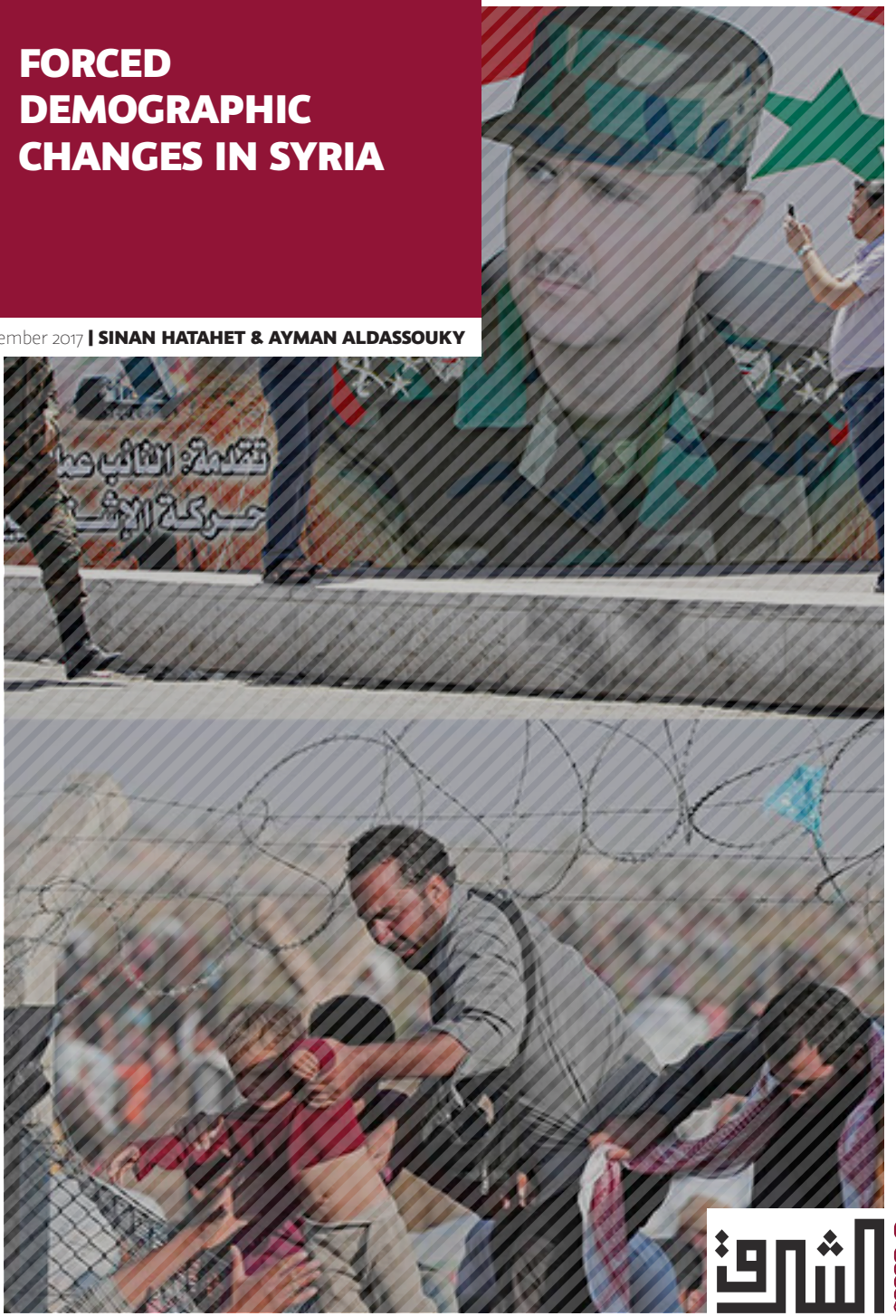
FORCED DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN SYRIA

September 2017 | SINAN HATAHET & AYMAN ALDASSOUKY



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Executive Summary

■ In the absence of well-established political institutions, Baathist leaders have used sectarian connections, their ideological appeal, and command of military forces to consolidate their authority, and have actively prevented the formation of an inclusive Syrian national identity.

■ Hafiz Assad employed Syrian sectarian divisions in manipulating local communities by comporting himself as their de-facto arbiter. Similarly, he has fueled ethnic and religious conflicts in neighboring countries to distract his regional foes and adversaries.

■ A demographic crisis emerged prior to the popular uprising in 2011, partially as a result of the authoritarian modernization and economic liberalization pursued under the rule of Bashar Assad, in addition to the 2009 drought.

■ The Syrian conflict has had a disastrous impact on the Syrian population as demographic indices show: Syria's annual population growth rate has dropped from 2.5 percent in 2010 to 0.3 percent in 2016, while its annual death rate has doubled over the past 5 years, and its total population has dropped from 21 million to 14 million over the same period.

■ A comparison of demographic indices between 2010 and 2016 reveals that the Sunni Arab majority was the community in the Syrian population worst affected by the ongoing war. They constitute nearly 70 percent of refugees and the majority of IDPs, and the areas in which they live have been among those most damaged by the war, according to data from U.N. agencies.

■ The Syrian regime has exercised collective punishment against opposition communities and has massively displaced civilians from key strategic areas around Damascus, Homs, the coastal region, and Aleppo. It has conducted indiscriminate aerial bombardments and

shelling, placed security restrictions on the movements of civilians, besieged communities supportive of the opposition, and has concluded U.N.-facilitated evacuation agreements for those populations with the encouragement of the Russian Army and Iranian IRGC. Early reports suggest that at least 400,000 civilians have been compulsorily displaced by regime forces over the last 5 years; this figure does not include IDPs who willingly fled combat areas.

■ In Syria, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) has committed war crimes against Sunni Arab dissidents and ethnic Kurds. The terrorist organization has persecuted non-complaint Arab tribes in the Deir Ezzor region and has forcibly displaced Kurds from towns in Raqqa, Hassaka and Aleppo provinces. ISIS literature does not discriminate against people based on ethnic or racial affiliation, but rather on the basis of religion and loyalty to the Caliphate. Nevertheless, the fighting between ISIS and the YPG (the People's Protection Units) in Syria has led to the development of a specific ISIS policy towards the Kurds, especially after the intervention of the international coalition.

■ Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Network of Human Rights have found evidence that proves YPG involvement in ethnic cleansing against Arabs and Turkmens in Tal Abyad district in Raqqa province and Al Kahbour Valley in Al Hassaka. Further reports show that similar acts have been carried out against other non-Kurdish ethnic groups in Qamishlo and Al Khabour Valley. YPG and Asayish police forces have been accused of illegal and arbitrary arrests on false charges of terrorism, the confiscation and destruction of dissidents' private property, and threats of international coalition airstrikes. Nevertheless, empirical data shows that the YPG forced displacement policy is limited in its geographic scope, and is limited to areas of strategic importance to the YPG project of expansion.

