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SYRIA'S URBICIDE

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AS A MEANS TO
CONSOLIDATE HOMOGENEITY

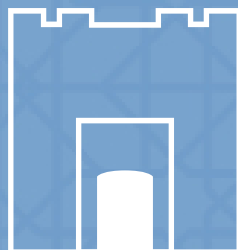
JULY 2019

SAWSAN ABU ZAINEDIN
HANI FAKHANI



Photo: Adaset Sam (Facebook page, @samlenses), Eastern Ghouta, 2014.

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

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Executive Summary

The Syrian regime has been significantly tampering with the built environment in Syria over the past years in order to realise and sustain political achievements. This paper explores this dimension of the Syrian conflict through the lens of urbicide. It argues that different violent urban arrangements - both destructive and constructive - have been enforced in the Syrian context to consolidate the regime's authoritarian power and eradicate socio-political diversity. These arrangements include:

- the indiscriminate, systematic destruction of residential areas and vital civilian facilities in opposition areas;
- the deliberate post-battle demolitions of residential neighbourhoods;
- systematic prolonged sieges and the weaponisation of aid delivery to besieged areas;
- forced eviction and population transfer;
- blocking return to recaptured opposition areas; and
- discriminatory reconstruction frameworks that favour regime cronies.

The paper concludes that this violent configuration of Syria's built environment is an attempt to eradicate the populations of opposition areas, hence, instating political homogeneity. It further serves economic interests, as it transforms the general conditions for capital accumulation in a way that fortifies the despotic character of the regime. Finally, this strategy also runs along sectarian lines, building on and sustaining Syria's socio-economic and political hierarchies.

Introduction

The hope for a democratic turn in Syria seems further from being realised than ever. The eight-year conflict has instead turned the country into what many have described as hell on earth (McKenzie 2018). Syria has witnessed a genocide (Carey 2013) that has taken the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and an urbicide (Sharp 2016) that has violently tampered with its built environment, reinforcing the homogenisation brought forth by the genocide. In order to understand this, damage to the built environment in Syria cannot be reduced to levels of destruction, or destruction cannot be merely treated as the physical manifestation or collateral damage of the conflict. The extent of devastation can only be assessed when looking at destruction in Syria as a deliberate act and a weapon of war, linked to post-conflict reconstruction and with far-reaching structural implications.

Urbanised Genocide

Genocide is defined as the deliberate act to kill or destroy a particular group of people (UN n.d.). Therefore, it is a systematic act to eradicate diversity. The word genocide has been appropriated in the urban sphere as urbicide. Through its application in different contexts, including the large infrastructure development projects of the 60s and 70s in the US, the Lebanese civil war in the 80s, the Bosnian war in the 90s, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, urbicide has been introduced as both a destructive and constructive phenomenon. Stephen Graham, who works extensively on the topic in the Palestinian/Israeli context, identifies three manifestations of urbicide: systematic destruction, denial of cities to particular groups, and exclusionary reconstruction frameworks (Graham 2003; 2004).

Deen Sharp took this concept further by arguing that the critical aspect of the application of urbicide is the political interests in what is being targeted (2016). He explains that acts of urbicide are intended to control complex urban arrangements and the material and social circulations within these arrangements. Building on Martin Coward's work (Coward 2007; 2008) in which urbicide is introduced as the deliberate destruction of shared spaces to eradicate socio-political heterogeneity, Sharp defines urbicide as the violent attempt to impose certain urban arrangements in an effort to enforce homogeneity, or eradicate plurality and diversity (Sharp 2016).

This paper will build on this definition in an attempt to explore the manifestation of urbicide in Syria, arguing that urban arrangements in the conflict have been manipulated by the Syrian regime to enforce political homogeneity that would further consolidate the regime's power in the post-conflict phase. The paper will analyse several examples from Greater Damascus (the capital and its suburbs) in order to demonstrate the destructive and constructive manifestations of urbicide.

