

# Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses: *Siege Warfare as Counter-Insurgency*

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This paper argues that the Syrian regime's authoritarian nature has affected the choice of the siege as a tactic of counter-insurgency. The first section traces the evolution of urban locales as sites for the practice of war, and explores the geographies of counter-insurgency tactics, the justification for collective punishment, and the concept of 'urbicide'. The tactics employed by the Syrian regime are examined in light of the history of counter-insurgency and urban warfare in Syria in the twentieth century. The evolution of the Syrian regime's military doctrine is explored in order to show how it came to include siege tactics, which were first deployed in Hama in 1982 when Hafez al-Assad quashed the Islamist rebellion. Finally, the paper explores the imposition of sieges since April 2011, looking at how various armed groups employed sieges to achieve their military objectives. Two area case studies are given to illustrate the differences in military tactics between urban and rural sieges - the sieges of Yarmouk Camp and the Eastern Ghouta. The paper shows how siege tactics allowed the Syrian regime to isolate and contain sources of rebellion, and prevent them from spreading to key areas of strategic importance. Thus, siege tactics were one of the factors that contributed to the Syrian regime's ability to survive during the current conflict, even when various analysts predicted its imminent fall.

## **Introduction**

In December, 2016, convoys of green buses carried tens of thousands of civilians and opposition fighters out of the remaining

rebel-held areas of Aleppo. The regime's brutal campaign to re-take Aleppo mirrored the tactics it used two years earlier to re-capture the city of Homs, once considered the capital of the Syrian revolution. In both instances, suffocating sieges forced the opposition forces to submit.

A siege is enforced by erecting checkpoints at strategic access points to a target area, thereby taking control of the area's supply-lines. Its primary aim is to force a restive population into submission by cutting off its access to food and other goods indispensable to its survival.

On April 25, 2011, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) deployed its first siege in the current conflict. After seven weeks of unrest, the SAA surrounded and laid siege to the southern city of Dera'a as part of a ten-day military operation that would leave over 500 Syrians dead, and 2,500 detained.<sup>1</sup> Following this initial use of siege tactics, the regime then began imposing longer-term partial sieges in rural Damascus in 2012, limiting the entry and exit of civilians and goods. The first instance of opposition forces besieging a pro-government area came in July 2012 when fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) surrounded Nubul and Zahraa, two Alawi-majority towns in rural Aleppo. In the spring of 2013, the regime intensified its sieges in rural Damascus, preventing all goods from reaching many areas, and subjecting the besieged populations to aerial bombardment and shelling.<sup>2</sup>

In November 2016, the U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, estimated that 974,080 people were living under siege in Syria, nearly doubling the estimate from six months earlier.<sup>3</sup> This revised figure brought the estimate closer to that of the monitoring group, Siege Watch, which has long argued that over a million Syrians live under siege.<sup>4</sup> Opposition armed groups, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), impose sieges that trap many thousands of Syrians. The vast majority, however, live under siege of the regime.

This paper will examine why the Syrian regime adopted sieges by exploring the urbanisation of modern warfare and

counter-insurgency. Beyond the relevant academic literature, the research draws upon interviews with 21 diplomatic and humanitarian officials, as well as survey responses completed by 16 inhabitants of various besieged areas in Syria, collected from Beirut during the summer of 2015. The identities and affiliations of these individuals are not included to ensure their confidentiality and safety.

Arguing that Syria's status as an authoritarian state affects the choice of counter-insurgency tactics, the first section will trace the evolution of urban locales as sites for the practice of war, and explore the geographies of counter-insurgency tactics, the justification of collective punishment, and the concept of 'urbicide'.<sup>5</sup> The second section will examine the tactics employed by the Syrian regime during the current conflict in light of the history of counter-insurgency and urban warfare in Syria in the twentieth century. The evolution of the Syrian regime's military doctrine is explored in order to show how it came to include siege tactics, first deployed in Hama in 1982 when Hafez al-Assad quashed the Islamist rebellion. The final section of the paper will explore the imposition of sieges since April 2011, looking at how armed groups employed siege warfare to achieve their military objectives. I will illustrate the differences in military tactics between urban and rural sieges by looking at the sieges of Yarmouk Camp in Damascus, and the Eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus. This paper will explain how adopting siege tactics allowed the Syrian regime to isolate and contain sources of rebellion and prevent them from spreading to key areas of strategic importance. Thus, siege tactics were one of the factors that contributed to the Syrian regime's ability to survive during the current conflict, even when various analysts predicted its imminent fall.

