



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
STIFTUNG** Für die Freiheit.

Lebanon and Syria



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير  
Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê  
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

# Demographic Engineering in the Course of Syria' War

A consequence or cause

2021-1962



# Demographic Engineering in the Course of Syria' War

A consequence or cause

2021-1962

## About VDC:

**Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)** is an independent non-governmental non-profit organization. We seek to build a society that guarantees freedom of expression and belief, human rights, and justice. Our vision is a democratic world based on justice, freedom, equality and respect for human rights and dignity. **Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)** is an independent non-governmental non-profit organization. We seek to build a society that guarantees freedom of expression and belief, human rights, and justice. Our vision is a democratic world based on justice, freedom, equality and respect for human rights and dignity.

Since SCM was founded in 2004, we work to defend oppressed individuals due to their beliefs or opinions, as well as promoting human rights and supporting and developing independent, critical, and professional media. SCM is in special consultative status with UN ECOSOC since 2011.

**The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF)** is the German Foundation for Liberal Politics. Established in 1958 by Theodor Heuss, the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, FNF promotes liberal values; above all the freedom of the individual in their pursuit of happiness.

FNF promotes liberal thinking and policies in cooperation with its local partners through civic education, international political dialogue, and political counselling. In Lebanon, our main objective is to support Lebanese start-ups, civil society organizations and liberal political parties while raising awareness about political education, female empowerment and durable development.

Copyright © 2021 Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) <https://scm.bz/en/>

November 2022



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
STIFTUNG** Für die Freiheit.

Lebanon and Syria



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير  
Navenda Sûriyayi ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê  
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

## **Acknowledgement**

This report was made possible with the essential participation and support of the witnesses who participated in the interviews.

We extend our gratitude to the researchers who worked on the outline, implementation and writing of the report in cooperation with the SCM team:

Lead Researcher **Aiman Menem**

Researchers and participants **Nizar Ayoub, Youssef Wahba, and Mansour Al-Omari**

General supervision: **Mazen Darwish**

We would like to express our gratitude to the SCM team who participated in preparing the interviews and collecting information and contributed to the work until its completion.



# Content

<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>VDC definition of the key actors for this report</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter I: Demographic Engineering</b> .....	<b>12</b>
First :Defining demographic engineering .....	12
Second: Demographic engineering tools.....	16
<b>Chapter II :Demographic Engineering in Syria Before2011</b> .....	<b>20</b>
First: The Syrian Jazira Region: A History of Demographic Engineering.....	20
Second :legalizing demographic engineering .....	24
Third: An overview of the societal structural transformations in Syria .....	25
<b>Chapter III: Major Forced Displacement Incidents Since 2011</b> .....	<b>34</b>
Forced displacement by the Syrian regime .....	34
Forced displacement in Homs city .....	36
Forced Displacement and Urbicide Practices in Rural Damascus .....	39
Completion of the displacement .....	44
Major forced displacement incidents by Iran and its militias .....	49
Major forced displacement incidents by the Democratic Autonomous Administration .....	56
Major displacement incidents by the Turkish occupation and its affiliated groups .....	59
Jabhat Al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham .....	61
Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-ISIS .....	63
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>65</b>
To all parties to the conflict and the governments supporting them.....	65
The Syrian government .....	65
The Syrian opposition.....	66
The Turkish government .....	66
The Democratic Autonomous Administration .....	67
The United Nations and the international community .....	67
United nations .....	67
The international community .....	68
The Syrian civil society.....	68
Businesses and potential investors .....	69
The media and academia .....	96
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>69</b>

## Summary

“And whoever fled and ran away from Syria to any other country, please do not come back, because if the state forgives you, we promise that we will not forget and we will not forgive”.

Brigadier General Issam Zahreddine in an interview with the Al-Ikhbariya Al-Suriye channel in September 2017<sup>1</sup>

Since the Syrian conflict started a decade ago, three-in-five Syrians fled their homes, some of which were forced to [flee more than once](#).<sup>2</sup> Sixty percent of the population or fourteen million have been displaced and stranded inside the country or turned into refugees. As for the urban destruction, the World Bank estimated in its [presser](#),<sup>3</sup> “The Visible Impacts of the Syrian War May Only be the Tip of the Iceberg” that as of 2017 about a third of the housing stock and about half of medical and education facilities were completely or partially destroyed.

The 82-page report, “**Demographic Engineering in the Course of Syria’ War: A consequence or cause**” analyses the processes of population displacement and urban destruction in the context of the deliberate change of the demographic structure in Syria, from the perspective of Demographic Engineering.

Most of the research and reporting on the Syrian regime bombardment and destruction of residential areas focuses on the use of indiscriminate bombardment as a systematic policy in the regime’s war in urban areas, to prove war crimes. This literature supposes that the Assad’s regime war tactics and practices are deployed mainly for military reasons related to achieving military victory, at any costs, including through war crimes, with the aim of proving the systematic indiscriminate bombardment policy as a basis for criminalizing the Syrian government for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

However, this evidence and identification of the government’s intent behind the mass destruction of civilian objects does not play the main role in proving the scheme of demographic engineering that is being widely conducted.

The government’s post-destruction policies in devastated areas, including what it calls reconstruction, and what we explain in detail in this report as a continuation of urbicide, in which we analyse and reveal the link between the locations of the previous and recent organizational plans and the areas of destruction and demolition since 2011, are the basis for proving that the Syrian government is committing discriminatory demographic engineering to consolidate its control at the expense of the population. This report also analyses the relation between the organizational plans before and after 2011, and the destroyed areas after 2011, and argues that whether the relation was a correlation or causation, it is **how the Syrian regime acts after the destruction** that eliminates the need to prove causation to prove the regime’s implementation of discriminatory demographic engineering.

Whether the main intention of the mass bombardment of cities and towns was to achieve military victory or was a part of a demographic engineering scheme, what the government does after the destruction is what determines the completion of the crime of discriminatory

---

1 The video of Al-Jisr channel on the YouTube channel, quoting an interview on the Syrian News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDbWKyl8uJE>, and there are several identical videos

2 “After 9 years of tragedy, resilience and solidarity, the world must not forget displaced Syrians” 10 March 2020, The UN refugee Agency. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e67ade92d6/9-years-tragedy-resilience-solidarity-world-must-forget-displaced-syrians.html>

3 “The Visible Impacts of the Syrian War May Only be the Tip of the Iceberg”, 10 July 2017, The world Bank. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/07/18/the-visible-impacts-of-the-syrian-war-may-only-be-the-tip-of-the-iceberg>

demographic engineering. In both cases, the government has benefited and exploited the defacto situation resulting from the crime of forced deportation to complete demographic engineering schemes, and therefore it is considered responsible for it, if it does not attempt to restore rights to their owners and put property rights as the basis and a condition for any construction and reconstruction operations.

The research traces the paths of demographic change prior to and during the conflict and defines modern concepts of demographic engineering and urbicide in Syria.

The report does not address the natural causes of demographic change, such as births, natural migration to and/or from cities, climatic causes, etc., but focuses on deliberate efforts for demographic change, that is, demographic engineering. The report also highlights the role of political, religious, racial and mixed attitudes that were used as motives and tools for displacement and for committing atrocities that forced residents to leave their homes and areas.

In its first chapter, the report expands on the definition of the concepts of **demographic engineering** and **urbicide**, as they are relatively recent concepts with varied definitions, and are not defined in authoritative sources of international law. Both concepts provide a broad gate to understanding and analysing events in Syria, including forced displacement and the urban destruction. The report tried to place urbicide within the framework of international law and set the first steps and initial perceptions of those terms in the Syrian context.

In its second chapter, the report examines the practices of demographic engineering in Syria before the start of the popular protests and the conflict in 2011 and analyses its impact as one of their main drivers.

In its third and last chapter, the report reviews the major incidents of demographic engineering in Syria with the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, which were documented by the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria and compiled by its monitoring team. It included incidents by the Syrian government and Iran and its militias, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, and the Syrian opposition and the Turkish occupation.

The report concludes with recommendations to the parties to the conflict, the international community, and other stakeholders.

## Methodology

This report is based on several sources, including testimonies of victims and witnesses, expert opinions, and previous years of documentation by researchers of Violations Documentation Center in Syria, and the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

VDC researchers conducted desk and field research, analysed relevant Syrian laws and reviewed reports by UN agencies, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, international humanitarian and human rights organizations and others.

VDC researchers conducted telephone and in-person interviews with eyewitnesses and victims inside and outside Syria. They also documented and analysed the statements of the conflicting parties in Syria, including the Syrian government, in state media and relevant government platforms.

VDC withheld or gave pseudonyms to several victims of and witnesses for their safety.

Mansour Omari, an Independent researcher, authored the Demographic Engineering chapter.

# Introduction

Due to its central location, Syria hosts a diverse array of ethnic and religious groups, which has been building up for thousands of years. Syria is a home of several of the oldest urban centres in the world, including Aleppo which is described in several sources as the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. However, this diversity contributed largely to the current conflict and drove the ambitions of different ethnic and religious groups to grab more powers over each other.

The lack of state protection and basic rights boosted allegiance to race, sect, and religion at the expense of the concept of citizenship and allegiance to the state. This was a key factor in driving the current conflict and promoting foreign intervention based mainly on those affiliations.

Over more than five decades, the ruling Baath Party and the Assad regime have fostered those affiliations to exploit them in controlling the country. The Syrian regime depended on those affiliations to conduct policies of demographic engineering throughout the country for decades.

Policies of demographic engineering have been strongly present since the beginning of the conflict in Syria and accompanied it through its various phases. It is not possible to accurately measure the extent of the demographic change during the previous decade, to which other parties of conflict have contributed through several tool and methods.

Forced displacement, bombarding and siege of civilian inhabited areas, arbitrary imprisonment and detention, systematic torture and enforced disappearance among others were used to reach either sectarian homogeneous societies such as the Four Cities Agreement by the state and Islamic groups, or racialized societies by the Kurdish Autonomous Administration and the Turkish occupation and the Syrian opposition factions affiliated with it.

In June 2018, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria issued its report on the siege of Eastern Ghouta, in which it [described](#)<sup>4</sup> the Syrian regime's siege of Ghouta as "the longest running siege in modern history" and said that "this method of warfare in Syria as barbaric and medieval". The report described severe physical and psychological harm of civilians while they were subjected to almost daily shelling and severe deprivation, which resulted in avoidable deaths.

Since April 2011, the Syrian government began to besiege and starve civilians in cities and towns and prevent them from food, medicine, and basic services, in response to the popular protests that swept the country calling for reform and basic rights. This siege, starvation and collective punishment that lasted for many years pushed many residents of the besieged areas to flee their homes. In conjunction with its continuous bombardment and targeting of civilians and civilian structures, including hospitals, schools and infrastructure, the Syrian government has provided civilians with one way to survive, which is to be displaced.

The Syrian government has pursued a policy of mass bombardment without any consideration for protecting civilians or civilian objects, forcing millions to flee, fearing for their lives. The Syrian forces continued to bombard and destroy these areas, making them uninhabitable. Residents who did not dare or were not able to flee to the regime areas were forced to agree

---

4 "The siege and recapture of eastern Ghouta marked by war crimes, crimes against humanity", 20 June 2018, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23226&LangID=E>

to displacement to opposition-controlled areas, through “reconciliation/truce agreements.”

The rhetoric of targeting “the popular incubator” of the opposition was propagated as a necessity for military victory in the state media and among its loyalists in social media. This rhetoric was supported and reinforced by the head of the regime, the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, when he spoke about the role of the popular incubator in a speech in 2014: “We are in front of tens of thousands of terrorists ... behind these terrorists there is a social incubator, there is a family, there is a neighbour, there is a relative, and there is a friend.”

In its report in [May 2018](#),<sup>5</sup> the UN Commission of inquiry on Syria described how the Syrian regime gave besieged civilians only one option, which is to leave their homes and flee to predetermined areas, in most cases:

once the parties in charge finally capitulate and accept to enter a truce and “evacuation agreement” the majority of civilians have faced the further punishment of being left with little option but leave their homes - to become internally displaced -often to a pre-determined destination, not of their own choosing, but set out within the “agreements”. To remain would otherwise risk incurring the wrath of the winner, which has most often been the Syrian state.

The regime targeted several groups of civilians after the agreements were executed. Medical personnel, service and relief providers, and journalists among others became a primary target for the state’s retaliation, including by arrests, torture, and assassinations. So, they and their families were among the first to seek evacuation.

In 2018 alone, about 50,000 people were displaced under local truce agreements, according to the United Nations.

After bombardment and displacement, the Syrian government demolished entire neighbourhoods. The regime’s official accounts and justifications varied. Sometimes it was for reasons of urban planning and others to eliminate terrorists, but the common factor among these operations is that the residents of these neighbourhoods and areas were from the opposition or under its control.

The prevalence of demolitions after the eviction and the lack of respect for property rights shows the government’s intention to not allow the displaced to return. This shows that the government has prior/defacto plans of demographic engineering in many of these areas.

In other areas in Syria, battles erupted along racial lines between the opposition and the Kurdish forces and led to displacement by both parties. Islamist and extremist groups, including al-Nusra and ISIS have also committed displacement on religious and sectarian grounds.

---

5 “Sieges as a weapon of war: Encircle, starve, surrender, evacuate”, 29 May 2018, retrieved on 13 October 2021, [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PolicyPaperSieges\\_29May2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PolicyPaperSieges_29May2018.pdf)

# VDC definition of the key actors for this report

## Ahrar Al-Sham

Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement (Arabic: Islamic Movement of the Freeman of the Levant).

A Sunni Islamist armed group and one of the main fighting factions founded in 2011 to fight the Syrian government. It has a political and social vision and seeks to establish an Islamic state.

Ahrar al-Sham defines itself on its website as: a comprehensive Islamic movement that works to liberate the land, liberate humans, and build a civilized Islamic society in Syria through institutional work.<sup>6</sup>

Ahrar al-Sham seeks “the establishment of an Islamic state governed by the true Sharia of Allah” and “preserving the Islamic identity in society.”<sup>7</sup>

Ahrar al-Sham said in its founding statement that it follows Sunni Islam in thought and action.<sup>8</sup>

## Al-Nusra Front/Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Jabhat Al-Nusra for the People of the Levant, (Arabic: The Front to support the People of the Levant)

An extremist Sunni Islamist armed group that was established in 2011 in Syria, affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra claimed that it was not affiliated with any party, i.e. its split from Al-Qaeda,<sup>9</sup> and changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (The Front for the Conquest of the Levant). In 2017, it changed its name to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Levant Liberation Committee) after merging other armed groups.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham controls areas in Idlib governorate, and govern those areas through its Syrian Salvation Government.

Al-Nusra adopts a hardline stance against Syrian religious minorities such as the Druze and Alawites, and considers them to be out of Islam, and that they must be forced to modify their religious beliefs to conform to those of Jabhat al-Nusra.

---

6 “About Us”, Ahrar al-Sham’s website. <https://ahraralsham.net/about-us/>

7 Ibid.

8 “Glad tidings (Has the story of the battlaions reached you?)”, Internet Archive, 4 June 2012. <https://archive.org/details/ALKTABhdeht>

9 Al-Nusra leader Jolani announces split from al-Qaeda, Al Jazeera, 29 July 2016. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/29/al-nusra-leader-jolani-announces-split-from-al-qaeda>

## Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

A project of administration and governance for northeastern Syria, founded by the Kurdish<sup>10</sup> Democratic Union Party (PYD) on the principles published on its website that include democracy, a common homeland, rights and freedoms, and seeks to “get rid of the ideological hegemony and positivist scientism that is characterized by the purely mechanical materialism and dogmatism imposed by the capitalist modernism system on the world.”<sup>11</sup>

The Autonomous Administration controls areas in northeastern Syria, including the Kurdish-majority areas and areas liberated by Syrian Democratic Forces from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-ISIS control.

## Hezbollah, Hizballah, Hizbullah (Arabic: “party of Allah”)

The Oxford Dictionary of Islam defines Hezbollah as: Political and social movement founded in the early 1980s seeking to transform Lebanon into an Islamic state.<sup>12</sup>

The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable: an extremist Shiite Muslim group which has close links with Iran, created after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and active especially in Lebanon.<sup>13</sup>

According to Hassan Nasrallah,<sup>14</sup> Secretary-General of Hezbollah since 1992, Hezbollah is “a Twelver Imami Shiite<sup>15</sup> Islamist party”, “funded by Iran”.<sup>16</sup>

Hezbollah is a Lebanese political party, militant group and social movement. It has members in the Lebanese parliament and the government, and a military wing that carries out military operations outside Lebanon, the most important of which is in Syria.

## Jaysh Al-Islam (Arabic: the army of Islam)

A Sunni Islamist armed group,<sup>17</sup> founded in 2013 with the merger of Liwa al-Islam and other armed groups, to fight the Syrian government. It is one of the largest armed groups in Syria. Jaysh al-Islam has a political and social vision and seeks to establish an Islamic state.

Jaysh al-Islam defines itself in its website as an opposition military formation that “qualifies its fighters according to the Islamic faith”, and “follows a moderate method, unlike the other extremist organizations such as the ISIS and Al Nusra Front.”<sup>18</sup>

10 The Kurdish National Council in Syria, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center. <https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48502>

11 “The Autonomous Administration Project”, [the website of the Democratic Union Party](http://the-website-of-the-democratic-union-party.com).

12 Oxford University Press (2006). Hizbullah, The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095939353>

13 Oxford University Press (2003). Hizb Allah, The Oxford Dictionary of Islam. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001/acref-9780195125580-e-862>

14 “Nasrallah: We, the Imami Shiite Party, will not abandon Palestine,” LBC Lebanon/YouTube, 2 August 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66Sv7\\_mkvt8&ab\\_channel=LBCILebanon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66Sv7_mkvt8&ab_channel=LBCILebanon)

15 Ende, W., & Brunner, R. (Eds.). (26 Jul. 2021). The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004492035>

16 “The full text of Sayyed Nasrallah’s speech on the fortieth anniversary of the great jihadi leader and martyr Mustafa Badr al-Din,” Al-Manar TV, 24 June 2016. <https://www.almanar.com.lb/397021>

17 “Speech of the Commander-in-Chief of Eastern Ghouta and the leader of Jaysh al-Islam, Sheikh Zahran Alloush, Aba Abdullah”, Hakim Jaber YouTube, 30 April 2015. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHK1kkyQz54&ab\\_channel=hakimjabr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHK1kkyQz54&ab_channel=hakimjabr)

18 “About”, Jaysh al-Islam website. <https://www.jaishalislam.com/about>

Jaysh al-Islam adopts religious views that incite violence against Syrian religious minorities such as Alawites. The former leader of Jaysh al-Islam, Zahran Alloush, described Alawites as “more infidels than Jews and Christians”,<sup>19</sup> citing Ibn Taymiyyah, a medieval Islamist theologian whose religious verdict (fatwa) against Alawites and Druze is that they are infidels and should be killed.<sup>20</sup>

## Syrian Democratic Forces

US-Backed Kurdish-Led Forces military forces commanded by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), that stems from the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

On several occasions, the United States has expressed<sup>22</sup> its desire to have local forces<sup>23</sup> in Syria on the ground to assist in the fight against the Islamic State-ISIS.

On 11 October 2015, several armed groups issued a statement regarding the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces, defining the forces as: “A unified national military force for all Syrians that include Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and all other components on the Syrian geography. This force aims to establish a democratic Syria.”<sup>24</sup>

On 30 October 2015, the United States announced that it is sending U.S. special forces to Syria to coordinate local ground forces and the international coalition against ISIS efforts to fight ISIS.<sup>25</sup>

## The Turkish occupation

The Turkish army launched military operations in northeastern Syria with the support of Syrian armed groups and occupied those areas. Currently, Turkey supervises the security and military in these areas, and supports armed groups there under the name of the Syrian National Army. Turkey trains and pays the salaries of more than 50,000 Syrian fighters.<sup>26</sup> “Turkish language is taught as a second language, patients are treated in Turkish hospitals built in those areas, electricity comes through Turkey, and the Turkish lira is the most traded currency.”

