

Displacement Strategy in the Syrian Civil War

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ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring, which began in the Middle East in 2011, has escalated into a civil war in Syria. The civil war between the Bashar al-Assad regime and opposition forces has harmed civilians, and the regime's displacement policy against civilians has been implemented indiscriminately. This displacement strategy has forced millions of Syrians to flee their cities, and those who survived and managed to flee have sought refuge in neighboring countries, particularly Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. The displacement policy implemented by the Bashar al-Assad regime's forces has been deliberately implemented within the framework of political and military strategies. The displacement strategy has employed methods such as imprisonment, bombing, siege, and starvation. This study aims to reveal the deliberate implementation of the displacement policy implemented by the Bashar al-Assad regime's forces against civilians throughout the Syrian civil war and to analyze the details of this strategy. Furthermore, the study aims to provide a perspective on the future of Syria's new administration and the Syrian people.

Keywords: Syria, Civil War, Displacement, Regime Forces, Bashar al-Assad

JEL Codes: F50, F51, F52

INTRODUCTION

The displacement strategy is predominantly regarded as a set of measures aimed at expulsion and removal, employed by authorities seeking to dominate a region or rural area. The primary reason for its implementation by states and powers through the use of military force lies in the firm conviction that the population subjected to this displacement policy lacks dependency. By displacing a population deemed disloyal, the state, government, or authority aims to reconsolidate its collective power.

The displacement strategy is commonly observed in countries experiencing civil wars. An unintentional displacement policy manifests when civilians voluntarily relocate to areas they perceive as safe from the effects of the conflict. An intentional displacement strategy, however, is rooted in the targeted removal or elimination of a specific population.

Below is the translation of the provided text into English, adhering to the original academic style, tone, and structure as presented in the Turkish version, while maintaining a formal, scholarly tone consistent with political science and international relations literature:

The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2011, evolved into a civil war in Syria. The civil war, which erupted between the Regime forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad within the Syrian government and opposition groups, gradually spread to the country's major and significant cities. The support of countries such as Russia and Iran for the Syrian

Regime forces elevated the Syrian Civil War to an international dimension. Thirteen years later, on December 8, 2024, the opposition forces' advance to the capital, Damascus, followed by Bashar al-Assad's flight to Russia, marked the beginning of a new era in Syria. The collapse of the last Ba'ath regime in the region and the end of Bashar al-Assad's rule not only transformed Syria but also reshaped the balance of power across the Middle East. The methods and strategies employed by the Regime forces to suppress the opposition throughout the civil war became more evident following the Regime's downfall. It has been observed that the Syrian Regime forces pursued displacement as part of a military and political strategy aligned with specific objectives.

The displacement strategy implemented by the Regime forces influenced Syria's demographics while prompting a reevaluation of assumptions regarding international and regional security. The Regime's displacement strategy, which impacted neighboring countries economically and politically, has been assessed as an inevitable consequence of civil wars. Accordingly, during a civil war, when one actor seeks to usurp the position or seniority of another, actors implement displacement strategies indiscriminately among civilians. This strategy poses risks for countries receiving migrants, interpreted as a threat to their demographic structures. The ruling powers enforcing displacement policies facilitate migration to other countries, resulting in a destabilizing effect on those nations.

The prolonged civil war in Syria has presented the image of a failed state structure. Since the onset of the conflict, the displacement policy implemented by the Regime forces has been pursued with a strategic objective in mind. Accordingly, the Bashar al-Assad Regime employed the displacement policy to enhance and expand its authoritarian power. Expected to yield military and political gains for the Assad Regime, this displacement policy was applied indiscriminately against the civilian population.

Reflecting the Assad Regime's projection of political and military power, the displacement strategy became a defining characteristic of the Regime, having been implemented from the early years of the civil war. Seeking to reinforce its authority through this displacement strategy, the Regime forces applied it comprehensively over many years, without regard for sectarian differences among the civilian population. The displacement strategy was executed through numerous methods, ranging from repression to bombardment, starvation to the imprisonment of opposition members as political criminals.

The Assad Regime forces, without regard for sectarian or political ideological differences, aimed to displace populations in every region or city identified as opposition-held throughout the Syrian Civil War, developing various methods to achieve this end. The displacement strategy, which established population reduction as a guiding principle, was employed by the Assad Regime forces to enforce a policy of imposing their political and military authority by force.

In this study, it is asserted that the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces implemented a displacement strategy against the Syrian population through various methods, with the stated strategy aimed at consolidating political and military power. Throughout the civil war, the displacement strategy applied in Syria became an integral component of the Assad Regime. Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to elucidate that the Assad Regime employed the displacement strategy against the Syrian population to expand and entrench its political and military power.