### **Counter-insurgency and the changing location of war**

The Syrian regime's tactics were a crucial element of its ability to survive even as it suffered from increasing military defections, dwindling finances, and growing international condemnation. I

propose that the regime considered the early stages of the conflict to be a counter-insurgency, and this explains various elements of its response to the uprising, including the use of siege tactics. When sieges were first imposed on restive areas of the country, the asymmetric military capabilities of the conflicting parties, and the guerrilla tactics the rebels employed, both corroborate this point of view. An insurgency is defined in modern times as:

[A]n organized movement that aims at overthrowing the political order within a given territory, using a combination of subversion, terrorism, guerrilla warfare and propaganda.<sup>6</sup>

Counter-insurgency, then, refers to the tactics that a government or occupying power employs to put down an insurgency. Laleh Khalili provides a useful differentiation between “enemy-centric” and “population-centric” counter-insurgency tactics.<sup>7</sup> Population-centric counter-insurgency involves attempts by the government or occupying power to provide security, protection, and services to populations living in the areas wherein insurgents operate. Enemy-centric counter-insurgency, on the other hand, aims to undermine insurgents’ support by imposing punitive measures on the entire population living in insurgents’ zones of operation, be they militants or civilians. Examining the impact of regime type on choice of counter-insurgency tactics, David Ucko argues that authoritarian regimes are more likely to adopt brutal enemy-centric tactics in a way that “punishes the people for the insurgency and severs the bonds between the two not through politics but with force.”<sup>8</sup> Authoritarian regimes are able to adopt such methods because they are not constrained by law, are uncontested by rivals, and can often control the flow of information available to their citizens through the state-owned press.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for an authoritarian regime, the focus of counter-insurgency is not on winning ‘hearts and minds’, but rather on “selling the threat to the broader populace, surging support for both party and state, and whipping up a chauvinistic hatred for the perfidious rebels that justifies whatever response is deemed

necessary.”<sup>10</sup> This paper will focus on these facets of enemy-centric counter-insurgency tactics, which the Syrian regime has overwhelmingly favoured during the current conflict.

### **The emergence of modern urban warfare**

The dramatic rate of global urbanisation over the last few centuries has had a profound effect on the nature and setting of warfare. Throughout history, while the city has remained the critical site of militarized power and control, the site of armed conflicts has shifted.<sup>11</sup> In pre-modern and early-modern times, cities were both the primary agents and targets of war, and great efforts were expended on sacking and capturing cities of strategic importance, often by employing sieges.<sup>12</sup> The European nation-states that emerged during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries directed the violence, control, and repression of colonial conquest from cities, however the cities themselves were no longer the primary site of conflict. Instead, colonial expansionism transferred the site of violence to rural areas as colonial states quashed rural insurrections in order to exploit the land to sustain the cities. However, with the coming of the industrial age, cities became crucial vehicles for providing states with sufficient manpower and military technology to sustain massive wars. As a result, once again, cities became the target of state-led armed conflict, with bombing campaigns moving from the “selective destruction of key sites within cities” to “attacks on urban areas” in their entirety.<sup>13</sup>

Twentieth-century urbanisation coincided with major global developments including increasing social polarization and inequality, violent political and economic structural adjustments, the heightening salience of ethnic and fundamentalist religious identities, and the growing scarcity of many essential resources.<sup>14</sup> This rapid urbanisation brought these new tensions into the urban sphere and resulted in an “implosion of global and national politics into the urban world.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, many of the conflicts arising from these tensions have occurred in urban spaces, and thus, bloody urban insurgencies have proliferated.

### **The geographies of counter-insurgency**

Insurgencies create new spatial possibilities for violence. Unlike the conventional warfare of the past, insurgencies are not constrained by linear movement, but rather operate indeterminably, exploiting the ability to exist in multiple spatial and temporal points in a seemingly random manner.<sup>16</sup> This unpredictability has proven an effective means of subverting a state's traditional authority, and helps explain why insurgency-tactics have arisen so frequently in recent history. To combat these new geographic vulnerabilities, counter-insurgencies often seek to reshape space as a way of re-exerting their authority.

During the French occupation of Syria, the French *Troupes du Levant* were forced to alter their military tactics in response to rebel insurgency. French forces traditionally used military column formations to march through areas and command the obedience of native populations. As the rebels exploited the new spatial opportunities insurgency-tactics afforded them, attacking the French sporadically and then swiftly retreating, the occupying forces attempted to reshape Syria's physical geography in such a way as to restore their military advantage over rebel groups.<sup>17</sup> As would be the case once again nearly a century later, one of the most important insurgencies operated in the Ghouta, the rural farmlands surrounding Damascus, after rebel groups failed to take the Syrian capital in October 1925. The *Troupes du Levant*'s military columns were ineffective in quashing the insurgents there, as the rebel groups could flee oncoming columns, hide in the rural landscape, and then re-form to strike in a non-linear, random fashion.<sup>18</sup> Initially unable to encircle such a wide area, the French employed an 'inverted siege' on Damascus to ensure that the rebels couldn't enter the city.<sup>19</sup> This tactic involved the construction of 12 miles of new boulevards and barbed wire fences around the capital.<sup>20</sup> After the landscape had been altered to ensure that the rebels could not penetrate the city, the French positioned some 9,000 troops around the Ghouta and swept through, forcing the rebel groups out to the North. This method of restricting movement to deal with insurgency in the

rural Ghouta, as we shall see, shares parallels with how the Syrian regime has attempted to quash rebellion in that region during the current conflict.

