrian Regime to “sort” the population. The Syrian Regime’s extensive use of siege and blockade enabled it, for example, to establish an agreement that removed the ISIS presence in al-Hajar al-Aswad, its last stronghold in the southern Damascus region (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2023). Fifteen hundred ISIS fighters were evacuated in 25 buses and 30 trucks to the Syrian Badia, which is near to As-Suwayda governorate (Al-Arabiya, May 2020), meaning that the whole of the capital, and the region to the south of it, was restored to Syrian Regime control for the first time since 2012. In consolidating its control over captured cities, the Syrian Regime removed “obstructive” Arab Sunnis and used demographic engineering. Dr. Riyadh Naasan Agha⁷ confirmed that the Syrian Regime sought to “replace the displaced [Sunnis] with Shiite settlers” (al-Jablawi, 2016) who would apparently be drawn from the Shiite population of Kafarya and al-Fu’ah al-Kafarya (Idlib governorate) (al-Khatib, 2019). This demographic engineering would then reinforce the Syrian Regime’s presence in a key strategic part of the country.

In these two places of Shiite worship, the Syrian Regime sought to establish a gathering point for hundreds of Shiite militia fighters who wanted to fight the opposition and target civilians. Hezbollah, the Brigade of “Abu al-Fadel al-Abbas” and Iranian Revolutionary Guards were located here, and so were foreign fighters and mercenaries from Afghanistan, Iran, and Lebanon, and limited Syrian Regime elements. The deployed forces were equipped with modern and sophisticated weapons and were based on both sides of the two towns (Mervat, 2018). Shiites in Idlib were protected by Hassan Taqi, a Nobol (a Shiite village in the northern suburb of Aleppo) native who directly followed Iran’s instructions. The unwillingness of nearby villages to join the “Revolution” was widely perceived as an insult,

but the influence of Iran was key as it made it possible to recruit militias, establish training centers, and equip militias with weapons. In mid-2012, this policy came to fruition when the so-called “Syrian Hezbollah” was established in al-Fauha (Muhammad, 2015).

The Syrian Regime also used aerial bombardment to disrupt the Opposition by crippling key infrastructure, cultivating divisions within the Opposition, and undermining efforts to establish alternative governance structures and arrangements (Martínez & Eng, 2018, p. 240). These widespread and indiscriminate attacks often used “imprecise and unguided munitions with wide-area effects” (Holliday, 2013, p. 28). This was a low-cost way of capturing or annexing territory, which offset the need to identify enemies or get non-combatants to comply (Stanton, 2017). Darayya was the first place in the country where strategic bombing was used to achieve displacement (Al-Arabi al-Jadeed, 2016). The city’s (estimated) population of 250,000 was completely displaced after barrel bombs, missiles, cylinders and various rockets destroyed over 90% of the city (Bakkour, 2022, p. 3). Indiscriminate air attacks subsequently became established as “the most significant instrument in the [R]egime’s efforts to displace populations” (Holliday, 2013). Air attacks destroyed at least 40% of the country’s infrastructure and substantially impacted patterns of displacement in the country (Handicap International, 2017). Syrian Regime forces also razed large sections of rebel-occupied neighborhoods, and displaced residents on multiple occasions. Indiscriminate attacks on civilians were complemented by “social engineering” that economically benefitted Syrian Regime supporters, further reinforcing the Regime’s support base. “Depopulation” has therefore been undertaken with the clear intention of benefitting Syrian Regime supporters, including “the Sunni bourgeoisie and upper-class [l]oyal to [A]ssad” (Abu Hashem, 2021). On August 27, 2016, the Syrian Regime re-established its control over Darayya City, which had been emptied of its residents (Sosnowski, 2020, p. 293). Under the terms of an agreement, the 700 Opposition fighters who remained were allowed to leave with their families and were then transferred to Idlib governorate (Amnesty International, 2017).

Siege and starvation were also established displacement tactics. After the Opposition seized various cities across the country, the Syrian Regime responded by besieging them (Todman, 2016) (it has been estimated that around 2.5 million Syrians (over 10% of the prewar population) lived in siege or siege-like conditions at some point in the civil war. Of the 24 sieges applied in the period 2015–18, the Syrian Regime was responsible for 22, ISIS for two (Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor) (Bakkour, 2021), and other opposition groups for the other one (Kafarya and al-Foua) (Bakkour & Sahtout, 2022). Cities, entire towns, villages, suburbs, and neighborhoods were besieged (Todman, 2016). This tactic appealed to the Syrian Regime because it required fewer resources and trained/military personnel, and could be combined with artillery and aerial bombardment attacks that effectively leveled entire neighborhoods (Amnesty International, 2017).