The study will elucidate how displacement strategies were instrumentalized in the Syrian Civil War and how they were implemented by the Regime forces. The role played by the displacement strategy in sustaining the Assad Regime will thus be demonstrated. The most significant contribution to the literature lies in revealing the methods through which the displacement strategy was indiscriminately applied by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces throughout the Syrian Civil War, as well as the outcomes it produced.

The study acknowledges that the Assad Regime forces implemented the displacement strategy indiscriminately throughout the Syrian Civil War for political and military purposes. Within the framework of this acknowledgment, this article will first evaluate the Syrian Civil War and the process of its internationalization. In this context, the study will analyze how the Arab Spring, which began in 2011, transformed into a civil war in Syria, and it will also elucidate the processes through which countries such as Iran, Russia, Turkey, the United States (USA), Qatar, and Saudi Arabia became involved in the Syrian Civil War. Furthermore, the article will present projections regarding Syria's future following the capture of Damascus on December 8, 2024, by opposition elements led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the subsequent termination of the Bashar al-Assad Regime.

The study will elucidate the displacement policies implemented by the Bashar al-Assad Regime throughout the Syrian Civil War. It will determine the strategy pursued by these policies to achieve political and military power objectives. The reasons behind the Assad Regime forces' indiscriminate application of the displacement strategy against the Syrian population will be analyzed in broad outline, and the methods employed for this displacement strategy will be explained. Ultimately, the political and military objectives of the displacement strategy, applied by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces without distinction based on sectarian or political ideological differences, will be delineated within this article.

1) The Syrian Civil War and the Internationalization of the Conflict Until the December 8 Revolution

The Syrian Civil War commenced between the Bashar al-Assad Regime Forces and opposition groups in Syria, subsequently expanding to include the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (DAESH), the Al-Nusra Front—a group that can be characterized as a Salafi jihadist faction—Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as well as various other Kurdish, Turkmen, Druze, and Assyrian groups, and, in its later stages, involving limited and regular participation by external powers such as Russia, Iran, the United States, Turkey, and Israel, within the framework of evolving conflict processes.

The civil war in Syria unfolded gradually. Protests against the Assad Regime commenced on March 15, 2011, and spread nationwide by April 2011. Toward the end of 2024, a coalition of opposition forces, including Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), initiated the Second Battle of Aleppo. On December 8, 2024, with the capture of the capital, Damascus, and Bashar al-Assad's departure from Syria, the opposition established a Transitional Government in the country.

In April 2011, the Assad Regime deployed the army to suppress the aforementioned protests and uprisings, with soldiers opening fire on demonstrators across the country (Jakarta Post, 2012). Following months-long military sieges on certain cities, the protests escalated into armed rebellions. Opposition forces, predominantly composed of defecting soldiers and civilian volunteers, initiated the insurgency without centralized leadership (IOL, 2025). Clashes occurring in nearly every town and city across the country took on the character of asymmetric warfare. In 2013, Hezbollah joined the conflict alongside the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces (YaLibnan, 2013). Throughout the civil war, the Bashar al-Assad administration received military and financial support from Russia and Iran, while the opposition obtained weapons and ammunition assistance from Qatar and Saudi Arabia (New York Times, 2013).

On the other hand, according to a 2012 United Nations report, the Syrian Civil War was characterized as a sectarian conflict between Alawite and Shabiha militias and Sunni opposition forces, supported by various international and domestic actors. However, this characterization was rejected by both the opposition elements and the Assad Regime. According to the same report, the death toll in the civil war exceeded 220,000 as of January 2015 (The Guardian, 2016). Various international reports indicate that throughout the civil war, tens of thousands of demonstrators were imprisoned in state facilities, where they were subjected to systematic torture and terror (Ansa, 2012). Numerous international organizations have accused both the Assad Regime and the opposition of human rights violations. The United Nations' investigations and field research in Syria, conducted in both 2012 and 2013, concluded that the majority of human rights violations, acts of torture, and war crimes were perpetrated by the Assad Regime (UN News Center, 2012). Chemical weapons were used on several occasions during the war, eliciting widespread international condemnation (BBC News, 2013).

Throughout the civil war, numerous countries and international organizations imposed sanctions in response to the harsh and ruthless policies of President Bashar al-Assad's regime against the Syrian population. Within this framework, the overseas assets of Bashar al-Assad and his close associates were frozen. It has also been alleged that certain countries provided arms assistance to opposition groups, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey identified in connection with these claims. The United Nations Security Council convened to adopt sanctions against the Syrian regime, but Russia and China, pursuing policies aligned with the regime, consistently vetoed these efforts. Due to the inability to reach a definitive decision within the UN Security Council, the United States and France established a coalition known as the Friends of the Syrian People Group. This group adopted sanction decisions during its meetings, though these measures failed to produce the desired impact.