In urban settings too, counter-insurgency operations seek to reshape space to their advantage, and this often includes constructing physical barriers, such as walls. Geographical partitions often have the effect of solidifying boundaries between different population categories, be they ethnicities, communities, or nations.<sup>21</sup> Walls have been constructed as a tactic of counter-insurgency in many modern conflicts including in Northern Ireland, by the U.S. army in Iraq, and by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The new spatial realities that emerge enable increased military control by curtailing the environments in which rebels can operate. These new geographies have the effect of turning entire populations of urban spaces into objects of “study, warfare, and manipulation” as the traditional separation between military and civilian targets is blurred.<sup>22</sup> To justify this, armed actors employ Manichaean, dichotomised rhetorical constructions of ‘us’ and an othered ‘them’, in a way that renders all human subjects living in an urban environment legitimate targets, being seen as real or potential fighters, terrorists, or insurgents.<sup>23</sup> Sieges also aim to curtail the space in which insurgents can operate, affecting entire populations, and the Syrian regime has employed rhetoric to justify such tactics.

### **Counter-insurgency and collective punishment**

Many aspects of this new military doctrine of counter-insurgency equate to collective punishment. Although collective punishment was historically accepted as a necessary element of warfare, the 1899 Hague Conventions broke this tradition and forbade collective punishment, stating: “[n]o general penalty, pecuniary or otherwise, can be inflicted upon the population on account of the acts of individuals for which they cannot be regarded as jointly and severally responsible”.<sup>24</sup> The 1949 Geneva Conventions expanded upon these provisions, stating that “[n]o protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has

not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited.”<sup>25</sup>

However, despite these provisions, governments and occupying powers have frequently employed measures which equate to collective punishment. Unable to locate insurgents responsible for hostile acts, powers have used collective punishment in an attempt to reduce violence and enforce obedience.<sup>26</sup> Historically, collective punishment included preventing food and other supplies from reaching a restive area. In Malaya, British colonial forces prevented the sale of anything but precooked rice to villages believed to be harbouring insurgents. Field Marshal Gerald Templer even ordered a reduction of rice rations as a punitive measure, following certain insurgent attacks.<sup>27</sup> More recently, throughout Operation Vigilant Resolve during the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2004, U.S. forces allowed just three of sixty vehicles carrying relief supplies, food, and medicine into Fallujah as part of their counter-insurgency operations.<sup>28</sup> This blockade was designed to force an end to the support of insurgents by downgrading the living conditions of all of the city’s inhabitants. In 2015, a UN OCHA study asserted that the Israeli and Egyptian blockade on the Gaza Strip had undermined the living conditions of its 2 million inhabitants, saying “[the] restrictions have reduced access to livelihoods, essential services, and housing, disrupted family life, and undermined the people’s hopes for a secure and prosperous future.”<sup>29</sup>

Given technological advances in the modern day, governments and occupying powers have increasingly sought to destroy the means of modern urban life in a systematic manner, a tactic known as ‘urbicide’. Employed as a facet of counter-insurgency, urbicide targets the modern infrastructure upon which urban populations rely, including systems of electricity, communications, water, sanitation, and transportation.<sup>30</sup> Tactics of urbicide aim to render a city uninhabitable, forcing the residents into submission by turning daily life into a “massive struggle against darkness, cold, immobility, hunger, isolation, fear of crime and violence, and a catastrophic and rapid degeneration in public

health.”<sup>31</sup> Other forms of urbicide reshape the physical geography of a city to assert the complete dominance of a power over its enemy.

War mobilizes a charged dialectic of attachment to place: the idea that ‘our’ places are the antithesis of those of the demonized enemy.<sup>32</sup> In counter-insurgencies, therefore, the very physicality of cities is also rendered a legitimate target of violence, wherein entire neighbourhoods are razed to the ground in retaliation for having harboured insurgents. Given that tactics of urbicide do not discriminate between armed fighters and civilians, they constitute a form of collective punishment.

The 1982 Hama uprising provides one of the first examples of institutionalized urbicide, in which Hafez al-Assad used urbicide as a tactic of counter-insurgency. Following the Muslim Brotherhood’s calls for Hama’s population to rise up against Assad’s regime in 1982, the regime carefully employed rhetoric in a way that would mobilize society for a brutal campaign of counter-insurgency. Patrick Seale described Hafez al-Assad as having turned from a recluse into an orator “able to set large audiences alight and to do so night after night” with his fiery speeches.<sup>33</sup> Two divisions of the SAA, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division under the command of General Shafiq Fayyad, and the Defence Brigades under the command of Rifaat al-Assad, joined forces to quash the rebellion. These loyal divisions were joined by pro-regime paramilitary forces which had been carefully recruited and armed by the regime.<sup>34</sup> Rifaat al-Assad employed rhetoric that was consistent with collective punishment, stating “those who are not with the regime must now be considered against it.”<sup>35</sup>

