

## Syria: the Strategy of Destruction

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**For the past five years, the population of Syria has been undergoing severe repression at the hands of a regime implementing a policy of mass destruction, forcing over half of all Syrians to leave their homes, and seriously threatening the future of a country that has had the strength drained out of it.**

My thanks go to Loïc Rivault, geography lecturer at the Université Rennes-2, for our rich discussions about the Syrian conflict and his generosity in allowing me to use the maps he creates, some of which are included in the present article.

Half a decade has passed since the first demonstrations of spring 2011, demanding rights and dignity in Syria. The regime of Bashar al-Assad responded to these with brutal repression from day one. There was no attempt to conceal this heavy-handed response, which immediately involved the state's apparatus of violence: we might recall the statement made in May 2011 by Rami Makhlouf, President Assad's cousin, and head of an economic empire that he acquired thanks to the liberalisation policies of the 2000s: "We call it a fight until the end"<sup>1</sup>. The economy of violence, orchestrated by its numerous security services, is one of the pillars of the Syrian regime's resilience<sup>2</sup>.

Syria in 2011 was an urban country. Around 75 % of its 21 million inhabitants lived in a strip of towns mainly ranging from north to south in the western part of the country, and along the Euphrates valley. The rest of the land is covered in *badya* (steppe). Major regional or national metropolises (from north to south: Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus) polarised urban growth, alternating with a dense fabric of medium-sized and small towns. Most of the conflict-related violence since 2011 has been inflicted on this urban Syria, bringing with it the by-products of death, wounded people, population displacement and destruction.

Destructions are of course an inherent part of armed conflicts. However, in Syria, their scale, their nature, and the consequences that they lead to – in particular the massive and probably permanent displacements of populations – prevent us from viewing them as mere "collateral" damage from the conflict, at once inevitable and regrettable. Indeed, the scale of the Syrian disaster and the extremely rapid collapse of

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<sup>1</sup> Source: 'Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to 'the End'', *New York Times*, 10 May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Souhaïl Belhadj, *La Syrie de Bashar al-Assad. Anatomie d'un régime autoritaire*, Belin, 2013, reviewed by Leïla Vignal, "The Origins of the Syrian Insurrection", *Books and Ideas*; 26 January 2015. ISSN: 2105-3030. URL: <http://www.booksandideas.net/The-Origins-of-the-Syrian-Insurrection.html>. And Souhaïl Belhadj, "L'appareil sécuritaire syrien, socle d'un régime miné par la guerre civile", *Confluences Méditerranée*, L'Harmattan, 2014/2 – No. 89, pages 15 to 27.

an apparently structured society lead us to ask questions about the forms of violence that have been inflicted, and to analyse the place occupied by destructions and population displacements within the Syrian conflict.

### **Destroying in order to Survive**

In 2011, the necessity of protecting the regime, which was viewed as vital, led the Syrian authorities to violently repress the demonstrations (which continued until 2013)<sup>3</sup>: mass arrest campaigns, shooting into the crowd, snipers, laying siege to towns, bombings of crowds etc. President Bashar al-Assad, by describing this popular and peaceful movement as a terrorist conspiracy, immediately shut down any pluralist dialogue<sup>4</sup>. Once the opposition became militarised, from the autumn of 2011, all of the regime's military resources were brought into play: army, secret services, auxiliary militias. From 2013, the regime received operational support from the armed branch of the Lebanese Hezbollah, from the Iranian Pasdaran corps, and from Iraqi Shia militias, in order to help it counteract the exhaustion of its own forces. Its weaponry, largely supplied by Russia, consisted of conventional weaponry (artillery, tanks, aviation), but also of non-conventional weaponry: use of long-range missiles against towns located in the north of the country; fragmentation bombs; bombings with barrel bombs from helicopters; chemical weapons. This second category of weapons – non-conventional weapons – are in particular being used against civilian populations.

To the military conflict between the regime's forces and the numerous armed groups of the opposition to Damascus was added the expansion in Syria of the jihadi group Islamic State from 2014. This group is only advancing in zones held by the armed opposition, which had *de facto* been providing the only groups to really be combating it and to have pushed it back, until the autumn of 2015, when the Russian airstrike campaign started in Syria.