These sieges also established a basis for so-called “reconciliation agreements,” a euphemism for forced displacement, in which the armed opposition would surrender in exchange for safe evacuation. In Aleppo, an agreement between Russia and the Opposition established a basis for the evacuation of East Aleppo’s remaining residents, who were then dispersed to the countryside to the west of the city and Idlib Governorate (Khaddour, 2017). This served two Syrian Regime objectives: the first was to expel continued opponents (Adleh & Favier, 2017) and the second was to enlist those entered its territory into the army (Berg & Yogev, 2016). Over 4000 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 (Czuperski et al., 2017).

While starvation has been mainly applied as a preferred alternative to direct intervention, it has also been used for purely vindictive purposes. This has been most clear in rural Damascus and, in particular, the Zabadani region, which is no more than 45 km from Damascus. The Syrian Regime also prevented electricity, fuel, medicine, and water from entering. Residents were forced to eat weeds and even, in some cases, rodents (Czuperski et al., 2017); malnourishment and dehydration increased, and hunger and disease-related deaths increased substantially (Zaman, 2017). In April 2015, the Opposition signed a truce with the Syrian Regime that would evacuate the remaining residents (OCHA, 2016). More than 2000 citizens left of their own volition and entered the neighboring towns of Madaya and Bukain (Assistance Coordination Unit, 2017). In the period October 2015–April 2016, around 25 families who refused to be resettled in Syrian Regime-held territory were gathered in Bludan and Zabadani towns, and then transferred by military vehicles to the towns of Madaya and Bukain, before being later transferred to Idlib province (Syrian Observer, 2015). On March 28, 2017, this was followed by the sectarian “Four Cities” agreement that reinforced Syrian Regime control in a contested part of the country.⁸

This formalization has also extended to Syrian Regime laws that seize the property of State opponents and transfer them to State ownership. These include (the counter-terrorism) Law No. 19, Law No. 22, and Decree 23 (which permits the State to operate outside of a legal framework when seizing property), which were all issued in 2012. Laws No. 66 and 40 (both also issued in 2012) give the Syrian Regime the authority to renovate old buildings. Meanwhile, Law No. 23 (which followed 3 years later) entitled the Syrian Regime to seize property without providing any compensation. In addition, Law No. 10 and Act No. 1 (both issued in 2018) entitled the Syrian Regime to seize the property of displaced residents who left the country (Real Estate Property and the Constitution, 2020). Moreover, Act No. 33 (2021) further supplements these extensive powers by permitting the Syrian Regime to seize the property of those who did not complete the mandatory military service or pay the required forfeit amount (Abu Hashem, 2021).

2 | CONCLUSION

As a consequence of the politicization of genocide, observers are increasingly likely to perceive mass atrocity crimes in civil wars through this lens, and, therefore, to understand them in the lineage of historical atrocities, and most notably the Holocaust. Indeed, in many instances, this is not merely the outcome but actually appears to be the desired intention. Ongoing innovations in the theorization and understanding of genocide have further reinforced the predisposition for observers to engage and understand through this conceptual, theoretical and legal lens.

This article has sought to challenge this proposition by demonstrating the various ways in which this lens can actually inhibit and obstruct the analysis of mass atrocity crimes committed during civil wars. In particular, this article has argued that viewing such actions through an ideological/sectarian lens can lead observers to fundamentally misunderstand both specific actions and the broader war. Under certain circumstances, it can lead observers down a legalistic “rabbit-hole” and divert their attention from the broader strategic and political significance of specific acts of violence.

In acknowledging the limitations and restrictions that are imposed by this framework, this article proposed strategic displacement as a more sustainable alternative. In doing so, this

article directly referred to the fact that international observers have repeatedly overlooked the significance of displacement and/or have conflated it with related but distinct practices, such as “ethnic cleansing.”

In the Civil War, for example, displacement has been viewed as being driven by sectarian hatreds and resentments, despite the fact that sect has more often functioned as a proxy for political loyalty. Indeed, location, rather than group membership, has actually functioned as a better predictor of Syrian Regime violence throughout the Civil War. The residual premise that ethnicity is the driver of violence is, *inter alia*, embodied in the belief that war is an extension of prewar divisions (Horowitz, 1985) or the additional costs ethnic divisions impose on bargaining (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, p. 70), therefore obstructs analysis and makes it more difficult to understand these acts in their true significance. Even efforts to reimagine and reconceptualize genocide have not managed to completely overcome or escape the influence of the preponderant model of ethnicity, in which, it is understood as the deliberate extermination of a group on the basis of pre-established characteristics and traits.