The assault began with several days of street battles, but after this proved insufficient, a high-intensity siege was imposed, and indiscriminate shelling destroyed whole neighbourhoods of the city.<sup>36</sup> Following this assault, army bulldozers were sent to flatten the smoking shells of buildings, allowing ground troops to advance, but also wiping the sites of rebellion from Hama’s geography.<sup>37</sup> Tens of thousands of the city’s fleeing inhabitants

were arrested at the security ring the regime forces had imposed.<sup>38</sup> Estimates of the dead range from 10,000 to 40,000.<sup>39</sup>

### **Syrian military doctrine**

Understanding why and how such brutal measures of counter-insurgency entered into the SAA's military doctrine, as exemplified in Hama, is key to explaining the use of sieges in the current conflict. Following the defeat of Arab armies in the Six-Day War of 1967, the Soviet Union took the opportunity to dramatically increase its military relations with various Arab armies, including with the SAA. As part of this process, Soviet military advisors were placed in every Syrian military training facility, air and naval base, maintenance depot, and even in every single squadron of the SAA.<sup>40</sup> The SAA also sent significant numbers of its officers to the Soviet Union for military training.<sup>41</sup> To a greater extent than other Arab countries with military relationships with the Soviet Union, the Syrian military adopted the Red Army's organisation, tactics and operations.<sup>42</sup>

The Soviet Union adopted siege tactics resembling those employed in rural areas of Syria today when fighting Ukrainian separatists in the 1940s and 1950s, establishing outposts and checkpoints on all the roads and trails that connected villages thought to be harbouring insurgents, thus cutting off their access to provisions and critical supplies.<sup>43</sup> However, until the occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviet Union had little experience in counter-insurgency, and had not developed a nuanced military doctrine capable of responding to such threats.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the Soviet Union relied on a tactic in Afghanistan that had previously proven successful, and which exploited an advantage it maintained over mujahedeen – overpowering military force through its superior artillery.<sup>45</sup> In Herat, a city central to urban guerrillas, the Soviets engaged in such extensive shelling that three-quarters of the urban centre was reduced to rubble.<sup>46</sup> Rifaat al-Assad, one of the key commanders in the Hama offensive, trained at the Soviet Yekaterinberg Artillery Academy, and it

was there that he likely learned such tactics. Thus, it seems probable that the tactic adopted by the SAA of overwhelmingly relying upon tank artillery fire in the operations against the insurgents in Hama was a product of Soviet military doctrine.<sup>47</sup> Russia has honed its doctrine of counter-insurgency through its involvement in other conflicts. During the second Chechnyan war in the late 1990s, the Russian military combined the heavy bombardment that had characterised many of its previous military operations with a military and economic blockade designed to choke any external support.<sup>48</sup> The military relationship between Russia and Syria so evident today has a long history. Given that reports of Russian military advisors embedded with the SAA surfaced early in the current conflict, it seems probable that Russian military doctrine has had an impact on the tactics employed in recent years by the SAA.<sup>49</sup> However, it is also important to remember that many of the same Syrian military officers who played a role in the 1982 Hama offensive retain roles in the SAA today. While Rifaat al-Assad and Shafiq Fayyad were respectively exiled from Syria and retired from the SAA in 1995, younger officers who participated in the Hama offensive remain in the SAA.<sup>50</sup>

In the intervening period between the Syrian regime's brutal crackdown in 1982, and March 2011, opponents of the government suffered from torture, detention, and long prison sentences, but the regime has not attempted military operations of the same scale.<sup>51</sup> This implies that the Syrian military's tactics of quashing rebellion in Hama were highly successful, and so it is logical that the regime would look to siege tactics as a proven means of putting down rebellion. Having witnessed the toppling of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the Syrian regime's response was also based on the premise that they did not repress the popular protests quickly enough. The following section will explore how and why the Syrian regime employed tactics of counter-insurgency during the current conflict.

### **The use of sieges in the current conflict**

During the early stages of the uprising that erupted in Dera'a in March 2011, the Syrian regime employed rhetoric in a manner typical of Ucko's model of authoritarian counter-insurgency. In his national address on 30<sup>th</sup> March 2011, President Bashar al-Assad argued that Syria was "facing a great conspiracy" at the hands of "imperial forces" who were supported by foreigners and media groups.<sup>52</sup> This rhetoric reflects the established tactic of counter-insurgency, to create divisions between those 'inside' and 'outside' of the nation.<sup>53</sup> Until late March 2011, all protests were depicted as a "decisive threat".<sup>54</sup> However, in subsequent speeches in early April, as it became clear that the protests were not dying down, and due to external pressure, Assad changed tack and proposed limited political reforms, acknowledging the presence of some protestors with legitimate demands.<sup>55</sup> When this too failed to quell the protests, once again Assad differentiated between groups of people. In a speech at Damascus University on June 20, 2011, he argued that there were three different categories of people involved in the unrest in his country: those with legitimate concerns; outlaws; and *takfiri* extremists who tried to "sneak into Syria". This rhetoric represented another attempt to paint all dissenters as foreigners or criminals, distinguishing between 'Syrians' and "saboteurs".<sup>56</sup>