The multiplication of outside interventions over the years has complicated the conflict. However, on the ground, these interventions are feeding into the war's original dynamics: that of an all-out repression against a multiform opposition. While the involvement of the international coalition led by the United States against Islamic State since the autumn of 2014 has not succeeded in reducing its power, Russia's direct involvement alongside Bashar al-Assad's regime from October 2015 – with its aviation, its long-range missiles, and its military advisors – has enabled the Syrian regime to reconquer part of the territories that it had been failing to regain control of since 2012. From this perspective, the cease-fire that came into force on 27 February 2016 has provided some respite, despite the "incidents" with which it is punctuated. At the time this article was published, there is some hope that it might open the way for a political resolution of the Syrian conflict.

### **The Cost of the Conflict: a Devastated Society**

The fifth anniversary of the Syrian uprising was thus still the anniversary of a war. It was marked by a litany of terrifying realities. In March 2016, the United Nations Organisation estimated that 270,000 Syrians have been killed during the

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<sup>3</sup> Leïla Vignal, 2014, "La révolution 'par le bas': l'engagement révolutionnaire en Syrie", in *Soulèvements populaires et recompositions politiques dans le Monde arabe*, Camau M. and Vairel F. (eds), Éditions des Presses Universitaires de Montréal.

<sup>4</sup> Leïla Vignal, 2012, "Syria: Anatomy of a Revolution" in *Books and Ideas* (September 2012).

conflict – which is very probably a conservative figure<sup>5</sup>. According to estimates, civilians supposedly make up between 50 and 70% of these victims<sup>6</sup>. In August 2015, over 65,000 were declared missing<sup>7</sup>. Over a million Syrians have been seriously wounded and/or disabled. Tens or maybe even hundreds of thousands of people suffering from chronic or easily treatable diseases have died due to restricted or impossible access to medical treatment.

Over half of the population living in Syria in 2011 have been forced to leave their homes. The reasons that are most frequently given to explain these departures are the bombings and explosions in inhabited areas, the targeting of civilians and “civilian objects” (meaning material and non-military objects: buildings, schools, markets, infrastructures etc.) and town sieges<sup>8</sup>. Entire districts have been driven to the ground, entire towns have been razed. Public infrastructures have been seriously affected: one school out of four has shut down, over 60% of hospitals have been destroyed or are only partly operational, as are over half of health centres and numerous roads, factories, industrial areas, warehouses, bakeries, markets<sup>9</sup>. Only a third of the population now has access to drinking water, with the rest of Syrians being forced to buy their water on the private market or to use improvised wells. Despite strong variations between different regions, electricity cuts are common everywhere: even the central districts of Damascus were only receiving six hours of electricity a day in January 2016<sup>10</sup>.

The Syrian economy has severely contracted, and the war economy now dominates the country. For most of the Syrian population, this is an economy of survival. Living conditions have become extremely fragile, while hundreds of thousands of heads of families have been killed, wounded, arrested or kidnapped. Despite there being extremely variable situations from one place to the next, over half of the working-age population is unemployed. Poverty affects 80% of inhabitants. While primary school education was generalised in Syria in 2011, over two million children and adolescents no longer attend school, and an increasing number of them are forced to work. One person out of three lacks sufficient food, and has to at best reduce the size and content of their meals, at worst to skip meals altogether. Bread dipped in water is all too often the daily fare of tens of thousands of families. International organisations thus estimate that 13.5 million people in Syria require humanitarian aid<sup>11</sup>. Finally, many civilians are trapped in besieged areas, mainly by regime troops or troops affiliated to it. The data regarding these sieges varies: fifteen sieges affecting 390,000 people according to the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs<sup>12</sup>, over 640,000 people in around fifty localities according to the

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<sup>5</sup> See “Bilan des victimes : l’impossible comptage”, *Libération*, 10 March 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Half according to the deaths documented by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (*Who are Killing Civilians in Syria, Civilian’s Death Toll up to the end of October 2015* Report, October 2015); 70% according to the Violation Documentation Centre, which documented 131,555 deaths as at 2 March 2016 ([www.vdc-sy.info](http://www.vdc-sy.info)).

<sup>7</sup> Source: *Between Prison and the Grave, Enforced Disappearances in Syria*, Amnesty International, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Source: *Humanitarian Response Plan, January-December 2016*, United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA), December 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Source: OCHA Report, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Source: Telephone interviews with inhabitants of Damascus, January 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Source: OCHA, December 2015, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> In September 2015, according to the OCHA (aforementioned report).

Syrian American Medical Report<sup>13</sup>, a million in 46 localities in early 2016 according to NGO studies<sup>14</sup>, or even 1.9 million according to Médecins Sans Frontières<sup>15</sup>.