---

19 “moderate” commander boosting the morale of his troops by telling them that alawites are more infidels than christians and jews”, Internet Archive, 19 July 2014. [https://web.archive.org/web/20171019083806/https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=730\\_1405745196](https://web.archive.org/web/20171019083806/https://www.liveleak.com/view?i=730_1405745196)

20 Ibn Taymiyya, Fatwa Collection, Vol 35, p. 162 The Comprehensive Islamic Library. <https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/5564/read?part=35&page=16613&index=3268710/3268766>

21 Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria, Human Rights Watch, 19 June 2014. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria>

22 Why Obama’s assurance of ‘no boots on the ground’ isn’t so reassuring, Rosa Brooks, The Washington Post, 26 September 2014

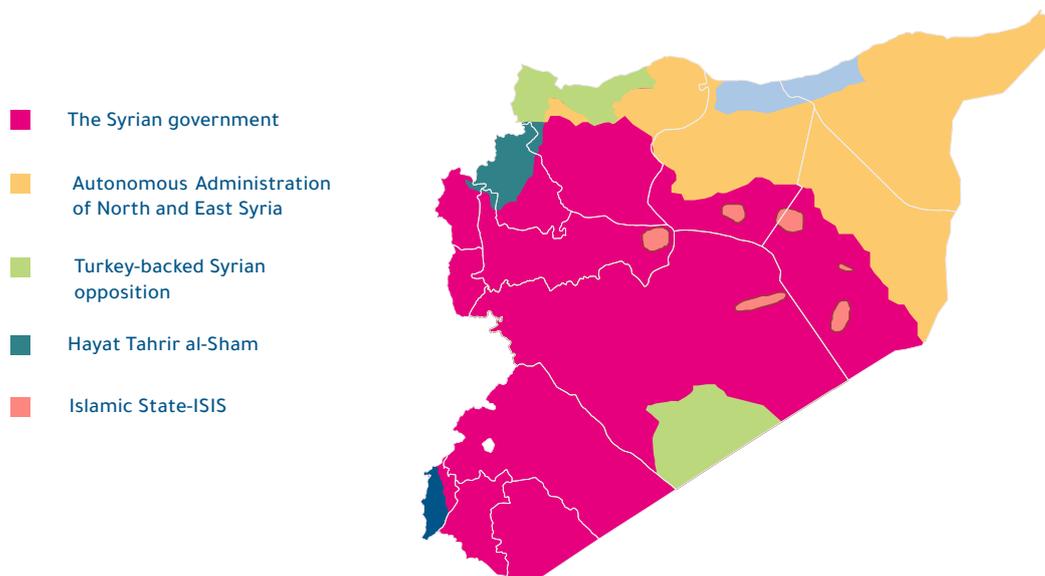
23 Daily Press Briefing by the Press Secretary Josh Earnest 10/30/15, Obama White House Archives, 30 October 2015

24 Syrian Democratic Forces: Statement No. (1), People’s Protection Units (YPG) official Facebook page, 12 October 2015.

25 U.S. Will Send Special Operations Troops To Help Fight ISIS In Syria, NPR, 30 October 2015.

26 Syria: what is Turkey’s grand plan? Andrew England and Laura Pitel, The Financial Times, 25 July, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/a14241de-8dbf-4a69-b064-2991f5992503>

## Map of control in Syria, 1 January 2022, Liveuamap



## Chapter I: Demographic Engineering

Brief definition: A term that refers to the deliberate change of the demographics in an area, by targeting the population and their urban areas.

### First :Defining demographic engineering

Demography: The word has its origins in ancient Greek, and is made up of “demo,” meaning people, and “graphy,” meaning measurement or description.

As a field of study, demography is defined today as the study of population, especially about numbers, density and geographical distribution. Contemporary demographic concerns include the interaction between population and economic development, urban congestion, illegal immigration, and others. What distinguishes it from other branches of science that study people, such as anthropology, psychology, and others.

Max Plank Institute for Demographic Research [defines demography as:](#)<sup>27</sup>

The science of populations. Demographers seek to understand population dynamics by investigating three main demographic processes: birth, migration, and aging (including death). All three of these processes contribute to changes in populations, including how people inhabit the earth, form nations and societies, and develop culture.

27 “What is Demography?”, Max Plank Institute for Demographic Research. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021, [https://www.demogr.mpg.de/en/about\\_us\\_6113/what\\_is\\_demography\\_6674/](https://www.demogr.mpg.de/en/about_us_6113/what_is_demography_6674/)

The Institute also emphasize that:

While demography cannot offer political advice on how to tackle demographic change, demographers seek to describe the phenomena related to this change, and to understand their causes. Using reliable data and the statistical processing of these data, modern demographic research embraces many scientific disciplines, including mathematics, economics and other social sciences, geography or biology.

Engineering: Oxford Dictionary defines Engineering as: “to arrange cleverly and often secretly for something to happen, especially something that is to your advantage” or: “to design and build something using scientific principles.”

Adding “engineering” to “demography”, creates a term that convey the meaning of a deliberate, intentional organized, and pre-designed act of demographic change, and it may be undeclared.

Definitions of demographic engineering varied in the academic literature in its comprehensiveness and focus, but it shared several points, the most prominent of which is the change of [states](#)<sup>28</sup> or dominant forces of the ethnic composition of a region, including [the settlement of majority groups](#)<sup>29</sup> in remote areas inhabited by minorities, and the resettlement of minorities within the state. Demographic engineering methods include practices and forms, some of which are justified by states, under various pretexts, including security, urban organizing, and management of international and local conflicts, while other practices may amount to genocide, one of the gravest international crimes. States also employ demographic engineering to address external and internal conflicts and to strengthen control over borders and areas inhabited by minorities. For example, after the Sino-Soviet split (1959-1982), the expulsion of the Russians and the resettlement of the Han Chinese ethnicity in the Chinese border areas with the Soviet Union escalated. The resettlement targeted areas inhabited by Russians. On the Soviet side, the expulsion of the Chinese and resettlement of Russians in the border areas also escalated.

The concept of demographic engineering was mentioned in several academic papers, most of which focused on the ethnic and religious basis of demographic engineering.

“Demographic engineering: the state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of conflict regulation” by Professor John McGarry<sup>30</sup> described the settlement of majority groups in peripheral regions inhabited by minorities, and the relocation of minority groups within the state. [In his paper](#),<sup>31</sup> McGarry discusses the reasons and circumstances under which states move ethnic groups.

Professor Milica Zarkovic Bookman explained in [her 1997 book](#),<sup>32</sup> “The Demographic Struggle for Power: The Political Economy of Demographic Engineering in the Modern World” how the total population of the country is no longer the determining factor of power, and demographic engineering has become a control tool by granting political and economic power to a specific ethnic or religious group at the expense of rest of the population.

---

28 John McGarry (1998) 'Demographic engineering': the state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of conflict regulation, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:4, 613-638, DOI: 10.1080/014198798329793

29 McGarry, J. (1998). 'Demographic engineering': the state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of conflict regulation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21, 613-638.

30 John McGarry (1998) 'Demographic engineering': the state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of conflict regulation, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:4, 613-638, DOI: 10.1080/014198798329793

31 Ibid.

32 Bookman, M.Z. (1997). *The Demographic Struggle for Power: The Political Economy of Demographic Engineering in the Modern World* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315037738>

Turkish academic Nesim Şeker expanded on the definition of demographic engineering in [his 2007 article](#)<sup>33</sup> as:

A novel concept employed to explain the forced migration and ethnic cleansing of recent decades in several regions of the world, such as the Balkans, Caucasus, and Africa. Nevertheless, it is not appropriate to confine the use of the concept to a region and/or historical period since it identifies state intervention regarding population level, composition, distribution, and increase/decrease. In other words, any deliberate state program or policy originating from religious/ethnic discrimination, or initiated for political, strategic, or ideological reasons which aim to increase the political and economic power of one ethnic group over others by manipulating the population through various methods can be defined as demographic engineering.

Dutch Professor Ugur Ümit Üngör expanded on the study and details of demographic engineering, in [his book in 2011](#):<sup>34</sup> “The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950” in which he talked about the subjecting of Eastern Turkey to various forms of nationalist population policies aimed at ethnically homogenizing and incorporation into the Turkish nation state. Üngör identified key tools of demographic engineering including manipulation of statistics, forced assimilation, pressure to emigrate, population exchange, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Despite the novelty of demographic engineering as a definition and a research concept, in practice, it preceded the definition for a long time, and was often associated with conflicts and wars. The first practices of demographic engineering may date back to before BC. What [researchers describe](#)<sup>35</sup> as the first documented genocide in history, was when the Romans invaded Carthage in today Tunisia, and completely destroyed the city in 146 BC, after it was one of the largest urban centres in the world at the time, following a struggle over resources and control in the region. A century later the Romans built a new city in its place, [so little is known](#)<sup>36</sup> about the physical appearance of the previous Phoenician city. This historical incident may be the first recorded example of urbicide too.

Examples of demographic engineering are almost countless throughout history. The great empires tampered with population demographics for centuries and in many areas around the world, including the British, Ottoman and Russian empires. The indigenous population in several regions of the world were also subjected to extermination, forced displacement, and replacement with new populations, as in the Americas and Australia. As for the major wars, especially the Second World War, millions of people were deliberately displaced and forced to flee or subject to fully fledged genocide such as Jews, Roma and Sinti.

Even today, the practices of demographic engineering keep adopting violence and crimes, such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and others. This includes the Rohingya genocide in

---

33 Nesim Şeker (2007) Demographic engineering in the late Ottoman empire and the Armenians, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43:3, 461-474, DOI: 10.1080/00263200701246157

34 Üngör, U. (2011-04-21). *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950*. : Oxford University Press. Retrieved 12 Oct. 2021, from <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199603602.001.0001/acprof-9780199603602>

35 Kiernan, B. (2004). The First Genocide: Carthage, 146 BC. *Diogenes*, 51(3), 27-39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192104043648>

36 “North Africa, the growth of urban life”, retrieved 12 Oct, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-growth-of-urban-life>

Myanmar. In China, crimes against humanity against Uyghurs Muslims were described by several states including [the United States](#)<sup>37</sup> as a genocide. Israel was [declared](#)<sup>38</sup> by Human Rights Watch as committing crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution against Palestinians.

In Syria, following the start of the conflict in 2011, all parties practiced demographic engineering to varying degrees, some with the support of other states involved in the conflict. However, these practices were not purely a result of the war, but rather were based in most on pre-existent foundations. Such as “the Arab belt,” northeast Syria, and the sectarian residential communities established by the Assad regime, especially in Damascus, the Syrian capital, and others.

For decades, demographic engineering has not only targeted the population in Syria on ethnic grounds, but also included sectarian\religious factors. The methods used to implement demographic engineering have included the pretexts of urbanization, agrarian reform, national security, and border protection. Many of those methods also amounted to war crimes, as well as cultural genocide.

Some of the previous drivers of the conflict in Syria were the demographic engineering conducted by “the Arab Socialist Baath Party” which assumed power in 1963. The Syrian state legalized demographic engineering by issuing laws, drawing state policies, and supporting it with political propaganda.

Prior to the Syrian conflict start in 2011 demographic engineering was based on explicit sectarian and ethnic foundations. The political aspect and subjugation to the ruling authority dominate as an overt and apparent starting point for the demographic engineering implemented by the Assad regime during the conflict. However, due to the wide geographical scope of the demographic engineering in Syria during the conflict, the practices and their foundations can be distinguished according to the area. In overlapping Sunni and Alawite areas, the demographic change was characterized by sectarianism, reaching what could be described as genocide in areas such as [al-Bayda and Ras al-Nabaa](#)<sup>39</sup> in coastal Baniyas. As for Iran and its militias operating in Syria, they declared sectarian policy of their intervention to “defend Shiite holy sites.” [Informal recruiters called](#)<sup>40</sup> for volunteers to defend the Islamic Republic and fellow Shiites against Sunni militants. They recruited Shiite fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The Islamist opposition, al-Nusra, and ISIS were also open in their recruitment and war against Shiites and Alawites.

On the other hand, the ethnic aspect was evident in the practices of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, the Turkish occupation, and the Turkish-backed opposition. While the practices of Islamist opposition groups provided a clear model for sectarian or religious demographic engineering.

---

37 “China’s Oppression of Muslims in Xinjiang, Explained”, 20 January 2021, The New York Times. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/20/world/asia/china-genocide-uyghurs-explained.html>

38 “Israeli Apartheid: ‘A Threshold Crossed’”, 19 July 2021, Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/19/israeli-apartheid-threshold-crossed>

39 “No One’s Left: Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas”, 13 September 2013, Human Rights Watch. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/13/no-ones-left/summary-executions-syrian-forces-al-bayda-and-baniyas>

40 “RPT-Abandoning discretion, Iranians proclaim their role in Syrian war”, 22 September 2016. Retrieved 13 October. <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iran-syria-idUSL8N1BX4W4>

The armed extremist organization “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”, known as ISIS, carried out extensive demographic engineering operations, adopted ethnic and religious cleansing, and committed grave crimes including [the genocide against the Yazidis](#).<sup>41</sup>

## Second: Demographic engineering tools

For the perpetrators of demographic engineering to implement their goals and complete their discriminatory plans against civilians, they must use multiple tools, most of which are violent and coercive, and are not directed at the population only, but also at their urban areas, to ensure that the previous population situation cannot be restored. Then they create and build a new situation appropriate to the ruling authority, concealing the crimes committed while implementing these plans.

Among the tools of demographic engineering in Syria:

### **Urbicide and forced displacement.**

The report adopts two main targets for implementing demographic engineering in Syria:

Urban centres, by urbicide.

Population, mainly by forced displacement.

Many scholars and monitors of war in Syria focus on studying destruction of residential areas and infrastructure as war crimes if civilian objects. One of the reasons for this focus, and the failure to address this destruction through the lens of urbicide and its effects on civilians now and in the future, could be that this term is not included in international law or authoritative sources. Nevertheless, this report gives special importance to urbicide, as a deliberate destruction of urban areas, for two reasons:

- Its significant impact in promoting forced displacement and ensuring that the previous conditions of the population cannot be restored. This makes forced displacement and urbicide the cornerstones of demographic engineering implemented by the Assad regime and the rest of the parties to the conflict in Syria.
- To expand on the concept of urbicide as a novel research concept, by detailing it and projecting it on the situation in Syria. Reconstruction or rebuilding following destruction on discriminatory grounds that violate property rights is the final necessary phase to conclude urbicide as part of the demographic engineering scheme in Syria.

---

41 “ISIS is committing genocide against the Yazidis”, 16 June 2016, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20113&LangID=E>

## Definition of Urbicide

Sharon Rotbard, a lecturer at the Academy of Bezalel, said in his book that the establishment of the city of Tel Aviv took place at the expense of Jaffa in 1948 when its people were expelled across the sea, who then numbered about 100 thousand people. Many of them drowned, and the English language invented a new word to describe this process, which is urbicide, meaning “urban extermination”<sup>42</sup>.

Urbicide has its origins in ancient Greek and is made up of: “Urbs” meaning city, and “caedere” meaning killing. Yet, to this day, neither the British Longman nor the American Merriam-Webster online dictionaries include this word, not even Microsoft Office, which underlines it with red as a misspelled word. The Oxford University-supported Lexico website defines urbicide as: “The destruction of a city or its character”<sup>43</sup>. While Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography defines it as:<sup>44</sup>

The destruction of whole cities or parts of the built environment for political and military ends. There are many examples of victorious armies destroying their enemy’s cities, for example, the Roman obliteration of Carthage in 146 bc. But many analysts argue that in recent decades cities have become a particular focal point for violence, part of the urbanization of war (Graham 2010). Examples include the targeting of specific buildings and districts by Serbian forces in Croatia and Bosnia during the 1990s war, the demolition of Palestinian neighbourhoods by Israeli forces, and the assault on Baghdad by the US military during the Iraq War.

This report defines urbicide as the widespread and systematic destruction of urban structures based on political, ethnic, or sectarian grounds, severing the population’s connection to their physical and cultural roots, and creating a new situation appropriate to the purposes and attitudes of the perpetrator state or controlling powers.

According to several sources, urbicide was first used by English writer Michael Moorcock in 1963, in his story “[Dead God’s Homecoming](#)”:<sup>45</sup>

Across a war-torn world rode Elric, his crimson eyes burning with a fierce anger at the sights of wanton destruction he witnessed. Although he had himself lived by his sword for many years and had committed acts of murder, robbery and urbicide, he disliked the senselessness of wars such as this, of men who killed one another for only the vaguest of reasons.

Then it was used as a term in the 1960s among opponents of urban restructuring in the United States, which included the destruction of residential areas for the purpose of urban development, and led to severe negative social effects, some of which were based on racist policies. Later, it was used to characterize the widespread and deliberate destruction of urban areas in the 1992-1995 Bosnian War.

---

42 White city, Black city: Architecture and war in Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Written by Sharon Rotbard and published in January 20th 2015

43 Urbicide (n), Lexico website, <https://www.lexico.com/>

44 Urbicide, Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=urbicide&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>

45 Moorcock, M. (1968). Stormbringer, (1st, p. 10). Mayflower science fantasy, University of Michigan.

Urbicide in Syria follows two main phases:

1. Destruction/demolition

Including by committing war crimes and violations of international law.

2. Rebuilding/Reconstruction.

Reconstruction may involve investors, national or foreign businesses or governments. Reconstruction after criminal destruction will create a new situation appropriate for the perpetrator. It will have a significant impact on future justice. Investors in this case will be complicit in sponsoring and covering up war crimes by concealing evidence. This will also manipulate historical truth and violate the rights of the victims.

## Urbicide and International Law

International law prohibits attacking civilian objects in international and non-international armed conflicts, with rare exceptions.

The rules of Customary International Law applicable in international and non-international armed conflicts define civilian objects as non-military objects. [Art. 52 of Protocol 1](#)<sup>46</sup> of Geneva Conventions states that military objects are:

Those objects which by their nature, location, purpose, or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court listed [war crimes that are related to civilian objects](#), including:

Attacking or bombarding, by whatever means, towns, villages, dwellings or buildings which are undefended and which are not military objectives.

Extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly.

Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives.<sup>47</sup>

The ICRC gave examples of [prima facie civilian objects](#)<sup>48</sup> that included civilian areas, towns, cities, villages, residential areas, dwellings, buildings and houses and schools, civilian means of transportation, hospitals, medical establishments and medical units, historic monuments, places of worship and cultural property, and the natural environment, “provided, in the final analysis, they have not become military objectives.”

Based on the above, for the purpose of this report “civilian objects” in international law can be used to describe urban areas targeted by urbicide with practices that violate international

---

46 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977.

47 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Art. 8. 2,b, iv, v, ix.

48 Customary International Humanitarian Law, rule 9, definition of civilian objects.

laws, so that international laws apply in international and non-international armed conflicts to uricide in Syria.

## Forced displacement

UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency and International Organization for Migrations define forced displacement as it occurs when:

Persons or groups who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, either across an international border or within a State, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.

## Forced displacement in international law

International law prohibits any form of forced displacement, and there are only a few exceptions to this rule:

[Protocol II](#)<sup>49</sup> of Geneva Conventions on the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts prohibits displacement of the civilian population. The United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross classify the conflict in Syria as a non-international armed conflict, so the laws of war relating to this type of conflict apply.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court states that “forced displacement of the persons concerned by expulsion or other coercive acts from the area in which they are lawfully present, without grounds permitted under international law” constitutes a crime against humanity, and a that “ordering the displacement of the civilian population for reasons related to the conflict, unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand” is a war crime. The criminalization of forced displacement was also mentioned in the literature of the Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as a crime against humanity.

In non-war related situations, states use displacement to consolidate or impose control over conflict areas, or weakly controlled areas under demographic engineering schemes.

In our research, we argue that even in the rare cases of military necessity mentioned in international law forced displacement must be temporary and respect property rights, and if these two conditions are not respected, forced displacement in the rare and necessary cases turn into a crime. Military necessity does not justify exploiting the resulting situation after the population transfer, in violation of their rights. Demolitions without providing legal options that take into account circumstances and property rights violate international humanitarian law. Such practices and violations contradicts the conflict parties allegations of military necessity, and turn in into a scheme of demographic engineering.