As noted, the Syrian Civil War rapidly assumed an international dimension due to the involvement of third-party actors pursuing their own regional and international interests in the conflict. Within this context, the Syrian Civil War can also be described as an asymmetric conflict process involving the proxy actors of various countries. Accordingly, the countries supporting the Assad regime throughout the civil war can be listed as Russia, China, and Iran. Additionally, Hezbollah, Iran's proxy actor in the Middle East, actively participated in the civil war, fighting on the side of the Assad regime. The leading countries supporting the opposition include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. These states provided financial and military assistance to elements of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA). Indeed, SNA forces were directly trained and militarily equipped by Turkey. Meanwhile, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany openly supported the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the primary component of Kurdish elements in Syria. Consequently, it has been repeatedly observed that the United States not only supported and equipped SDF elements militarily against Turkey but also explicitly protected them from potential Turkish military intervention.

Since the onset of the conflict, millions of civilians have sought refuge in neighboring countries due to violence and deteriorating living conditions. These countries primarily include Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Additionally, within Syria, 6.3 million individuals have been displaced. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance since the war began has reached 13.5 million. During the Syrian Civil War, the population experienced significant shortages of food, fuel, employment opportunities, and shelter (UNHCR, 2024).

Throughout the Syrian Civil War, 11% of the country's population has either perished or been injured. According to a United Nations report, more than 250,000 people lost their lives in the Syrian Civil War. Certain sources suggest this figure is significantly higher. A report published by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) indicates that between March 2011 and February 2016, 500,000 individuals died in the Syrian Civil War, while 1.88 million were injured (BBC News, 2016).

2)The Strategic Displacement Policy Implemented by Regime Forces in the Syrian Civil War

Syria stands among the countries experiencing the most significant demographic changes in the 21st century. One reason for this is the violent displacement policies implemented by Bashar al-Assad throughout the Syrian Civil War, while another is the migration Syria received due to regional events. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States led to the arrival of 230,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria's capital, Damascus. This refugee influx, which altered the demographic composition of the capital, produced a broader impact by contributing to demographic shifts across the country. Combined with migration from rural areas, this refugee influx became a significant factor in the protests and civil war that emerged after 2011.

The roots of the Syrian Civil War, which has extended over the long term since the 2000s, are complex and deeply intertwined. The protests that began in Tunisia in 2011, known as the Arab Spring, spread to Syria as a wave of violence by March of that year. Initiated in the southern city of Deraa, near the Jordanian border, the protests criticizing the Bashar al-Assad Regime focused on denouncing arrests and torture. These protests, which demanded not the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad Regime but a change in its treatment of the populace, were met with a response from the Regime forces using law enforcement units, leading to their spread to other cities and the capital, Damascus (Ferris & Kırışçı, 2016, p. 14). Seeking to prevent the protests from reaching Damascus, the Regime forces employed an even harsher response, as they assessed that the loss of Damascus would precipitate the Regime's collapse. As a result of the Regime forces' disproportionate reaction to civilian protesters, more than 500 individuals were killed between March and June 2011. Thousands of Syrians fled the Regime's reprisals and began seeking refuge in Turkey, thereby initiating a regional refugee movement triggered by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces (Ferris & Kırışçı, 2016, p. 14).

Concurrently, in the ensuing process, the internal displacement policies of the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces profoundly impacted the country's demographics. The Regime forces conducted various acts of violence to evacuate regions and cities deemed critical for the regime and the country. The evacuation of strategic cities through the use of violence by the Regime forces was intended to wrest these areas from opposition control and bring them under the Regime's dominion. This situation, over time, has demonstrated that it constituted an integral component of the Bashar al-Assad Regime's cohesive political and military strategies.

The Assad Regime forces employed chemical weapons against civilians from the early years of the civil war. The use of chemical weapons, as part of the displacement strategy, was first recorded on August 21, 2013, in Eastern Ghouta, resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,500 individuals, predominantly women and children. It is documented that over 10,000 civilians were also injured. According to a Network for Human Rights report, the Assad Regime conducted attacks using chemical weapons 11 times between 2017 and 2018. These attacks occurred 100 times in Damascus and its surrounding rural areas, 45 times in Idlib, 29 times in Hama, 27 times in Aleppo, 7 times in Homs, 4 times in Deraa, and 3 times in Deir ez-Zor. Throughout these assaults, Damascus and its rural environs faced the greatest threat from chemical attacks. The Assad Regime utilized its aligned media to assert that it did not employ chemical weapons and was facing baseless accusations, instead claiming that the opposition forces were the ones using such weapons. Under the pretext that opposition forces were being terrorized, innocent civilians—mostly women and children—were subjected daily to the Regime forces' attacks, fighting for survival. Chemical weapons continued to suffocate people over many years throughout the civil war (Muslu, 2018).