### **A Fragmented National Space**

The Syrian national space has been *de facto* fragmented into multiple territories that are under the control of various militarised players, which come from the regime or from the armed opposition, to which must be added the territories under the control of the Islamic State group.

However, the front lines separating these areas change over time. They have more or less depth depending on local contexts, and they are more or less active in military terms depending on the period. A town such as Maarat an-Nu'man, to the south-west of the town of Idlib, which housed around 90,000 people in 2011, thus passed from the hands of the armed opposition into those of the regime following an intense bombing campaign in May 2012; it was divided before being retaken by the opposition at the end of 2014. Its strategic position on the edge of the motorway leading to Aleppo, and its proximity to two of the regime's military bases, have earned it incessant bombings. As early as 2013, the local NGO Basmet Amal estimated that 850 people had been killed there and 2000 houses destroyed, as well as 20 schools and 15 mosques<sup>16</sup>. On 15 February 2016, a hospital supported by Médecins Sans Frontières was destroyed there<sup>17</sup>.

Locally, divisions can be porous. Some circuits of the Syrian state continue to function, for example as far as regards the payment of civil servants' salaries and pension payments in areas held by the armed opposition. The continuity between different zones of electricity and water supply, which depends on national infrastructures and/or infrastructures organised at the scale of the seventeen governorates, is punctually the object of agreements between the regime and opposition groups, or even between the regime and the Islamic State. In addition, the war economy is extremely active in terms of providing everything that is lacking. Its networks organise circulation between zones, adapting to spatial fragmentations and using them to generate profits. Thus, people profiteering from the war capture the market in surrounded or besieged areas and negotiate lucrative prices for transferring goods from one zone to the other. The only checkpoint providing access to eastern Ghouta, the suburb of Damascus held by the armed opposition, has for example been christened the "One Million Passage" – one million Syrian pounds being the profit per hour made from the levies taken on goods transferred from one side to the other<sup>18</sup>. Finally, the crossing of lines by civilian or military individuals contributes to

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<sup>13</sup> Source: *Slow Death: Life and death in Syrian communities Under Siege*, Syrian American Medical Society Report, March 2015.

<sup>14</sup> According to the data collected by the Dutch NGO PAX and the Syrian Institute, *First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas*, February 2016 ([www.siegewatch.org](http://www.siegewatch.org)).

<sup>15</sup> Source: Médecins Sans Frontières: *Syrie 2015 – Rapport sur les blessés et les morts de guerre au sein de structures sanitaires soutenues par MSF* Report, published on 8 February 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Source: "The Syrian revolution is a baby – it needs nourishment", *The New Statesman*, 18 July 2013 ([www.newstatesman.com](http://www.newstatesman.com)).

<sup>17</sup> In 2015, the NGO recorded 82 strikes on the 70 medical structures it supports, of which twelve structures were completely destroyed.

<sup>18</sup> Source: Rim Turkmani with Ali A. K. Ali, Mary Kaldor and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, July 2015, "Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria; evidences from three local areas", Department of International Development, London School of Economics.

maintaining a certain porosity between zones. This is however becoming increasingly limited as the conflict deepens.



Photo 1: Impacts of bombings on the district of Khaldiyye in Homs in July 2013 (credits: AFP/Getty images)

Source: The Mail on Line (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2380913/Syria-Homs-aerial-pictures-scale-destruction.html>), 29 July 2013.

The fragmentation of the Syrian territory is also accentuated by the destruction of its urban fabric. This creates a singular geography: it is principally areas held by the armed opposition to the regime that are affected by large-scale destruction. Large-scale destruction should be understood to mean at once large surfaces being destroyed, and a high degree of damage, or even total destruction, being inflicted on buildings. Witness statements, photographs, films and satellite images illustrate what fields of ruins have become for example of the town of Talbisiyeh to the north of Homs, of the eastern districts of Aleppo, of the districts of Baba Amro, Khaldiyye or al Inchaat in Homs (see Photo 1), or of some towns in wider urban area of Damascus, such as Darayya (see Photo 2), Moadamiyye or Jobar.



Photo 2: Destructions in Darayya, a southern suburb of Damascus, on 19 January 2016 (credits: Lens of Young Damascene)

In areas under governmental control, destruction is non-existent, such as for example in the coastal town of Tartus, which is far removed from the combat zones; or it is limited, as is the case in the central districts of Damascus. In such cases, it results from rocket and mortar fire from armed opposition groups, or from bombs<sup>19</sup>. It therefore affects the urban fabric in a scattered and punctual manner. It is the districts on the edges of these zones that are the most affected.