---

49 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II)

Forced displacement is not limited to direct practices such as ordering residents to leave or displacement agreements, placing residents in means of transportation and deporting them, but includes, by definition, actions that force people to move out of fear for their lives or an attempt to avoid the effects of war. For example, targeting infrastructure can be one of the causes of forced displacement, including hospitals and health centres, and thus a war crime of forced displacement by leaving only one choice for civilians: to leave their areas, [as explained eloquently in the report](#), “No Choice: Attacks on Health as a Driver of Forced Displacement in Syria” by Georgetown University:

The Syrian government and its allies have directed and carried out attacks on health care since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. These attacks have caused the health system to fail, making it difficult or impossible to access basic medical care. As a result, the Syrians had no choice but to flee. Syrians have left their homes and country due to their inability to access health care, in whole or in part.<sup>50</sup>

## Chapter II :Demographic Engineering in Syria Before2011

### First: The Syrian Jazira Region: A History of Demographic Engineering

In the 1920s, Kurdish waves crossed into Syrian through the new Turkish Syrian borders drawn by the colonial powers. After The Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, and the defeat of the Dersim rebellion in 1938, large numbers of Turkish Kurds were displaced because of the Turkish crackdown and violence. Although their displacement was temporary, waiting for the war to end so that they would return to the revolution again, especially since entire clans with their leaders moved to Syria to continue the resistance and then return, the Kurdish labor force that moved to work in cotton cultivation settled in the Jazira (northeastern Syria) plains. Though Damascus government was not comfortable with this emigration and became more sensitive to it with the spread of calls for Arab nationalism, the governments of President Taj al-Din al-Hassani did not take any measures to stop this emigration.

In the absence of statistics or specific numbers about the Kurds who came from Turkey and their ratio to the Kurds in Syria, and in the absence of any official efforts to deal with it, the Kurdish migration has turned into a material for political and media exploitation that was used as a pretext to employ demographic engineering against them, and to implement policies of deprivation and isolation later, including by the Arab Belt scheme.

In the 1950s, the rhetoric against the Kurdish migration, remained as a space for political exploitation. Syrian president Adib al-Shishakli issued a decree in 1952 prohibiting the

---

50 “No choice attacks on health as a driver of forced displacement in Syria”, May 2021, Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute, [https://www.law.georgetown.edu/human-rights-institute/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/06/No-Choice-Report\\_web.pdf](https://www.law.georgetown.edu/human-rights-institute/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/06/No-Choice-Report_web.pdf)

registration of border lands under unreal names - the Kurds - without the approval of the Presidency to prevent them from ownership. Al-Shishakli accepted -within the framework of his policy to reduce the influence of minorities in the Syrian army- raised the number of army personnel after the 1948 Palestinian exodus and the establishment of the Israeli state, from 7000 to 30-35 thousand. Hundreds up to thousands of Kurdish soldiers, with false identities and pseudonyms, joined them with the knowledge and consent of the leadership.

## The Syrian Jazira Region after 1950s

After the demographic change in the first half of the last century, its second half was the time when a new definition of the Syrian state for the first time was included in the interim constitution of 1961. It was called the **Syrian Arab Republic**, which was a harbinger of ethnic exclusion for all non-Arab Syrians. It was also the time when demographic engineering policies escalated, including through Al-Hasakah census in 1962 and the transfer of Arabs in the **1970s**.

## Al-Hasakah exceptional census

Before talking about the exceptional census, it is necessary to discuss the position of the Kurds on the union between Syria and Egypt in 1958, which helped shaping the attitudes of the Kurds later and deepened their need to separate from the environment that seemed to have presented Arabism over citizenship. The Iraqi Kurdish leaders took a position in support of President Gamal Abdel Nasser after the nationalization of the Canal Suez in 1956. Mullah Mustafa Barzani declared his full support for the nationalization of the Suez Canal from his exile in Moscow. The Kurds took out to the streets in supportive demonstrations in the cities of Iraqi Kurdistan, in contradiction to the position of Nuri al-Said Iraqi government, which was fully loyal to the United Kingdom and the Baghdad Pact. Cairo launched a Kurdish-language radio in 1957, "Voice of Free Iraq", in which Iraqi and Syrian Kurds worked.

In Syria, and according to Nasser's openness to the Kurdish issue, the Syrian Kurds did not take a unified position on the union. Three Kurdish position can be observed. Kurds living in the cities supported the union based on attitudes against "the West" and the general cultural and social climate. As for feudal and wealthy Kurdish families who had fears of nationalization laws did not show a position rejecting the union due to the general climate, nor did they show enthusiasm for it. As for the partisan group that made up a significant proportion of the Kurdish community, it followed the directions of the Syrian Communist Party, whose Secretary General Khaled Bakdash was absent from the parliament session on 5/2/58 that approved the declaration of the union. Bakdash did not issue any statement in support of the establishment of the Kurdish Democratic Party, which was founded in June 1957 and whose political program was to defend the political, social and cultural rights of the Kurds, and which did not issue any explicit position rejecting the union, until 1961.

In the parliamentary elections on 5 September 1961, days before the secession of the union, the Democratic Party violated the parliamentary electoral tradition that has continued since the era of the French mandate. The Party presented a more independent list headed by Nouredine Zaza, whose members refused the military intelligence request to withdraw

their candidacy, so a campaign of arrests began against a large number of party members and Kurdish leaders. This was a pivotal moment in the modern history of the Kurds and reinforced the position of the party wing that was demanding the unity of Kurdistan, and became the “Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria”. A few days later, on 28 September, the Syrian Egyptian union ended and Syria was called the Syrian Arab Republic.

In 1962, Syrian president Nazim al-Qudsi and the government of Khaled Al-Azm, under the supervision of Saeed al-Sayed, the governor of al-Hasakah, who described himself as an extremist Arab nationalist, approved conducting an exceptional census for the city of al-Hasakah. Despite the uncertainty of the motive behind the census, some saw it as related to the oil boom in the Arab region and the discovery of oil in Jazira, which created a conviction among politicians that Syria is destined to become an oil-producing country and that the infiltration of Turkish Kurds into Syria is a conspiracy aimed at settling some non-Arab groups within the supposed oil triangle. Others saw the census as a gift from president Qudsi to the Arab nationalist movement, which has long accused him of isolationism and hostility towards the union.

Whatever the justifications for the census, if it was abandoned and the Kurds were accepted as citizens, who chose to live in the region regardless of their other sub- or original identities, like the grandparents of the Qudsi President coming from the Saudi Hijaz or the grandparents of president Al-Azm from Turkey, this would have saved Syrians burdens which later generations paid the price for, and would have saved the Kurdish citizens from unbearable torments.

The census decision issued by the government of Bashir Al-Azma, which was implemented by the government of Khaled Al-Azm, was made on the basis that Syrians are only those who were registered in the civil registry before 1945, and that every registration after this date was considered a forgery, which led to the expunging of 27.5% of Jazira registered population from the civil registry records, which was 309,279 people, who constituted about 53% of the Kurds in the Syrian Jazira.

## Yazidis

One of the most vulnerable religious minorities in the world, the genocide of the Yazidis did not begin at the hands of ISIS-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, but was preceded by the practices of the ruling Baath Party in Syria, by excluding them and stripping them of their citizenship rights, seizing their property, them and depriving them of education and citizenship and their basic rights, and changing their independent religious identity by registering them as Muslims, in practices that amount to cultural genocide.

In addition to the Kurds who were expelled from the citizenship by the census, Yazidis were often ignored, and were subjected to the same exclusion policies that restricted freedom of movement and travel for some of them, after they were merged with the Kurds who were not qualified to hold citizenship and were considered to be unregistered or foreigners in al-Hasaka. The Baath government also seized their agricultural lands, their main source of income, and later populated them by Arabs. Their areas were devoid of any development or industrial projects. Some believe that the strictness of the Yazidi clergy in preventing the education of the followers of the sect was responsible for depriving them of registration in civil records, career and political hierarchy, entering parliament and representing one of the Syrian ethnicities, considering education the only way to break through its monopoly of

influential leaders and families.

Although freedom of belief is guaranteed in the Syrian constitutions, the political climate that marginalized the non-urban groups first, then the Baath governments that marginalized everyone else, and did not seek to create legal frameworks that protect the most vulnerable minorities, Yazidis were left to the mercy of social and religious custom, which continued to exclude them from public life and with security and authoritarian justifications, they were deprived of practicing their own religious rituals. The hostility between the Baath governments in Iraq and Syria also prevented the Yazidis from traveling to Iraq to perform the pilgrimage to Lalish temple near Mosul or to visit the spiritual council of the sect.

Despite they have their own provisions and laws of marriage, they were forced to follow the provisions of Islamic Sharia in personal status law and were prevented from including their religion in the civil registry. Rather, many their children were registered as Muslims. In 1993, the first Sharia judge in al-Hasakah, Abdullah al-Urfi, issued a decision banning their testimony before courts, considering that they do not follow Abrahamic religions, and here forms of marginalization intersected to pour into demographic engineering and put the group on the brink of extinction, even before the genocide by ISIS.

## The Arab Belt :Displacement of Kurds and Arabs

The Arab Belt is a demographic engineering project implemented by the ruling “Arab Socialist Baath Party” in Syria, through phases, to change the ethnic composition in the border province of al-Hasaka with Turkey and Iraq. The project mainly targeted the Kurds.

In 1963, [a study](#)<sup>51</sup> by Muhammad Talab Hilal, a Syrian government official, explicitly suggested re-engineering the demography of the border areas with Turkey and Iraq, in which he spoke of the need to find a “final solution” to the “Kurdish problem” and dedicate the nation to issues of Arab nationalism, stating that: “The state displaces the Kurds into the interior, and houses Arab and nationalist elements...because they are 100 percent nationally guaranteed.” The practice of demographic engineering is not limited to physically relocating populations, but rather to forcing their displacement using other means. This was evident in Hilal’s study, where he presented proposals to make life impossible for the Kurdish population and force them to migrate from the borders to the interior, by means including economic strangulation, banning from education, and propaganda campaigns against them, “to put them in unstable conditions and force them to emigrate.”

---

51 Hilal, M. A study on Jazira Governorate. Wekhevi. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://wekhevi.wordpress.com/2009/06/22/%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%86%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%AF/>

## Second :legalizing demographic engineering

Hilal's study included proposals that needed legal grounds for implementation. A year after the study was issued, Decree No. 136 of 1964 was issued, granting the Minister of Interior the authority to define border lands. He considered al-Hasaka governorate and the areas on the Turkish border at a depth of 25 kilometres as security areas in which the establishment, transfer or modification of any right in kind, or lease, or the establishment of companies, or contracting for agricultural investment for a period of more than 3 years are not allowed without a license from the Minister of Interior. On the proposal of the Minister of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, after the approval of the Minister of Defense. The maximum agricultural ownership was lowered from what was in effect in the 1958 law, and the operations of appropriation and distribution began throughout Syria. This decree seemed to codify a proposal for one of the items in Hilal's study:

Closing the door of work: We must also contribute to the plan by closing the doors of work to the Kurds, so as to make them in a situation, firstly unable to move, and secondly in an unstable situation ready to leave at any moment, and this must be taken by the agrarian reform, first in Jazira: that the Kurds do not rent, and the Arab elements are many and abundant.

After that, political recommendations and implementation instructions followed.

In September 1966, the ruling Baath Party issued several recommendations such as "working to fix the existing imbalance in the population distribution in the country in order to achieve agricultural production, the economy and national security in general" and "reconsidering the ownership of lands located on the Syrian-Turkish border, at a length of 350 km and a depth of 10 - 15 km, considering it the property of the state, and applying appropriate investment regulations to achieve state security."

To implement the seizures, Law No. 145 of 1966 was legislated and committees were formed to approve the seizure reports in the governorates, after the merger of the Ministries of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. Appealing claims of confiscation, appropriation and customary confiscation and did not recognize the previous property documents and the Ottoman documents that prove the families' ownership on the border strip. The largest proportion of landlords whose lands were seized were Kurds, then Christian Assyrians and Chaldeans, as well as some Arabs.

In contravention of the Agrarian Reform Law, which gives the owner the right to determine the location of the land that will be kept for him and his family, the procedures for sorting, sparing and grouping, i.e. confining the lands of the seizure in one area, forced the owners to surrender their lands and move deep south without the right to choose. Small property that did not exceed the maximum ownership allowed and not included by agrarian were seized. The land was not distributed to the farmers at the time but was handed over to a newly created body called "the State Farms" for distribution to the Arabs whose villages were flooded by the Euphrates Dam construction in the mid-seventies.

The Arab Belt scheme continued. With the start of filling the Euphrates Dam lake in June 1974, the ruling Baath Party issued Resolution No. 521 to bring in those whose land had been flooded from the governorates of Raqqa and Aleppo and to settle them in 35 residential communities along the Syrian-Turkish border. The displaced were granted agricultural areas depending on the rainfall rate. The compensation did not take into account the size of the previous properties in the flooded lands, so the lands were distributed equally among the displaced, except for a few tribes Sheiks who were granted larger properties than others in

order to guarantee their agreement.

The lands that were seized in the governorates of Aleppo and Raqqa were distributed by the Euphrates Basin Foundation to its employees and some members of the ruling Baath party, instead of giving it to the people who were forced to move away from their villages under deprivation of compensation. The government did not only replace them, but also moved their civil registry records to al-Hasakah Governorate records.

Determining flood lands and deporting the people by the security forces in anticipation of some protesting or refusal to leave, included arbitrary measures such as the immediate closure of schools, confiscation of water pumping generators and agricultural equipment, and confiscation of many lands that were not covered by flooding as well. To complete the transfer process and taking into account the tribal structure, the government made a number of promises to the people that included, in addition to compensation for the lands, paying the costs of transportation and deportation operations, limiting the mandatory military service to the tribesmen within al-Hasakah Governorate, and transferring them to what were called at the time “model villages,” which later turned out to be cement bricks covered with tin roofs.

The length of the Arab Belt reached 275 km, with a depth of 15 km at its maximum point. 3000 families were transferred to it, forced to migrate, and settle. As a result of the government’s reneging on its promises and duty in terms of services, transportation, and necessary facilities and infrastructure, these groups lived decades of exclusion and social stigmatization, and they were called settlers and occupiers living in closed and exiled environments within the already marginalized Jazira region.

## Third: An overview of the societal structural transformations in Syria

In the context of monitoring the subsequent demographic changes, it was necessary to review the demographic landscape in the governorates in view of their centers, and the changes that affected their populations from the Baath Party coup d’état in 1963 until the revolution in 2011.

The demographic exception that the Syrian Jazira experienced during the past century does not apply to all of Syria. The country, after the Baath Party coup, was subject to societal structural changes that were not as sharp as in the Jazira region. The migration of rural people to the cities formed the path of the escalating demographic change since 1970, which is largely due to the government’s policies aimed at strengthening the bonds of power by dismantling the demographic structure of Syria and abolishing the natural civil ties between its people by removing entire societies, stripping them from their historical environment, and preventing them from integrating into the city, by keeping them in squatter settlements. According to figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria in 2007, 50% of the total housing in Syria was squatter settlements, 45% of the population of Damascus resided in “illegal areas,” as well as 35% of the population of Aleppo and 42% of the population of Homs. According to statistics published in the draft national housing strategy by the United Nations Human Settlements Program, squatter settlement areas in Syria increased by 220 percent between 1994 and 2010, so that 44% of the population of Syria in 2011 was distributed in the governorates of Damascus, Damascus Countryside and Aleppo, whose area do not exceed 20 percent of the county. This led to a severe depletion of resources, especially water.

While 17% of the total population resides in three governorates with an area of about 41%, namely Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor and Hasaka, which in turn suffered severe development neglect and higher rates of unemployment, which were compounded by droughts, and turned into an environment that expelled the population. As for Tartous and Lattakia, which together constitute only about 2.2% of the total area, they retained 9% of the population without real development plans.

## Hama

The commercial center in the Assi River Basin, which was economically dependent on real estate rents, where Hama families owned large areas of al-Ghab Plain and the Asi River Basin, and on dominance in of pastoral business by owning and marketing animal products, before dismantling the traditional structure through agrarian reform in Syria since 1958. In 1982, during the government's conflict with the "Muslim Brotherhood" and during 27 days in February 1982, the city of Hama was subjected to the biggest change in its history. The Syrian Human Rights Committee estimated the number of those who were killed between 30,000 and 40,000, the vast majority of whom were civilians. Reports indicated the disappearance of between 10,000 and 15,000 civilians, and about 100,000 people were forced to flee the city after a third of its neighborhoods was completely destroyed. The old city and its walls and streets, the Azem Palace Museum and the ancient archaeological scenes were razed to the ground. In addition, entire families migrated out of Syria permanently to escape repression and death sentences.

## Homs

The city expanded with the establishment of the oil refinery on its borders in the 1950s, and continued to expand during the subsequent decades, and its expansion included the surrounding villages, such as Deir Baalba and Baba Amr. Squatter settlements expanded on an area estimated at 1000 hectares in 1989. It also received migration from Alawite villages. So that the Alawite population increased in Homs city from zero after the independence of Syria in 1946 to 25% of the population with the beginning of the revolution in 2011. The city included a sectarian division: Alawite neighborhoods such as Ikrima, Al-Nuzha and Al-Zahra, Christian neighborhoods in Al-Hamidiyah and Sunni neighborhoods such as Baba Amr, Bab Al-Seba, Al-Khalidiya, Asherah, Karm Al-Zaytoun, Al-Rifai, Al-Bayada, Al-Sabil, Wadi Al-Arab and Al-Sultania, in addition to the economic elite neighborhoods. The refusal to tamper with the city's demography was expressed in the protests starting from 18 March 2011 to denounce the governor of Homs, who has a long record of suspicious real estate seizures and sales and his project of "Homs Dream,"<sup>52</sup> in which the protestors saw a hidden agenda to change the demographic structure of the city. The demographic reality was also invested and consolidated by the government by exploiting the marginalized economic situation of the Alawite population, making them a major recruitment hub for pro-government militias. The division of the population also facilitated the task of the security services in igniting the sectarian discourse, and moving the conflict dynamics between the protest movement and the government into a conflict between social groups defined by the sect to a large extent.

---

52 Bishara, A. (2013) Syria-A Way of Suffering to Freedom (1<sup>st</sup>, pp.75, 352). Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Doha.

## Cities of the Syrian coast

Before Syria's independence in 1946, the cities of the Syrian coast, including Latakia, Tartus, Baniyas, and Jableh, were Sunni cities with some Christian populations. Its people worked in maritime trade, relying on the products of Aleppo and the agricultural interior areas. The surrounding mountains were mostly inhabited by Alawites who worked seasonally in agriculture in the plains of Homs and Hama. This was different in the early seventies, and these cities were subject to a major demographic shift after 1970, where the rural Alawites became the majority, due to the policies of economic modernization. Alawites figures assumed leadership positions in the army, security forces and state establishments, which prompted many rural people to leave their villages and head to cities to work in the public sector. Waves of displacement targeted the outskirts of the city centre. Gradually, these settlements became part of the urban fabric, and these profound demographic shifts reinforced tensions between the urban population of Sunnis and Christians on the one hand, and Alawites on the other.

The number of Alawites in Latakia city rose from 10 percent of its population in 1945 to more than 50 percent at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The percentage rose in Tartous from 30 to 80 percent, and in Baniyas from less than 10 percent to about 60 percent. In addition to their numbers, groups of Alawites from Turkey and northern Lebanon were granted citizenship through al-Murtada Association, which was run by Jamil al-Assad, brother of former President Hafez al-Assad.

The port of Latakia joint-stock company, and the ambitious project in the 1950s, provide a clear picture of the impact of the political and economic decisions on the composition of the population. After 1970, the policy of militarizing the port began by appointing graduates of the Naval Military College in the company administration, without having work experience in the civil and commercial maritime transport sector. The new administration began to fire Sunni workers from Lattakia, Tartous, and Arwad Island, and replace them with Alawite farmers from the mountains who were inexperienced. Appointments were made based on their Alawite sectarian affiliation not their work experience. This led to the deterioration of the port's management and performance, on the one hand, and the complete change of the area's residents, even before issuing Decree No. 17 in 1982, for the state to own all private sector shares in the port company. Those shares were fully taken over by members of the Assad family who did not immigrate with him to Damascus. The port turned into an outlet for illegal business, smuggling and extortion of importers.<sup>53</sup>

## Aleppo

The industrial and economic capital of Syria. The demographic landscape of Aleppo was divided, with the economic elite residing in the west, while the eastern neighborhoods were less fortunate even in basic services. Despite the expansion of the largest city in Syria and the migration of rural population to it, it was not subject to demographic changes such as those that impacted Damascus and the cities of the Syrian coast.

---

53 Patato, H. (2014) Syrian Peasants. Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Doha.

## Idlib

The stronghold of the Nasserists who followed a nationalist socialist political ideology based on the thought of the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1950s-60s. Idlib expressed its rejection of Hafez al-Assad's rule from its early days and later became a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. Idlib was subject to severe demographic changes like other Syrian cities. The Syrian government punished the border province with Turkey, which is supposed to be Syria's gateway to Europe, with policies of isolation and marginalization even from international roads that were built about 20 km away from it. Idlib city was also excluded from the Syrian social development plan, development projects or even investment, as the city did not constitute an element of attraction even for the people of the nearby countryside.