Greater Damascus and the Battle over Land

Following the aggressive crackdown of the uprising in late 2011, the opposition launched a battle to take over Damascus. While the opposition failed to gain control over the city of Damascus specifically, it

managed to consolidate its grip over the capital’s suburbs. As a result, different neighbourhoods in the city (including Jobar, Qaboun and Barzeh) and its suburbs (including Douma, Harasta, Arbin and other towns in Eastern Ghouta, Darayya and Mouadamyia in Western Ghouta, and other towns in the southern and northern suburbs) became strongholds for the opposition in late 2012. This coincided with the opposition gradually gaining control over more territories across Syria (Archicivilians 2015) (see Figure 1).

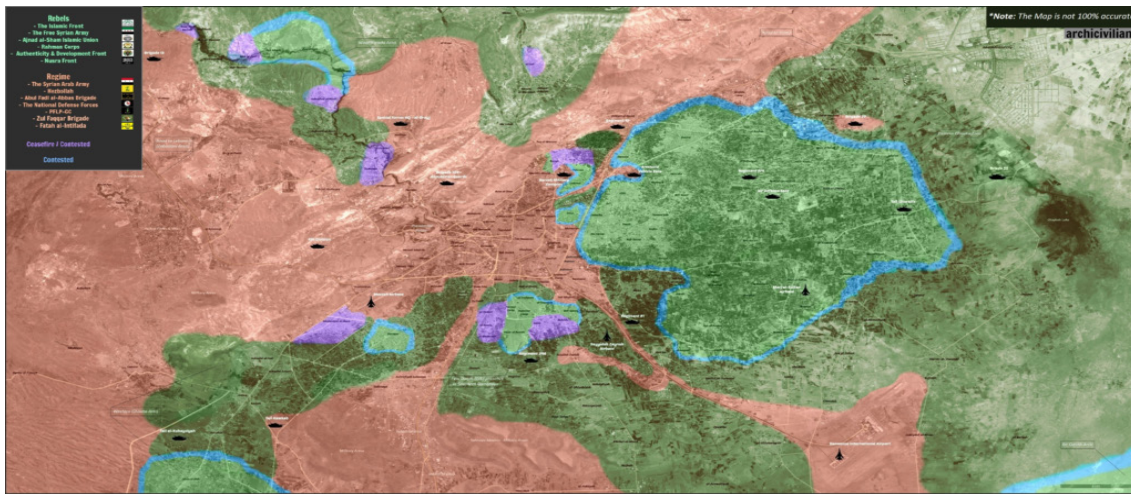


Figure 1: Areas of control in Damascus and its suburbs in late 2012 and early 2013. Green areas are under opposition control and red areas are under regime control (Archicivilians 2015).

The proximity of the opposition to the capital’s centre was viewed by the Syrian regime as a critical threat and unacceptable challenge to its sovereignty. Bashar Al Assad responded to this by vowing to crush “terrorism” with an “iron fist” (SANA 2012). To that aim, the regime spared no violent means in the attempt to recapture its lost territories, making no distinction between rebels and civilians, who were labelled as ‘terrorist embracers’.

The tactics employed by the regime in the war over Damascus were no different from those used elsewhere in the country: bombard, besiege, and evict through local reconciliation agreements. This strategy led to the death of thousands of civilians in opposition areas and eventually to the forced evacuation of hundreds of thousands of survivors. Not only did this change the map of military control, but it also tampered dramatically with the demographic composition of Syria (Amnesty International 2017).

In its battle to retake land, the regime politicised, militarised, and weaponised a wide range of urban practices. This section provides an overview of some of the practices that were systematically employed by the regime, as part of its strategy to recapture land.

Systematic Destruction

Indiscriminate bombardment leading to mass destruction has perhaps been the regime’s most frequently used weapon against opposition-held areas. A 2019 report by REACH mapped 35,722 partly damaged or fully destroyed buildings in Damascus suburbs alone. It reported that in early December 2017, 71% of all structures in Ein Terma and 93% in Jobar neighbourhoods were damaged or destroyed. The destruction was not limited to the frontline areas, but extended deep into opposition territories, resulting in entire cities and towns razed to the ground. Regime-held territories, just on the opposite

side of the frontlines, witnessed comparably low levels of destruction (REACH 2019) (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Map of Damascus showing Jobar District (opposition-held) to the right, and Qassaa District (regime-held) to the left (Google Earth June 2019).