Finally, we should note that this geography is constantly changing: areas that used to be held by the opposition and were bombed at certain points in the conflict have since passed under governmental control, which explains why governmental areas include (or at least, included as at March 2016) some largely destroyed urban and economic fabrics or infrastructures.

### **Destructions as a Weapon of War**

The singular geography of destruction in Syria must therefore be understood at once in light of the nature of the Syrian conflict – a repression – and of the asymmetry of the forces involved in the conflict. In particular, the ballistic and air capacity of the regime’s forces is unequalled: only the regime is in control of the country’s skies, from which the majority of destruction is inflicted.

The scale of the material devastation suffered by Syrian towns raises the question of their position in the conflict. Indeed, in international humanitarian law, “civilian objects” may not be targeted in the absence of any clearly-identified and circumscribed military targets. If such targets have not been identified, aiming for civilian targets therefore constitutes a war crime<sup>20</sup>. In fact, a quick typology of the

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<sup>19</sup> Only two groups use bombs in an urban environment: the al-Nusra Front and Islamic State.

<sup>20</sup> Henckaerts J.-M., 2005, “Étude sur le droit International humanitaire coutumier. Une contribution à la compréhension et au respect du droit des conflits armés”, in *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, Vol. 87 French Selection 2005. Regarding customary international law, cf. for example the website of the International Committee of the Red Cross (<https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/customary-law>).

destruction in Syria indicates that this is one of the weapons through which the war is being conducted by the regime's forces.

#### *Frontlines and Other Destructions Connected to Military Operations*

Armed confrontations between opposition groups and regime forces mainly take place in urban environments. The frontlines, as is typical, are therefore subject to substantial destruction. Thus, in Damascus, the limit between the district of Jobar, which is held by the armed opposition, and the central districts of the city has a topography that is characteristic of this type of destruction: it takes place in a linear manner, along the dividing line between enemy territories. In addition, some destruction is connected to combat requirements: this is the case for example with perimeters around strategic buildings or military positions which are razed to the ground in order to secure them. This type of destruction, which is justified by there being a specific and circumscribed military target, does not constitute a war crime.

#### *'Scorched Earth' Operations: Destruction as a Military Tactic*

This is not the case with military operations that use destruction as a tactical device. Faced with the setbacks they encountered from the summer of 2012 in regaining lost territories, the regime's forces have increasingly resorted to these methods. To retake a town, it is first bombarded by the artillery until the armed groups within it retreat. Regime forces then take it over, even if the town has been reduced to rubble. This is the case, for example, of al-Qusayr, a town of 30,000 inhabitants located to the south of Homs. The town was massively bombarded by regime forces in April and May 2013, before the final attack was launched together with the Hezbollah militia in June.

This tactic, which was doubtless inspired by the Russian military advisors that have been present in Syria since 2012, was still being implemented in the autumn of 2015 in the north of Syria: the Russian aviation pounds a town, and the governmental forces, supported by Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi militias, then retake it, now emptied of its population and of its groups of fighters – this was the case, for example, when al-Shaykh Maskin in the southern province of Daraa, or Rabia in the province of Latakia, were retaken in January 2016. The towns to the north of the city of Aleppo were thus bombarded during the first week of February 2016 (one thousand Russian air raids), then taken over by the Syrian army, interrupting the continuity of the opposition's territorial control from the eastern districts of Aleppo through to the Turkish border<sup>21</sup>.