To demonstrate this, this article referred to specific Syrian Regime practices, including the extensive use of unguided munitions with wide area effects (Holliday, 2013, p. 28) and the leveling of entire neighborhoods (Amnesty International, 2017) and noted how they were consistent with the intention to target and uproot entire populations. This violence should not be conceptualized as the expression or embodiment of underlying sectarian animosity, but should instead be viewed as violence that is exerted with a very specific aim and intention in mind. This violence was instead an adjustment to a situation of weakness and the waging of a form of “cost effective” war. Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017, p. 40), in referring to the use of violence against civilians in civil war, observe that it is used to achieve a mixture of ideological, military, and/or political goals. In the Syrian case, this article downplays the importance of ideology and instead strongly emphasizes the importance of military and tactical considerations. Here it is essential to acknowledge, in accordance with Kalyvas (2006), that the actual behavior of targeted individuals and populations was effectively irrelevant, as their guilt was presumed from their location and failure to flee, whether before or during intense bombardment. However, sect or religious affiliation was not always an accurate predictor of violence, as displacement practices were also used against minority communities in the early phases of the Civil War.

The strategic character of various activities, including sustained bombardment, massacres, and sieges was confirmed both by domestic and international observers (al-Khatib, 2019), who observed that the targeting of civilians and the use of indiscriminate violence did not occur in isolation but instead appeared to derive from an underlying strategy, and also by the Syrian Regime’s actions in the aftermath of large population movement that were accompanied by “reconciliation agreements” that enabled the relocation of armed fighters and their families, along with the remaining civilian population (Al-Arabiya, May 2020). In this and other respects, the relocation of the population was not simply an outcome but was a desired and intended objective. In other cases, displaced civilians were directly conscripted into the armed forces.

Even if it is granted that certain practices, including the Syrian Regime’s deliberate use of starvation in the Zabadani region, have at least genocidal connotations or implications, we should also acknowledge that pursuing this would ultimately lead observers down a legalistic “rabbit-hole,” and leave us no more enlightened about why they have occurred. And here it is crucial, and even obligatory, to recall Raymond Evans’s observation that genocide is ‘an inviolable legal precept rather than simply a useful, heuristic tool—a legal instrument designed

to prosecute and convict people, rather than to find out causes and mechanisms of episodes of massive killings and/or population displacement' (Evans, 2009).

Engaging within a strategic displacement framing enables us to divest ourselves of normative, humanitarian, and legalistic considerations and to directly engage with these activities in their full tactical and strategic significance. Accordingly, mass movements are not viewed as a consequence of conflict, and nor as the more concrete embodiment or expression of underlying sectarian animosities. Instead, it becomes possible to see how they feed into and help sustain broader conflict aims and objectives. Aside from improving understanding and analysis, this will also directly contribute to more effective means of external engagement and intervention. This acknowledgment will also, in turn, have direct implications for established legal regimes that address mass atrocity crimes.

In terms of weaknesses, this article has, in common with different observers, merely identified a strategy or even just a strategic intent. Further studies will need to undercover this strategy and demonstrate the significance of specific acts of violence. This could conceivably occur in either a research or legal setting. Second, this article largely views displacement from “without,” and does not, therefore, extensively engage with the experiences of the displaced, or their perceptions of the process of displacement. And finally, this article is almost entirely focused on demonstrating the contributions and benefits of a displacement framework—however, it does not discuss the direct and indirect implications of this framework for international engagement, and nor does it consider how international actors should adjust their interventions in response.

In terms of future research, it is worthwhile to note that while many single case studies of atrocities have addressed displacement as a method of killing, they have been explored at the individual case level and have rarely striven to create theory (Greenhill, 2010). In seeking to further develop this article, researchers should engage through a comparative political science lens that provides a structural account of atrocities (aside from its other recommendations, this is consistent with the approach proposed by the Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies—see Bloxham & Dirk, 2010, p. 15). They should also seek to connect multiple cases of atrocities (rather than treating them as isolated events) and examine how “elites, political parties, bureaucracies, armed forces, and paramilitaries” are all connected in atrocity perpetration.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Syrian Regime-allied militia.
- ² The Genocide Convention (1948) defines genocide as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.
- ³ Respectively, killing members of the group and causing serious mental and/or physical harm to group members.
- ⁴ Respectively, deliberately inflicting conditions of life that are calculated to bring about the complete or partial physical destruction of the group, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children from the group to another group.
- ⁵ The US government inadvertently confirmed this during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, when it committed considerable diplomatic efforts, which far outstripped the efforts it took to stop the genocide itself, to preventing the word “genocide” from being included in Security Council deliberations.

- ⁶ Here it should be noted that observers frequently conflate ethnic cleansing with genocide.
- ⁷ Riyad Naasan Agha formerly served as education minister and culture minister in the Syrian government. He also served on the Syrian Opposition's high negotiations committee.
- ⁸ This agreement, which was signed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ahrar al-Sham, Hezbollah, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard representatives, proposed to transfer Sunnis in Bludan and Zabadani to Idlib, and to evacuate Shiite inhabitants of towns in Idlib Province (al-Fouah and Kafarya) to different parts of the country, including Zabadani (OCHA, 2017). Eventually all of Zabadani's residents were 'evacuated'/relocated to northern Syria.

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