## As-Suwayda

The southwestern city remained immune to demographic change, due to its centrality to the Druze religious community, and their vast majority in it. The city has a Christian minority and a smaller percentage of Sunnis. The social cohesion and the position of the local and religious leadership managed- even in part- to resist the attempts of assimilation by the authority, which was not able to change the political and social structures, also due to the coherent sectarian identity, and the insistence on the national dimension in the sect's discourse and behaviour.

Therefore, the regime's successive governments have tended to marginalize and impoverish the governorate, which has not witnessed agricultural, industrial or tourism development for more than five decades. The regime also invested the historical sensitivity with the Bedouins residing east of As-Suwayda. The regime was keen not to enable their villages to develop and to disregard arming them. This was the regime means to keep the governorate under a security threat that doubles its need to protection from the authorities. Clashes between Druze and Bedouins were ignited several times, including in 2000 when the army intervened to suppress protests in the governorate against the attacks of the Bedouins, who were proven to have been pushed and supported by the intelligence and military security in the southern region.

As-Suwayda Governorate received the largest wave of displacement in its history, following the 2011 revolution, where it turned into a refuge hub for displaced people from many governorates. Their numbers exceeded three hundred thousand, most of which from Homs, Daraa, Damascus and Quneitra.

## The Occupied Golan

The Golan, which administratively belongs to the southwestern Quneitra governorate, was subjected to severe demographic changes in 1967, when it was occupied by Israel. The majority of the population were displaced. Only 10,000 remained out of 145,000, and were displaced to Damascus and its countryside, Daraa and Homs, after the occupation forces demolished no less than 110 villages, and left five towns: the Alawite Ghajar, and the Durzi

Majdal Shams, Buqaata, Ain Qinya, and Masade.

To complete the chapters of the occupation the Knesset decided to annex the Golan in 1981 and to encourage settlement in Katzrin settlement and the surrounding villages. On March 25, 2019, the US administration recognized Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Golan. Despite the lack of direct legal effect of the decision contrary to international legitimacy.

## Damascus ,the Syrian capital

Damascus, which had a population of 300,000 in 1945 and 800,000 in 1970, underwent a population explosion, where it doubled to 3 million in 1980, due to the influx of refugees from Palestine, in addition to the displaced people from the Golan Heights. However, the biggest increase was due to the migration of rural people to the city. The city began to expand in the orchards of Ghouta of Damascus and the Mezzeh hills. Unable to be accommodated in the city, the newcomers settled in unauthorized huts at the entrances to the city and on the slopes of Mount Qasioun. In the mid-1980s, eight districts turned into slums with a population of one million. The government recognized the irregular residents as permanent residents and provided them with electricity and water to their areas.<sup>54</sup>

The random expansion of the population was a social bribe to the newcomers. Where the government provided them with housing and clean water that did not meet the minimum required internationally as a grant from the government, to deepen control over citizens, and to suggest that their basic rights are linked to the extent of their subordination and loyalty to it, which came as part of a decision not to implement housing projects, and to ignore the expansion of slums in the capital. In 1980, in conjunction with the expansion of slums in Damascus and the transformation of its historical palaces into schools, warehouses or abandoned buildings, the construction of the largest presidential palace in the country's history began on the highest area west of the city and on an area of 31,500 square meters, with a cost estimated at one billion dollars, which was enough in 1980 to build thousands of housing units to maintain the city.

## Squatter settlements

Since the 1980s, signs of military demographic engineering have emerged that closed the city of Damascus to areas and mini-communities, some with sectarian and other economic identity. This led to the social fragmentation of the city. The city expanded as a military base, surrounded civilian groups. Military and Baath party neighborhoods, suburbs, and housing were expanded and established penetrating the urban and population fabric of the city, encircling it and controlling its entrances and exits. Baath Party and security establishments were created, and security fortifications, facilities, observation points, and guard headquarters in hospitals, police stations, intelligence services headquarters, "revolutionary youth" camps, and others were created.

The vicinity of Damascus city alone included about 18 squatter settlements, some of which contain majorities from specific groups, where Christians are concentrated in al-Duwayla and

---

54 Seale, P. (1989) *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*. University of California Press.

Tabbala, the Alawites in Mazze 86, Ish al-Warwar and Hay al-Wurud, while the Sunni majority is concentrated in the areas of Jobar, Barzeh al-Balad, Basateen al-Mazze, and Kafr Sousa al-Lwan, Al-Dahadeel, Bayader Nader, Nahr Aisha, and in the neighborhoods of Al-Qadam Al-Asali, and Daf eshShouk and AzZohour. The Kurds were concentrated in in the slums of Jabal Al-Raz/Zurafa neighborhood, on the edge of Mashrouaa Dumar, while Al-Tadamon slum were inhabited by religious, sectarian and national mixture of Sunnis, Alawites and Druze, in addition to Palestinian refugees.

While slums and poor areas usually form the backbone of protests and anti-government movements, some of them formed the first lines of defense for the regime and the human reservoir for the auxiliary forces at the time of the revolution. This was the result of what was planted in the previous decades, to secure the capital with squatter settlements, such as the Mezzeh 86 neighborhood or Ish al-Warwar, which has an Alawite majority that settled in Damascus, and whose [number of its population](#)<sup>55</sup> rose from only 300 in 1947 to more than 500,000 before the revolution. The slums that carried the pulse of the people and were protest centers in 2011 were destined to be displaced and their homes to be razed to the ground, including Al-Tadamon, Al-Qaboun and Basateen Al-Mazze.

## Al-Mazze: Basateen Al-Razi in Mezzeh

The policies of displacement and replacement are clear, by harnessing the law, administrative decisions and economic reality to change the demographics of the region. In 2012, Decree No. 66 was issued to categorize Basateen Al-Mezze area and other areas in Damascus as random housing areas that must be reorganized. This was an old plan that the government was unable to implement, and it waited until 2012. It also seemed to be a punishment for the neighborhood for the peaceful movement against the government and to complement the Iranian embassy's attempts to expropriate the neighborhood after deducting a large area of its land as a gift to Iran to build its new embassy.

The organizational plans were also characterized by sectarian discrimination. Several slums with a majority of Alawite with random housing and squatter settlements more than Basateen Al-Mezze, such as Mezzeh 86, Ush Al-Warwar, and Al-Sumeria. Those Alawite squatter settlements were not categorized in any organizational plan and its people did not face the risk of homelessness and loss of shelter. The regime foreign allies also received rewards for their support as well, including by Damascus governorate handing "the 66 Project" to Iranian companies.

The Iranian embassy, which is located on the Mezzeh highway on the outskirts of Basateen neighborhood, had an extraordinary activity. It took control of many lands in the area, the largest of which was the land facing the College of Medicine, and constructed a huge building surrounded by an area of twenty acres. The Embassy also took control of Zahra Mosque in the old Mezzeh, also near the embassy, and bought the land surrounding it from the government. The Iranians' ownership in Mezzeh is not limited to the Iranian government, but it also included businessmen who benefited from the services of banks linked to the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, such as Ansar Bank and Mehr Financial Corporation, which provides facilities and loans to anyone who wants to buy real estate in Syria.

---

55 "Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete", 8 September 2016, Hanin Ghaddar, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-useful-syria-practically-complete>

Neighborhood residents were subject to following restrictive procedures:

- In addition to raising the free deduction ceiling set by the administrative units to secure basic services “roads, gardens and parking lots”, in return for the benefit that the property owner will receive for including his/her property into the regulation area, Decree No. 66 abolished the compulsory distribution, and put the owners in front of the option of allotment in units, or contributing to the establishment of a joint stock company in accordance with the Companies Law, or the option to sell by public auction. Considering that most of the properties in the area are small and not sufficient for allotment, and due to the difficulty of contributing to the establishment of a company, most of the owners resorted to auctioning, and were unable to return to live in this area.
- Despite the conditions of war and the approaching brink of complete economic collapse, the eviction and demolition continued, and the area was completely evacuated in 2017. No consideration was given to waiting for the end of the school year, or giving additional deadlines before eviction and demolition, as well as the difficulty of obtaining a house for rent in Damascus, which is overflowing with displaced people. In addition to the collapse of the Syrian currency and the rise in rent rates, Damascus Governorate cut off electricity and water from the area, to force people to leave.
- Despite 8 years have passed since the decree was passed, 150,000 residents of Mezzeh and Kafr Sousa are still without housing, waiting for alternative housing, although Decree 66 stipulates in Article 44 that those who are not eligible for alternative housing be granted a two-year rental compensation, while those who are eligible are compensated with an annual rent until they are handed over the alternative housing, to be paid within a month from the date of notification of the eviction warning. Most of the families who vacated their homes did not get enough rent to secure shelter during the implementation period due to the collapse of the Syrian pound and the massive inflation in the market.
- Clause “D” of Resolution No. 122 issued by the Syrian Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, annexed to Decree 66 to determine the mechanism for granting alternative housing, stipulates that the recipient of alternative housing must prove ownership in the period from the date of the decree’s issuance until eviction. However, Damascus Governorate added a condition for those who want to confirm their ownership by submitting a movement/departure statement, in order to prevent the establishment of the ownership of those who left the country from the regulated area, contrary to the text of the decision, which did not request actual occupancy of the property, but rather the proof of ownership.
- Although the alternative housing buildings must be located within the first area “Marota City”, according to Decree 66, in Articles 19 and 20, Damascus Governorate transferred the alternative housing from the regulatory area “Marota City” to “Basilia City” on October 11, 2019, which It means moving the housing site from an area 3 km from the city center to its outskirts and removing the original Mezzeh residents from their areas.

## Al-Ikhlas neighborhood

Al-Basateen area, which has been expropriated since 1985 for the construction of the new “People’s Assembly” building, remained outside the provisions of Decree 66 and its residents were deprived of compensation, despite the expropriation taking place on their properties. In 2001, the ownership of the expropriated lands was transferred to the People’s Assembly pursuant to Resolution No. 2973 issued by the real estate department in Damascus on October 17, 2001. Five years later, the People’s Assembly issued regulation No. 1868/S.D. to the Governor of Damascus, with the Council rescinding its transfer of its headquarters, and instead of restoring the property to its owners, those lands were transferred to the ownership of Damascus Governorate. Although the ownership is conditioned with the construction of the new People’s Assembly according to the deed of acquisition. That is, the council does not own the land before its reconstruction and has no right to relinquish it, and expropriation Law No. 35 of 1985 should be considered void based on the People’s Assembly abandoning the expropriated area and transferring its ownership to the governorate.

## Al Tadamon neighborhood

Al-Tadamon neighborhood is located in the southeast of Damascus, and it is considered the southern gateway to the capital separating the city from its countryside. The population of Al-Tadamon before the beginning of the peaceful movement was about 250,000, most of whom were Arabs and Turkmen displaced by Israel from Golan in June 1967. Al-Tadamon also hosted residents from the governorates of As-Suwayda, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, Daraa, Latakia and Tartous, and many Palestinian refugees.

The opposition armed groups managed to control the southern areas in the neighborhood in 2012, and with the expansion of the battles, its population decreased to 65,000. After the government forces took control of the neighborhood in 2018, a committee was assigned from Damascus Governorate to survey the damage and determine the habitable houses out of 25,000 houses. The majority of them were deemed inhabitable, according to the committee.

Despite the issuance of Decision No. 3191-2018 by Damascus Governorate to restore nine areas in the neighborhood in order for the people to return to, only a small number of people were able to return in September 2019. For return, the regime stipulated that the owner should not have any “security problem”, and should sign a pledge that includes obtaining a license to restore the property from Al-Mdan Municipality before carrying out any restoration process, and that the owner should remove the rubble within a maximum period of 60 days from the date of receiving the property. In addition to clearance certificates from financial, water, electricity, and telephone institutions and the governorate of Damascus. The owner of the property should reside in it or dispose it legally, whether selling or renting it, at his personal responsibility without any government agency bearing the responsibility for the construction safety of the property. The entire area was also subjected to reorganization in accordance with Law No. 10, bearing in mind that only ten percent of the properties in the neighborhood are regular, and the majority of the residents do not have title deeds registered in the real estate departments, but rather housing statements that enabled them to benefit from infrastructure services and pay taxes. Which means replacing the entire population structure of the neighborhood under Law No. 10.

## Jobar neighborhood

Jobar neighborhood in the northeast of Damascus, between the neighborhoods of Bab Touma, Al-Qasaa and Al-Tijaria in the west, Al-Qaboun in the north, the towns of Ain Tarma and Zamalka in the east, and the town of Ain Tarma and Al-Duwaila in the south. The neighborhood is seven km away from the Presidential Palace, and it is one of the closest neighborhoods to Abbasid Square in Damascus. According to official statistics in 2008, the population of the neighborhood was about three hundred thousand, most of whom were Sunni Muslims.<sup>56</sup> After the opposition armed groups took control of the neighborhood in mid-2013, it was subjected to daily aerial and artillery bombardment from Mount Qasioun to secure the capital and prevent any advance by the opposition forces. After the government forces regained control of the neighborhood in the summer of 2018, it became clear that the extent of destruction exceeded 80%, and that it had become a deserted area and inhabitable.

## Ish Al-warwar

Ish al-Warwar neighborhood is located at the foot of a rocky mountain northeast of Barzeh al-Balad neighborhood. It has a population of about 100,000 people, most of whom are Alawites. When the peaceful movement began in neighboring Qaboun and Barzeh al-Balad, the people of Ish al-Warwar supported the government, and attacked Barzeh al-Balad, armed with sticks, knives, pistols, and rifles to suppress the population.<sup>57</sup>

In 1975, the government took advantage of a murder that occurred in Barzeh neighborhood, when an army officer killed four residents of the neighborhood following a dispute in a café. The people protested and closed the entrances to the neighborhood. At that time, the army cordoned off the area and stormed the neighborhood. However, the regime felt the necessity of having a supportive population bloc in Barzeh.<sup>58</sup> So it began by bringing in Alawite families from the Syrian coast, and Hafez al-Assad granted them an elevated area called Ibrahim al-Khalil, in reference to the cenotaph located there. These families established slums that later became known as Ish Al-warwar. With the start of the popular movement, they turned into armed groups of people supporting the regime. With this, the government was able to plant a population mass within Barzeh neighborhood, which was composed of a tight-knit local community to a large extent.

## Mezzeh 86

MazzeH 86 is located west of Damascus. Until the 1970s, it was area of forests, rocks and agricultural lands owned by the people of Mezzeh. As for the top of the mountain that extends to the Qasioun mountain and the lands adjacent to it were owned by the Ministry of Defense. Rifaat al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad's brother, established the Defense Brigades, which

---

56 The organizational plans weapon is approaching regime loyalists in Damascus: protests against the government's decision to implement Law No. 10 in neighborhoods that participated in the war.

57 Ibid.

58 Ahmad Hamza: Arab Slums: Decades of Change Destroy Damascus. Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, <http://bit.ly/389k1vP>

he called the 86th Brigade, which was based in the same area that is now called Mazze 86. The 86<sup>th</sup> Brigade was initially allowed to build small rooms of brick and tin to house its officers and members, and over time, these soldiers brought their families from the Syrian coast. The area later became a residential area with a military character.

The population of the area in 2011 was about 300,000, while the head of the committee implementing Law No. 3 of 2018 stated that its population reached one million. The residents of Mezzeh 86 have sided with the government since the start of the peaceful protests in the Mezzeh Basateen area and the cities of Darayya and Moadamiya in the southwestern Damascus countryside, near the Mezzeh neighborhood. They formed militias to suppress protests in these neighborhoods and as a reward for Mezzeh 86 absolute loyalty to the regime, it was not included in Law No. 10.<sup>59</sup>

## Chapter III: Major Forced Displacement Incidents Since 2011

### Forced displacement by the Syrian regime

Most of the research and reporting on the Syrian regime bombardment and destruction of residential areas focuses on the use of indiscriminate bombardment as a systematic policy in the regime's war in cities and towns. And that it is mostly for military reasons related to achieving military victory, including through war crimes. With the aim of proving the systematic indiscriminate bombing policy as a basis for criminalizing the Syrian government for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

However, this proof and identification of the government's intent behind the mass destruction of civilian objects does not play the main role in proving the scheme of demographic engineering. The government's post-destructive policies toward devastated areas, including what it calls reconstruction, and what we explain in detail in this report as a continuation of urbicide, are the basis for proving that the Syrian government is committing demographic engineering to consolidate its control at the expense of the population.

Whether the main intention of the mass bombardment of cities and towns was to achieve military victory or was a part of a demographic engineering scheme, what the government does after the destruction is what determines the completion of the crime of demographic engineering. In both cases, the government has benefited and exploited the current situation resulting from the crimes of forced deportation to complete demographic engineering schemes, and therefore it is considered responsible for it, if it does not attempt to restore rights to their owners and put property rights as the basis for any construction and reconstruction operations.

---

59 The organizational plans weapon is approaching regime loyalists in Damascus: protests against the government's decision to implement Law No. 10 in neighborhoods that participated in the war.

## The government's policies after the destruction included:

- Linking legal procedures related to ownership with security approvals, which are often not granted to residents, and are granted based on the political attitude.
- Suspension of services to areas that were under opposition control, such as Daraya. See Daraya section.
- Contracting with Iranian companies to build private housing for their fighters who have not left Syria. See Daraya section.
- The acquisition by the army and governmental establishments of nearby properties. See Daraya and Wadi Barada
- Issuing decrees and laws that include short deadlines to prove ownership of land and real estate, which do not allow the original owners to implement them, for several reasons, including their displacement in the first place, their lack of presence in areas that allow them to take legal measures, and the predominance of security approvals. See Darya, Al-Qusayr.
- In addition to instructions for the confiscation and seizure of property of persons opposing the government or taking part in hostilities. The seizure instructions cover the property of spouses, children and relatives.

The President of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, has stated more than once in his public speeches, indicating his intentions and ideas regarding the population and the displaced.

In [his speech](#) to the heads and members of popular organizations, unions, and chambers of industry, commerce, agriculture and tourism of his regime, on July 26, 2015, he thanked Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite militias: "The forces with the army are the ones who are fighting.. They had an important role and effective performance, and we are grateful for their courage, strength and support for us." He added:

Gentlemen! The homeland is not for those who resides in it and not for those who holds its passport or nationality. The homeland is for those who defend and protect it, and the people who do not defend their homeland have no homeland and do not deserve to have a homeland.<sup>60</sup>

In [his speech](#) in August 2017, after talking about sectarian and federal schemes, al-Assad continued his speech:

I want us to understand that we are living in a non-separate stage, which is linked to the stages that preceded it several decades ago. We lost the best of our youth and an infrastructure that has cost us a lot of money and sweat for generations, right? But in return, we have won a healthier and more homogeneous society in the true sense, not in the structural sense or the compliments. This homogeneity is the basis of national unity, homogeneity of beliefs, homogeneity of ideas, traditions, customs, concepts, visions, despite their diversity and differences. Homogeneity does not mean congruence. Homogeneity means that they are complementary to each other, when they are integrated to form one national color. It is this one national color that

---

60 "President al-Assad: The battle is a battle of an integrated axis that represents an approach of independence and dignity" June 26, 2015, Syrian State News Agency, SANA. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <http://www.sana.sy/?p=245771>

forms the basis for the national unity of all the people of the one nation.<sup>61</sup>

Assad adopts the principle that the one national color is the one that supports him, and the rest should not be part of the Syrian society. The one national color is the one that spent money, blood and sweat to get rid of other colors. Rather, they are terrorists, as [he put it](#):<sup>62</sup> “There are only two components in Syria, the terrorists and the rest of the Syrians.”

Assad’s thoughts and attitudes toward the Syrian population are expressed in the words of journalist David Gardner in [his article](#)<sup>63</sup> in the Financial Times, that the Assad regime is trying to “ensure that The Assad regime is trying to ensure a Sunni-majority population cannot be recreated” through “violent demographic engineering”.

In a targeted demographic engineering scheme to seize the property of people and the relocation of the population, the forces affiliated with the Syrian government and the armed militias adopted the strategy of siege and collective punishment against the population as a means of war, under the pretext of fighting armed groups that it classifies as “terrorists” to justify the policy of besieging residential areas and indiscriminate bombing in various types of weapons and ammunition, depriving the population of necessary food and medical supplies, and preventing humanitarian aid organizations from reaching these areas.