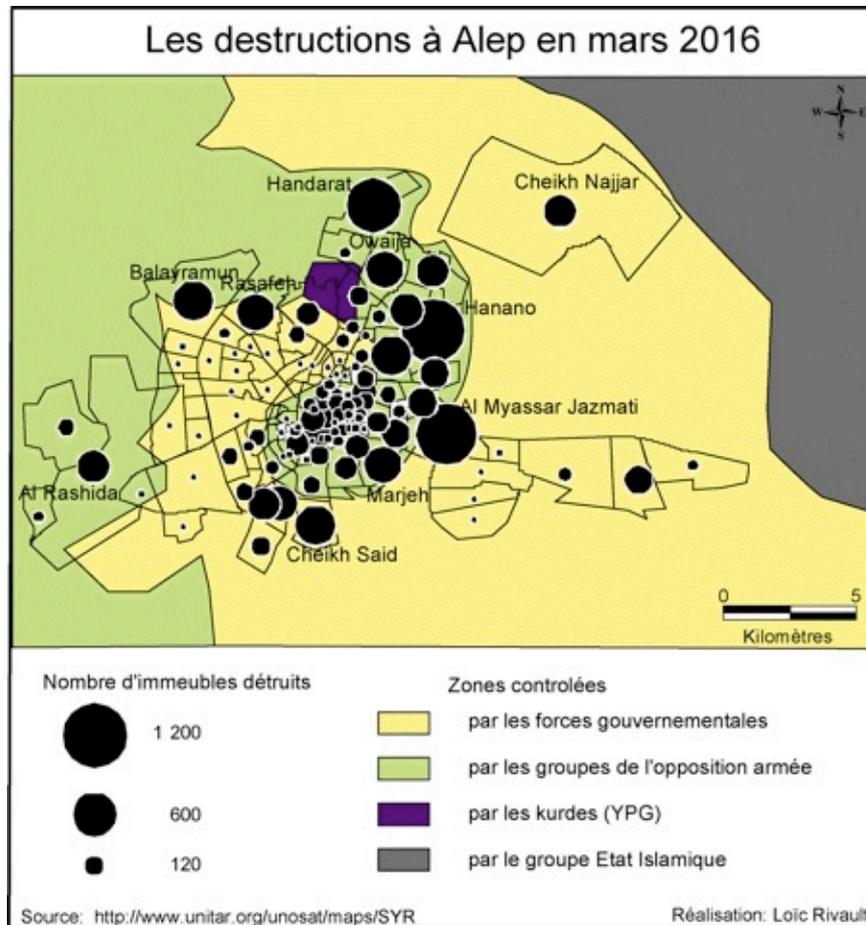
#### *Destruction as an Instrument of Repression and Terror*

Destruction also arises out of campaigns being led in contexts that are not directly connected to military operations. These include bombing campaigns conducted using three types of weapon: SCUD-type long-range missiles; bombings carried out by the regime's (and, from October 2015, Russian) air forces; aerial drops of barrels filled with metallic fragments and explosives (up to 900 kg of TNT) from helicopters. These barrels are a non-conventional weapon that is frequently used by the regime, particularly in northern Syria<sup>22</sup>. These campaigns engender large-scale urban destruction. They have remarkable spatial characteristics: firstly, most of the destruction takes place far from the frontlines; secondly, the impacts of the bombings

<sup>21</sup> Source: *Le Monde*, 7 February 2016, "La bataille d'Alep, tournant de la guerre civile syrienne".

<sup>22</sup> Source: Human Rights Watch (2014) "Syria: Unlawful Air Attacks Terrorize Aleppo", and Amnesty International (2015), "Death everywhere; war crimes and Human rights abuses in Aleppo, Syria".

are extremely numerous, one next to the other, like a carpet, and cover large surface areas; thirdly, only residential areas held by the armed opposition are affected by this type of bombing. There are numerous examples of this type of destruction in Syria. Map 1 illustrates the destruction inflicted on the eastern districts of Aleppo in March 2016.



Map 1: The destruction of Aleppo's eastern districts in March 2016

The triple characteristics of this type of destruction – a destruction of substantial areas of residential districts far from the frontlines, without any immediate military target, but that are held by armed opposition groups – raises the question of their place in the regime's war tactics. They may have the aim of turning the local population against local opposition groups, or of serving as punishment for their support for such groups<sup>23</sup>. They may serve as a warning to populations that are located in areas that are still under the regime's control and that might be tempted to rebel. Whatever the case may be, these campaigns support the diagnosis that what is

<sup>23</sup> This is explicitly the case with urban sieges, an integral part of the regime's strategy, which has been qualified by Syrian officers themselves as a campaign of "starvation until submission". Source: Reuters, 'Insight: Starvation in Syria: a war tactic', 30/10/2013.

See also Amnesty International, 2014, *Squeezing the Life Out of Yarmouk. War Crimes against Besieged Cities*; and UNOHR, 2014, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/25/65.

taking place is an “indiscriminate” bombing of populations<sup>24</sup>, a military tactic that is illegal under international humanitarian law. From this perspective, urban destruction is not just one of the consequences of the armed conflict: it is also, and perhaps above all, a weapon in the hands of governmental forces.