The regime relied heavily on the use of barrel bombs made of metal cylinders filled with metal fragments and explosives which were usually plunged from helicopters causing indiscriminate and imprecise mass destruction. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported the use of 12,858 barrel bombs in 2016 alone (SNHR 2017a). A study conducted by Amnesty International, measuring the death toll of eight specific barrel-bomb attacks on Aleppo, found that they resulted in the death of 188 civilians and only one rebel fighter (2015a). These findings highlight the indiscriminate nature of barrel bombs. A report by the SNHR that documented the death of thousands of Syrians, further implicates the regime as the party responsible for the by far greatest number of civilian deaths (SNHR 2017b).

Discussing the regime’s strategy of destruction, Leila Vignal concludes that its scale, spatial distribution, and targets (which she states are mainly residential areas and vital service structures) “suggest that destruction is not simply collateral damage (see Figure 3). Rather, it is an instrument of warfare”. She further argues that the destruction “was meant to eradicate the population of opposition areas, and to give lessons to the groups of regime-held areas” (Vignal 2014).

EASTERN GHOUTA SATELLITE DETECTED DAMAGE POINTS (APRIL AND SEPTEMBER 2018)



Figure 3: Destruction levels in Eastern Ghouta (REACH 2019)

Post-battle Demolitions

When the regime had land access to opposition-held territory, it tended to resort to explosives and bulldozers - rather than barrel bombs - for the demolition of these areas after the fighting had stopped. Entire neighbourhoods in the city of Damascus were deliberately demolished by the Syrian regime after it had regained control over them. Regime officials justified this by claiming that these neighbourhoods were built illegally and required redeveloping according to planning needs. Many residents of these areas, however, viewed this as collective punishment, insisting that many had valid legal claims to their properties and that demolitions took place with little or no warning and no compensation (HRW 2014).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported the demolition of thousands of residential buildings in five opposition-held neighbourhoods in Damascus between 2012 and 2013. The report stated that demolitions served no necessary military purpose and were therefore unlawful and thus constituted war crimes. Areas of demolitions included 41.5 hectares in the Mazzeh area, 15.5 in Tadamoun, 14.5 in Harran al-`Awamid, 5.3 in Barzeh, and 18 in Qaboun (see Figure 4). Targeted neighbourhoods in Qaboun were razed to the ground immediately after the government pushed back an opposition offensive in 2012. The regime-instated governor of these areas claimed that those demolitions were essential to drive out opposition fighters (Human Rights Watch 2013).