In addition to the escalating violence of the Syrian Civil War over the years, the support provided by Russia and Iran, allies of the Bashar al-Assad administration, has been presented as justification for the violence, sieges, starvation, and imprisonment reportedly directed against the opposition. However, the intensification of military policies served political objectives and, over time, demonstrated the implementation of demographic engineering within the country. The execution of displacement policies resulted in the internal displacement of millions of individuals. The inability of the international community to intervene, coupled with the vulnerability of the population, facilitated the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces' implementation of a displacement policy against the country's citizens, guided by a political and military strategy.

The displacement policy of the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces has been internationally recognized merely as a "response to political opposition against the Regime." However, the political and military displacement policies sustained by the Bashar al-Assad Regime were pursued with a strategic purpose. Extending over the long term, the displacement policy focused on altering the demographic structure within Syria and followed political objectives. Statements from Bashar al-Assad and senior officers of the period underscore that the displacement policy

enforced by the Regime forces was entirely shaped by a political and military strategy. Bashar al-Assad remarked that Syria had lost its finest youth and infrastructure but, in return, had gained “a healthier and more cohesive society.” Meanwhile, General Jamil al-Hassan, the Air Force Intelligence Chief at the time, stated that “a Syria with 10 million reliable people obedient to the leadership is preferable to a Syria with 30 million vandals” (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, p. 48).

Furthermore, the Bashar al-Assad Regime has not expressed any willingness on international platforms to reach a reconciliation with the opposition and its supporters. The absence of negotiation prospects has revealed that the Bashar al-Assad Regime intended to perpetually maintain its political and military strategy within its displacement policies. Similarly, the proposal of local reconciliation agreements by the Regime has been interpreted as a component of the civil war’s battlefield tactics. Indeed, the existence of ceasefires did not alleviate the pressure on the Syrian population; rather, displacement strategies were implemented with heightened intensity (van Veen et al., 2021, pp. 20-21). The Bashar al-Assad Regime escalated its violence and continued attacks targeting civilians indiscriminately. This situation led to increased internal displacement of the Syrian population and prompted those able to flee to seek refuge in neighboring countries (Ferris & Kırışçı, 2016, pp. 33-34).

Over the course of 13 years, the displacement policy sustained by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces compelled the Syrian population to seek refuge in safe areas on multiple occasions. The Syrian people have reported being displaced at least nine times during the first decade of the civil war (Giovetti, 2024). United Nations reports have substantiated that the Syrian population was subjected to a displacement policy aligned with political and military strategic objectives. The UN has designated the Syrian Civil War as the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Throughout the civil war, millions of individuals have been displaced, expelled beyond the country’s borders, or killed (Bakkour & Sahtout, 2023, p. 28).

As clashes between the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces and the opposition intensified, the propensity for violence against the Syrian population increased further. Humanitarian aid was restricted, and public services were obstructed (Country Profile: Syria, 2022). Overt acts of violence, such as artillery fire, barrel bombs, and airstrikes, were employed by the Regime forces. In addition to these, indirect violence targeting the public was also utilized as part of the displacement policy. The use of unguided munitions over vast areas, deliberate attacks on public facilities such as schools, hospitals, and bakeries, and the weakening of infrastructure constituted acts of violence by the Regime, forming an integral component of the displacement policies directed against the Syrian population.

The displacement policy implemented indiscriminately by the Syrian Regime forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad against civilian areas was intended to diminish support for the opposition while instilling fear through the Regime’s elements. The state-sponsored terror executed by the Regime forces was deliberately conducted, establishing a climate of fear in regions devoid of military targets. A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) assessing the Regime forces’ attacks on Idlib highlighted that the Regime targeted civilian sites without distinction. The Syria-Russia collaboration, in violation of international law, launched unlawful attacks on areas inhabited by civilian populations, compelling their displacement. Furthermore, the Regime forces and their allies strategically implemented the displacement policy by damaging civilian livelihoods and infrastructure (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, p. 49).

Another dynamic proving that the displacement policies of the Regime forces were applied strategically is the prioritization of different methods in each significant city. For instance, Aleppo stands among the most critical cities in Syria. The siege method, which required fewer troops and resources, was deemed rational by the Regime forces for Aleppo. Consequently, in the early stages of the civil war, Aleppo was besieged with the aim of bringing it under the control of the Regime forces. In the capital, Damascus, a similar approach was employed by obstructing access to food. Homs was designated a strategic city by the Regime forces due to its access to Lebanon and its connections to Damascus. Likewise, Deraa was identified as strategic for the Regime owing to its proximity to the Army’s Fourth Division, the Republican Palace, and the Mezzeh military airport.