From this perspective, the spiral of violence benefits the regime, and the urban destruction is therefore part of a paradoxical logic of survival for this same regime<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, it explains the heavy price paid by civilian populations: over 90% of deaths of children and of wounds suffered by children are inflicted by air raids. These are sparking massive waves of displacement by making life impossible for these populations.

### **Conflict and Transformation of Demographic Equilibrium**

The conflict is profoundly transforming the demographic equilibrium in Syria as a result of combats, of the progression of the Islamic State, but also of sieges, indiscriminate bombings and the destruction that they lead to.

We know the figures: of the 21 million inhabitants of Syria in 2011, we estimate that 11.5 million people at least were forced to leave their homes. Population displacement is thus not only taking place on a massive scale, it is also extremely intense in terms of its time-scale. According to the HCR, 4.8 million Syrians have sought refuge abroad, mainly within the region (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq)<sup>26</sup>. To this figure must be added part of the 900,000 Syrians who have submitted an application for asylum in a European country since 2011<sup>27</sup>, and the several tens of thousands being hosted by other countries. However, a substantial number of Syrians are not registered or have not submitted an asylum application – the figure might be as high as one million according to certain estimates<sup>28</sup>. As a result, the Syrian population has been massively reduced, not just by the death of at least 1% of its population, but also by forced exile.

The settlement structures of Syria have been all the more transformed by the fact that, to people taking refuge abroad, we must add the displacement within the country of around 6.5 million people. We observe three types of population displacements: neighbouring ones, within one same region or territory held by one of the parties in the conflict; displacements towards other regions or territories, which may or not be held by other parties in the conflict; displacements towards the outside of the country (refugees). The combinations of these three main dynamics are a function of the local characteristics of each territorial body (which furthermore may have varied since 2011). For example, as is illustrated by Maps 2 and 3, the

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<sup>24</sup> UNOHR, 2013, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/22/59; and UNOHR, 2014, *op. cit.*

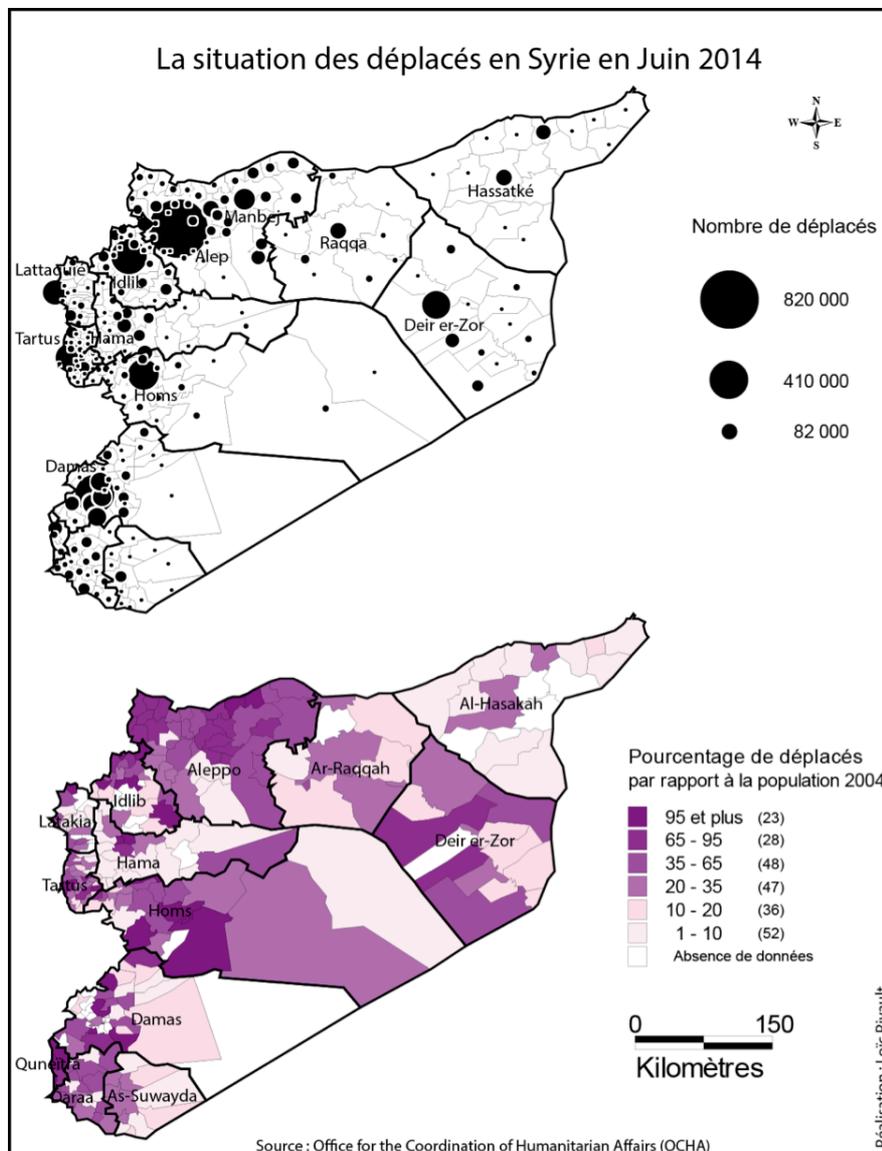
<sup>25</sup> Vignal L., 2014, “Urban destructions: Revolution, repression and war planning in Syria (2011 onwards)”, in *Built Environment*, Special issue ‘Urban Violence’, Vol. 40, no. 3.