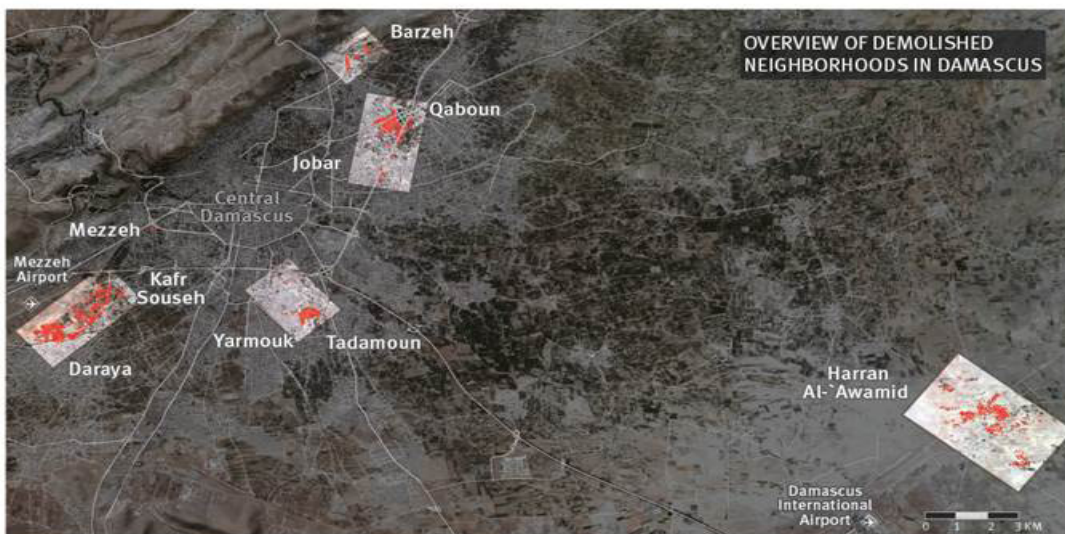


Figure 4: Overview of demolished neighbourhoods in Damascus by the end of 2013 (HRW 2014).

Siege and the Politics of Aid

Another tactic that was employed as part of the regime's urban war was siege: restricting movement and cutting off all food and medical supplies to opposition-held areas. In its Siege Watch project, PAX monitored the sieges and concluded that an approximate 2.5 million Syrians lived in besieged areas between 2012 and 2018. Its final report says:

The Syrian government, along with its allies Russia and Iran, were responsible for the vast majority of sieges and were the only side to impose sieges in a widespread, systematic manner across the country. These government sieges were a form of collective

punishment that often ended in the complete collapse of targeted communities and large-scale forced population transfers as part of a long-term demographic engineering strategy (PAX 2019, 11).

Eastern Ghouta was besieged in April 2013 soon after it came under the control of the opposition. Tens of thousands of individuals subsequently lived in dire circumstance, relying on man-made tunnels to smuggle food and medicine (Human Rights Council 2018). In 2015 Amnesty International stated that the 165,000 residents of Eastern Ghouta were “Left to die under siege” (Amnesty International 2015b). The siege was described by Pax as a strategy of “surrender or die” (PAX 2019) and by the UN Inquiry commission as “barbaric and medieval” (UN News 2018).

Other areas in Greater Damascus were subject to the same tactics, with varying levels of intensity. In 2016 Siege Watch documented 39 besieged communities in Greater Damascus, only 15 of which were recognised by UNOCHA (PAX 2016) (see Figure 5). Other areas listed by Siege Watch maintained some degree of accessibility, although movement to and from these areas was severely restricted through regime checkpoints. In all scenarios, aid was contentious.

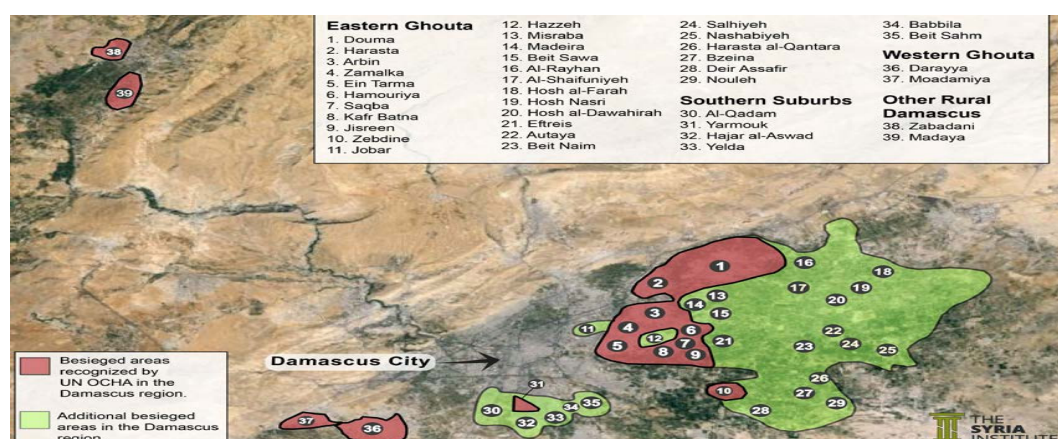


Figure 5: Besieged areas in Damascus and its suburbs in 2016 (Pax 2016).