In addition to the strategic designation of cities, the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces implemented a strategic displacement policy against the civilian population through methods such as imprisoning those deemed political criminals among the opposition, fostering sectarianism among the populace, restricting access to food, perpetrating massacres, conducting bombings, and besieging cities. Following the December 8, 2024 revolution, the imprisonment policy enforced by the Bashar al-Assad Regime fully emerged as the most severe punishment inflicted upon both civilians and opposition members.

Located 30 kilometers north of Damascus, Sednaya Military Prison remained under the control of the Syrian Ministry of Defense until the December 8, 2024 revolution (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023). Established in the 1980s, the prison served as a facility where opponents of the Assad Regime were detained, including individuals known or presumed to be affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, deemed rebels. Political arrests were applied to individuals opposing the Assad Regime or residing in areas known for such opposition (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2019). The suppression of a prisoner uprising in 2008 through torture and excessive force revealed Sednaya’s function as a mechanism of extermination. Comprising two blocks, Sednaya housed between 10,000 and 20,000 detainees. Following the onset of the civil

war, peaceful opponents of the Bashar al-Assad Regime and military personnel suspected of anti-Regime sentiments were subjected to torture in Sednaya. It has been established that detainees were held in custody for extended periods before being transferred to Sednaya, where trials were conducted secretly and unjustly in military courts. Most individuals deemed guilty were imprisoned in Sednaya without trial and remained unaware of the duration of their confinement (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023).

Due to the severe torture inflicted, Amnesty International prepared a report in 2017 concerning the authorities at Sednaya, dubbed a human slaughterhouse. The report formally established that a component of the Bashar al-Assad Regime's strategic displacement policies included extermination methods, as recognized by the international community. Emphasizing that the crimes committed against political prisoners encompassed torture and murder, Amnesty International asserted that these acts constituted violations of international law and issued a call for justice and reparations (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2019).

Following the Syrian revolution on December 8, 2024, Amnesty International conducted interviews with opposition detainees held in Sednaya. It was determined that every prisoner was systematically subjected to extermination methods, with some dying from torture, and that they were routinely exposed to daily beatings, inhumane treatment, and humiliation. It was reported that, as part of the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces' extermination strategy, prisoners were denied food and water, and no equitable interrogations were conducted. It emerged that the torture was not intended to extract information about the Regime and that the prisoners had no legal representation. As a method of the extermination strategy, families were informed of the prisoners' deaths (United Nations, International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, 2024). All of these findings demonstrate that the extermination method, implemented through imprisonment, was an extension of the Bashar al-Assad Regime's displacement strategy. The fact that not all prisoners were opposition members, and that civilians merely residing in the same regions as the opposition were also imprisoned as political detainees and killed through torture, indicates that the displacement policy was a strategy pursued for political purposes.

The airstrikes conducted by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces have been the most effective instrument of the displacement strategy applied against the civilian population. Indiscriminate bombing campaigns were carried out in Syria's major and significant cities. These airstrikes, which damaged the infrastructure of cities and towns, also destroyed public buildings. This situation led to the displacement of civilians, even if they did not flee the bombings, as the cities and towns became uninhabitable. Bombings targeting strategic locations rendered cities 80% to 90% unlivable. Through the use of barrel bombs, guided missiles, toxic gases, and rockets, the Regime targeted the lives of city residents alongside the opposition, disrupting the urban structure.

In the airstrikes affecting both the opposition and civilians, the city of Darayya, a suburb of Damascus, saw 250,000 of its population displaced. It has been confirmed that chemical weapons were used in these bombings, which were intended to serve as a deterrent against opposition forces. The Bashar al-Assad Regime forces employed sarin gas in their attacks on Ghouta in August 2013. These Regime assaults, which killed nearly 1,500 people, elicited a response from the international community. In Deraa, the Regime forces subjected an already displaced population to further displacement (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, pp. 52-53).

Sieges and the fostering of sectarianism should be regarded as long-term steps in the displacement policy implemented by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces against the opposition and civilian population. Sieges have been viewed as a particularly effective strategy in displacing civilians. By obstructing the entry of goods and food into cities, these sieges rendered urban areas uninhabitable. City residents were subjected to control measures during the sieges, with neither the population nor goods permitted to relocate. This situation, over time, resulted in the involuntary exposure of city dwellers to the displacement policy.

The partial siege initiated by the Regime forces in Aleppo began to obstruct the entry of essential supplies, medicine, and food into the city. After a period, with Russia's support, the Regime forces imposed a full siege on Aleppo, confining nearly 37,000 individuals within a mere 2-kilometer area (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, p. 54). The simultaneous execution of airstrikes against the besieged population, who were struggling with hunger in an unsanitary environment, also demonstrated that the Regime forces pursued an extermination strategy alongside displacement. According to World Bank data from 2017, sieges and bombings in cities such as Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama resulted in the destruction of 80% of the service sector (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, 2024, pp. 6-7).