■ The Syrian regime and human rights organizations have accused armed opposition groups of committing war crimes against religious and ethnic minorities, including indiscriminate shelling and forced

displacement. These allegations mainly refer to events that occurred between 2013 and 2016 in Latakia, Hama, Homs, Damascus, Idlib, Hassaka and Raqqa. There is insufficient empirical data to prove the existence of an opposition ethnic cleansing policy. However, opposition armed groups can be blamed for their failures to establish rule of law, prevent acts of terror, or bring culprits to justice. Indeed, even though the mainstream opposition rejects acts of terror and discrimination, it has failed to prevent the radicalization of individuals who have later on joined Al Qaeda or ISIS.

Introduction

In a speech delivered at the opening of a conference held by his Foreign and Expatriates Ministry on August 20, 2017, Bashar Assad said that "While it is true that Syria has lost its youth and infrastructure, it is also true that it has won a healthier and more homogeneous society."[1] A historical examination of the Syrian conflict would reveal that the Syrian regime and its allies are the main architects of ongoing demographic engineering in the country, but not the sole perpetrators. Indeed, while the massive civilian exodus from Aleppo[2], Damascus[3] and the countryside around Homs[4] strongly indicates the existence of a regime ethnic cleansing policy, we can see similar tactics being used by the PYD, ISIS and other radical armed groups. Hence, it is crucial for any future Syrian administration to grasp the significance of the demographic changes undergone during the war years in Syria in order to reestablish social harmony.

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It is worth noting that demographic engineering has had disproportionately important consequences in the Syrian context. What started as peaceful demonstrations with demands for regime change has quickly escalated into a civil war which has nurtured pre-existing sectarian and ethnic grievances. This sensitivity towards ethnic and religious demographic changes is particularly felt in the early denunciation of potential ethnic cleansing even though mass incidents only began to emerge in the later stages of the war.

Historically, Syria has had two aggrieved communities that have failed to completely assimilate into the larger society: the Kurds and the Alawites. The Kurdish identity is nationalistic and tightly engaged with their counterparts in Iraq and Turkey. This is especially the case of Jazira Kurds, whom the Syrian state has deprived of their cultural rights and actively discriminated against. The Alawite identity, on the other hand, is sectarian and mostly influenced by the modern Syrian state and the Assad family in particular.

Historically, Syria has had two aggrieved communities that have failed to completely assimilate into the larger society: the Kurds and the Alawites. The Kurdish identity is nationalistic and tightly engaged with their counterparts in Iraq and Turkey

In contrast, other religious and sectarian minorities were either too small or too geographically dispersed to form a strong communitarian affiliation. Thus, they were either commonly identified as Sunni Muslims like the Turkmens and Chechens, or as Arabs like the Christians and Ismailis. Consequently, the mainstream Syrian identity throughout the twentieth century was Pan-Arabist with somewhat of a Muslim character so as not to alienate the Sunni Muslim majority.

Even though Sunni Arabs constitute a majority in the country, their identity is less coherent and consistent than those of the homogenous Kurdish and Alawi communities. Indeed, their local, regional, political and tribal affiliations often trump their common ethnicity and sect. Nevertheless, if the memory of historical injustices are a crucial part of Kurdish identity, and if the fear of persecution a common factor in the development of the Alawite identity; then aspirations for unity and integration are the common factors of the Sunni Arab identity. This reality is particularly reflected in their endorsement of Pan-Arabism as an "inclusive" national identity capable of rallying other sectarian and religious identities.

This study attempts to bring attention to the phenomena of forced displacement in Syria. Although it is extremely difficult and very early to reach definitive conclusions, it is still possible to identify general trends within the data available. We hope that the findings we present will encourage interested parties to further investigate demographic changes in Syria and their effects on the future of the country.

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Historical background

In the aftermath of the First World War, France and Great Britain divided the Near East into fragile states with mismatched geographical and demographic dimensions. Over the next century these went through three phases: first as "colonial states" under foreign mandates until they gained independence shortly after the end of the Second World War; then as "post-independence states" that assumed sovereign functions for a short while until the Cold War began, and finally as "authoritarian states" that emerged in the course of military coups in the 1950s and 1960s and lasted until the Arab Spring.[5] Unlike other parts of the world, these states are neither the product of the natural evolution of history, nor a product of popular mobilization, but rather a top-to-bottom creation, maintained and sustained by years of elite rule. This setup proved to be beneficial to the colonial powers, enabling them to act by exploiting intercommunal conflicts and differences, and later proved essential to the Americans and the Soviet Union, who used this situation to empower friendly autocrats and proxies. Nevertheless, these policies have mainly succeeded in sustaining a perpetual conflict of interest within local communities, and have further consolidated differences in identities among them.

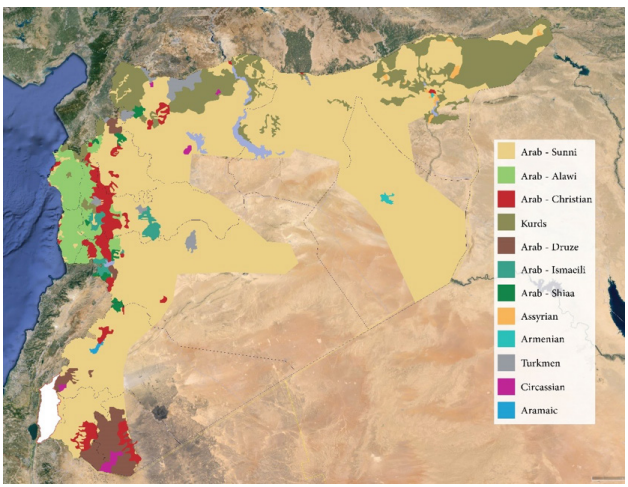

Figure 1: The distribution of ethnic/denominational groups across Syria (Note: The colors represent areas in which the different groups are concentrated, not necessarily where they are the absolute majority)[6]

After independence, the Syrian elite endorsed Arab nationalism as a glue for the Syrian 'mosaic', bringing Arabic-speaking minorities and the Sunni majority together. The most successful political elites and political movements of the 1950s championed Syria as a part of a wider Arab nation.[7] The Baath Party was no exception: it was portrayed as a pan-Arab project that called for unity, liberty and socialism, and it succeeded in attracting minorities and rural Sunnis who felt ignored by the oligarchical political urban elite.[8] Yet, the Baathist seizure of power in 1963 was widely viewed as one coup in a long line of coups. The new regime was not the product of mass mobilization but rather a plan conceived by a handful of military officers. In the absence of well-established political institutions, Baathist coup leaders used their sectarian connections, ideological appeal, and command of the military forces to consolidate their authority.