UN Resolutions 2139 and 2165 demanded that all fighting parties, and in particular the Syrian authorities, end the siege and attacks on civilians and allow unfettered cross-line humanitarian aid access (UNSCR 2014). Despite the UN’s relative success in brokering humanitarian access across borders not controlled by the Syrian regime, the resolutions were not enforced in besieged areas, where cross-line operations had to be permitted by the regime. This was documented by the Syria Campaign, which also reported that the regime weaponised the UN’s aid delivery operations and enforced conditions and terms leading to international aid being delivered mostly to regime-held areas. According to their report, only 4% of aid sent to Damascus was delivered to besieged areas in the first eight months of 2015. The report was signed by over fifty Syrian NGOs who saw this as a virtual submission of the UN to the regime’s conditions. Therefore, they accused the UN of “taking sides” and not acting according to its principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality (The Syria Campaign 2016).

Local Truces and Forced Displacement

Besieged populations had only one exit: the UN-brokered local truces. Amnesty International reported:

Local agreements have increasingly become one of the Syrian government's key strategies to force the opposition's surrender. The agreements are presented by the government and its allies as a "reconciliation" effort, but, in reality, they come after prolonged unlawful sieges and bombardment and typically result not only in the evacuation of members of non-state armed groups but also in the mass displacement of civilians (2017, 6).

Although the Syrian regime presented these truces as part of a strategy for national reconciliation in its public discourse, they in fact meant the surrender of the opposition and the eviction of fighters, and, at times, whole populations. Members of the regime's People's Assembly and media even described these agreements as efforts "to enhance the victories achieved by the Syrian Arab Army against the terrorist organisations" (Hinnebusch and Imady 2018, 2). Short term, the truces undoubtedly stopped the violence in their areas of application. In the long term, however, they can clearly be regarded as "policies of forced conscription and displacement, loss of property of displaced, razing of informal settlements and lack of regime release of detainees" (Adleh & Favier 2017).

Darayya's four-year siege ended with a local truce that forced its entire population to leave the city. An Amnesty International report describing the agreement stated, "then US Secretary of State John Kerry was in Geneva holding talks on Syria with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. Reuters reported that Kerry said the Syrian government had "forced the surrender" of the city, while Lavrov described the agreement as an "example" to replicate" (Amnesty International 2017, 29). UNOCHA, on the other hand, issued a statement saying that "agreements resulting in a mass evacuation of civilians after a prolonged period of besiegement do not comply with international humanitarian law and human rights law", adding "What happened in Darayya should not be precedent setting for other besieged areas in Syria" (OCHA 2016).

These statements, however, had little impact on the regime's strategy to forcibly displace the population of opposition areas. Eastern Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, and other areas were all subjected to forced displacement after Darayya. The Eastern Ghouta agreement in the Spring of 2018 forcibly displaced over 60,000 people to the rebel-held Syrian north. The remainder of the population either fled to aid centres where they were then detained, escaped to surrounding regime-held areas, or stayed in their destroyed towns, which had been taken over by regime forces.

Blocking Return

The forced displacement operations were followed by a strategy of blocking return to certain neighbourhoods (HRW 2018). Since their recapture, access to areas such as Darayya, Qaboun, al-Tadamun and Wadi Barada has been strictly controlled or completely blocked by regime forces. Only a small number of people were allowed to enter and leave on the same day to check on their properties. They were granted this special access either because they were able to pay substantial bribes or had connections with high-profile military officials.

HRW reported that two years after recapturing Darayya, regime forces were still imposing restricted access through checkpoints and physical barriers. State media, on the other hand, claimed that the residents of Darayya were returning to their properties (Reuters 2018). There had indeed been an announcement by the Darayya Executive Office permitting people to enter Darayya. However, residents interviewed by HRW said that only those who had registered to enter from a certain point in the town were granted access and only to check on their homes. No one could actually remain; they had to leave on the same day. HRW concluded that this arbitrary restriction on movement and denying people access to their properties is an imposition of collective punishment and violates human rights and humanitarian law.