Historically, sectarianism has been regarded as one of the most effective methods in the Middle East region for fostering discrimination and inciting conflicts among populations. The Bashar al-Assad Regime forces aimed to serve their political objectives during the Syrian Civil War by promoting sectarianism and arming groups. Armed sectarian factions were mobilized to function as an instigated instrument of conflict in service of the Regime forces. It has been posited that sectarianism was a source of division among the Syrian populace even prior to the civil war. However, it has become evident that sectarianism was instrumentalized by the Regime forces during the Syrian Civil War as part of their displacement strategy.

To bolster support for the Regime forces against the opposition, a political discourse serving sectarianism was adopted. The Regime forces' portrayal of the opposition as sectarian Islamists was designed to prevent them from garnering public sympathy. The dissemination of hate speech between Sunnis and Alawites in major cities, coupled with the emphasis that opposition forces endorsed such rhetoric, has been identified as a deliberate policy of the Regime forces. Prior to the civil war, Homs had a recorded population of 2,147,000. Approximately five years later, due to displacement policies, the population of Homs was determined to be 1,052,000. In Homs, where more than half of the population consisted of Muslims adhering to the Sunni sect, over half of the Sunni population was displaced following the Regime's sectarian policies. While the proportion of the population affiliated with the Shia sect was 1%, displacement policies led to an approximately sevenfold increase in the Shia population. This situation demonstrates that the demographic structures of cities were deliberately altered—either increased or decreased—through the application of sectarianism (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, pp. 50-51).

As a result of the strategic displacement policy implemented by the Bashar al-Assad Regime against the Syrian population through methods such as imprisonment, sieges, starvation, sectarianism, and bombings, millions of people were forced to abandon their living spaces over the course of 13 years. The indiscriminate application of strategies purportedly directed against the opposition to the civilian population indicates that the Regime forces pursued not only displacement but also objectives of extermination and massacre. Beyond the displacement of millions of Syrians within the country, their confinement in camps, and their subjection to sieges, the country also experienced outward migration. Fleeing the attacks of Bashar al-Assad, the populace sought refuge in bordering countries, primarily Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Cities of strategic importance such as Homs, Damascus, Deraa, Darayya, and Aleppo, perceived as opposition strongholds in Syria, were among the primary regions where the Regime forces implemented their displacement policy. These cities, serving as evidence of the Bashar al-Assad Regime's demographic engineering, emerged over time as clear strategic focal points of the Regime's displacement policies.

It has been possible to quantify the strategic displacement policy implemented by the Regime forces over the years, illustrating that the Regime executed displacement against the Syrian population in a gradual and planned manner. In Aleppo, following the displacement policy deliberately implemented by the Regime forces in 2012, 1,500 properties were rendered uninhabitable, and 200,000 Syrians were displaced (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, p. 47). In 2013, the capital, Damascus, a focal point, accounted for 14% of the country's displaced population. By 2014, Damascus comprised 23% of the displaced populace. The first four years following the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 were critical for the Syrian people, who were extensively subjected to the Regime forces' displacement policy. During these initial four years of the civil war, Damascus lost nearly 520,000 of its citizens due to the displacement policy (Bakkour, 2024, p. 39).

By June 2014, half of Syria's population had been displaced. In 2015, nearly 1.7 million individuals were displaced due to the policies of the Regime forces. Syrians fleeing the oppression and arbitrary imprisonments imposed by the Bashar al-Assad Regime escaped from Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and Ghouta to areas under opposition control, only to be subsequently subjected to forced displacement agreements (Abbara et al., 2022, p. 6). By 2016, Syria faced some of the most severe humanitarian crises of the period. Indeed, approximately 13 million people—roughly half of Syria's population—were compelled to migrate from their living areas due to the Assad Regime's displacement policy (Ferris & Kırışçı, 2016, p. 1).

Between 2016 and 2017, the Syrian Civil War assumed a more complex structure with the increasing involvement of additional actors. The internationalization of the civil war heightened the Syrian population's exposure to a planned and gradual displacement policy. The support the Regime received from collaborating countries strengthened its position in reconciliation agreements with the opposition, facilitating the migration of populations from areas it seized through its displacement policy. The populace, forced to migrate to opposition-controlled regions, was affected by the Regime's hostility toward the opposition and, in addition to the displacement policy, was also subjected to an extermination policy.

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The cities where the Regime's displacement policy was most intensely applied were Aleppo and Idlib. In 2020, the number of individuals forcibly displaced and subjected to intra-provincial migration rose to 1.82 million. However, only 467,000 Syrians were able to return to their homes (Abbara et al., 2022, p. 5). By the end of 2021, nearly 6.7 million Syrians had been displaced due to the violence and conflicts perpetrated by the Regime forces.