The besieged areas were intentionally emptied of their residents, and through agreements with the armed opposition groups, which require the exit of the armed men with whomever civilians wish to other areas predetermined in the agreements. Most of the civilian population preferred to leave the besieged areas and to be displaced out of fear of reprisals and oppression by regime forces and leadership.

## Forced displacement in Homs city

According to opposition sources, the population of Homs decreased from 1.5 million before the beginning of the revolution to about 400,000 people today, after the displacement of about 65% of the city’s original population towards neighboring countries and opposition areas. The features of displacement began early, as the residential neighborhoods were bombarded by the Syrian government with mortars since the beginning of the peaceful protests in neighborhoods of Baba Amr, Jobar and Al-Sultaniya in January 2012, which led to the first waves of displacement. Nearly thirty thousand people were forced to leave. In February of the same year, al-Khalidiya neighborhood people were forced to flee due to the bombardment by the government army. This was followed by the displacement of the “Ashera neighborhood” east of the city, which was stormed by government forces and emptied of its residents, then the neighborhoods of Karm al-Zaytoun and al-Rifai, al-Bayada neighborhoods, Wadi al-Arab and al-Sabil neighborhood in the east north of the city, which were completely emptied of its residents. Al-Waer area was their first destination.

61 “The speech of the President during the opening of the conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates”, 20 August 2018. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. [موقع وزارة الخارجية والمغتربين- الجمهورية العربية السورية \(mofaex.gov.sy\)](#)

62 “President al-Assad: The battle is a battle of an integrated axis that represents an approach of independence and dignity” June 26, 2015, Syrian State News Agency, SANA. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <http://www.sana.sy/?p=245771>

63 “Syria is witnessing a violent demographic re-engineering”, 2 Oct 2019, David Gardner, The Financial Times. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www-ft-com.proxy.choate.edu/content/e40cb754-e456-11e9-b112-9624ec9edc59>

In May 2014, the last civilians left 13 neighborhoods in the heart and surroundings of the old city of Homs, after a siege that lasted about three years, during which old Homs was subjected to massive bombardment and almost complete destruction that pushed most of its people to seek refuge and displacement and ended with the conclusion of an agreement between the government and the opposition under Russian auspices. When opposition fighters departed to the northern countryside of Homs.



Road to Ruin. Syria, January 2017 Homs © Christian Werner/Zeitenspiegel

## Al-Waer neighbourhood

Displacement (truce) agreements were held in Al-Waer in 2015, 2016, 2017

**Perpetrator:** government army and intelligence forces, militias affiliated with the Syrian government, Shiite Hezbollah.

Those involved in setting and supervising the agreements: the Russian military police, the representative of the United Nations mission in Syria, Yaqoub El-Helou, and a representative of the office of the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura in Damascus

**Displaced:** Sunni Muslims

Al-Waer neighbourhood is adjacent to several military areas, including the Infantry College, the War College, the Military Sports College, the Air Defense College, the Military Information College from the north and east, and farms where pro-government forces are stationed from the south, and from the west villages loyal to the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah near Homs oil refinery. In the middle of 2013, a sign reading “hunger or kneeling” was raised at the entrance

to the neighborhood near the Mazraa roundabout. The neighborhood was completely closed and food, medicine, baby milk and other life necessities were blocked. Government forces kept the entrance to the neighborhood open in one direction for those wishing to leave only and without returning. Then the repeated shelling and powercuts began throughout the winter of 2014, which led to an additional wave of displacement.

In 2015, 150,000 residents of the neighborhood were at subject to continuous and successive air strikes, artillery shells and high-explosive missiles, that lasted for several months with the ban of food and medical supplies, which prompted more residents to leave. In December 2015, a truce agreement was reached between the Syrian government and the opposition under the auspices of the United Nations, which included the deportation of 2,000 fighters and civilians from the Al-Waer neighborhood to the opposition-controlled areas in Idlib countryside, in exchange for lifting the siege and allowing relief aid, in addition to settling the conditions of the fighters wishing to surrender their weapons.

The government bombed the neighborhood again, and in early September 2016, the two sides agreed again to stop the government's bombing of the besieged neighborhood, and reveal the fate of more than seven thousand detainees whose names the opposition had submitted, in return for re-instatement of the agreement concluded in 2015 under the auspices of the United Nations, which stipulated the exit of opposition fighters from the neighborhood in batches to northern Syria, within five phases.

The first phase: agreement on the exit of three hundred armed men, accompanied by their families, in a first batch from the Al-Waer neighborhood to the opposition-controlled areas in Idlib Governorate, northwest of the country.

The second phase: the government releases two hundred detained residents of al-Waer, and five hundred opposition fighters and their families leave for the opposition-controlled areas in Idlib.

The third phase: the government reveals the fate of detainees according to lists submitted by the negotiating committee, in exchange for the departure of three hundred opposition gunmen with their families.

Fourth phase: the opposition abandons government sites and establishments in the neighborhood, with the rest of the fighters leaving with their families.

The final phase: handing over the neighborhood to the Syrian government. On 11 March 2017, hundreds of families left the neighborhood, and a general committee composed of representatives of the "Al-Waer neighborhood committee - the security committee in Homs - the Russian side" to be formed to supervise the implementation of the agreement and deal with its violations.

# Forced Displacement and Urbicide Practices in Rural Damascus

## Siege and displacement of the people of Darayya

**The Perpetrator:** the government army and intelligence forces, Iranian and Iraqi Shiite militias, and the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah

**Displaced:** Sunni Muslims

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria described Darayya siege in [its paper](#)<sup>64</sup> in 2018, and included that the regime forces started the siege of Darayya in Ghouta (Rural Damascus) in November 2012, and cut water lines there in 2013, forcing residents to use unsanitary wells for hygiene and consumption. Often, out of necessity, doctors in Darayya were forced to practice outside of their fields of specialization. Residents described dependence on agricultural crops and a life without electricity until a local truce was reached in August 2015, followed by a complete “evacuation” of all residents.

Darayya is the largest city in Western Ghouta. As a result of urban expansion, it has become an extension of the southwest of the capital, Damascus, which included the neighborhoods revolting against the regime in 2011, including Al-Midan and Al-Qadam neighborhoods, and the cities of Moadamiya and Jdeidet Artouz. Darayya was included in Decree No. 66 of 2012, which stipulated the creation of two organizational areas within the Damascus governorate, provided that the second area includes: real estate areas, Qanaqat Basatin, Darayya and al-Qadam.

In addition to its close location to the capital, Darayya city showed the actual opposite of the government’s narrative about the opposition as terrorists. The city that presented flowers to the army and security forces at the surrounding checkpoints, and preserved the civil struggle and inclusive national discourse despite the years of exhausting siege and international silence. It was the city that used culture, education and imagination to counter its bombardment and violence by keeping a secret library with tens of thousands of books, as eloquently described in “[The Book Collectors](#)”<sup>65</sup> by Delphine Minoui. However, the people were forced to agree to an agreement to empty the city of its people and displace them to northern Syria in August 2016. Its local council, which was committed to electoral legitimacy, presented the most mature experience, run by civilians, and armed factions in the city did not interfere in its work. It continued to administer the city and sponsor civil activities until the last days of the siege.

Daraya was subjected to government army raids and bombardments, in which government forces used various types of weapons and ammunition, such as barrel bombs and incendiary weapons, and targeted vital facilities, including the only Daraya Hospital, setting it out of service. In November 2012, the government imposed a siege on about 7000 people in Darayya,

---

64 “Sieges as a weapon of war: Encircle, starve, surrender, evacuate”, 28 May 2018, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/PolicyPaperSieges\\_29May2018.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/PolicyPaperSieges_29May2018.pdf)

65 Minoui, D. (2020). *The Book Collectors: A Band of Syrian Rebels and the Stories That Carried Them Through a War*. Translated by Lara Vergnaud. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

after tens of thousands fled the military attacks and killings, some of which lasted for three days in August 2012, and was described by the “Independent International Commission of Inquiry” at the United Nations a massacre.

Tammam Jannah (Abu al-Khair), a sociologist, who worked during the siege of Darayya in the local council, and then in the administration department of the field hospital, said in his testimony to the Violations Documentation Center:

The largest massacre took place in Darayya on August 25, 2012, killing nearly 700 martyrs, after the security forces and accompanying militias stormed the city, and arrested more than a thousand civilians and many went missing. After that, the process of exhuming the bodies continued for 10 consecutive days from the orchards, basements and roads. All martyrs of the massacre were buried in mass graves. The army withdrew, leaving behind a devastated city left with the smell of blood for two weeks.

After a siege that lasted for four years, all residents of the city, between 2500-4000 people, were evacuated in August 26 and 27, 2016, based on a local agreement between the government and a committee representing civilians and fighters in Darayya, which ended with the displacement of the people to the north or to a government evacuation centers. The city then was left for looting of for two years, during which the government prevented its people from entering their city.

In his testimony about the agreement, Tammam Jannah said:

After Darayya was left alone, suffering from lack of everything, we had no choice but to leave. Negotiations took place with government representatives on the eastern side of the city, and it was agreed to complete the evacuation of the city after threatening to storm it if the agreement concluded in 2016, the anniversary of the Great Darayya massacre, August 25 was not executed. The next day, green buses entered to evacuate the residents, and the people and fighters began to pack their belongings. The first convoys of six buses began to move towards Idlib, and other buses headed to the city of Harjala in the western countryside of Damascus.

Four years after the displacement, the city of Darayya is still completely empty of residents. No one can enter it unless obtained a card from the municipality, by registering the name with the executive office of the municipality, and filling out a form that includes all the detailed information about the person, family members, in addition to the address and number of the property in Daryya. By presenting a family book or family statement and title deed, and then waiting for the names to be submitted to the National Security Office for security study and approval. Under the card, civilians are allowed to enter and then exit on the same day without being allowed to sleep there. Several measures taken by the government to prevent the return of people to Darayya:

- In April 2018, Law No. 10 was issued under the pretext of organizing and it was imposed on every Syrian who owns a property in the areas covered by the law, including Darayya, to prove ownership, whether directly or through the power of attorney of one of his relatives within thirty days from the date of the announcement of the reorganization plan, or the ownership of the property will be lost.
- The government prevented real estate sales in Darayya on the pretext that the physical inspection committees of the Damascus finance department were unable to access the area. Previous sales required a financial statement, and it is linked to the security approval that is not granted to the people of the city.

- Preventing the return of the more than 70,000 displaced people who left Darayya to Jdeidet Sahnaya, Al Kiswa, Taybeh, Kanaker, Zakia, Muqalibiya, Jaramana, shelters in Harjala in Damascus countryside, and Idlib governorate.
- Restricting basic facilities and services in an area of the city that has remained under the control of government forces since 2012, including Sheridi, Al-Nakashat, Al-Shamiyat, Al-Zaytouna Roundabout, the Corniche, Al-Baladiyah Street, Al-Thanawiya Al-Sharia Street, Al-Khawlani neighborhood and Al-Khaleej neighborhood, which have not been destroyed. The destroyed area that was under the control of the opposition was kept completely without services, including the western and southern neighborhoods, in addition to the area separating Moadamiya and Darayya.
- Bulldozing the properties north of the city and seizing the lands from the Mezzeh military airport to the entrance of the city from the southern highway "Al-Basel Roundabout" under the pretext that the area is a security area for the airport.
- The Iranian involvement was also clear under the pretext of protecting the shrine of «Sakina», which turned into a security square with a heavy presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah, amid media reports confirming contracts with Iranian companies to build housing complexes for the settlement of Iranian officers in the city.

## Siege and displacement of the people of Moadamiya

**Perpetrator:** Government army and intelligence forces, Iranian and Iraqi Shiite militias, and Hezbollah

**Supervision:** Russian Army

**Displaced:** Sunni Muslims

Moadamiya al-Sham, adjacent to Darayya, is in the middle of several military and pro-regime points, including the Mezzeh military airport and the Mashrou neighborhood from the east, and from the north the Moadamiya Mountains, in which the Fourth Division is deployed, in addition to Sumaryya neighborhood and Police housing. Only 12000 out of 32000 of its residents remained. They were subjected to a suffocating siege on the 25 November 2012, accompanied by bombing operations and preventing the arrival of relief aid and medical supplies.<sup>66</sup>

Nour Mukhayber from Moadamiya al-Sham - a member of Syrian Revolution General Commission and a member of the city's media center in his testimony to the Violations Documentation Center:

The siege of the city of Muadamiyat al-Sham began partially in August 2012 after government forces, Iraqi militias and Hezbollah stormed the city, and committed a massacre against by slaughtering people with knives, and by burning or field execution, in addition to the arrest of dozens of civilians. Then, the siege was implemented under the slogan "starve or kneel", and in fact everyone in the city refused to surrender,

66 Forgotten under siege: a special report on the Yarmouk camp in Damascus and the city of Moadhamiya in the Damascus countryside. Violations Documentation Center in Syria, September 2013, <https://bit.ly/3atrtDe>.

but due to the severity of the siege, everyone showed symptoms of malnutrition. On August 21, the city was bombed with chemical weapons, leaving more than 65 people dead and hundreds of injuries. After that, negotiations began that led to a truce in September 2013 after the death of more than 15 children and women due to starvation, and it was a prelude to the 2016 negotiations on the basis of which the displacement was carried out.

The negotiations between the delegation of Moadamiya, “the faction leaders and the head of the local council” and the government delegation took place mostly at the headquarters of the Fourth Division, which is located between the city and Damascus, and at the Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus. The negotiations were loaded with threats and intimidation by the army officers and the heads of the security branches. We cannot call it an agreement basically because it was imposed on the city under the threat of accepting it or “burning the city with its inhabitants” in light of the world’s indifference to what was happening.

As a result of the negotiations, the green buses entered to transport all those who refused the government’s entry to the city within the framework of the so-called “reconciliation”. Buses went to Idlib in the north of Syria on 19 October 2016, carrying 3000 people including media activists, fighters, males who wanted for military service and others.

## Forced displacement in Wadi Barada

**The Perpetrator:** the government army, intelligence and Hezbollah forces

**Displaced:** Sunni Muslims

The water security of the capital was present in the siege and displacement of “Wadi Barada”, which was under the control of the armed opposition, and contested for years for its symbolic and actual value to the residents of the capital, Damascus. The government forces and Iranian militias attacked it including by targeting its water pumps at the end of 2016 before reaching an agreement that stipulates that the opposition members and their families from leave Wadi Barada to Idlib, and the government controls the spring and the surrounding villages.

Wadi Barada is located in the northwestern countryside of Damascus, about 20 km away from the city center, with 14 villages: Jdeidet al-Shaibani - Ashrafieh al-Wadi - Bassimah - Ain al-Khadra - Ain al-Fijah - Deir Muqrin - Kafir al-Zayt - Deir Qanoon - Husseinieh - Souk Wadi Barada - Kafr Al-Awamid - Barhelia - Ifra - Huraira. The area of Wadi Barada has a strategic importance as it is surrounded by hills that overlook the capital, Damascus, in addition to the presence of the Ain al-Fijah spring. The villages of the valley are administratively affiliated to the Zabadani district in the Damascus countryside governorate.

Salem Nasrallah, head of the local council of the villages of Wadi Barada:

The demonstrations began in the villages of Wadi Barada at the beginning of the revolution and were faced with violence by the security forces and the army until the beginning of 2012, when the people were able to control most of the villages of the valley and expelled the security forces and the army from them and controlling the flow of spring water to Damascus city. The government forces tried to regain control of the valley several times, without success, using bombing and siege. In the end, it

was agreed between the people and the government to keep the al-Fijah spring under the control of the townspeople, who are employees of the spring's administration, and this remained the case for about three years.

Jamal al-Din, known as "Abu Muhammad al-Bardawi", a resident of the village of Ain al-Fijah, director of the media office in Wadi Barada and its spokesman:

From the fifties of the last century until 2011, the governments in Syria tried to expropriate the village of Ain al-Fijah. They tried to expel its people from their homes and lands, and expropriate what people inherited from their ancestors hundreds of years ago, for very little money or for real estate not equal to a quarter of the original property value. The 1978 acquisition project was rejected by the people. But due to pressure and within two years, the government bought most of the properties near the spring. A small percentage of the owners refused to sell their homes or real estate, including my grandfather, who refused to sell his house and leave it. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Defense acquired vast areas of land in the surrounding highlands, in the valley for the Republican Guard, and the 104th and 105th Republican Guards Brigades were stationed there.

In 2007, the government, with some dignitaries from the village, sent to the people the state's decision and its intention to completely empty Ain al-Fijah and compensate its people with homes in the "Labor city of Adra" in Eastern Ghouta. This decision was met with great popular anger from the people, and they decided to go out with a large sit-in, men and women, if the decision is implemented, so it was postponed.

#### **Jamal al-Din continues:**

In 2015, some leaders of the opposition military factions in Ain al-Fijah cut off the water of the spring from the Damascus city and linked its re-pumping to the capital with the cessation of the military campaign against the city of Zabadani. The government forces responded by besieging the villages of the valley and bombing them with artillery and aircraft, especially the village of Ain al-Fijah, which led to the displacement of large numbers of people to escape the bombing. The siege continued for six months, followed by the signing of an agreement stipulating ending the siege and restoring the flow of water from the al-Fijah spring, in addition to other provisions related to wanted persons and releasing detainees, only a small part of which was implemented.

On 22 December 2016, the government forces launched a new and violent campaign against the entire villages of Wadi Barada, in partnership with the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, and tightened the siege on villages that were subjected to indiscriminate bombardment with barrel bombs and artillery, and prevented the exit of civilians, women, children, and those who are sick. The campaign continued until the day of displacement agreement on January 27, 2017, and the government did not accept the truce efforts and assassinated the negotiator for the people of the valley, Major General Ahmed Al-Ghadban. Later the government imposed an agreement stipulating the displacement of the people and the militants to northern Syria after their assembly in the village of Ain al-Fijah. On the 28th of the same month, a total of 2250 people were displaced, including (50) fighters and the rest were civilians.

Later, the government forces allowed some loyalists to return, except for the people of the villages of Ain al-Fijah and Basima, where no one was allowed to return to. The Syrian government has also seized the entire real estate and lands surrounding the Al-Fijah Spring for the benefit of the Water Corporation. Dozens of houses were destroyed and bulldozed as

direct and indirect reserve areas for spring, while some businessmen close to the authority bought real estate and the properties of some residents who forcibly left the village.

## Completion of the displacement

Eastern Ghouta - Al-Tal and Khan Al-Sheeh - Qudsaya and Al-Hama - south of Damascus - Eastern Qalamoun

### Eastern Ghouta

**The Perpetrator:** the government army and intelligence forces, Russian airforces, Iraqi and Iranian militias, and Hezbollah

**The parties to the agreements:** the Syrian regime and Russia, the opposition: Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Rahman, and Jaish al Islam

The eastern Ghouta neighborhoods were subject to forced displacement after the almost complete destruction of cities and villages. They were targeted with continuous bombardment of civilian objects, mosques, schools, medical and service centers, with various types of internationally prohibited weapons, including chemical weapons. Under the agreement between Russia and Ahrar al-Sham Movement in March 2018, armed opposition left control on Harasta city, and left it. The central sector was completely out of the opposition's control following an agreement concluded between Russia and "Faylaq al-Rahman" armed group at the same time. The city of Douma was out of opposition control in April following an agreement between Russia and "Jaish al-Islam" armed group, after a long siege and military operations that did not stop for the five years. The negotiation in Ghouta was on three sectors, and each sector was dealt with independently after Russia categorically refused to form a unified negotiating delegation for the three regions. Russia insisted on dealing with each region and armed group separately. According to the United Nations, more than 158000 people left Eastern Ghouta during the period of agreements between March 9 and April 18, or about 40% of the population of Eastern Ghouta.

The displacement of Eastern Ghouta and the control of the cities of Harasta and Douma was a declaration of the government's complete control over the vicinity of the capital, which gave it political and military superiority and allowed the transfer of the military focus to its south to control the neighborhoods of Al-Qadam, Al-Tadamon, Al-Hajar Al-Aswad and Yarmouk camp.

### Qudsayya and al-Hamah

**Perpetrator:** government army and intelligence forces

**Parties:** the Syrian regime, Russia, the armed opposition

**Displaced:** Sunni Muslims

The armed opposition in the towns of Qudsayya and al-Hama, in the western suburbs of

Damascus, agreed to a “reconciliation” agreement with the government in October 2016. This agreement came after a military campaign by the government 14th Division that attempted to advance towards the area, preceded by artillery shelling from the Rahba Defense Laboratories and the Special Forces in al-Dreij. However, a draft agreement to evacuate the area, which included the displacement of fighters and all arms bearers towards the Syrian north in Idlib, in exchange for stopping the indiscriminate bombing of the area, providing food to civilians, and the establishment of forces of popular committees from the people of the area under the direct command of the Republican Guard.