Similarly, under Hafez Assad's rule, the regime established a dual power structure, composed of an inner informal core together with a formal outer governmental structure. The inner core is essentially composed of the state security apparatus, with the main objective of controlling the country's politics, economy, and society

Similarly, under Hafez Assad's rule, the regime established a dual power structure, composed of an inner informal core together with a formal outer governmental structure. The inner core is essentially composed of the state security apparatus, with the main objective of controlling the country's politics, economy, and society. The Sunni peasantry and old bourgeoisie were allowed to participate in governance but rarely in the inner core, which was mainly reserved to Assad's kin and sect. This structure was engineered to create an appearance of balance in Syrian society and to maintain a sense of consensus among its communities' elites.

This structure attests to Assad's sensitivity to the question of sect and race within Syrian society. Yet, instead of promoting and encouraging a more inclusive national identity, he has chosen to preserve subnational affiliations. Indeed, by maintaining the Syrian fragmented societal order, the Assads have been able to exercise greater control

over different local communities, posing as their de-facto arbiter, and pitting them against one another in a classic divide-and-rule strategy.

Following years of foreign interventions in Syrian internal politics, Assad proceeded to destabilize his direct neighbors while forging nested and complex relations with regional powers. Ethnicity and sect were once more his tools to stabilize his regime within the region. For instance, Damascus maintained a close relationship with the Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK), hosting its leader Abdullah Ocalan in the early 1990s and providing it sanctuary in the Syrian-controlled Lebanese Bekaa Valley until 1998.[9] Syria support to the PKK was not ideological or built on reciprocal principles: Syrian Kurds were in the meantime persecuted and deprived of their cultural rights. Assad chose to support the PKK because the latter was engaged in an armed insurgency against the Turkish state, a regional power perceived as a threat to the pro-Soviet bloc Syria had adhered itself to. Likewise, Damascus intervened on behalf of the Maronites in the Lebanese Civil war in 1976, but turned against one of their leaders, Michel Aoun, in 1989; it also actively participated in the ousting of Yasser Arafat while supporting the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and targeting left-wing Lebanese militias and Palestinian resistance armed groups. Arguably, Assad believed that this rogue behavior would distract his regional foes, and render his rule indispensable to international powers vying for regional stability.

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The roots of a crisis

Hafez Assad never implemented a policy of demographic change, instead manipulating Syrian ethnic and sectarian communities, pitting them against each other and his antagonists, and actively prevented the forging of a cohesive national identity. However, the policies led by Bashar Assad unraveled the sense of balance his father had created, and a demographic crisis gradually took shape due to the following factors:

1- Modernizing authoritarianism: Bashar Assad encouraged his close kin to switch from being military men to businessmen. He also initiated a reconciliation process with the urban population at the expense of the regime's formal association with the peasantry and military. This policy disrupted a major pillar of the stability of the Assad regime.

Hafez Assad never implemented a policy of demographic change, instead manipulating Syrian ethnic and sectarian communities, pitting them against each other and his antagonists, and actively prevented the forging of a cohesive national identity

2- Economic liberalization: The economy under Bashar Assad rule's went through several cycles of liberalization, resulting in cumulatively greater gains for the private sector. At the center of his new order were businessmen who had created monopolies in the service and industry sectors. It is true that the Syrian economy experienced an average annual growth rate of 4.7 percent[10] between 2005–2011 but this was at the expense of a growing disparity between rich and poor. A new service-based economy emerged while traditional artisan manufacturing was devastated by foreign competition.[11] Crony capitalists extended their grip on the economy while the former rural base of the regime grew increasingly alienated.

3- The 2009 drought crisis: This crisis led to massive waves of migration from rural eastern provinces to urban western Provinces. Demographically it led to a decrease in the Assyrian population, which preferred to to immigrate to Europe and the U.S., and an increase in the Kurdish population around Damascus and Aleppo. It also led to a decline in population in the rural Jazira region and the emergence of precarious socioeconomic conditions for Kurdish IDPs.

These demographic, economic, political, and social crises eventually caught up with other factors and climaxed in the March 2011 protests. The latter gradually evolved into an open war with direct regional and international interventions on behalf of different ethnic and sectarian communities. Iran and Russia supported religious minorities, Turkey and the GCC countries assisted Sunni Arabs, and the Americans trained and equipping the Kurds in later stages of the war. All wars produce

All wars produce demographic changes: some are natural results of the fighting such as migration, decreased fertility rates, an increased mortality rate and so on, while others are the result of systematic policies adopted by the parties to the conflict, including forced displacement, genocide, and population replacement

demographic changes: some are natural results of the fighting such as migration, decreased fertility rates, an increased mortality rate and so on, while others are the result of systematic policies adopted by the parties to the conflict, including forced displacement, genocide, and population replacement. The rest of the paper will attempt to shed light on these factors and their impact on the Syrian population.

Syrian Demographics in Numbers

In 2010, the United Nations projected that the Syria population would reach 22.6 million by the end of 2015 due to a healthy population growth rate of 2.5 percent.[12] However, after six years of war, Syrian population growth rate declined far below expectations, with an estimated growth rate of only 0.3 percent.[13] The direct causes of this population decline are high migration rates, low birth rates and high mortality rates.

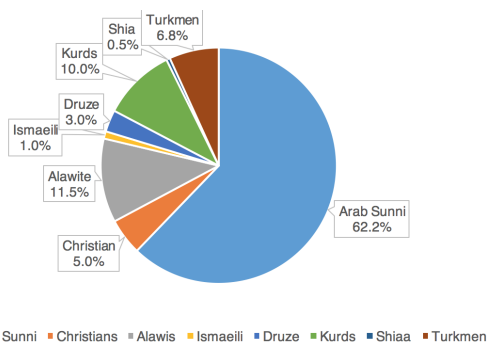

Figure 2: 2011 Population[14]

Figure 2 shows population distribution in Syria according to ethnic and religious affiliations before the Arab Spring. Sunni Muslims (including Arabs, Turkmens and Kurds) make up a combined 79 percent of the population (respectively 62.2%, 6.8%, 10%), followed by Alawites who make up 11.5 percent. The World Bank estimated the Syrian population at 21 million inhabitants in 2010.[15]

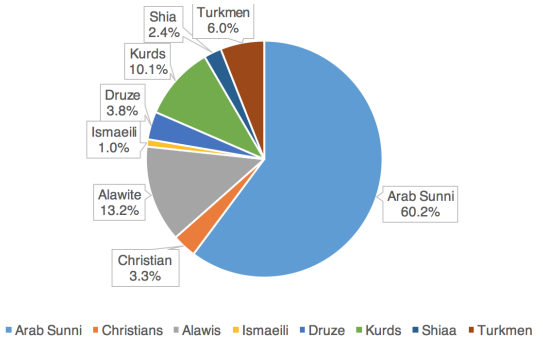

Figure 3: 2016 Population[16]

Figure 3, on the other hand, shows the demographics of Syria after 6 years of war. Comparing migration and asylum statistics with death and mortality rates shows a decline in the Sunni Arab population from 62.2% to 60.2%, which is predictable since the Sunni Arabs have been worst affected by the war (Figure 4 shows that Sunnis constitute a higher proportion of Syrian refugees than any other group).