<sup>26</sup> The figure here is the number of people registered.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, part of the Syrians en route to Europe has been registered in the region, and there is no “deregistration” procedure.

<sup>28</sup> This estimate from the Syrian Centre for Policy Research is based on projections and not on a count: “Confronting Fragmentation! Impact of Syrian Crisis Report”, 2015.

governorate<sup>29</sup> of Aleppo, which was the most densely populated in 2011, and which is now divided between different opposition groups, Syrian Kurds, and regime forces, is at once the one that is experiencing the most departures towards other governorates or abroad, and the one that is receiving the largest population of displaced people from within the country.



Maps 2 and 3: Internal displacements of populations within Syria (June 2014): full and empty areas

Overall, the regions that receive the most displaced people from within the country are those that are protected from the bombings, i.e. those that are held by the government. As a result, even if the governmental areas are also experiencing many departures, their population remains relatively stable, and is sometimes even increasing – as is the case of the Tartus governorate – as a result of the arrival of interior refugees. The territories controlled by the opposition are more heavily

<sup>29</sup> The largest administrative unit: there are 14 governorates in Syria. In the current conflict, these administrative divisions do not mean much in relation to the reality on the ground and the divisions there, but the available data refers to them.

affected by demographic decline. They are indeed receiving displaced people from within the country, fleeing fighting, repression and bombings. But population flows towards other regions or towards the border predominate. These can be explained by the number of deaths, the bombing campaigns, the expansion of Islamic State in the eastern regions since 2014 – but also by the increasing difficulty of daily life in these territories.

On a local level, situations vary greatly depending on the context. Full areas and empty areas very often sit right next to each other. This is the case for example of besieged zones: the population of the district of the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk, in the south-eastern districts of Damascus, has for example decreased from 150,000 to around 18,000 inhabitants<sup>30</sup>. In Aleppo, the eastern districts held by the opposition and subjected to air raids have been emptied of their population: in the summer of 2014, it was then estimated that 300,000 people were still living in these eastern districts, versus one million before the conflict started<sup>31</sup>.

### **Forced Displacement: an Accelerator of Social and Spatial Fragmentation**

Generally, displacement is not unique, unidirectional and definitive: people first move to a neighbouring area, within the same region, to take shelter and take time to evaluate the possibility or not of returning. Depending on the local context, displacements can thus be temporary and circular. Nevertheless, very often, new security risks, economic constraints, the necessity of sending their children to school, or the possibility or not of reaching family or friends who might offer them a roof, lead individuals to undertake another move, and then another, and another. Refuge is part of this continuum: refugees outside of Syria have on average undertaken eight interior displacements before they cross the border.

However, the ability to move in order to protect oneself depends on numerous factors: all Syrians are not equal before displacement. The existence of social networks is often a determining factor: being hosted by friends or family is the main way displaced persons find accommodation, and is often a vital condition for receiving material support. In addition, the possibility of funding a move or, on the contrary, the absence of any resources, are also decisive factors in the mobility or immobility of Syrians in this conflict. For displaced persons, their ability to settle in one place often depends on the possibilities they have for finding some kind of paid activity. Conversely, as a result of a lack of resources, many Syrians are forced into an unwanted immobility, be it in their usual place of residence, in one of the places they are displaced to, or in their refuge abroad.