Qudsaya and al-Hama were among the most important opposition strongholds in the Damascus countryside at the gate of Damascus, and contain more than half a million people, in addition to tens of thousands of displaced people. They are also close to the Republican Palace and most of the headquarters of the Fourth Division. The government was keen to control them as part of the scheme to secure the vicinity of the Palace by forcing the cities and towns surrounding it to sign a truce and the armed groups to leave for northern Syria.

## Al-Tal and Khan Al-Shih

The armed opposition signed an agreement with the government in November 2016 for the “exit” of the armed opposition members with their families and the civilians who wish from the two towns located in the western countryside of Damascus to areas in Idlib, thus forcibly displacing hundreds of residents.

## Displacement in Eastern Qalamoun

The Qalamoun region is located east of the international road that connects the capital, Damascus with Homs.

On April 19, 2018, the opposition armed groups in Qalamoun agreed to the terms of an agreement with Russia that stipulated the handing over of heavy weapons and the displacement of thousands of civilians who do not want reconciliation towards the areas of northern Syria. As well as resettling the situation of those who wish to stay through a center within the region.

## Yarmouk camp for Palestine refugees

“Almost all the Palestine refugees who were there have now fled.”

the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General of the United Nations, speaking about Yarmouk camp in 2018.

Yarmouk was established in 1957, 8 km from Damascus, to accommodate refugees who were scattering in mosques, schools and other public places. In 2011, Yarmouk was home to about

160,000 Palestinian refugees and tens of thousands of Syrians.<sup>67</sup> It was the largest unofficial camp for Palestinian refugees in Syria, and was considered the capital of the Palestinian diaspora in the world, according to the United Nations.

After the armed opposition took control of Yarmouk camp in 2012, the Syrian government and Palestinian factions, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command, imposed a stifling siege on Yarmouk camp.

In December 2012, the outbreak of hostilities forced some 140,000 refugees to leave Yarmouk camp, according to the United Nations.<sup>68</sup>

In July 2013, the Syrian government forces initially laid siege to Yarmouk camp in July 2013, encircling some 18,000 civilians and preventing the entry of humanitarian aid.<sup>69</sup>

In April 2015, ISIS captured “two thirds of Yarmouk, displacing thousands more to neighbouring Yalda, Babila, Beit Saham and Tadamon.”<sup>70</sup>

In May 2018, the Syrian government, under Russian/Turkish/Iranian supervision, concluded an evacuation agreement that led to the displacement of 10,000 civilians from Yarmouk camp. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria said that “a majority of the 10,000 civilians who had remained trapped inside Yarmouk until its recapture on 21 May were forcibly displaced pursuant to an “evacuation agreement”.<sup>71</sup> The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) said that Yarmouk Camp in Damascus lies today in ruins, with hardly a single building that has not been destroyed or damaged. The official spokesman for the UN Secretary-General also said: “Almost all the Palestinian refugees there have fled.”<sup>72</sup>

## Forced displacement in Yarmouk Camp and Kefraya and Al-Fuah towns

On 28 April 2018, the Syrian government news agency said that an agreement had been reached for the fighters and their families to leave the Yarmouk camp, in exchange for releasing people of of Kefraya and Al- Fuah towns, who were abducted and held hostage by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

The parties to the agreement: mainly the Syrian government and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, under the supervision of Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

The agreement included the evacuation of fighters and their families from Yarmouk camp to Idlib, and the evacuation of approximately 7,000 residents of the Shiite towns of Kefraya and Foua in Idlib countryside, to Aleppo.

In 2020, Damascus governorate announced Organizational Plan No. 105, which included

---

67 Yarmouk (Unofficial Camp), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/yarmouk-unofficial-camp>

68 United Nations, Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/39/65, 9 August 2018, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1641475?ln=en>

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, 21 May 2018. <https://press.un.org/en/2018/db180521.doc.htm>

Yarmouk Camp, and gave rights holders and the people of the area only one month to submit their objections. The plan faced objections from thousands of residents. The government did not abolish the plan, but stated that it would postpone it.

For years, the Syrian government prevented the residents of Yarmouk camp from returning to their homes. In 2020, it set conditions that were almost impossible to meet by those who want to return, including: security approval, proof of ownership, and structural safety of the houses, despite the government's knowledge of the extent of the destruction that impacted most of the buildings. Until early 2021, only a few hundred families had returned to Yarmouk.

## Forced displacement in east eastern Aleppo

**Perpetrator:** Government army forces, intelligence, Iranian and Iraqi militias, Hezbollah, Russia, the Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade

**Displaced:** Sunni Muslims

**The parties to the agreement:** the Syrian regime, Russia, Turkey, the opposition Ahrar al-Sham

In 2012, Aleppo city was divided into two parts, with the eastern part under the control of armed opposition groups, and the western part under the control of the Syrian government. On July 7, 2016, government forces imposed a siege on the eastern part, which was inhabited at the time by about 250,000-275,000 people, and imposed strict restrictions on the access of food and medicine to the besieged area. In conjunction with air attacks by the government army with the support of Russian forces targeting civilians and civilian objects, using prohibited incendiary weapons and bombs. These attacks primarily targeted inhabited residential neighborhoods, markets, and hospitals in the heart of the city, without the presence of military targets in the vicinity of those places.

Ahmed Mujahid Attar, nicknamed "Mujahid Abu Al-Joud", a journalist from the city of Aleppo who worked with the Aleppo Media Center and British TV News, said:

The siege of Aleppo actually began before 2016, specifically eight months before the announcement of the siege when government forces advanced in the villages of Al-Mallah And Handarat, north-east of the city, on the "Castello" road, the only outlet for the residents who were always targeted by shelling by the Kurdish Protection Units, in the Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood overlooking the road. This made the movement through it very dangerous, and led to a severe shortage of food supplies, before government forces and militias and their foreign supporters could tighten the siege on the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo completely on June 1, 2016.

Attar continued:

The Syrian Civil Defense teams documented between 15 and 28 October 2016 targeting the city with more than two thousand air raids and seven thousand artillery and missile shells, in addition to ballistic missiles and internationally prohibited weapons. Public streets were under constant attacks, which made it difficult for ambulance

---

73 Yarmouk (Unofficial Camp), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/yarmouk-unofficial-camp>

and civil defense crews to reach the places that are being bombed and blocked them from providing any service to the population. Also, during the siege, all hospitals were completely out of service. Targeting warehouses and relief stopped almost completely the work of relief groups and bread bakeries as well.

In December 2016, as a result of the negotiations between the “Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement” and a representative of the Russian government, it was agreed to evacuate all opposition fighters to the north of governorate of Aleppo. Although the agreement did not include the displacement of civilians, the experience of the daily siege and bombardment, the lack of confidence in government commitments, and the civilians’ fear for their lives from the government’s brutality and retaliation, led to the exodus of the vast majority of the population who were in the area, estimated at 37000 people.

Attar added:

The exit of the first group of the besieged (the convoy of the wounded) began on December 15, 2016. Its exit was obstructed by government forces who targeted the wounded and civil defense members with direct bullets, which led to the death of one person and the injury of three others. The evacuation process lasted for eight full days, ending on December 22, 2016.

Salem al-Atrash, from Aleppo, the secretary of the local council of the city of Aleppo from March 03, 2013, until June 2015, then a member of a general committee of the city council said:

After the advancement of the government and Iran forces backed by Russian air cover, the siege was imposed on the city on July 4, 2016. 300,000 people suffered from the siege and a significant shortage of food. The United Nations was unable to bring in any aid during the six-month siege, except for two weeks when Ramouseh road was open. During those weeks some residents escaped from the siege, and many of them were bombed during the exit, but no food items were brought in. The siege was imposed by the Syrian army, Iranian forces, the Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade, the militias Hezbollah, Al-Baqir Brigade, Fatemiyoun, and Russian air forces, which destroyed the infrastructure, all roads and neighborhoods. 90% of the victims of the bombing were civilians.

In September 2015, Russia began to bolster the Syrian government forces on several key battlefronts, “including in Aleppo, where air strikes were used with the overarching goal of besieging eastern Aleppo city.”<sup>74</sup>

The Syrian government and Russia continued to launch indiscriminate air attacks on eastern Aleppo almost on a daily basis, bombing various vital infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, health centers, bakeries, and markets. In mid-2015, the Syrian government, with Russian air support, imposed a siege on the eastern part of Aleppo city, which was home to about a quarter of a million people, and cut off all supplies and humanitarian aid.

In September 2016, the Syrian and Russian aircraft launched a month-long intensive aerial

---

74 United Nations, Human Rights Council, **Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic**, A/HRC/34/64, 2 February 2017. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/026/63/PDF/G1702663.pdf?OpenElement>

bombardment campaign on opposition areas in Aleppo, using prohibited weapons.

On 14 December 2021, Odense court in Denmark found a Danish company guilty of violating European sanctions, for selling Russia fuel to carry out air strikes in Syria. The court said that the Company should have known that Russia was likely using the fuel in its air campaign in Syria. The Danish company supplied the Russians with fuel, during the period from October 2015 to May 2017.

Danish military expert, Major Mikkel Storm Jensen, said that the amount of fuel that the Danish company sold to Russia, 172 thousand tons, was of great importance to the Russians' ability to fly.<sup>75</sup> In his court testimony, Jensen said that Russian airstrikes in the fall of 2016 played a crucial role in the fall of Aleppo.<sup>76</sup>

Anders Rechendorf, senior prosecutor at Denmark's Public Prosecutor for Special Economic and International Crime, said:

Two companies and a director have been convicted of selling more than 170,000 tonnes of jet fuel to Russian companies, which sent it on to Syria. It says something about the seriousness of the violation that the fuel has gone into the tanks of Russian fighter jets that have bombed Syria on behalf of Assad. It is of course very serious when you as a Danish company violate EU sanctions that have been introduced against another country on the basis of a very critical situation.<sup>77</sup>

On 1 December 2016, a global coalition of 223 NGOs, including the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, called on UN member states to convene an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly to demand an end to all unlawful attacks on civilians in Aleppo.<sup>78</sup>

## Major forced displacement incidents by Iran and its militias

### Al-Qusayr Displacement by Hezbollah Militia

The battle of the city of al-Qusayr, 35 km southwest of Homs and 15 km on the Lebanese border, which ended in the control of the Syrian government, was a pivotal event with significant moral and military repercussions. Al-Qusayr is the connecting point between northern Lebanon and the southern countryside of Homs, at a distance of 10 km from where most international roads converge inside Syria.

75 Ekspert: Brændstofmængde i dansk sag var afgørende for Syrien-krig, DR.dk, 19 November 2020. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/ekspert-brændstofmaengde-i-dansk-sag-var-afgoerende-syrien-krig?fbclid=IwAR0rHnzlqclfnEMLPuMRm1HVc-AU6oDWC1C9d0mrxfkFPVEVH15324PQ-vR0>

76 Dan-Bunkering trial: Denmark also bombed Syria, confirms defence counsel, Mainfold Times, 25 November 2021. <https://www.manifoldtimes.com/news/dan-bunkering-trial-denmark-also-bombed-syria-confirms-defence-counsel/>

77 Dan-Bunkering, Bunker Holding og direktør dømt for at sælge brændstof til Syrien, Anklagemyndigheden, 14 December 2021. <https://anklagemyndigheden.dk/da/dan-bunkering-bunker-holding-og-direktoer-doemt-saelge-braendstof-til-syrien>

78 Uniting for Peace in Syria: Global Civil Society Appeal to UN Member States, Human Rights Watch, 1 December 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/uniting-peace-syria-global-civil-society-appeal-un-member-states>

More than forty mixed religious and sectarian villages in Al-Qusayr area; Sunni Muslims and Christians are concentrated in the city and its immediate surroundings, and the villages of Al-Mouh and Abu Hourri, surrounded by Shiite villages, most notably Al-Burhaniya, Al-Dumainah Al-Sharqiah, Al-Aqrabeya, Al-Nizariah, and Alawite villages such as Al-Haydariyah and Al-Aboudiyah. Hezbollah announced publicly its intervention in Al-Qusayr and its fight in Syria, after a sectarian mobilization campaign to convince its followers of the duty to fight to defend the Shiite villages in al-Qusayr area.

In June 2013, the city was subject to the first and largest forced displacement incident in the Syrian war, after a major attack in which the government forces and Hezbollah militia used all kinds of weapons, in addition to intensive aerial bombardment, which pushed civilians to flee to the north of Syria. Some of the displaced sought refuge in the Lebanese's town of Aarsal. The number of returnees to the city was about 10% of the displaced.

During the past years, Hezbollah turned Al-Qusayr into a base and launching hub for its military operations that expanded to the rest of the Syrian regions, especially those located on the border strip with Lebanon. In addition to that an active movement by Hezbollah and its supporters started to purchase housing properties and agricultural lands, taking advantage of the people's need and the poverty, and benefiting from Law No. (11) of 2011 regarding the provisions of non-Syrian persons owning real estate rights, which allows foreigners to own real estate rights by a decision of the Council of Ministers based on the proposal of the Ministers of Interior and Foreign Affairs.

In October 2018, the organizational plan of the city of Al-Qusayr was announced, according to Law No. 10, and the deadline for objecting to the plan was set from October 10 to November 9, 2018, to the City Council, in the absence of the city's residents and their inability to come to it to prove their ownership. The city suffered a destruction rate of 75% of the city.

Khaled Harba (Abu Muawiyah), who was born in Al-Qusayr, says in his testimony to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria:

The revolution in al-Qusayr, like other Syrian regions, was peaceful and for six months, during which the government committed the most heinous crimes and massacres, the most famous of which was the Al-Assi massacre, in which 13 people were killed, in addition to killing and abusing the detainees. The people were forced to take up arms, and they had control over the town, despite the siege that lasted until June 2013, when the military forces and Hezbollah mobilized and launched a war using the most powerful ground weapons, combat aircraft and helicopters. It was the first area in which the explosive barrels were used. The war continued, and the people of Al-Qusayr provided nearly 3300 martyrs and a similar number were wounded, most of which were civilians of different ages. Not to mention the complete destruction of nearly two-thirds of the city, and the burning of property and crops until livelihoods were cut off. Health support and crews were absent, and we had no safe places to protect the wounded.

Harba continues:

On June 5, 2013, the fighters decided to withdraw from Al-Qusayr in a random way through the "Al-Dumaina hatch" towards the eastern side of the Levant Road, which was called the "death hatch" due to the large number of people who were killed while crossing it. It was confined between two reinforced military checkpoints between the mountains. As for the people of Al-Qusayr, they were subjected to two displacement

incidents. The first from their city and the second from the western Qalamoun, after being pursued by killing, destruction and air tickets, which forced them to be displaced again towards Arsal. The largest part of them, and some of them headed to northern Syria.

The forced displacement of the people of al-Qusayr was described in a [2013 report](#) of Commission of Inquiry on Syria:

In March and April, internally displaced civilians - predominantly from Homs governorate - sought refuge in Deir Atiyah, a town in northern Damascus. Between 19 and 23 April, government forces shelled Deir Atiyah and sent a message to the town authorities that the internally displaced were to be forced to leave the town; failure to do so would result in an attack against the town. In late April, the municipal office of Deir Atiyah informed the displaced that they had four days to leave before their quota of bread was withdrawn. Shortly thereafter, there was an exodus of internally displaced persons, many from Homs city and Al Qusayr, from Deir Atiyah.<sup>79</sup>

The UN report also stated that:

A review of the evidence collected since January has satisfied the commission that the gravity of the crimes committed by government forces and affiliated militia and antigovernment armed groups, the prevalence of such crimes and the alarming rate at which they continue to be perpetrated lend force to the recommendation made by the commission that there must be a referral to justice at the national and international levels.

Currently, between two thousand and five thousand people live in the city of Al-Qusayr. In July 2019, Military Security allowed more than a thousand people to return after Hezbollah and its local militias stalled and objected to the mass return of the population, even if the returnees were employees, or who were “known to be loyal to the government,” despite the appearance of Hassan Nasrallah, the militia’s leader on media calling on the people of the city to return.

## Four Towns Agreement :Madaya ,Zabadani ,Foah and Kafraya

“In the power struggle of a brutal proxy war between state and non-state actors, human lives in Syria have become disposables, moved around, bombed, starved to death.”<sup>80</sup>

-Annabelle Böttcher, professor at the Free University of Berlin in her [analysis paper](#): “Large-scale forced population transfers in Syria”.

---

79 Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 July 2013, A/HRC/23/58.

80 “Large-scale forced population transfers in Syria: details of the recent “four towns agreement”, May 2017, Annabelle Böttcher. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. [https://www.sdu.dk/-/media/files/om\\_sdu/centre/c\\_mellemoest/videncenter/artikler/2017/ab+article+may+17.pdf](https://www.sdu.dk/-/media/files/om_sdu/centre/c_mellemoest/videncenter/artikler/2017/ab+article+may+17.pdf)

**Perpetrator:** Government army and intelligence forces, Iranian and Iraqi Shiite militias, Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah, Sunni Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

**Displaced:** Sunnis, Shiites

**The parties and sponsors of the agreement:** the Syrian regime, Iran, Qatar, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

The Four Towns Agreement was the clearest and most direct form of the Iranian project to tamper with the demography of Syria. The agreement also represents the consensus of the parties in implementing a sectarian demographic engineering, as the process of uprooting and transferring the population was carried out based on a declared sectarian segregation, in which the Sunni majority was subjected to a process of forced displacement, to be replaced by foreign Shiite groups in addition to the Syrian Shiites, and in which the Shiite minority was subjected to displacement and replacement by Sunni groups.

The agreement which took place in the Qatari capital, Doha, between representatives of Iran and others from Jaysh al-Fateh "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham Movement" in addition to other opposition factions, stipulated in its main clause the evacuation of the cities of Foua and Kafraya, in exchange for the exit of the militants and their families from the cities of Zabadani and Madaya. The agreement marked the end of a course of negotiations that began in September 2015. It initially provided for a ceasefire in the four towns, and to allow humanitarian aid to enter them. The government and Hezbollah militia did not commit to it in Zabadani and Madaya, and their forces restricted and stole it. On the other hand they allowed food and medical aid, and even weapons to Foua and Kefraya by air.

Doha's involvement in the negotiations and the pressure it exerted on the armed opposition was at the request of the Iranian leader Qassem Soleimani to facilitate the process of liberating [the kidnapped Members of the Qatari ruling family](#)<sup>81</sup> in Iraq in 2015. The kidnapper was "Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas" militia affiliated with Iran. With the complete impotence of the Iraqi government despite the presence of the kidnappers on its lands, Qatar turned to Iran, which pledged to work to hand over the kidnapped in exchange for a ransom that the Qatari government denied paying, and to intervene with the Syrian opposition to complete the evacuation of the residents of Foua and Kefraya.

The agreement extended to include several cities and towns: Madaya al-Zabadani, Kefraya, al-Foua and their surroundings, in addition to "Taftanaz, Ta'um, farms in Bruma, Zardana, Shalakh, Maarat Misrin, Ram Hamdan, the cities of Binnish and Idlib City", as well as the towns of "Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem" south of Damascus. The entire population of Foua and Kefraya to be evacuated, within a maximum period of 60 days, and in two phases, starting on April 4, 2017, in exchange for the evacuation of Zabadani fighters and their families from Madaya, Zabadani and the surrounding areas to northern Syria. In the second phase, the agreement was supposed to include the release of 1500 detainees in government prisons, and addressing the prisoners of war. The agreement stipulated the submission of joint lists by both parties with the numbers and names of prisoners, and for the evacuation of "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" fighters from Yarmouk camp, south of Damascus.

The agreement, despite the humanitarian need that forced its acceptance due to the conditions of siege and starvation that were imposed on the people of Wadi Barada, came from a practical and strategic point of view entirely for the benefit of the government and

---

81 Qatari royals released from captivity as part of Syria population swap deal, 21 April 2017, Martin Chulov, The Guardian. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/21/qatar-royals-released-iraq-syria-four-towns-deal>

the Iranian project in the region.