Military operations conducted by Syrian authorities to quash the growing insurgency mirrored the broad dichotomy between those who were with the regime and those who were against it, and whole geographical areas were categorised as being one or the other, making no attempt to distinguish between legitimate protestors and those allegedly involved in violence.<sup>57</sup> The SAA's military operations were all-encompassing and unforgiving, constituting collective punishment in a way similar to Hama in 1982.<sup>58</sup> Having failed to prevent protestors from continually taking to the streets chanting anti-regime slogans by firing upon them, the Syrian military opted to deploy all-out military force in a way that would reduce the spatial possibilities for insurgency. The first siege was imposed on the city of Dera'a.

On April 25, 2011, the army surrounded Dera'a, cut water and electricity supplies, shelled the city, and prevented the entry of humanitarian aid to the besieged population by either aid agencies or civilians.<sup>59</sup> Security forces opened fire on residents who attempted to leave their houses in search of food or medicine for the wounded during the 11-day siege.<sup>60</sup> The SAA would replicate this pattern in many sites of unrest across the country in their attempt to quash the uprising. The official rhetorical justification for the high levels of violence was that by promising reforms, Assad had removed the grounds for continued demonstrations.<sup>61</sup> On April 16, Assad had declared "with these laws, we draw a line between reform and sabotage."<sup>62</sup>

The Syrian military considered the first siege in Dera'a to be successful, withdrawing on May 5, 2011. Sieges were also imposed on Douma, Zabadani, Baniyas, and the Bab al-Seba'a and Baba Amr areas of Homs city between April 25 and May 6, 2011. These sieges aimed to restrict the geographical possibilities of insurgents' attacks by hermetically sealing populated areas thought to be harbouring fighters, preventing their escape. Checkpoints were erected at strategic points of entry to the encircled urban areas, and snipers often covered areas in between, shooting all those attempting to escape.<sup>63</sup> Restrictions on movement were combined with artillery shelling, although at this early stage in the conflict, it did not specifically target the infrastructure required for urban life, as is common with tactics of urbicide. Rather, these attacks seem to have constituted a common tactic of authoritarian counter-insurgency, seeking to terrorise the besieged populations in hope of turning them against the rebels and thus preventing rebel mobilisation.<sup>64</sup> The initial tactic of besieging restive areas was intended to be a short-term military tactic, using enemy-centric methods of counter-insurgency including violence and terror to force populations to withdraw perceived support for armed insurgents. However, as these tactics proved insufficient to control areas of rebellion, the SAA shifted to a systematic campaign of destroying vital sites of ci-

vilian infrastructure in a way that would force besieged populations to surrender by starving them. Investigating how siege tactics were deployed in specific areas helps explain how the regime protected its grip over Damascus, which was crucial to its hold on power. The regime first employed tactics of urbicide in a besieged area in the southern suburbs of Damascus, in Yarmouk Camp.

### **An urban siege – the siege of Yarmouk, Damascus**

The Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp lies in Damascus' southern suburbs, and had a population of approximately 800,000 before the beginning of the current Syrian conflict, consisting of roughly 150,000 Palestinians and 650,000 Syrians.<sup>65</sup> Remembering the September 1982 massacres in Sabra and Shatila in Beirut and the mass expulsions of Palestinians from Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War, the vast majority of Palestinians in Syria were determined to remain neutral during the Syrian uprising.<sup>66</sup> However, after the increasing arming of protestors in the summer of 2011, and the entry of regime forces to al-Ramel Palestinian camp near Latakia in August, some Palestinians inside Yarmouk increased contact with the FSA. The regime was acutely aware of Yarmouk's potential as a site of opposition activity, as its strategic location made it a possible launch-pad from which rebels could advance into central Damascus, with supply lines available through the rural lands to the south of the camp.<sup>67</sup> Despite the majority of the camp residents' attempts to maintain a neutral stance in the conflict, armed opposition groups infiltrated the camp in the winter of 2012. Following this, Yarmouk became a target of sustained regime attacks.<sup>68</sup>

In August 2012, the SAA shelled the camp for the first time, reportedly killing 21 civilians.<sup>69</sup> In December of the same year, hostilities reached a climax, and a battle between armed opposition groups and pro-government forces erupted. In an important escalation in the conflict, on December 16, 2012, Syrian jets were used for the first time to bomb densely populated areas of

the camp.<sup>70</sup> The regime claimed this was a mistake, but indiscriminate bombing was to become a common feature of the SAA's counter-insurgency tactics, especially as continued defections and mounting casualties stretched the regime's forces.