Similarly, in Qaboun access to certain neighbourhoods remains completely blocked, while other neighbourhoods have restricted access. HRW further documented that new large-scale waves of demolitions had been carried out, targeting buildings that were still intact and inhabitable with no warning to residents or alternative housing or compensation made available (HRW 2018) (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Satellite image of a large blast cloud from the demolition of a residential apartment building with high explosives (Digital Globe 2018).

In al-Tadamun, a Damascus provisional committee announced that only ten per cent of the neighbourhood housing was inhabitable and that residents whose houses had not been designated as part of this ten per cent were not allowed to return to their properties. The Syrian state newspaper al-Watan reported that the committee's report was seen by the residents as subjective and unfair (al-Watan 2018). These views are understandable, given that residents of other areas, which have witnessed large destruction such as al-Zabadani and al-Mouadamyia, had returned and been granted access to their properties (HRW 2018). The disparity in the regime's management of recaptured areas indicates a plan to redevelop and reassign, or impose state ownership (or that of its allies) over areas with strategic economic and/or political importance (see Figure 7).

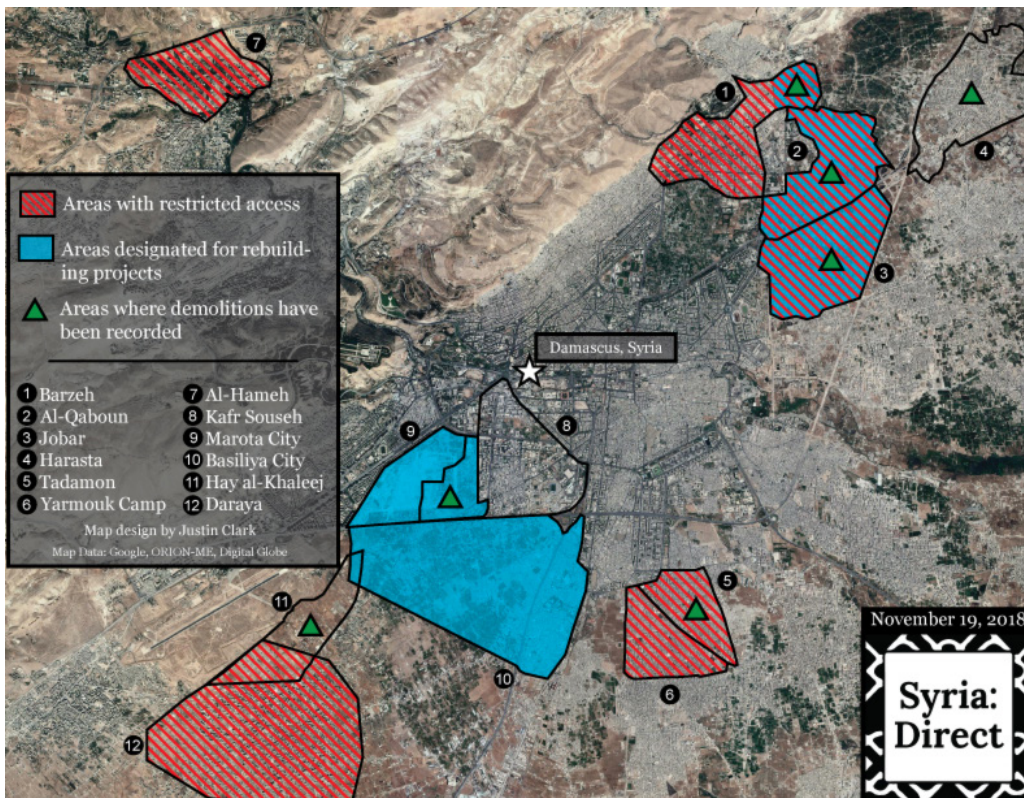


Figure 7: Urban interventions in some areas in Damascus and its suburbs (Syria Direct 2018).