- The residents of Foua and Kefraya, whose number is at least 30,000 people, with majority of adult males, of whom are fighters trained in weapons, participated in many battles on the side of the Syrian government. Accepting their deportation meant supplying the government with thousands of trained fighters, while it was suffering from lack of fighters.
- Al-Fu'ah and Kefraya formed a strategic balance in favor of the opposition, and provided partial protection to the cities and towns in Idlib governorate, due to the absolute loyalty of the people of the two cities to Iran and the latter's keenness to protect them.
- For reasons related to the decision in Tehran, the people of Foua and Kefraya were not settled in Wadi Barada. They were distributed in shelters in Homs and Lattakia, while the rest waited until the full evacuation agreement in 2018 before moving to the shelter center in Jibrin, east of Aleppo. Then they were transferred to Aleppo to reside in homes for the displaced from the neighborhoods of Al-Salihin, Al-Maysir, Al-Mashhad, Al-Sukari, and Al-Firdous. They were provided with generous financial aid from the Iranian charities Mahad Complex, Al Thaqaalain Complex and Al-Baseera Center. In the summer of 2019, the militia of the «Al-Baqir Brigade» and the «Aleppo Defenders Corps», with direct support from the «Iranian Reconstruction Authority», handed over 50 houses out of 300 that had been restored in the Marjeh neighborhood of Aleppo to accommodate displaced people from Foah and Kefraya.

Eastern Aleppo is controlled by "Al-Baqir Brigade" and "Aleppo Defenders Corps", which took over the process of handing over the houses. On the other hand, the Syrian government has not had much influence in the region since the defeat of the opposition in 2016, and was only a spectator during the delivery of housing. Pro-media websites circulated the news as: "The people of al-Marjeh neighborhood in Aleppo donated 300 apartments to the people of Kefraya and Foua, and the Islamic Republic of Iran provided basic aid to the displaced families, including securing housing needs and repairing homes."

## Az-Zabadani and Madaya

Az-Zabadani area is located in Damascus Countryside governorate and is administratively affiliated to it, near the Lebanese-Syrian border. The city of Zabadani is the center of the region, and is about 45 kilometers from the capital, Damascus. The Zabadani area and its affiliated villages and towns, especially Madaya and Sarghaia, are of great strategic and military importance, given that they are located on the Lebanese-Syrian border, and constitute the link between Syria and Lebanon commercially and economically, and because they overlook the international road between Damascus and Beirut, which prompted the Syrian government and Hezbollah to maintain their control over these areas.

Hezbollah's military presence has intensified in the Zabadani area since 2015, when government forces and the National Defense Militia prior to that time took over the multiple military campaigns and imposed the siege. In July 2015, government forces and allied militias began besieging Madaya and Zabadani. In response to the siege of "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" and "Ahrar al-Sham Movement" in March 2015 on Kefraya and Foua.

Amer Burhan, born in Zabadani in 1963, and previously worked as director of the medical

authority in Zabadani, a local council member and a member of the negotiating committee with the authority:

In 2012, Zabadani city got out of the control of the Syrian government, which responded with a mobilization of elite forces and a massive military campaign and artillery bombardment to storm the city. This led to the first wave of displacement during the revolution in 2013. The use of explosive barrels began with the aim of destroying and displacing the rest of the population in the absence of any military benefit for 4800 barrels dropped in the city prior to the Zabadani campaign in July 2015.

Amer Burhan adds:

At the beginning of 2015, Hezbollah was seeking to complete its control over the borders, and preparations began to launch a campaign jointly with the Syrian army on Zabadani, in conjunction with the conquest of Jaysh al-Fateh's control over all of Idlib except for the villages of Kafriya and Foua, whose fate will be linked with the fate of Zabadani later. On July 3, 2015 the army campaign against Zabadani began under the leadership of Hezbollah, and the siege of Madaya, which was under the control of Ahrar al-Sham was tightened.

Hezbollah responded at the time to pressure the fighters by forcibly displacing their relatives from the displacement areas such as Bloudan, Al-Inshaat and Al-Mamoura under the control of the Syrian government, and forcibly returning them to the town of Madaya. When the fall of the city became imminent, Ahrar al-Sham movement authorized the Jaish al-Fateh to intervene to stop the storming. Qatar and Iran through Turkish mediation reached an agreement stipulating the following:

- Cessation of military operations on Zabadani, Madaya, Kefraya and Foua.
- Allowing humanitarian aid to the four towns.
- Evacuating the injured out of the besieged areas to receive treatment.
- Allow those who want to exit from Zabadani and Madaya towards Idlib, and from Foua and Kefraya towards government-controlled areas.

The terms are to be implemented within 3 weeks, but implementation was delayed for two years, during which a famine struck Madaya and Zabadani.

Amer adds:

The famine led to the death of nearly seventy people from starvation. When the agreement was signed, food was allowed into the four towns, that is, after 3 months of siege. The aid was only grain, while vegetables, meat and even bread disappeared from Zabadani and Madaya. People were cutting down trees to use their wood for cooking grain and heating, while those who wanted to leave were supposed to leave three weeks after the aid came in. The implementation of the agreement was disrupted, the siege continued, and within a month, food aid ran out and severe famine began. Some slaughtered dogs and cats to feed the children, the most vulnerable people began to collapse. The specter of death loomed over the town of Madaya, and those who tried to escape were hunted by the surrounding military checkpoints and the mines planted on the periphery of the town.

Amani Adnan Burhan, echoed what several other witnesses said, including Samira Abdel Latif Raad:

The popular committees in Madaya and members of Hezbollah, accompanied by people we know from Zabadani, began to force families to leave Zabadani, from neighbourhoods such as the Al-Maaser near Horsh Bludan. They were only allowed to carry one small bag, and they are forced to ride in the military cars designated to transport soldiers and take them to Madaya. During these raids, dozens of families were transferred, including my relatives and the families of my friends. The same was true of the residents of Zabadani, who were also displaced to Dimas. As for the neighborhoods adjacent to the city, within one month, the majority of its residents were displaced, including families known for their opposition to the Syrian government, and all of them were pushed into the town of Madaya, while some loyalists and families of the military and those affiliated with the Syrian government's national defense were left.

The agreement did not explicitly provide for the exit of all residents of Zabadani and Madaya, but rather the militants and their families and those who wish to leave the rest of the civilians or non-civilians who wish to settle their situation with the Syrian government. However, the government forces' procrastination in complying with the rest of the agreement's terms, such as bringing in humanitarian aid and allowing the wounded to be treated, was intended to put more pressure on those who decided to stay in the area. This was accompanied by arrests and sniping of civilians during the implementation of the terms of the agreement.

Maysoon Burhan said:

After the militants left the area, the government demanded those who decided to stay or returned after the end of the military operations to take the original title deeds of the houses and properties, despite knowing in advance that the residents of the area had inherited these properties from their ancestors and that there are rarely property titles for the current residents.

This approach was an additional tactic by the government after the forced displacement by military actions and the agreement of the four cities, using legal means to compel those who remained or dared to return to the area to leave permanently under legal pretexts.

In March 2017, the parties to the conflict reached an agreement to end the siege, to completely evacuate fighters and civilians from Kefraya and Al-Fu'ah, as well as to evacuate fighters from Madaya, Zabadani, and Yarmouk Palestinian camp. The Syrian government and allied forces lifted the siege of Madaya and Zabadani following the evacuation of fighters and civilians in April 2017. However, the evacuation of fighters from Yarmouk stalled a month later. By that time, only 8000 out of 16000 civilians and fighters in Kefraya and Foua had been evacuated. The operation was halted, and "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" and the "Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement" continued their siege of the two towns. Before reaching this agreement, the parties to the conflict had negotiated other ceasefire agreements, but they did not reach a conclusion.

According to Hussam:

The process of displacement began in Zabadani area on April 20, 2016, when about 400 people, including wounded and sick, were evacuated with their families towards the north of Syria, and then completed on April 14, 2017, when about 2400 people from the towns of Madaya and Baqin left towards the north of Syria, then It ended with the departure of about 600 people on April 21, 2017.

# Major forced displacement incidents by the Democratic Autonomous Administration

With the outbreak of popular protests in the country, the influence of the Kurds in their areas emerged when the Syrian government withdrew most of the security forces from the Jazira region in 2012, implicitly ceding the local authority to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and its military wing. The party copied many of the government's practices and focused on consolidating its security grip on this region through a security-focused approach, thus undermining the prospects for [effective governance in the region](#).<sup>82</sup>

On August 13, 2013, the Democratic Union Party announced the end of the first phase of the project for the self-administration of northern and eastern Syria. Throughout these years, the informal treaty or tacit understanding between the Damascus government and the Democratic Union Party spared the region from aerial bombardment and ensured a state of stability and continued even after the region entered into military conflict with ISIS in 2014.

The US administration was the most prominent supporter of the Autonomous Administration forces, excluding other opposition factions, under the pretext of the penetration of extremist organizations into all opposition formations, and that the experience proved the ability of the Kurds alone to organize and manage the areas and impose security in exchange for chaos and competition that reached the point of fighting between the factions. While some saw that what the US is doing is an implementation of the policy of "ethnic democracy" that Lenin applied to the Muslims of Central Asia, which calls for the strengthening of nationalities to separate them from their universal religious identity. The US, by supporting the Kurds and distinguishing them from their surroundings, ensures that their national loyalty takes precedence over their religious identity.

In 2015, the People's Protection Units managed to defeat ISIS from in its areas with the support of the International Coalition led by the United States, which contributed to the amplification of the project of the Kurdish entity, and ambitions escalated until the official announcement of the administration in September 2018. The Autonomous Administration works as other parties to the conflict to impose facts on the ground to be used later in the negotiations, foremost of which is the change in the population structure and the practices of displacement and replacement.

International organizations have documented the forced displacement perpetrated by the Autonomous Administration forces, including Amnesty International [in its report](#):<sup>83</sup> "Syria: 'We had nowhere to go' - Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria". Amnesty described the wave of forced displacement and destruction of homes as war crimes carried out by the Autonomous Administration, led by the Democratic Union Party and explained "the deliberate demolition of civilian homes and the forced displacement of civilians, and in some instances entire villages, by the Autonomous Administration".

---

82 "How Regional Security Concerns Uniquely Constrain Governance in Northeastern Syria", 23 March 2017, Kheder Khaddour, Malkolm H. KERR Carnegie Middle East. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/03/23/how-regional-security-concerns-uniquely-constrain-governance-in-northeastern-syria-pub-68380>

83 "Syria: 'We had nowhere to go' - Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria", 13 October 2015, Amnesty International. Retrieved 13 October 2021. Syria: 'We had nowhere to go' - Forced displacement and demolitions in Northern Syria

## Displacement in the countryside of Raqqa - Tal Abyad ,Ain Issa ,Suluk

Administratively, the city of Tal Abyad belongs to Raqqa Governorate, and is 100 km to the north of the city, the commercial center of its countryside. According to the 2010 census, the population of the city and its countryside reached 300,000 people, including 30,000 Kurds. The city is adjacent to the Turkish city of Akcakale, which was the northern part of the city, before a train line divided it into two cities with demarcation agreements of the 1940s. Akcakale hosts the largest refugee camp in Turkey, the Suleiman Shah camp for Syrian refugees.

Its strategic location on the Syrian-Turkish border and on one of the sources of the Balikh River, "Ayn al-Arous", made it vulnerable to changes of the dominant forces, the "Free Syrian Army" in mid-2012, and then ISIS in 2014, before the Kurdish forces expelled ISIS declared its control over it in mid-2015. It became a central point for its military forces. Some believe that the Autonomous Administration is committed to protecting the people and has formed a civil council in the city, that assumes the task of managing the area and fairly represents the ethnic composition of the city, consisting of 15 people, ten of whom are Arabs, three Kurds, one Armenian and one Turkmen. Others believe that the Autonomy tried to change the identity of the region by changing its Arab name to a Kurdish one, but the attempts were unsuccessful due to the Arab majority, along with an Armenian minority and a Kurdish minority in the villages of al-Yabiseh, Bagdik, Tal Akhdar, Susak and seven Turkmen villages, including al-Dadat and Hammam al-Turkman.

In 2019, Tal Abyad was among the targets by the Turkish military operation in northeastern Syria, which was announced by the Turkish president as Operation Peace Spring against Kurdish fighters whom Ankara considers a threat. After a few days of violent battles between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian National Army supported by the Turkish forces, the city of Tal Abyad in the countryside of Raqqa fell in the custody of the Syrian opposition and the Turkish occupation.

In his testimony to the Violations Documentation Center, Wael (a pseudonym) said:

The population of Tal Abyad reached 250,000 in 2015, and was distributed over the city and more than 600 Arab villages and about 43 Kurdish villages, during the control of ISIS and the Turkistan Islamic Party, before the Kurdish forces entered it and tried to push the Arabs to leave as all the warring parties did by targeting the population and seeking to displace them. After ISIS was expelled from the city, ISIS tried to regain control over it and started violent bombardment from outside. At that time, the Kurdish forces facilitated the exit of the Kurds to escape the bombing and prevented the Arabs from exiting. The Kurdistan Party also imposed forced conscription on Arabs, and those who did not obey orders were killed.

In Ramadan of 2015, 60 percent of Arabs were displaced due to intense bombing during the recent attacks to expel ISIS, which extended to include Arab villages where there are no ISIS elements. People were forced to flee, and their properties and homes were looted by the Kurdish forces that entered it. As for the displaced, some of them headed to Raqqa, which was under the control of ISIS, where several of them were killed or arrested, or to the Turkish border, which was easy to cross.

The correspondent of the Violations Report Center in Syria in his report on the events in

Raqqa governorate at the time:

Because ISIS prebagged that the coming Kurdish forces will carry out massive massacres against the people, entire villages fled from the area. In one of the villages near the village of Sharayan and the village of Khirbet Al-Zer, which is called Zahle, only 180 people remained, all of them women and children. The residents of many of the villages they left were prevented from returning to their villages, including the residents of Suluk district and its villages, the residents of the villages and towns of Abdi Kwe, Al Thawra, Abu Kharza, and some other villages located to the west of the Tal Abyad area. The joint forces led by the People's Protection Units (YPG) asked the residents of one of the villages, Al-Dawghaniya, which consists of about 100 houses, to leave the village, arguing that ISIS members are not far from the village.

The battles between the "Euphrates Volcano Operations Room" on the one hand and ISIS on the other, in addition to the air strikes of the international coalition that preceded the entry of those forces, were the direct cause of the displacement of the overwhelming proportion of the people of the eastern countryside, the area of Suluk and Tal Abyad city, to the extent that more than 23 thousand of Arab citizens were displaced from their areas and their villages before the arrival of those forces.

Media campaigns that preceded the battles had a pivotal role in increasing the number of displaced people, whether by people affiliated with the People's Protection Units who published "wanted lists" for those forces and threatening the people of certain villages and/or because of the campaigns launched by ISIS warning of the coming forces.

According to the testimonies received by the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, the Kurdish Units forcibly displaced people in several cities and villages, especially in the beginning of July 2015.

When the People's Protection Units captured the town of Suluk and the surrounding villages, it proceeded to displace the residents and demolish their homes. It also asked the residents of Asilim village, about 35 kilometers south of Suluk, to leave it, and informed them that they could return after three days, only to find that 100 houses had been demolished from 103 houses in the village.

In the nearby village of Hammam al-Turkman, members of the People's Protection Units gathered its residents inside a school and told them to leave the village. The same happened in the villages of Maghath and al-Ghabeen, where members of the People's Defense Units in their uniforms and asked the residents to leave their villages, claiming that they are collaborating with ISIS. People's Defense Units also threatened them that they would tell the coalition forces that ISIS fighters were present in the village in order to be bombed by airstrikes.

The People's Protection Units deny executing displacement, and accuse ISIS of being responsible, and that they did not take collective measures, but rather included relatives of ISIS members who communicate with ISIS, and accordingly they were expelled.

# Major displacement incidents by the Turkish occupation and its affiliated groups

On October 29, 2019, Turkey announced the start of the military operation “Peace Spring” by launching air strikes on border towns and cities in Tal Abyad regions of Raqqa governorate and Ras al-Ain / Serêkaniyê in al-Hasakah governorate, which was under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Armed groups of the Syrian opposition participated in the operation, as a continuation of the two “Euphrates Shield” operations in August 2016, which aimed to remove ISIS militants from Jarablus, Al-Bab and Azaz, and the “Olive Branch” that targeted Afrin in early 2018, to confront what it considers a separatist project led by Syrian Democratic forces, which was ended with two agreements with the United States and Russia. After the operation Turkey and its Syrian affiliates were largely accused by international human rights organizations and UN officials of practices that may amount to war crimes as well as forced displacement, which led to the most severe wave of displacement since the beginning of the conflict. The areas to which the displaced were heading to were no less dangerous than the areas from which they came.

## Forced displacement in Afrin

Afrin city, to which 6 districts belong: Sharan, Sheikh Al Hadid, Jindires, Rajo, Bulbul, and Maabatli, includes 360 villages and farms. Its population was about 350 thousand in 2015, with a Kurdish majority, in addition to the displaced from Aleppo Governorate and other Syrian regions. The area was under the control of Kurdish Protection Units since June 19, 2012. Although the local community in Afrin had welcomed the displaced before the control of the Protection Units, the latter followed policies to limit internal displacement and required those coming to the area to show an old lease contract or follow the sponsorship system to allow entry. As a result of the Turkish military operation “Olive Branch”, most of the Kurdish population was displaced in March 2018, including 5000 refugees to outside Syria and 145000 internally displaced people, including 60000 living in the camps of al-Shahba region “Barkhadan, Sardam, Afrin, and al-Shahba” north of Aleppo.

The Turkish authorities took advantage of the displacement of people from Eastern Ghouta in April 2018, and from the northern countryside of Homs in May 2018, to settle the displaced in the Afrin region. Figures published by the Afrin Local Council in mid-2019 indicate that the number of the displaced has reached about 88000 people, 51% of whom were displaced from Ghouta, and about 20% were displaced from Aleppo Governorate, in addition to 2600 families displaced as a result of the battles in the northern countryside of Hama, and 600 Turkmen families, and 600 families from the Al-Bul camp, east of Azaz, in addition to the families of the fighters of the Sultan Murad armed group in the “Euphrates Shield” area. In a move to permanently resettle the displaced in Afrin, on May 17, 2019, the Turkish authorities dissolved the Commission for the Displaced, which issued identity papers and residence documents to maintain the original civil registry, and forced them to extract personal identity cards from the Afrin Council.

Shirin Afrin, the name the witness chose, told VDC:

For 5 years, Afrin region has been suffering from a suffocating siege by the armed groups. Goods entered the area through smuggling carried out by war merchants at very high prices until the Turkish army and armed opposition factions began on January 20, 2018 attacking the city, which is inhabited by more than 70 thousand people, as well as the displaced from the rest of the Syrian cities. On the 27th of the same month, Turkish warplanes bombed civilian homes in my village, so we had to hide in an underground cave. We were about 60 people, including children, women and the elderly, and certainly these caves are not equipped for housing.

Randa Muhammad, from the border village of Kamrasha, a resident of Afrin, described the situation as catastrophic at the beginning of the Turkish attack, and the reprisals that led to her fleeing to the city.

Salem Irfan from the town of Jindires said in his testimony:

With the beginning of the attack on the town center, our neighbours were killed during the attack, in which the Euphrates Shield forces loyal to the Turkish forces participated and bombarded the town with heavy artillery and missiles. The residents of the town became very afraid, especially as the attacking forces approached, and a massive number of people started to leave to the center of Afrin city. Although we were prevented from leaving the town by the Syrian Democratic Forces, it was impossible to stay as human shields, so we went out towards the northeastern countryside of Aleppo into the open. Then I learned of the confiscation of my house and the burning of a number of our properties. I was told by those who lived in my house not to return because my name is on the wanted lists by the armed groups because I was a Kurdish language teacher in the area.

Sherine Afrin, speaking about the last days of the operation:

With the advance of the Turkish forces and the Free Army, the bombing became more violent, which led to the exodus of all civilians from the village towards Afrin city. We spent three weeks at a clinic, hoping to return to our home in the village, but with the armed groups taking control of the village, we lost hope of returning.

Shireen added:

In Mid-March 2018, we decided to go back to our village. We headed with the convoy of civilians towards Jindires, so we were stopped at a checkpoint of the Free Army and were not allowed to cross. They took us to the village of Hajilar. The Free Army forces gathered thousands of people in this village and as a result of the severe overcrowding of the people returning to their villages, civilians were spending the night in vehicles of transportation because all houses hosted five families or more. A week later a convoy was formed to continue our way to Jindires. The convoy left, but the Free Army did not allow us to return to our village, under the pretext that there were mines there. There are many armed groups, and each one has its own members, and every member has his own laws. They practice violations of all kinds and forms against civilians who decided to return to their lands instead of going to government-controlled areas.