After this incident, when more extreme Islamist factions, including Jabhat al-Nusra, stormed the camp, the SAA attempted to besiege Yarmouk, but supply lines from the south of the camp sporadically allowed in limited goods, meaning the siege was incomplete. By July 2013, the scarcity of goods, shelling, aerial bombardment, and the radicalisation of armed factions operating within Yarmouk, had motivated an estimated 85 percent of the camp's population to flee.<sup>71</sup> On July 15, 2013, the Syrian regime then imposed one of the most brutal sieges of the conflict to date.<sup>72</sup>

Systematically destroying the infrastructure upon which the camps' residents relied, including water, sanitation and electricity networks, the SAA prevented the movement of all people and goods in and out of the camp until April 2014.<sup>73</sup> During this time, humanitarian conditions deteriorated to become some of the worst in the whole conflict. Amnesty International estimates that at least 194 civilians died, 128 by starvation, and others due to a lack of adequate medical care or sniping while foraging for food.<sup>74</sup> In early 2014, the camp's residents broke into an abandoned spice factory and survived for months from boiling weeds, spices, and water into a kind of broth, drinking just one cup a day.<sup>75</sup> A number of residents reported having eaten nothing more than this for many weeks at a time.<sup>76</sup> In October 2013, a fatwa was issued by Salah al-Khatib, Imam of Yarmouk's largest mosque, lifting religious restrictions on eating cats and dogs in a desperate attempt to prevent people from starving to death.<sup>77</sup>

Beyond malnutrition, as a result of the tactics of urbicide the medical situation deteriorated with the destruction of the camp's infrastructure. With no electricity networks and severely limited fuel supplies, residents of Yarmouk resorted to burning wood salvaged from destroyed buildings and the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) cites smoke inhalation as the cause

of death for a resident of Yarmouk.<sup>78</sup> Severe shortages in medical supplies and the inability to operate medical equipment due to a lack of electricity led to fatalities from easily-treatable medical problems. For example, several women died during childbirth.<sup>79</sup> As levels of sanitation have further deteriorated, communicable diseases have proliferated. After months of fears of the spread of typhoid in the camp, UNRWA detected as many as 90 cases among those residents of Yarmouk who were able to exit the camp to UNRWA mobile health units in the neighbouring area of Yalda in September 2015.<sup>80</sup> The Syrian regime has attempted to justify the blockade on basic medical supplies, including bandages and baby formula, on the basis that they could be used to treat wounded opposition fighters.<sup>81</sup>

Because of the difficulties in getting basic goods into the camp during the most severe times of the siege, prices of basic food items increased exponentially, as seen in the table below (figures given in Syrian pounds and U.S. dollars to control for the inflation of the Syrian pound).

**Figure 1: Comparison of prices of staple goods in Yarmouk before the siege to when they reached their height during the siege, based on author's data collected from residents of the camp**

| Food item             | February 2011<br>Prices (pre-siege) |      | April 2014<br>Prices |      | Increase |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|------|----------------------|------|----------|
|                       | SYP                                 | USD  | SYP                  | USD  |          |
| <b>Rice (1 kg)</b>    | 80                                  | 1.68 | 10,000               | 67   | 40x      |
| <b>Sugar (1 kg)</b>   | 90                                  | 1.89 | 11,000               | 73.7 | 39x      |
| <b>Flour (1 kg)</b>   | 50                                  | 1.05 | 9,000                | 60.3 | 57x      |
| <b>Bread (1.5 kg)</b> | 15                                  | 0.32 | 1,000                | 6.7  | 21x      |

The siege of Yarmouk represented a decisive evolution in the government's use of siege tactics, as it was the first example of systematic urbicide during the current conflict. Rather than surrounding the area with armed forces and restricting the entry of goods alone, the regime's fear of an attack on Damascus from Yarmouk led it to combine these tactics with targeted airstrikes, shelling, and a comprehensive seal on the area in an attempt to starve the camp's residents and render continued life inside the camp impossible. This tactic has proved successful, as it curtailed the ability of armed opposition groups to operate outside the camp, and prevented any major attack on the city centre. However, the regime was not able to establish such an intense siege on rural areas in which armed groups operated, such as the Eastern Ghouta, which also presented a threat to the regime's grip on Damascus.