Citizens compelled to endure displacement reported being subjected to forced displacement policies three or four times over the years (Country Profile: Syria, 2022).

In January 2023, an independent United Nations commission stated that the Bashar al-Assad Regime had pursued its displacement policy against the Syrian population in a gradual manner within a strategic framework. It affirmed that the displacement was sustained by the Regime forces as an organized effort aligned with political objectives, constituting a crime against humanity. General Philip Breedlove, affiliated with NATO's Allied Operations Command, noted that the Syrian Regime and its allies continued to weaponize their displacement policies. He emphasized that the bombs dropped by the Regime forces were intended to terrorize both the region and its inhabitants, thereby displacing them (Bakkour & Stansfield, 2024, p. 48). Consequently, by the end of 2023, it was established that 7.2 million Syrians had been compelled to endure displacement by the Regime forces. The displacement policy inflicted upon Syrians has been recognized as the world's longest-lasting and most extensive displacement policy (Country Profile: Syria, 2024).

At the beginning of 2024, it was determined that more than 60% of Syria's pre-civil war population, amounting to 13.7 million individuals, had been displaced. It was further reported that approximately 15.5 million people were deprived of basic needs. Consequently, in 2024, Syria was rendered the country experiencing the world's largest displacement crisis and refugee crisis by the Regime forces (Giovetti, 2024). According to the UN OCHA, from November 28, 2024, to the December 8, 2024 revolution, nearly 1,000,000 Syrians in cities such as Homs, Aleppo, and Idlib were subjected to displacement due to conflicts within a ten-day period (Country Profile: Syria, 2024).

By the end of 2024, the Syrian population, due to displacement policies, rendered Syria the fourth most food-insecure country in the world. Indeed, 12.9 million Syrians have become dependent on food assistance. Beyond food insecurity, the destruction of infrastructure, the deterioration of living conditions in camps, and the rise in diseases demonstrated that, by the end of 2024, 16.7 million Syrians were in urgent need of humanitarian aid (European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, 2020).

Indeed, the Syrian population endured a displacement policy implemented by the Bashar al-Assad Regime forces with increasing intensity from the onset of the civil war until the December 8, 2024 revolution, executed in a strategic, planned, and gradual manner. This policy, pursued for political and military purposes, condemned 7.2 million Syrians to internal displacement. It resulted in 90% of Syrians living below the poverty line (The UN Refugee Agency, 2024). With millions of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in neighboring countries, the Bashar al-Assad Regime, through a strategy driven by political and military objectives, caused the world's largest displacement crisis—both internally and externally—committing a humanitarian crime (The UN Refugee Agency, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 caused Syria to descend into a civil war. The civil war began between Bashar al-Assad and opposition groups and spread to strategic cities in the country. The support the Bashar al-Assad regime received from Russia and Iran shifted the framework of the Syrian civil war. Following years of civil war, on December 8, 2024, opposition forces advanced on Damascus, the capital, against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Subsequently, Bashar al-Assad's flight to Russia and the surrender of Damascus to the opposition ultimately brought an end to the Syrian civil war.

The collapse of the last Baath party in the Middle East has been identified as a development with unprecedented consequences not only for Syria but for all countries in the region. The methods employed by Bashar al-Assad's forces to suppress opposition forces within Syria became more visible after December 8, 2024. It has become clear that the Bashar al-Assad regime forces are pursuing their goal of displacing the opposition through political and military actions.

In the conflict between the Bashar al-Assad regime and opposition forces, the regime's displacement policy has forced civilians to flee their cities. The regime's indiscriminate political and military displacement has led to Syrians seeking refuge in neighboring countries. In response to the regime's displacement strategy, Syrians have sought refuge in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. Consequently, millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their country and seek refuge in neighboring countries due to the regime's displacement policy.

Syrian citizens who were unable to flee to neighboring countries have been killed or injured. Syrians who remained inside the country have been in need of humanitarian needs such as shelter, food, and clean water. Millions have been unable to meet their humanitarian needs. The Syrian civil war, which has claimed thousands (some sources say millions) of lives, has made the process deadly for the civilian population that survived.

Bashar al-Assad's regime forces have pursued a policy of displacement against civilians for political and strategic purposes. Airstrikes have been seen as the most effective weapon of this displacement policy. Bashar al-Assad's regime forces have bombed Syria's important and strategic cities, indiscriminately targeting both civilians

and opposition members, forcing the population to flee. Not only did the airstrikes displace the population, but the airstrikes also damaged the city's infrastructure and rendered public institutions unusable.

The bombing of the entire infrastructure has rendered cities uninhabitable. Those who refused to leave the cities as a result of the bombings were forced to flee the country due to the destruction. Thus, Bashar al-Assad's regime forces have displaced the population through airstrikes. Syrians who were not killed or fled by the airstrikes were forced to flee the country due to the cities becoming uninhabitable. As a result, the Bashar Assad Regime forces implemented their strategies of displacing not only the opposition but also the civilian population through aerial bombardments and displaced the people.