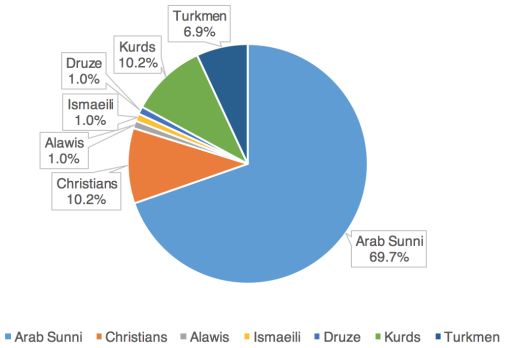

Figure 4: Refugees by sect[17]

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered 5.2 million Syrians thus far,[18] but that figure undercounts the actual number of refugees by at least 20 percent. Indeed, the number of inhabitants of Syria in 2017 is estimated at approximately 14 million, from which we can deduct the 456,000 Syrians killed as a result of the war.[19]

Alawites and Shiites numbers increased due to:

1- The relatively low migration rates within the Alawite community, who make up less than 1 percent of Syrian refugees.[20]

2- The increasing number of those within the Sunni and Alawite communities who are converting to Shiism,[21] and the settlement of the families of pro-Iranian militiamen along the Syrian–Lebanese border.[22] [23] Unconfirmed reports estimate a Shia population increase from roughly 100,000 in 2010 to around 350,000 in 2017.

3- Sunni population growth rates have fallen considerably in comparison to those of the non-Sunni population, mainly because of higher migration and mortality rates.[24]

The available statistics reveal that most ethnic and sectarian groups have more or less preserved their share of the national population, with the exception of the Shia, who have nearly quadrupled their presence in the country. However, a further examination of the data shows that broad demographic shifts have occurred. Despite the difficulty of accessing statistics about internally displaced persons, the available data shows an internal displacement of 6.5 million Syrians.[25] This figure includes approximately two million persons displaced from areas controlled by the opposition to areas controlled by the Syrian Regime (see Figure 5). *Next Page*

Macro-Level Observations

The aforementioned data is based on statistics compiled and published by multiple sources including the U.N. and its agencies, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the World Bank, and local reports. It is difficult to reach conclusive observations before conducting in-depth field research. However, since access to the most affected areas is still restricted for various security reasons, this paper has relied on the available information to be able to come to the following tentative conclusions:

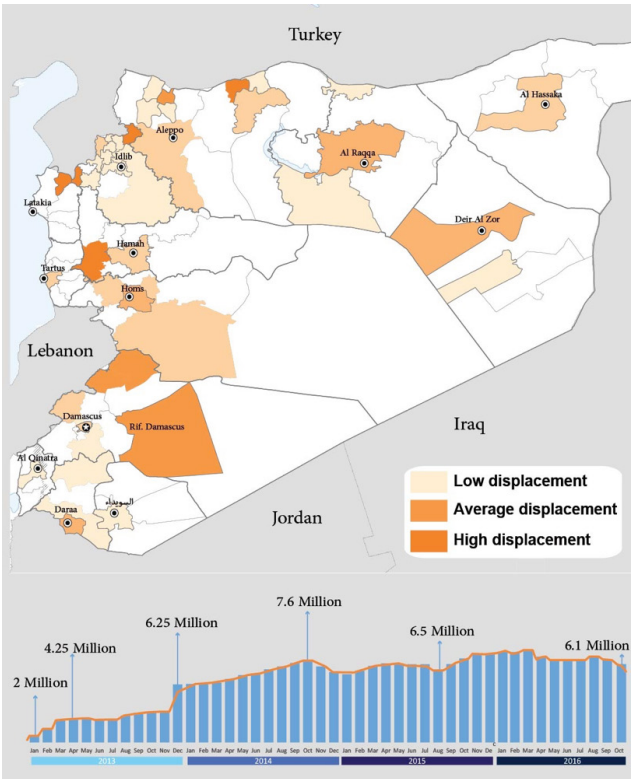

Figure 5 shows displacement in Syria during the war years (courtesy of UNHCR)

Opposition-held areas are the worst affected: The areas controlled by Sunni opposition groups experienced the largest displacement rates for the following reasons:

1- The aerial bombardment and violence perpetrated by the regime and its allies.
2- The siege tactics employed by regime forces against opposition-held areas.
3- The economic recession and loss of livelihoods in opposition-held areas.
4- The absence of basic public services such as health, education, and energy.

5- The inability of the U.N. to effectively deliver aid to besieged populations.

6-The high levels of insecurity and factionalism among local opposition forces.

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Choices of resettlement: UNHCR data[26] demonstrates a clear inclination among civilians to move into safe areas where their relatives live. It also shows that the faction or community which controls the resettlement area does not affect the choices of IDPs. For example, PYD-controlled areas attracted Kurds and indigenous Arabs equally, and pro-opposition populations resettled in regime-controlled cities while fleeing violent military confrontations.

Minorities live in regime controlled territories: Assad is aware that his Alawi base is still a minority despite the increased immigration rates among Sunnis. Therefore, he worked on keeping Christians, Alawi, Druze, and Ismaili areas under his control. Studies[27] indicate that sectarian minorities constitute 41 percent of the population under Assad's control (26% Alawite, 5% Christian, 4% Druze, 3% Shia, 2% Ismaili). The displacement of ethnic and religious minorities from the rebel-controlled areas into regime territories has massively contributed to this phenomenon.

Damascus has been engaged in demographic engineering: The regime has had to expel millions of Sunni Arabs to tip the balance in favor of its social base. Indeed, it has adopted a strategy of purging vital areas of pro-opposition population. The evacuation of opposition armed groups from areas of the Damascus countryside such as Khan Al Sheeh,[28] Daraya,[29] Al Tal,[30] and Al Moadamiya,[31] are examples of this policy (see figure 6).

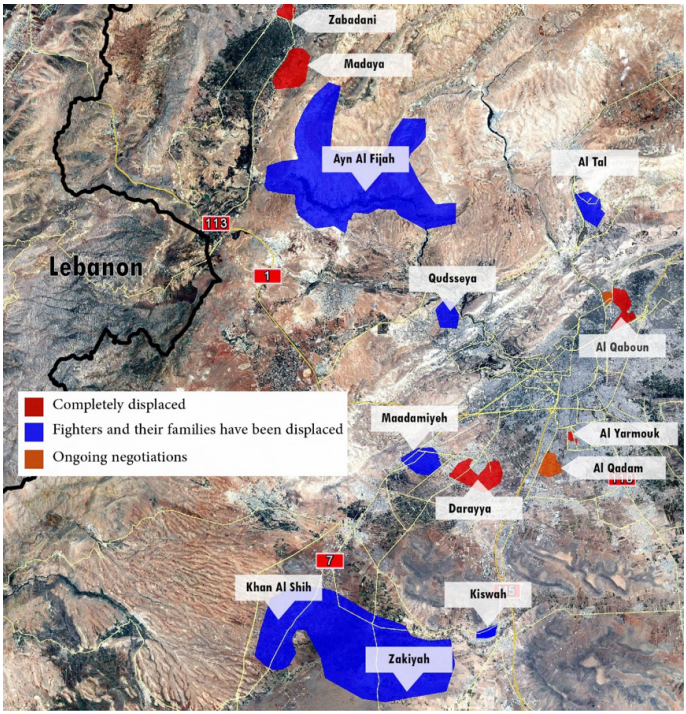

Figure 6: Regime Cleansing Campaigns in the Damascus countryside

Although many refugees and IDPs will want to return home once peace is established, they will be unable to do so because of their sect, ethnicity or political affiliation. Resettling displaced people will become a strategic question for each local actor. Sectarian diversity is disappearing in many areas of the country, and this process of regional homogenization is drawing internal borders.