#### **A rural siege: the siege of Douma, the Eastern Ghouta**

Just as the rural farmlands of the Eastern Ghouta had once become a centre of dissent against French occupation, with rebel groups able to conduct ambushes and then escape with relative impunity, the Eastern Ghouta also became a major site of armed opposition against the regime in the current conflict, with groups exploiting the geographical opportunities for insurgency provided by the rural landscape. Mirroring the tactics employed by the French in 1925, the SAA's first major move against the opposition groups in December 2011 was to cut off the town of Douma, the administrative capital of the Eastern Ghouta, from Damascus. Unlike the relationship between the inhabitants of Aleppo and its surrounding rural lands, many of which are marked by animosity, there were strong ties between Damascus and the Eastern Ghouta.<sup>82</sup> Some of these networks were based on industry and land tenure, as many individuals living in Damascus owned rural land to the east of the city. As such, the regime feared the spread of opposition from the Eastern Ghouta into the capital, and so cut transportation links between the two areas.<sup>83</sup>

By the end of 2012, after a prolonged period of fighting, large areas of the Eastern Ghouta had fallen under the control of an array of 16 different armed opposition groups.<sup>84</sup> Unlike the urban Yarmouk camp, which could be surrounded and cut off with comparative ease, the rural lands of the Eastern Ghouta proved much more difficult to isolate, hence the proliferation of the various armed groups in the area. In 2013, leaders and civil servants from Douma who had defected from the regime created a local council that provided some services autonomously from the regime, including street cleaning, and the issuance of birth and death certificates.<sup>85</sup> At the time, Douma represented one of the only credible attempts for opposition factions to establish an alternative administrative system to that of the regime, and it became a military and administrative centre for the opposition-held areas of the Eastern Ghouta. Determined to destroy this rival administration, but lacking the resources to launch a full-scale attack into the area, the SAA established a full siege around the whole of the Eastern Ghouta in October 2013, mirroring the second stage of the occupying French forces' counter-insurgency operations against rebels in the area. A number of towns and villages fell inside the siege, including Harasta, Douma, Adra, Al-Marj, Saqba, Maliha, Irbin, and Kafr Batna.<sup>86</sup> The SAA enforced the siege by establishing a number of checkpoints at strategic entry points around the perimeter of the area, with snipers covering the farmland in between, in which they also planted mines.<sup>87</sup>

The siege that ensued destroyed much of the infrastructure in Douma, delivering a critical blow to opposition factions' ability to use it as an administrative centre, and making Doumanis' primary concern "simply avoiding death and finding food and shelter."<sup>88</sup> In June 2015, residents of Douma reported that the only water extracted from wells by hand pumps was available, and generators provided a maximum of two hours of electricity a day. In February 2015, local councils made the decision to restrict school hours, only opening early in the mornings "before

air strikes begin.”<sup>89</sup> In addition to almost daily shelling and air-strikes on civilian areas, an infamous Sarin chemical attack on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2013 is considered to be one of the most serious human rights abuses during the Syrian conflict, killing hundreds of civilians.<sup>90</sup> Although the regime denied responsibility for the attack and a UN investigation was careful not to apportion blame for the attack, a report conducted by Human Rights Watch came to the conclusion that Syrian government forces were “almost certainly responsible.”<sup>91</sup>

Unlike the urban siege of Yarmouk, the presence of agricultural lands inside the besieged area of the Eastern Ghouta produced dynamics that rendered the nature of the siege distinct from those the SAA had hitherto imposed in urban areas. Firstly, the farmland inside the siege provided a limited source of food for the besieged population. While limited access to water and the lack of diesel to power agricultural equipment meant that agricultural output was severely damaged, farmers continued to cultivate crops and orchards in an attempt to provide food for the besieged market.<sup>92</sup> However, airstrikes frequently bombed crops during or just before the harvest period, showing that even in the case of rural sieges, starvation remained a key aim of the SAA’s siege tactics.<sup>93</sup> An UN official who entered Douma as part of an aid convoy described the besieged population as “skeletons floating in their clothes”.<sup>94</sup>

As with Yarmouk Camp, the medical situation in the besieged areas of the Eastern Ghouta became dire. After regime strikes destroyed the electricity, water, and sanitation networks in the winter of 2012-13, residents resorted to irrigating agricultural lands with sewage-contaminated water, which the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) linked to the outbreak of typhoid in August 2014.<sup>95</sup> SAMS staff operating in the Eastern Ghouta estimated that even with bribes, the amount of medical supplies that they could smuggle in amounted to less than 5 percent of what was needed.<sup>96</sup> As with the siege of Yarmouk, many people living in Douma and the wider Eastern Ghouta area have died as

a direct result of the conditions brought about by the siege. During the period between October 21, 2012 and January 31, 2013 alone, SAMS collected evidence of at least 208 civilians in the Eastern Ghouta having died from malnutrition or lack of access to medical care.

Besieging the Eastern Ghouta served two principal purposes in terms of the regime's problems with manpower. Firstly, planting mines around the besieged area and manning the checkpoints was a means of isolating the area with limited manpower.<sup>97</sup> Secondly, the siege of the Eastern Ghouta was one of the first instances in which the regime exploited the conditions of the siege to conscript young males into the army.<sup>98</sup> The regime detained and forcibly conscripted some of these young men at checkpoints, but for others, unemployment, the dire humanitarian conditions, and the continued military attacks led them to the conclusion that joining the SAA was the only means of escaping the situation.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, siege tactics not only helped the regime to operate with limited manpower, but were also a means of remedying these problems, as conscription is a common feature across various sieges.