As part of its strategic displacement policy against the opposition, Bashar al-Assad regime forces have continued to imprison the remaining Syrian population and foster sectarianism among the population. The indiscriminate imprisonment of political prisoners has become a component of this strategy. Furthermore, the strategy of spreading sectarianism among the population has been seen as part of the displacement strategy implemented by Bashar al-Assad regime forces. Similarly, denying civilians access to clean water and food has been described as a displacement policy by Bashar al-Assad regime forces.

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, concluded in December 2024 with the rapid advance of HTS (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham), SNA (Syrian National Army), and other opposition groups, culminating in the capture of Damascus and Bashar al-Assad's flight to Moscow. Following the seizure of Damascus by opposition forces led by HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa, the leader of HTS, was appointed as the President of the Syrian Arab Republic on January 29, 2025, during a conference held among the opposition factions. At the same conference, it was also declared that the 2012 Constitution and parliament were dissolved, and the establishment of a transitional legislative council and a transitional government was announced.

Despite the formation of a transitional government, challenges persist in consolidating Syria's fragmented structure under a central authority. Within this context, while a significant portion of Syria remains under the control of HTS-led opposition forces, certain radical elements within HTS may object to the moderate policies intended for the new order, potentially leading to instability. However, it can be asserted that Ahmed al-Sharaa's absolute authority over the HTS base is sufficiently robust to mitigate such risks of instability.

In northern Syria, Kurdish groups within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are observed to maintain a close relationship with the United States, continuing to hold an autonomous region against Turkey with American support. These areas under SDF control are, in reality, regions predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arab tribes. For the ongoing process, a potential reconciliation between Turkey and the United States could facilitate the integration of the SDF into the newly established central government through various arrangements, which appears plausible.

Regarding the establishment of Syria's new government, while the future of the Alawite community in the country was a subject of debate in the initial days, the moderate policies pursued by Ahmed al-Sharaa during the process have begun to clarify the view that no systematic wave of violence will target the Alawite community. Within this context, as Syria progresses toward greater stability, the perspective that the Alawite community will preserve its existence and cultural autonomy within the central system through various arrangements has become increasingly distinct.

A new and emerging issue concerning Syria's fragmented structure pertains to the relations between Druze groups in the country and Israel. Within this context, Druze-centric activities in the Suwayda region and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, Israel's policies toward the Druze, and the escalating demands of the Druze in recent days, which have heightened expectations of conflict, have brought to light another problem that Syria has overlooked.

On the other hand, the city of Suwayda in Syria, with a population of approximately 350,000, is predominantly composed of the Druze ethnic group. The Suwayda region holds critical importance not only for the security of the Golan Heights—rich in water resources and under Israeli occupation—but also for the security of Mount Hermon and its surrounding areas in Syria, which Israel began to bring under control starting in January 2025. As evident, the potential instability arising from Druze groups demanding autonomy in these regions with Israeli support could pose a challenge for Syria's new government. To prevent this situation from escalating into new conflicts within the country, it is imperative to curb Israel's policies in this regard and for the new government to initiate negotiations with the Druze groups.

Ahmed al-Shara's leadership, which took power after December 8, 2024, has formed Syria's new transitional government. The Syrian people and neighboring countries have high expectations of Ahmed al-Shara's leadership in this new era. Ahmed al-Shara's victory in the opposition against Bashar al-Assad's regime forces was seen as a path to the return of all displaced Syrians to their homeland. However, it is understood that Ahmed al-Shara's leadership faces multifaceted challenges in this new era. It has become imperative for Ahmed al-Shara's leadership to recover from the devastation in the country, ensure good treatment for the people, ensure food security, and prevent the resurgence of sectarianism within Syria.

As outlined above in broad terms, significant challenges await Syria's new transitional government. Nevertheless, since December 2024, it is evident that Ahmed al-Sharaa, with the support of international actors, has the potential to demonstrate strong leadership capable of overcoming these challenges. Within this context, in the coming period, the adoption of a new constitution encompassing all segments of civil society during Syria's transitional phase, the prosecution of those responsible for human rights violations committed under the Assad regime through fair and impartial investigations, the facilitation of international investments for the country's reconstruction with contributions from global actors, the initiation of a reconciliation process inclusive of all societal groups—encompassing religious, sectarian, minority, and former regime elements uninvolved in crimes—and the establishment of justice, the integration of Syria into the international system through legal membership in international organizations, the establishment of diplomatic relations with all countries, and the attainment of international legitimacy would undoubtedly transform Syria into a more stable nation. Such a Syria would be a country where people live in peace and security, and the wounds of the past begin to heal.

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