Blocking residents' return to their properties was not only enforced by restricting access and demolishing properties. Another widely used but less direct tactic was tampering with Housing, Land, and Property rights (HLP). This includes the targeted destruction of HLP records and infrastructure, as well as the falsification of transactions, among other practices, facilitating the expropriation of housing and land owned by people belonging to certain population groups and awarding them to others (Unruh 2016).

Destructive Reconstruction

Within this context of militarised spatial interventions, the Syrian regime has embarked on its reconstruction process with the development of Marota City (see Figure 8). This project sets the baseline for the regime's intended vision of the reconstruction of Syria. Marota City is being developed in the heart of Damascus, on top of the razed buildings of the former informal settlement Basateen al-Razi, which has seen anti-regime protests at the beginning of the revolution. It is the pilot project for Decree 66, which provides the legal and financial foundation to expropriate areas of informal settlements and to redevelop them through private sector investments. The strict and excessive procedural requirements of Decree 66, coupled with the overall socio-economic and political disadvantage and vulnerability of Basateen Alrazi's residents, enabled local authorities to expel most of them as well as deprive them of rights in the new development. Residents were offered unfair or no compensation at all, and the neighbourhood's development was opened up to private investors, mostly regime cronies (Daher 2018).

In 2018, the Syrian regime announced a new problematic law, Law No. 10 (Amended into Law 42/ 2018). This is effectively an expansion of Decree 66, taking its remit outside informal areas by

empowering Local Administrative Units (LAUs) to create zones within their areas to be designated for reconstruction.



Figure 8: One of the Luxury projects which received planning permission in Marota City (Source: <http://marotacity.sy>).

These new laws clearly pave the way for a reformed urban administration and housing and land ownership system, as well as setting the blueprint for the reconstruction of Syria. When regarding this within the context of the conflict, and considering the regime's actions related to recaptured opposition areas, it can be easily surmised that a strategic manipulation of the power of urban planning is underway, in order to engineer demographic change based on economic and political interests. This, in turn, presents a grim outlook of a homogenised Syria, where the regime has an even tighter grip over the nation.

Different areas across Syria have been designated for reconstruction under Decree 66 and Law No. 10. Basilia City is a 900-hectare development (four times the size of Marota), planned according to Decree 66 in the southern areas of Damascus, that is currently being reviewed for implementation. It will include Darayya, al-Qadam, Mezzeh, Kafr Sousa, and other neighbourhoods, which had been selected by the Damascus governorate under Law No. 10. While the planned development has evoked 21,000 objections by affected residents, 17,000 of these have allegedly already been resolved, according to the executive director of Decree 66 (Damascus Governorate 2018). Negotiations are ongoing between the Public Corporation for Housing and Russian companies to set up joint investments for residential projects in the area (Hurriya Press 2018).

Other development plans are presumably also underway or will soon follow. In a meeting between relevant ministers and the governors of Damascus and its suburbs, Prime Minister Imad Khamis emphasised the need for a new identity when it comes to regional planning, in line with the new conditions for rezoning the areas of Eastern Ghouta, Barzeh, Jobar, and al-Qaboun among others. He stated that the reconstruction of these areas would begin immediately, requiring the urgent removal of dangerous buildings first and rubble second (al-Watan 2018).

The Urbicide of Syria

The regime's weaponisation of urban practices, both destructive and constructive, targets the entire country. If we examine its practices since the beginning of the conflict through the lens of urbicide, as identified by Sharp, we can argue that the regime deliberately enforced certain urban arrangements in order to realise and sustain political achievements. The destruction of buildings and infrastructure, prolonged sieges on cities, forced evictions and geographic displacement, demolition of recaptured neighbourhoods, and new legislations reconfiguring the morphology and demographic make-up of cities, can all be understood as attempts to eradicate the populations of opposition areas. In other words, these practices serve to instate political homogeneity in Syria.

Syria's urbicide does not just seek to achieve political gains, however, but is also driven by economic objectives. In Homs, destruction and eviction have reportedly targeted neighbourhoods that were part of a controversial neo-liberal master plan pre-dating the conflict, called Homs Dream (PAX 2017). Allegedly this plan, born in 2007, entailed arbitrary land and property confiscation and demolition. The scale, pattern, and spatial distribution of the destruction and eviction in Homs were seen by many as indicative that Homs Dream was being brought back to life and finally implemented - a feat made possible through the war and the city's participation in the revolution (Najm Aldeen 2018).