### **Conclusion**

Because the Syrian regime is authoritarian, its counter-insurgency campaign has not been subject to many of the constraints that affect other governments. In a comparable manner to authoritarian counter-insurgencies elsewhere, the Syrian regime has utilized indiscriminate violence and countered this with narratives that sought to mobilise the Syrian population against those deemed to be foreign insurgents. Seen as a tried-and-tested tactic of counter-insurgency after Hafez al-Assad brutally quashed the Islamist insurgency in Hama in 1982, sieges were imposed early in the conflict across the country, in an attempt to repeat this past success. When the insurgency evolved into civil war in 2012, and as the SAA became increasingly overstretched, sieges proved an even more effective tactic for the re-

gime, as they required limited manpower, and provided opportunities for conscripting civilians into the army. Sieges also allowed the regime to utilise the military advantage provided by its air-force. Air attacks intensified the sieges, transforming the military blockades into a systematic campaign of urbicide in an attempt to render life in the besieged areas entirely unfeasible.

Siege warfare, therefore, is a military tactic that helps explain the longevity of the conflict in Syria. The Syrian regime's tactics of counter-insurgency were instrumental in its strategy of protecting certain key strongholds, and sieges were a central element of this strategy. As we have seen, whenever a threat to Damascus emerged, such as in Yarmouk camp or in the Eastern Ghouta, the regime employed sieges to isolate the centres of rebellion and cut them off from external support, thus staving off the threat to the city. This logic also explains the prolonged siege the regime imposed on the city of Homs, which occupies a strategic location in between Damascus and Aleppo, and on the corridor from the capital to the Mediterranean coast, and the 2016 siege of Aleppo city.<sup>100</sup> Controlling these key cities was crucial for the regime to maintain the legitimacy it was afforded by presenting itself as the sole actor capable of providing stability and services to the Syrian people, which explains its continuing support from a segment of Syrian society.

However, given the severe humanitarian conditions and extreme levels of destruction that sieges cause, it may seem surprising that many sieges failed to force the besieged populations to surrender, and instead have endured for many years. Some scholars, including Stathis Kalyvas, have argued that indiscriminate violence is often counter-productive, and that it actually *provokes* rather than dissuades insurgent violence.<sup>101</sup> However, a more significant motivation for the longevity of sieges has been the emergence of new networks of profiteering in the war economy. The Syrian regime has failed, either through negligence or necessity, to stop the spread of corruption within the SAA, and the prevalence of the practice of bribery. All 16 respondents to my surveys from besieged areas noted that regime

soldiers allowed certain goods into the besieged areas if they were bribed enough, and this helps explain why many sieges endured for years and failed to achieve their military objectives.<sup>102</sup>

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- <sup>82</sup> Author’s interview with Kheder Khaddour, Carnegie Middle East Center (February 23, 2016).
- <sup>83</sup> Author’s interview with Kheder Khaddour (February 23, 2016).
- <sup>84</sup> Amnesty International. “Left to Die Under Siege” (August 2015), 16.
- <sup>85</sup> Kheder Khaddour. “The Assad Regime’s Hold on the Syrian State”, *Carnegie Middle East Center* (July 2015), 10.
- <sup>86</sup> See Map 2 in the Appendices.
- <sup>87</sup> Author’s interview with resident of Douma, (May 2015).
- <sup>88</sup> Author’s interview with resident of Douma, (May 2015).
- <sup>89</sup> Teacher in Douma, quoted in Amnesty International “Left to Die Under Siege,” 22.
- <sup>90</sup> Amnesty International. “Left to Die Under Siege” (August 2015), p. 16, using data from the VDC: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/>
- <sup>91</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria” (September 10, 2013).
- <sup>92</sup> Questionnaire responses from residents of Douma (June 2015).
- <sup>93</sup> SAMS, “Slow Death”, 22, corroborated by several of the author’s interviews with residents of Douma, (May-June 2015).
- <sup>94</sup> Author’s interview with UN official (June 2015).

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<sup>95</sup> Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Douma Section, “A report from the Department of Water and Sanitation, Committee of Disasters Management”, (August 1, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> SAMS, “Slow Death”, 25.

<sup>97</sup> Balint Szlanko. “Assad’s Achilles’ Heel: The Manpower Problem”, *Carnegie Middle East Center* (February 21, 2014).

<sup>98</sup> Author’s interview with Valerie Szybala, (February 23, 2016).

<sup>99</sup> Author’s interview with INGO worker (June 2015).

<sup>100</sup> Paul Salem, “Understanding the Regime Offensive in Homs” in *Syria Deeply* (July 5, 2013) [accessed online 28/02/16: <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2013/07/2388/understanding-regime-offensive-homs/> ]

<sup>101</sup> Stathis Kalyvas. ‘The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War’, in *The Journal of Ethics* 8/1, (2004) 97–138

<sup>102</sup> For more on the war economy of besieged areas, see Will Todman, “Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery”, *Middle East Institute* (June, 2016).