Mobility is also strongly constrained by security issues: crossing the dividing lines between territories held by opposing forces is difficult, be it for example due to checkpoints (those controlled by Islamic State around the town of Deir ez-Zor for example), or to the high risk for men of fighting age coming from areas held by the opposition of being arrested by governmental forces. In this respect, women circulate more freely than men, which explains in particular their greater numbers within

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<sup>30</sup> Source: Valentina Napolitano, “Yarmouk, une guerre contre tous”, Noria, May 2015 (<http://www.noria-research.com>).

<sup>31</sup> Source: “Urban factsheet, Eastern Aleppo City, Syria crisis” REACH Report ([www.reach-initiative.org](http://www.reach-initiative.org)).

populations of displaced people. They take with them young boys before these reach adolescence. In addition, religious affiliation is an obstacle to mobility for Sunni men, who are more likely to be arrested at the regime's checkpoints than members of religious minorities.

Displacement thus effects a kind of spatial, social, generational, confessional and 'gendered' selection of the Syrian population. In other words, the ability of Syrians to move to flee the risks of warfare largely depends on their networks, their resources, their gender, their age, their religion, and their geographic origin. And access to territories held by the regime, and daily life in these territories, is furthermore easier for some individuals and groups than for others.

In this process, entire families are separated by long-term removals, and the trajectories of individuals are subject to very strong uncertainty. In addition, in an impoverished Syria, the living conditions of displaced persons degrade rapidly and often give rise to the development of 'compensatory'<sup>32</sup> behaviour that is characteristic of such times of crisis: sale of goods and property titles for miniscule amounts, reduction of food portions, development of prostitution, of child labour, etc.

### **Destruction and Displacement: Instruments of Conflict and Conditions for Peace**

The scale of population displacements in Syria thus reflects the scale of urban destruction, though it cannot be completely conflated with it for three main reasons.

On the one hand, the fate of Syrian refugees is no concern of the Damascus regime. We might even think that the unprecedented difficulties created by this extraordinary situation for countries that are not favourable to said regime – be it among its immediate neighbours or in Europe – are a way of creating trouble on the international scene, failing any other trump cards. Damascus' negligence as far as concerns the fate of its population is also illustrated by the control exercised by the regime on humanitarian access to the populations within governmental territories. Not only is the weapon of hunger used in siege situations, but the regime, by limiting the distribution of this aid and de facto controlling its destination (to selected populations) has de facto transformed it into a political instrument<sup>33</sup>. Any supply of humanitarian aid that does not go through authorised circuits is, in addition, criminalised, which explains why the independent Syrian humanitarian networks are all clandestine.

On the other hand, the effect of the bombings on the populations of territories held by the opposition – deaths, wounded people, destruction – is leading to their progressive demographic depression. Targeting civilian populations thus feeds into the weakening of the regime's adversaries, which supports the stated strategy of “*al-jû` aw al-rukû`*” (hunger or submission) that has been implemented in siege situations since the end of 2012<sup>34</sup>. From this perspective, destroying a territory and emptying it of its population is a weapon in the conflict. The cost incurred is deemed to be

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<sup>32</sup> The 'coping strategies' defined by NGOs and international humanitarian organisations.

<sup>33</sup> A recent article describes this control and the difficulties the international community has in responding to them, since the regime of Bashar al-Assad is still its interlocutor in terms of international legality and of the UN system: “Aiding Disaster. How the United Nations' OCHA Helped Assad and Hurt Syrians in Need”, by Annie Sparrow, in *Foreign Affairs*, 1 February 2016.

<sup>34</sup> See *First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas*, *op. cit.*

marginal compared to the aim of recapture – and the survival of the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Finally, we might ask ourselves what role is played by population displacements towards regions dominated by governmental forces in the consolidation of a “useful Syria”, the control of which is vital to the survival of the regime. It could thus lay claim to a stronger political legitimacy due to the fact that “its” territories would be housing a larger proportion of the Syrian population, while those dominated by its opponents would be emptied of their lifeblood.

In this context of the destruction of a major part of the country, of its residential, commercial, and economic areas, of its major infrastructures, and of large-scale and prolonged displacements of populations, the return from displaced Syrians within the country and of refugees outside its borders will be one of the challenges for the Syria of tomorrow. This return will depend on the way in which the conflict is resolved, but also on the possibility of genuinely rebuilding the country – socially, politically, economically, and materially: a reconstruction which, in order to be sustainable, will in short require the establishment of a real political solution, and not of a mere military ceasefire.

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