Demographic Changes Induced by the Syrian Regime

When the Syrian uprising first began in Sunni-majority areas, it did not have a specific ideological character. Slogans and chants demanding freedom, dignity, and social justice were unanimously adopted by protestors, and so were a peaceful means to achieve them. This unstructured, yet surprisingly quickly-growing movement obtained local, regional and international sympathy and support. The Syrian regime realized that the revolutionary movement was damaging its

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legitimacy. Therefore, it preceded to create a split between the Sunni majority and the rest of the country by creating an existential threat to rally non-Sunni minorities behind it. Assad hoped that such a strategy would allow him to pose as the protector of minorities, and most importantly challenge the domestic credibility of the revolution.

A keystone of this strategy was to create a suitable environment for civil war. Consequently, the regime used segregation as a tactic to execute a divide and conquer strategy. The following are the steps by which Assad achieved this:

1- Stage One: "Collective Punishment". In this phase, the regime launched several security and military campaigns aimed at seizing control of cities that had witnessed large demonstrations and protests, such as Jesr Al Shoughour and Banias. Syrian regime forces carried out dozens of massacres[32] against civilians between March and December 2011; its objective was to encourage military resistance within the opposition.

2- Stage Two: "Ethnic/Sectarian Cleansing". In response to regime tactics in stage one, the opposition gradually came to favor military actions over peaceful means. By the end of 2011, large parts of the country were under the protection of local armed groups and regular clashes were occurring between them and security forces. At last, the regime had enough reasons to justify the ethnic and sectarian cleansing of strategic areas from "terrorists". The regime began its cleansing strategy in Homs province, displacing local population from the Baba Amro, Al-Seba', Al-Khaldiya, Ashira, Karm Al-Zayton, Al-Refi'e, Al-Baiyada, Al-Sabiel, Wadi Al-Arab, and Joubar and Al-sultaniya areas.[33]

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3- Stage Three "The Useful Syria": By the beginning of 2013, the forced displacement of civilians was openly being advocated as a tactic with the aim of protecting a "Useful Syria" with two key objectives at its heart:

Consolidating regime control over the region between Damascus and the Mediterranean coast, which are its centers of political strength in the country.

Preserving the Hezbollah stronghold of Lebanon by establishing a buffer zone along the Lebanese-Syrian border to protect it from any possible negative impact from the Syrian conflict.

4- Stage Four "Russian Intervention": Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias intervened to save Assad from losing power, but were unable to prevent the opposition from advancing in Idlib and Dera. The Russian intervention in September 2015, on the other hand, empowered him to overthrow the opposition in key strategic areas, mainly in the Aleppo and Damascus countryside. The Russian domination in air power, in addition to the systematic application of sieges, humanitarian aid blockades, and indiscriminate use of barrel, vacuum, cluster, and phosphorus bombs against civilians eventually pushed the opposition armed groups to negotiate U.N.-sponsored "evacuation" deals with the regime. This stage was marked by the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of civilians to Idlib province as follows:

- From Eastern Aleppo, 65,000 civilians evacuated in December 2016.[34]

- More than 300,000 civilians reportedly evacuated from Damascus and its suburbs from 2015–2017: 45,000 from Moadamiya,[35] 40,000 from Qudsiya and Hame,[36] 5,700 from Daraya,37 55,000 from the extended Zabadany and Barada Valley,[38] 60,000 from Al Tal,[39] 13,000 from Khan Al Shikh,[40] 30,000 from Barzeh,[41] and 10,000 from Qaboun.[42]

In 2017 alone, 40,000 more from Homs.[43]

Tactics and Tools

The Syrian regime and forces loyal to it utilized political, military, economic, and administrative means to force civilians to leave their home towns, including the following:

The regime has used its air forces to systematically destroy basic infrastructure such as hospitals, bakeries, and schools to force inhabitants out of strategic areas

1- Massacres: The Syrian regime and forces loyal to it committed a number of sectarian massacres to intimidate civilians into fleeing their homes, such as: the Hula massacre (May 25, 2012),[44] the Al-Qubeir massacre (May 6, 2012),[45] the Al-Bayda and Ra's Al-Nab'e massacre (May 2, 2013),[46] and the Daraya massacre (August 27, 2012).[47]

2- Air bombardment: The regime has used its air forces to systematically destroy basic infrastructure such as hospitals, bakeries, and schools[48] to force inhabitants out of strategic areas. Research conducted by Homs local council (Displacement Indicators in Al-Waer Neighborhood – Homs)[49] shows the correlation between air bombardment and the displacement of people from the neighborhood.

3- Security restrictions: The regime's security apparatus has implemented specific restrictions in strategic pro-opposition towns. These have included constraining freedom of movement in and out these areas and conducting arbitrary arrests of their men and young people,[50] thus forcing the local population to leave in fear of further retaliation.

4- Besieging opposition-controlled cities: Analysis shows that the majority of displaced areas have been subjected to long periods of besiegement, including Daraya, Moadamiya, the old city of Homs, Zabadani, Madaya,[51] and other areas. The aforementioned study entitled "Displacement indicators in Al-Waer neighborhood – Homs"[52] shows that a decline in a population followed each time the siege on the neighborhood was temporarily lifted.

The war was an ample opportunity for the regime to accelerate forced evacuation from key strategic neighborhoods through new urban plans. These plans primarily allowed the state to grant land ownership to loyalists and allies

5- Changes of ownership and reconstruction: The war was an ample opportunity for the regime to accelerate forced evacuation from key strategic neighborhoods through new urban plans. These plans primarily allowed the state to grant land ownership to loyalists and allies. These areas included the Mazzeh Basatien Al-Razi area[53] (Legislative Decree No. 66 dated 18/9/2012) Baba Amro, Al-Sultaniya, and Jobar in Homs (Legislative Decree No 5 of 1982, as amended).

6- Evacuation agreements: These agreements can be defined as follows: negotiating processes with a demographic dimension which take place between regime representatives and local opposition armed groups, either through the United Nations or other third parties. According to the available data,[54] the Syrian regime and forces loyal to it have partially or completely displaced the inhabitants of 136 areas including 111 predominantly Sunni Arab cities and 26 Turkmen towns.[55] Figure 7 shows the distribution of displaced areas across the country from 2012–2017.

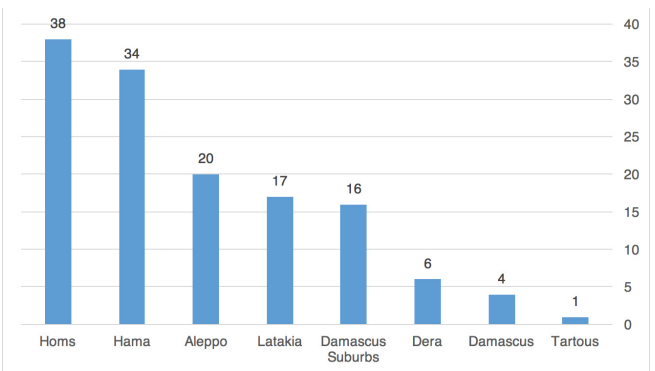

Figure 7: The number of cleansed cities and areas per province[56]

Demographic Changes Induced by ISIS

The Islamic State in Iraq and Al Sham (ISIS) has inherited its violent and sharp sectarian tendencies from Al Qaida in Iraq. However, ISIS has further developed AQ's doctrine of dominance (taghalob) and declared a Caliphate to justify its monopoly over available human and financial resources. In contrast with ISIS, AQ does not necessarily seek to control territory, and it is more inclined to form alliances with other insurgent groups. For instance, AQ was allied with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and with Islamic and Jihadist armed groups in Syria.

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ISIS, on the other hand, adopted state-like behavior in managing its intra-insurgency relationships: it does not tolerate competition and it does not accept any form of collaboration other than subordination. This behavior does not only apply to militant groups and organizations, but extends to the local population as well. Hence, in a "state" where citizenship is granted to Sunni Muslims only, every other religious group is subjected to different levels of discrimination. "The commanders of ISIS have acted willfully, perpetrating these war crimes and crimes against humanity with clear intent of attacking persons with awareness of their civilian or 'hors de combat' status," the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria[57] reported.

The "state-building" approach adopted by ISIS has translated into the following policies:

1- Qualifying non-Sunni and non-Muslim individuals as foreigners and variously imposing extra taxation, restricted movement, confiscation of property, deprivation of practicing faith in public, and deportation on them.

2- Considering all non-compliant armed groups or organizations as dissidents to be crushed and completely annihilated.

3- Treating non-compliant individuals such as activists employed by or collaborating with international NGOs as foreign agents or spies.[58]

In contrast to Iraq, sectarian and religious minorities had already fled Eastern Syria prior to the arrival of ISIS. Thus, the terrorist group shifted its focus to subjugating its Sunni population, Arabs and Kurds alike, exposing them to tactics of brutal intimidation

In contrast to Iraq, sectarian and religious minorities had already fled Eastern Syria prior to the arrival of ISIS. Thus, the terrorist group shifted its focus to subjugating its Sunni population, Arabs and Kurds alike, exposing them to tactics of brutal intimidation.[59] Indeed, the "Caliphate" has focused its efforts on eliminating any source of future insurgency within its alleged constituency. The group first began with Sunni Arab armed groups and their local supporters, identifying them as apostates. Massacres were reported in Al Shahil, Abu Hamam, and the town of Shietat[60] in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor.[61]. After the elimination of resistance and "apostates", ISIS shifted its focus on expanding its Caliphate, and with its renewed fervor for conquest, the local population on the edge of its territory suffered the most. Kurdish and other indigenous populations in southern Hasaka, northern Raqqa and northeastern Aleppo were subjected to all kinds of horrific war crimes.

ISIS's Track Record

Ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds grew after the clashes at Ras Al Ain between Al Nusra Front and The People's Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel – YPG) in early 2013,[62] but the ISIS campaign in Kobani[63] constituted a milestone in the history of Arab-Kurdish relations in Syria. Forced displacement and deportation were repeatedly reported, with the following the most notable incidents:

1- Tal Brak - Hasaka: Tal Brak forms a strategic link between Hasaka and Qamishli, and it witnessed heavy clashes between ISIS and the YPG in 2015.[64] Human rights activists have denounced the ISIS and YPG

deportation of local Arabs and Kurds amidst these clashes.

2- Raqqa:

■ Tal Abyad - July/August 2013: Activists accused ISIS, the Ghoraba' Assham brigade and local Ahrar Asham fighters of deporting Kurdish civilians from Sowsak, Aarkoa, Kiri Sur, Afdh Kawi, Qaz'ali, Malouh Al Qamar, and Tel Fender[65] to Kobani and the surrounding countryside.

■ Raqqa city - June 2015: ISIS issued a memorandum[66] forcing all Kurds to evacuate the city on charges of supporting the international coalition and YPG, giving them one day to leave.

Aleppo:

■ Jarablus countryside - July 2014: The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported ISIS burning, looting and seizing civilian homes in the villages of Afkdah, Abisorra, Cork, Wajal Ogli, and Aljibna,[67] prompting 2,100 families to flee towards Kobani and the Syrian–Turkish border.

■ Al Bab countryside - August 2015: Local human rights activists reported the deportation of hundreds of Kurdish civilians and the confiscation of their property in the villages of Shdoud, Kibbet Al Sheikh, Sheikh Jarrah, Tal Battal, Talbttal, KalaaKalbin, Blikha, Tal Jirji, Chaoui and Alkaiabah,[68] causing waves of new displacement towards Afrin and Kobani.

ISIS literature does not discriminate against people based on ethnic or racial affiliation but rather on religion and loyalty to the Caliphate. Indeed, the organization employs people from diverse ethnicities and nationalities including Kurds

ISIS literature does not discriminate against people based on ethnic or racial affiliation but rather on religion and loyalty to the Caliphate. Indeed, the organization employs people from diverse ethnicities and nationalities including Kurds, but the fighting between ISIS and the YPG in Syria, and the Peshmerga in Iraq has led to the development of a specific ISIS policy towards the Kurds, especially after the intervention of the international coalition.

Demographic Changes Induced by the PYD

Today, the Democratic Union Party (Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) controls a territory in which 2.5–3 million people live, but only 60 percent are of Kurdish ethnicity.[69] Historically, the Syrian Kurdish population was largely based in the provinces of Hasaka and Aleppo and other urban areas such as Damascus and Aleppo. The Kurdish population does not constitute a majority in any of the Syrian provinces, but Kurds have clear majority in Afrin district in Aleppo province and Al Malkiyah, Amuda, Qahtaniyah, and Addarbasiyah districts in Hasaka Governorates.[70] Moreover, the Kurdish population has established a strong presence in the Ayn Al Arab (Kobani) district of Aleppo province and Ras Al Ayn and Qamishli districts in Al-Hasakah province.[71]

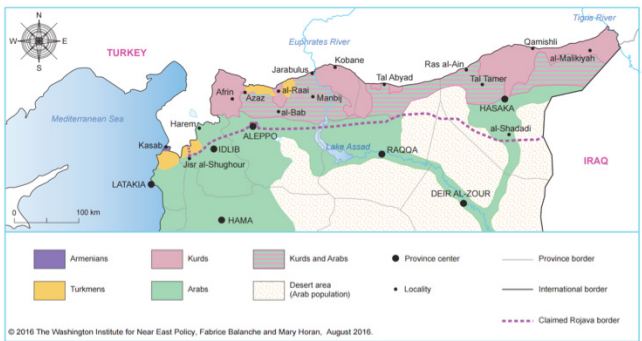

Figure 8: Ethnic Divisions in "Rojava" (Courtesy of the Washington Institute[72])

The PYD have identified Kurdish territories in Syria as Rojava or west Kurdistan: this area includes Hasaka province, northern Rakka province and northern Aleppo governorate, and constitutes roughly 25 percent of Syria's territory (see figure 8). Rojava comprises three cantons as administrative units: Jazira in the east, Afrin in the west and Kobani in the middle. The distance between Afrin and Kobani enclaves is 140 kilometers and there are 160 kilometers between Kobani and Jazira. Large non-Kurdish ethnic groups populate

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Indeed, the PYD ambitions are not supported by Kurdish demographics in Syria: instead, they are driven by its determination to connect its three cantons. Hence, the PYD has had to integrate non-Kurdish populations during its expansion

territories between these regions and especially inside the Jazira canton. In the Jazira and Kobani cantons, Kurds constitute a slim majority, a little above 50 percent. In Afrin canton, the population is nearly 100 percent Kurdish, but the PYD plans to include Tal Rifaat, Minnigh, and northern Manbij to the canton, reducing the Kurdish population share to two-thirds.

Indeed, the PYD ambitions are not supported by Kurdish demographics in Syria: instead, they are driven by its determination to connect its three cantons. Hence, the PYD has had to integrate non-Kurdish populations during its expansion. In Manbij for instance, Kurds represent less than a quarter of the population.[73] Nevertheless, the group's leaders believe that various efforts could help bring a large part of the population under their banner.

On one hand, they attempt to compromise with non-Kurdish ethnic groups by winning their support in exchange of security, stability, basic governance, and by nominally integrating them in some of the self-administration functions. For example, many Arab tribes want to eliminate their rivals under the false pretense of counter-terrorism. Hamidi Daham Al Jarba of the Al Shammar clan is a clear example of this kind of integration: not only does he co-chair the self-administrating government, but he also heads the Al Sanadid Forces, a part of the Syrian Democratic Forces coalition.[74]

On the other hand, when faced with resistance, the PYD tends to conduct small-scale ethnic cleansing. Salih Muslim, the leader of PYD, had previously declared his intention to conduct such campaigns against Arabs. "One day, Arabs who have been brought to the Kurdish areas will have to be expelled," said Muslim in an interview with Serek TV.[75] Local and international Human Rights NGOs[76] estimate that thousands of Arab villagers have been forcibly displaced from Hasaka and Raqqa provinces so far.

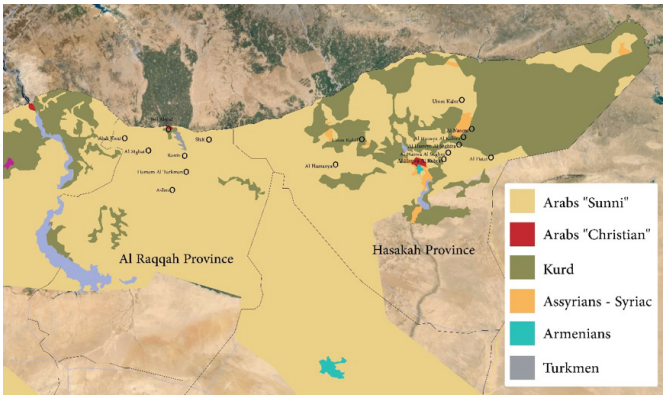

Figure 9: Towns targeted by the PYD for ethnic cleansing (Courtesy of Nusuh.org)

PYD Track Record

According to Amnesty international[77] and the Syrian Network for Human Rights[78] the YPG conducted small-scale ethnic cleansing campaigns in rural Tal Abyad, Tal Hamis and the villages of Abdi Kawi, Amaghawat, Slook, Ranin, Haswa Al Kobra, Haswa Al Soghra, Om Kbir, Om Khif, Al Naem, Honwa Al Kobra, Honwa Al Soghra, Al Fustat, Al Khowla, Tal Shook, Husseiniya, Okaz, Jazaa, Al Ishra, Bakarah, Hilaliya, Tal Majdal, and Alaghbish (see Figure 9). Arab and Turkmen indigenous inhabitants were subjected to:

Evidence, on the other hand, suggests that unlawful forced displacement was carried out in retaliation for perceived sympathies with ISIS or Syrian mainstream opposition

1- Arbitrary arrests and illegal detention: Amnesty International has documented arbitrary detention, mistreatment, and unfair trials of detainees held on terrorism charges.[79]

2- Confiscation and demolition of private properties: In most of the aforementioned towns there were reports of houses and private properties being demolished. Amnesty International visited the village of Husseiniya in the Tal Hamis countryside in early August 2015 and saw that all but one of the village's approximately 90[80] homes had been demolished.

3- Threats of international coalition air strikes: The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported that local residents in targeted towns were constantly threatened by YPG officials with international coalition air strikes, implying they would mark their villages as ISIS facilities.[81]

Nevertheless, the PYD has rejected all allegations of ethnic cleansing, and has justified population displacement on military grounds. Ciwan Ibrahim, the director of the Asayish police forces operating under the Autonomous Administration, has acknowledged that families had been forcibly displaced from their homes, but he characterized these cases as isolated incidents and necessary measures to counter the ISIS security threat.[82] Evidence, on the other hand, suggests that unlawful forced displacement was carried out in retaliation for perceived sympathies with ISIS or Syrian mainstream opposition.[83]

Further examination of the circumstances that led to these events shows that these operations were conducted in geostrategic areas that threatened the PYD expansion project. PYD policies in Al Khabour Valley demonstrate this pattern in the group's behavior. The YPG have also begun a campaign of disarming the local Assyrian a militia called the Al Khabur Guards.[84] The leaders of the Khabur Guards protested the practice of looting by YPG members who raided Assyrian villages after the evacuation of ISIS. Shortly afterwards, attempts were made against the lives of Assyrian militia leaders David Jindo and Elyas Nasser.[85] Fearing for their lives, most Assyrian residents of the Khabur fled to Syrian Army-controlled areas in Qamishli, and did not return to their villages. Similar attacks were also reported in Qamishli, most notably on December 20, 2016, when several Assyrians private establishments were attacked and 14 Assyrian civilians were killed.[86]

It is important to note that Arab local residents were allowed to settle back in the towns of Abu Al Hol as well as Slook, and Tal Brak after fleeing their homes due to fighting between ISIS and the YPG. Moreover, despite its intolerance towards political and ideological rivals, PYD literature celebrates ethnic diversity and encourages the inclusion of non-Kurdish citizens into their administrative structures

The Syrian regime and human rights organizations have accused armed opposition groups of committing acts of war crimes against religious and ethnic minorities, including indiscriminate shelling and forced displacement

On the other hand, cities like Qamishli and Afrin host hundreds of thousands of Arab and Turkmen IDPs,[87] some of whom volunteered to join the YPG and SDF forces, hence refuting the idea that the PYD have adopted a policy of ethnic cleansing on a large scale.[88] It is important to note that Arab local residents were allowed to settle back in the towns of Abu Al Hol as well as Slook,[89] and Tal Brak[90] after fleeing their homes due to fighting between ISIS and the YPG. Moreover, despite its intolerance towards political and ideological rivals, PYD literature celebrates ethnic diversity and encourages the inclusion of non-Kurdish citizens into their administrative structures. This reality leads us to believe that forced displacement policies lead by the PYD are limited in their geographic scope, specifically to the areas that are strategic to its expansion project.

Demographic Changes Induced by the Opposition

The Syrian regime and human rights organizations have accused armed opposition groups of committing acts of war crimes against religious and ethnic minorities, including indiscriminate shelling and forced displacement. These allegations mainly refer to military campaigns led by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and Islamic armed groups in the Latakia countryside in 2013[91], Qalamon in September 2013, and the Hama countryside in November 2013[92] and in September 2016. Other accusations described intimidation campaigns directed against minorities in regions and cities under the control of the opposition, in Homs, the Damascus countryside, Idlib, Hassaka and Raqqa.

According to the regime, armed opposition groups have illegally deported civilians in the following cities:

1. The Damascus countryside: Maloula,[93] Adra industrial city,[94] and Mgharat Al Meer.
2. Idlib:[95] Kefraya, Fouaa,[96] Holloz, Al Kinniya, Ishtabraq, Al Jadayde, Al

Yacoubiye, Al Ghassaniya, Maaret Masreen,[97] and Zarzour.

3. Aleppo: Zahra and Nubbol.
4. Hama: Mhardeh, Jidreen, Kafarbo, Quastal Al Burj, Tel Skeen, Sifsafiyeh, Hay Al Midan, Joureen, Shatha, and Al Zara.
5. Latakia:[98] Abu Mecca, Al Badrowah, Alhambushah, Aramo, Al Balouta, Al Jib Al Ahmar, Al Khawarat, Al Khamilah, Kassab,[99] Buj Al Qasab, Ghassaniya, Kshish, and Soulnfeh.[100]
6. Homs: Sadad, Homs, Qusayr, and Rableh.
7. Daraa: Namer, Al Kherbe, Tilsiye,[101] Maaraba, and Shaqra.[102]

Upon further examination of the circumstances that led to these events, a pattern in the tendency of minorities to flee opposition-controlled areas can be seen. Indeed, rebel victories often spur local religious and ethnic minorities to depart.[103] Only the Druze-dominated Jabal Al Summaq in Idlib province remains in the opposition areas.

The United Nations-sponsored "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic"[104] has documented war crimes in Syria since the start of the conflict. It has reported that armed opposition groups had committed war crimes, but that they "did not reach the gravity, frequency and scale" of those by regime forces. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also accused armed opposition groups of diverse war crimes but none of them include premeditated forced displacement of civilians.

The claim that the opposition conducted systematic ethnic cleansing crimes falls short of sufficient evidence to incriminate the mainstream opposition. The main parties accused of unlawful forced displacement and war crimes are Al Nusra Front, ISIS, and in some cases local radical Ahrar Al Sham fighters. Ever since the beginning of the uprising, opposition political parties and organizations, as well as the FSA, have re-iterated their commitment to protecting minorities. Moreover, when such incidents have occurred, opposition factions were among the first to condemn it and to demand its perpetrators be brough to

justice, hence refuting the existence of a systematically adopted ethnic cleansing policy.

It is important to note that the Syrian regime is not the sole actor engaged in this demographic warfare: similar patterns have also been identified in the modus operandi of ISIS, PYD and radical opposition groups. Meanwhile, efforts by the international community to resolve the ongoing war have been fruitless

On the other hand, the opposition armed groups could be blamed for their failure to establish the rule of law, prevent acts of terror, or to bring culprits to justice. In many cases, opposition factions have chosen to ignore or to disregard crimes committed either by their members or by other factions. Ahrar Al Sham, for instance, failed to bring their fighters in Ras Al Ayn to justice, even after recognizing their implication in crimes committed against local Kurdish residents.[105] In other cases, like the latest military campaign on northern Hama, FSA groups associated with the extremist group Jund Al Aqsa even though they suspected the faction's intent to commit war crimes against minorities if the chance presented itself.[106]

Conclusion

Forced demographic changes are very important consequences of times of war—even more so in a country with a broken social contract, such as is the case in Syria. These waves of forced migration during times of conflict have had severe political, social, and economic impacts on the population as a whole. Between refugees and internally displaced persons, more than half of the Syrian population have left their homes since the war began in 2011. To understand why this has happened and what can be done to reverse it, one must examine the country's demographics in detail.

This study has shed light on the population question in Syria both before and during the war, and has also analyzed the pattern the Syrian regime has employed in the ethnic and sectarian cleansing of key strategic areas from hostile communities. To overcome the lack of theoretical and applied studies and research during the conflict, this

paper has taken all available data from different sources in order to get a clearer view of the current status of the Syrian population.

It is important to note that the Syrian regime is not the sole actor engaged in this demographic warfare: similar patterns have also been identified in the modus operandi of ISIS, PYD and radical opposition groups. Meanwhile, efforts by the international community to resolve the ongoing war have been fruitless, and ceasefire agreements have openly endorsed the mass exodus of civilians and the depopulation of vital strategic areas.

The stability of Syria and the region requires the preservation of local communities. Naturally, any efforts to bring peace back to the country must guarantee the safe return of the displaced populations to their homes and towns, and must offer assistance in rebuilding the worst affected areas. The failure to provide such a framework will either perpetuate the ongoing conflict, or eventually lead to the complete disintegration of state and society.

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FORCED DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN SYRIA

In the absence of well-established political institutions, Baathist leaders have used sectarian connections, ideological appeal, and command of military forces to consolidate their authority, and have actively prevented the formation of an inclusive Syrian national identity

Hafiz Assad employed Syrian sectarian divisions in manipulating local communities by comporting himself as their de-facto arbiter. Similarly, he has fueled ethnic and religious conflicts in neighboring countries to distract his regional foes and adversaries

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