In an extensive study of the political economic context of Syria's reconstruction, economist Joseph Daher states that current projects and other urban measures "should not be understood the way they are presented by the regime; namely as necessary and "technocratic" steps aimed at overcoming the ravages of war and destruction. Instead, they are better understood as means to transform and strengthen the general conditions for capital accumulation". He predicts that "the Syrian government's reconstruction plan, which remains underdeveloped, will fortify and strengthen the patrimonial and despotic character of the regime and its networks, while being employed as a means to punish or discipline former rebellious populations" (Daher 2018). This means that from an economical perspective, urban arrangements have been appropriated to further consolidate the power of a business elite made up of regime-supporters and allies, at the expense of residents' rights to their properties.

The violent reconfiguration of Syria's urban structure also runs along sectarian lines. Neighbourhoods targeted by bombardment and demolition, had been predominantly populated by Sunni residents, while Alawite and mixed neighbourhoods had been largely spared, unless their destruction served certain military interest (Poppe & Timreck 2018). Moreover, the manipulation of HLP rights, for example through the falsification of transactions, is actually benefiting members of particular population groups, as properties in evacuated former opposition areas are reportedly being awarded to Shia and Alawite loyalists and fighters (PAX 2017).

Regardless of the drivers, the Syrian regime's barbaric and sustained attack on civilians, orchestrated humanitarian crisis, and scorched-earth policy across vast expanses of the country, was a blatant attempt to eradicate Syria's insurgent population. The forced displacement perpetrated under the guise of reconciliation, and the continued bombardment of Idlib after most evicted communities had been

moved there, can only be seen as another attempt to eradicate those who survived. Wiping entire neighbourhoods, expropriating the dissident communities of their homes and awarding these new or redeveloped properties to loyal citizens and militia fighters further serves to eradicate the threat of future insurgency. All in all, the regime's war tactics bear clear markings of a plan to establish a new social and demographic order, ensuring the homogenisation of post-war Syria.

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Sawsan Abou Zainedin presented this paper at the keynote session of the 5th Lemkin Reunion, held in March 2019 and organized by the Shattuck Center at the School of Public Policy, Central European University in Budapest. Each year the Shattuck Center hosts the Lemkin Reunion, a gathering named in honor of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who lost his family in the Holocaust and first coined the word genocide. He campaigned tirelessly during his life to ensure that the crime of genocide was enshrined in international law. The Lemkin Reunion gathers policymakers involved in responding to atrocity crimes and assess the lessons they learned.

The 5th Lemkin Reunion

March 2019 marks eight years since people in a wide web of villages and cities across the Syrian landscape took to the streets in defiance of the Assad family's rule. Initially responding with gunfire, imprisonment and torture, the regime's strategy evolved into the carpet bombing and mass destruction of whole rural and urban communities, culminating in the forced transfer of all remaining residents from areas such as Ghouta and eastern Aleppo, which remain largely uninhabited. Although the fighting has ebbed, the war in Syria has not ended and a political settlement has not been reached. The near ten million displaced, mainly in harsh conditions in and around Syria, do not feel safe to return to their neighbourhoods and villages. However, the Syrian government has promulgated laws enabling the construction of development projects where displaced communities once resided with no or few guarantees of compensation for displaced property owners. One such project, Marota City, plotted over the demolished informal district of Basateen al-Razi, is already under construction. What will reconstruction under the current conditions serve? Under what conditions can reconstruction in Syria be equitable?

[Other publications from the 5th Lemkin Reunion](#) can be found in the papers section of the Aleppo Project website.

**Shattuck Center
on Conflict,
Negotiation and Recovery**

Central European University

Nador u. 9 | 1051 Budapest |
Hungary Phone:
+36.1.327.3000 | ext. 2614

aleppo@spp.ceu.edu