Iris Afriniya said in her testimony to the Violations Documentation Center:

The displacement of people and that they headed to al-Shahba areas in Aleppo and areas under the control of the Syrian government had a great negative impact on all people. It happened suddenly and quickly, and people suddenly left and entered villages

planted with mines in under fear and slept in the open. My house was completely robbed, and my village was all planted with mines. After a very bad experience in al-Shahba area, I decided to return without thinking to my village, which was almost deserted and all the armed groups were busy only with theft.

Two months after the start of Operation Olive Branch, the Turkish forces and its affiliated Syrian factions were able to control the entire city of Afrin. The Turkish flag was raised over the official departments in the city. When we asked witnesses about the possibility of returning to their cities and towns, they said that they would not return or not think of it currently, for several reasons, including violations, the impact of war, theft, arbitrary arrests, confiscation of homes, and expropriation.

Amnesty International said in [its 2019 report](#),<sup>84</sup> “Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies” that

The Turkish military forces and a coalition of Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, during the offensive into northeast Syria

## Jabhat Al-Nusra/Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham

In addition to its siege and shelling of Alawite and Shiite villages such as Kefraya and Al-Foua, Jabaht Al-Nusra participated in sectarian displacement agreements, including in Kefraya and Al-Foua, and committed violations and crimes against Alawite and Druze civilians that led to the displacement of civilians from their areas.

On 27 May 2015, Qatar’s Al-Jazeera TV broadcast an interview with the leader of Jabhat Al-Nusra, known as Abu Muhammad Al-Julani. In the interview, Al-Julani explained Jabhat Al-Nura attitude towards Alawites and Druze of Syria. He said that their religion is wrong and that they are outside the “religion of Allah.” He described Alawites as a sect that departed from the “religion of Allah” and that they are not “people of Islam.” Al-Julani set conditions for Alawites to be safe from Jabhat al-Nusra: to retreat from the “mistakes of their religion,” return to Islam, lay down arms, and abandon Bashar Al-Assad.

As for the Druze, Al-Julani said that they have errors in their religion and that Al-Nusra is working to correct those errors. He added: “As for the temples, there was something that went outside the Sharia. Al-Nusra demolished Druze hole sites and shrines, which al-Julani described as “polytheist”, and forced the Druze to announce that have converted their religion.

On 10 June 2015, two weeks after Al-Julani’s interview on Al-Jazeera, Al-Nusra massacred Druze civilians in Qalb Lawzeh village. After al-Nusra tried to seize a house of Druze civilians, al-Nusra members attacked civilians, accusing them of blasphemy, and shot them, killing more than twenty people, including elderly people and a child. Al-Nusra disavowed its responsibility for the massacre, and promised to hold the perpetrators accountable, but there are no reports of prosecutions of the perpetrators.

---

84 “Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies”, 18 Oct 2019, Amnesty International. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/>

In 2011, the Druze village of Qalb Lawza had a population of about 2,000 people. In 2015, its population was about 300. In 2015, al-Nusra seized 60 homes in Qalb Lawzeh, after issuing a decree permitting the seizure of empty Druze homes.<sup>85</sup>

On 12 October 2015, al-Julani called for targeting Alawite civilians:

The battle must be escalated and the Nusayris villages in Lattakia must be targeted, and I call on all the factions to collect the largest possible number of missiles and rockets, and launch hundreds of missiles every day on Nusayris villages, as the scoundrels do in the cities and villages of the Sunnis.<sup>86</sup>

Displacement in Ishtabraq village

In April 2015, Jaish al-Fateh stormed the Alawite village of Ishtabraq in Idlib, killing dozens, including civilians, and taking children and women hostage. Jaish al-Fateh stated:

When we entered Ishtabraq south of Jisr al-Shughur in Idlib, the women and children of the Alawite sect were gathered and fed, and we entertained the children with some games and communicated with the Syrian regime to negotiate over female detainees.<sup>87</sup>

Survivors of Ishtabraq fled to Syrian government areas.

In 2018, Jaish al-Fateh released the remaining hostages as part of a deal to evacuate the fighters and their families from Yarmouk Camp.

A press report described the experience of one of the hostages kidnapped by Jaish al-Fateh in Ishtabraq:

Shorouk Fakhro was a child when Jaysh al-Fatah killed her father and three brothers and kidnapped her and her mother, after injuring her feet. Shorouk and her mother spent three years as hostages of Jaish al-Fateh, in the harshest conditions, away from her studies and normal life. When they were released with the rest of the hostages, Shorouk moved to Latakia to live with her relatives who had survived Ishtabraq.<sup>88</sup>

---

85 Druze og Qalb Lawza tell Al-Modon the details of Al-Tunisi massacre, [Almodon](#), 12 July 2015.

86 Al-Julani calls for an escalation of attacks on the Alawite stronghold in Syria in response to the Russian bombardment, Reuters, 12 October 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/oegtp-nusra-attacks-ea3-idARAKCN0S626E20151012>

87 Al-Muhaisni: The Syrian regime's refusal to exchange prisoners does not mean harming Ishtabraq detainees, [Al-Quds Al-Arabi](#), 10 May 2015.

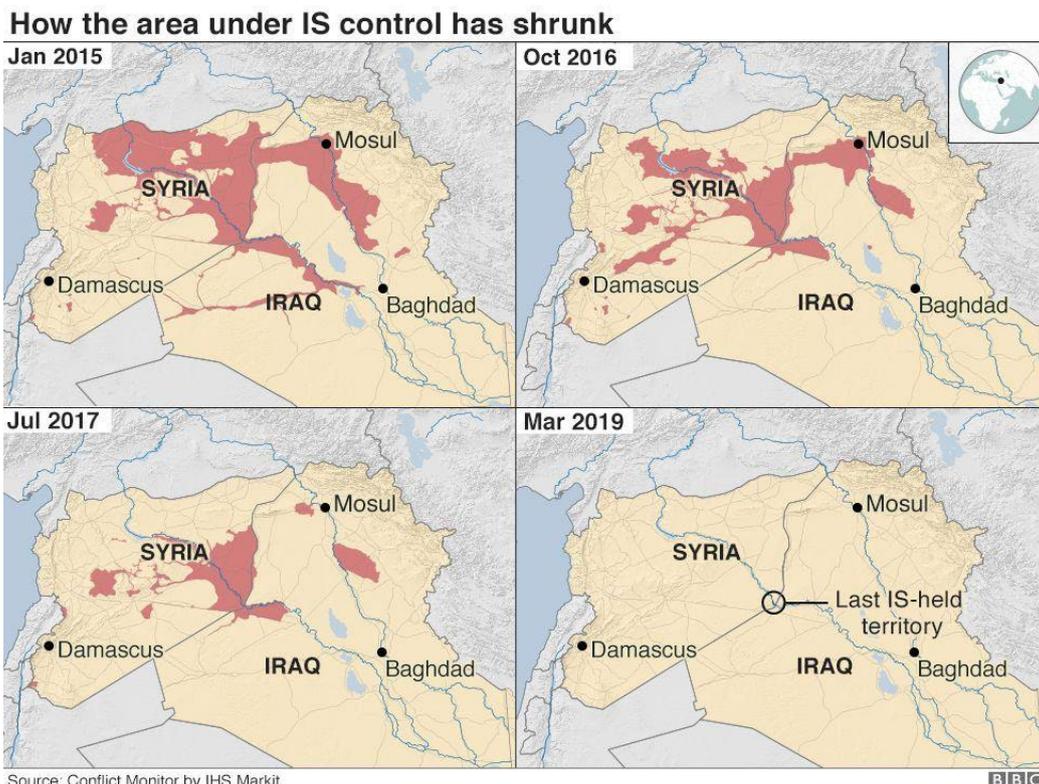
88 Ishtabraq's daughter, Shorouk Fakhro, defies the war and excels in the basic education certificate, Q Media, 20 July 2019. <https://qmedia.one/news/abnh-ashtbrq-shrwq-fkhrw-tthda-alhrb-wttfwq-fy-shhadh-altalym-alasasy>

# Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-ISIS

Despite the relatively short period of ISIS control in Syria over large geographic areas as a ruling authority from 2013 until 2018, the extremist organization implemented and was the reason for the implementation of comprehensive, wide-ranging and rapid demographic engineering policies that continued even after ISIS lost control of the population and urban areas. Understanding the scope and comprehensiveness of the demographic engineering resulting from the rise and fall of ISIS requires comprehensive research, but we will present an initial overview of it here.

The process of demographic engineering associated with the rise and fall of ISIS is still ongoing. How the victorious parties address the current situation of the population and urban areas determines the extent to which these parties complete the demographic engineering launched by ISIS.

At its greatest extent, ISIS took control of about a third of the territory of Syria in 2015 and committed the most heinous crimes with the aim of [intimidating the people under its rule](#).<sup>89</sup> It imposed one colour of religion and ideas in its areas of control. As ISIS took control of new areas, it committed crimes of torture, rape, ethnic cleansing, genocide, appropriation of property, kidnapping, and use of child soldiers. All these forced residents to flee from areas controlled by ISIS, and others from areas that ISIS was expected to control. In Kobani/Ain al-Arab, for example, ISIS attacks led to the displacement of [about 150,000 people](#),<sup>90</sup> mostly Kurds, and some of the formerly displaced.



ISIS-controlled areas from 2015 to 2019

89 “Two Years an ISIS Slave”, 26 June 2017, Mansour Omari, The Daily Beast. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/two-years-an-isis-slave>

90 “ISIS Forcibly Displaces about 150,000 People in Ein Al-Arab”, 26 September 2014, The Syrian Network for Human Rights. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://sn4hr.org/blog/2014/09/26/1708/>

# Displacement and destruction in the war on ISIS

The war on ISIS led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands, most of whom did not return, could not or were prevented from returning to their original areas, which are controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Syrian regime and the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition.

The US forces air war on ISIS-controlled areas was criticized by international human rights organizations for civilian casualties and mass destruction in urban areas. In Raqqa, for example, [Amnesty International said](#):

The US-led Coalition's military campaign to oust the "Islamic State" (IS) from its self-styled "capital" in Raqqa, Syria, killed and injured thousands of civilians. Four months of relentless bombardment reduced homes, businesses and infrastructure to rubble.

Civilians were caught in the crossfire in a city that had become a death trap. IS snipers and landmines prevented them from fleeing, while the Coalition's air bombardments and reckless artillery strikes killed them in their homes.<sup>91</sup>

The organization also described the military campaign in Raqqa as [a war of annihilation](#) in its report on civilian casualties in Raqqa, while civilians were desperate to flee their homes and areas, fleeing ISIS and the war on it.

The Commission of Inquiry on Syria [reported in 2018](#) on ISIS' siege of government-controlled neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor city in June 2014, saying that the supplies for the besieged residents were through the main government-controlled airport. Over the course of three years, more than 200,000 residents living in densely populated neighborhoods in Deir ez-Zor city faced increasing hardships, as neither the government nor the world was able to provide sufficient aid to support the entire population.

In September 2017, the Syrian government announced that its forces had broken the ISIS siege. Although the area is not subject to an "evacuation agreement," the air and ground operations to fight against ISIS in Deir Ezzor have unleashed one of the largest waves of IDPs since the beginning of the conflict. Since July 2017, tens of thousands of Syrian men, women and children from Deir ez-Zor - including those previously besieged - have been transferred to desert camps run by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Raqqa and Hasaka governorates, where tens of thousands are being detained illegally in displacement camps. The total number of displaced people who have fled Deir ez-Zor governorate since July 2017 is [about 230 thousand people](#).<sup>92</sup>

Most of the justifications for this mass destruction and the use of excessive force, were in the context of military necessity to end the battle and eliminate ISIS. Although a number of these justifications may not be true and do not negate the commission of war crimes against civilians and civilian objects, all of these justifications will not be useful after the end of the war, and will not justify the benefiting of the controlling powers from the resulting situation to complete the uricide process initiated by ISIS, in the context of broad demographic engineering.

---

91 "WAR IN RAQQA: BRIEFING", Amnesty International. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021. <https://raqqa.amnesty.org/briefing.html>

92 "Sieges as a weapon of war: Encircle, starve, surrender, evacuate", 28 May 2018, UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Retrieved 13 Oct 2021.

## Recommendations

### To all parties to the conflict and the governments supporting them

Immediate cessation of construction in the destroyed areas, and the adoption of a policy of respect for property rights that meets international human rights standards, as a basis for any construction or “reconstruction” process. Resorting to repairing the infrastructure to provide services, and not expanding it in a way that violates property rights.

Investigate acts of looting, possession and seizure of property of others, holding perpetrators accountable, returning property to its owners, and providing financial compensation for what cannot be recovered.

### The Syrian government

Take all possible measures to ensure the protection of civilian objects during and after military operations and to comply with the laws of war that protect civilian objects and civilians.

Facilitate the return of the displaced to their former places of residence, their homes and their lands in safety and with dignity, provided that the return is based on a free choice, and that it is unconditional. Enabling the displaced to recover their property and homes that they were arbitrarily or illegally deprived of and cancelling any legal obligations or modifying or changing their legal status as owners or occupants of real estate and returning the situation to what it was before their displacement. Establishing a rapid response mechanism to provide urgent financial support to the displaced who wish to return, and to provide temporary alternative housing for those whose homes were completely or partially destroyed.

Reverse any laws that discriminate between loyalists and opponents of the government in the text or application or that violate human rights and respect the property rights of all Syrians inside and outside the country, in any decrees, laws or regulations in the text and application.

Commit to legal protection of the right to adequate housing and guarantees of protection against forced eviction, and the procedures set out by the body charged with interpreting the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights when enacting any law relating to urban planning in particular (a) an opportunity for genuine consultation with those affected (b) adequate notice to all affected persons before the scheduled date of eviction (c) provide legal redress and other remedies.

Announcing the invalidity of the transactions of sale or transfer of ownership of housing, land and property belonging to the displaced, which were seized through coercion, whether directly or indirectly, or by taking advantage of the fact of the forced absence of the displaced, or if they were carried out in contravention with international human rights standards, and confirming that a bona fide party cannot be assumed in these transactions.

Addressing issues related to the return of the displaced and guarantee of all their rights, including property rights and reparation, and the formation of judicial committees in partnership with the local community to reconsider any decisions or obligations resulting from national reconciliations that were concluded under coercion and exceptional conditions and the absence of free and equal will among its parties.

Adhering to the provisions of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties and the provisions of the Syrian Constitution. Publishing bilateral agreements with the Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation, and canceling any contracts, projects or administrative exceptions granted to one of the two countries or its nationals outside the framework of the law, and determining responsibility for any claims that third parties may file as a result of damages caused by Iran and its affiliates over the past years.

Annulment of decrees granting Syrian citizenship issued since 2011 and the formation of an independent judicial committee that cooperates with the State Consultative Council specialized in examining issues of naturalized persons and their conformity with the provisions of the Nationality Law No.

## The Syrian opposition

Advocate the return of the forcibly displaced to their cities and towns as a condition for any negotiation process and an inevitable prelude to any political solution, and the enshrinement of this right through legislation, laws and executive establishments.

Announcing a public and clear position, categorically rejecting all forms of resettlement practiced by the Turkish occupation authority in its areas of control, especially the Afrin region, and working to correct and review all practices associated with the extraction of civil registry records for the displaced or tampering with real estate properties in the region and emphasizing that the procedures and the situation are temporary and does not have any form of permanence.

## The Turkish government

Commit to the unity and independence of Syria, and to its responsibility as the occupying power for the security of civilians in its areas of control, and for their basic rights and freedoms.

Stop property rights violations and demographic engineering practices, return rights to their owners and compensate all victims.

# The Democratic Autonomous Administration

Commit to the Charter of the Social Contract of the Administration and its preamble in particular, which stipulates equality between citizens without discrimination.

Ensure the right of the displaced to return voluntarily and safely to their homes, enshrined in Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Rule 132 of Customary Rules, and take all possible measures to facilitate the reintegration of the displaced and provide them with basic needs.

Protect property right that does not change through the transfer of sovereignty enshrined in Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Social Contract for Democratic Self-Administration, Articles 30-41 and Principle 21 of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement of the Economic and Social Council of the Commission on Human Rights United Nations 1998.

## The United Nations and the international community

Establishing a UN or international monitoring mechanism to ensure respect for the rights of housing, land and property for refugees and displaced persons, to monitor foreign investment operations by companies, investors, governments and international donors, in a manner that respects property rights.

End the marginalization of victims of displacement and enable them to participate in any decision processes related to their housing, property and return, and enhance their ability to influence decisions related to their fate and property.

## United nations

Create international legal and financial oversight mechanisms on the practices of donors and investors in the field of humanitarian aid to ensure that any funding or budget operations enhance the rights of Syrians, and require the concerned authorities to adopt due diligence to ensure respect for human rights in every new project within the framework of humanitarian aid or the reconstruction process in the future to ensure donors are not complicit in covering past violations and crimes or in ongoing violations and crimes.

Conduct a comprehensive survey of the damaged properties in Syria by creating a unified claim form that takes the status of a legal document, and adopts the title deed, the lease contract, or any document that proves the occupancy of the property, and the number of individuals residing, with a claim rate for each family, taking into account the cases of the independent bachelors. Donors should provide funds for the study efforts as the basis for future reparations policies.

Conduct a comprehensive survey of the displaced and completely independent of the Syrian government, and considering it the only internationally accepted reference, as a base for all decisions and policies related to the issues of return, resettlement, reconstruction and reconciliation, which facilitates decision-making regarding internationally supported reconstruction, and leads to the protection of the rights of the displaced and the maintenance of their rights.

## The international community

Condemn the policy of forced displacement of the population in Syria, as war crimes and crimes against humanity, and call for accountability for those responsible for these crimes, and emphasize the participation of the forcibly displaced, that is, more than half of the Syrians, in any talks or formula for a solution and any future political transition process.

Firmly address what appears to be a systematic and escalating behavior by the parties to the conflict to obstruct the voluntary and safe return of the displaced, and ensure that the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons to their places of original residence, security and safety are included in all political agreements and settlements.

Ensure that the decisions taken regarding return and compensation are consistent with international humanitarian law and international human rights standards, and are subject to independent oversight, with priority given to the right of the displaced to recover their property, and in the event that this is not possible, resort to compensation.

## The Syrian civil society

Establish legal emergency teams at the national level of lawyers, legal and human rights experts, and real estate experts to work on the ground and remotely through hotline services to inform the displaced of their rights and contribute to avoiding any potential legal disputes in favor of establishing the rule of law, and work to establish a network of reliable activists to accompany and document the progress of mass returns in the future.

Constant legal documentation of the organizational plans and violations of property rights, and monitoring the investment and reconstruction situation in Syria, and communicating with the concerned authorities to inform of violations of property rights. Inform the countries hosting business and investors, and prepare research and lawsuit files to confront companies and investors aiding in any work in Syria that violates property rights.

Draft a law that include protection of local communities, and the state's responsibility to preserve the population in their historical areas and to take utmost care to provide the conditions supporting their survival.

Emphasize on not reducing transitional justice to the concept of reconciliation, and dispensing with the general amnesty mechanism based on the idea of turning the page of the past and opening a new page, which may lead to bypassing the right of individuals and society to reveal the truth, preserve national memory and recognize the suffering of victims of grave violations, and cover the perpetrators of crimes and violations. Replace the General amnesty with fact-finding mechanisms and alternatives to criminal cases that achieve complete justice and have greater effectiveness in achieving social peace, or by employing the special amnesty mechanism in which each case is studied separately.

## Businesses and potential investors

Adhere to human rights principles and international standards in not promoting human rights violations, in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Not to fund violations or participate in covering them, and not to work with the Syrian government or any of the parties to the conflict to complete plans that violate property rights.

## The media and academia

Exerting more efforts, including through investigative journalism into demographic engineering practices, including forced displacement and urbicide, and provide information in various forms to raise awareness among Syrians about their housing and property rights.

Empowering victims of displacement from all sides to express their opinions and to carry their voice and stories in the media.

Preparing academic research related to demographic engineering and its tools, including demographic engineering and urbicide in Syria, to fill the large gap in academic research in this field, including with regard to the numbers and areas of the original and subsequent displaced persons, property rights and the practices of the controlling parties in Syria.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the individuals who made this report possible by sharing their experiences with us despite the risks involved.

This report was researched and written by VDC team. Mansour Omari, an Independent researcher, authored the Demographic Engineering chapter.



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
STIFTUNG** Für die Freiheit.  
Lebanon and Syria



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير  
Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê  
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression