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Neither peace nor democracy: the role of siege and population control in the Syrian regime's coercive counterinsurgency campaign

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the role of siege warfare and population control in the coercive counterinsurgency strategy used by the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad to effectively crush the revolution that began in 2011. We extend the coercive counterinsurgency framework offered by Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri Zhukov to analyze the Syrian regime's use of the twin tactical pillars of siege warfare and population control. We focus on how these two types of denial – military and political – proved essential to the regime's military victory.

Introduction

The post-Cold war liberal peace-building model posits a complex yet linear set of dilemmas arising from the notion that war termination will lead to a 'negative peace' and, if those dilemmas are properly addressed, allow for a transition towards a 'positive peace' characterized by democracy/democratization, and development.[1] This model is largely predicated upon an assumption of conflict termination via a negotiated settlement. Yet, while there was an uptake in the number of negotiated solutions to civil wars post-1990, since 2000 their frequency began to decline. By the 2010s, the norm of civil wars being resolved through some sort of outright military victory has become increasingly common.[2]

At the same time, the modalities through which that military victory is achieved reveal a template whereby armed conflict is increasingly 'civilianized' i.e. fought predominately amongst civilians and over their loyalty and

control.[3] In a context of 'war amongst people'[4] – characterized by active insurgencies[5] and deep civilian involvement[6] – violence is employed deliberately by both state and non-state armed groups against the civilian population for their own military and political ends. Consequently, rather than being mere collateral damage when targeting military personnel and objects, civilians are being directly targeted as a strategic choice in order to win wars.[7] This form of deliberate mass violence directed at civilian populations has gained increasing attention in academia over the past decade. It is rightly regarded as central to what has been labelled coercive counterinsurgency strategies,[8] especially in its population-centric form.[9]

According to Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri Zhukov, coercive counterinsurgency is centered around two strategic goals – punishment and denial.[10] The strategy of punishment seeks to raise the costs of continuing to fight for insurgencies through overwhelming military strength. The strategy of denial aims at preventing the expansion of the insurgency by curtailing the battlefield and the insurgents' ability to spread their fight to new areas. In this article we apply Toft and Zhukov's framework to an analysis of Bashar al-Assad's counterinsurgency strategy in Syria. The majority of the existing literature on the Syrian civil war focuses on documenting the Syrian regime's reliance on the strategic goal of punishment, zooming in on mass-based forms of collective punishment enacted against civilians.[11] In this article, we focus instead on examining the use of siege warfare and population control to achieve the strategic goal of denial; arguing that these two tactics – siege warfare and population control – have been instrumental to Assad's military victory. They have done so by enabling *two* types of denial – military and political.

Extending Toft and Zhukov's approach, we distinguish between *military* denial, intended to prevent the expansion of the armed insurgency, and *political* denial, designed to frustrate the rise of any alternative political order. The former has been achieved through the strategic use of sieges to raise the cost of fighting for insurgents in strategically located rebel-held areas, effectively freezing the battle-lines in order to contain the spread of the fight ('shrinking the sea to kill the fish'), while at the same time avoiding direct armed confrontation. The latter has been achieved by undermining rebel governance efforts and depriving insurgents of supportive populations through demographic manipulation. In addition, deliberately engineering forced displacement and population control, often in the form of unilaterally imposed settlements branded by the regime as 'reconciliation agreements', has de facto impaired the possibility of political opposition to the state. When the end of a siege was finally 'negotiated' under duress, civilian populations were forced into a type of strangle contract whereby they supposedly chose whether to be transferred to the rebel-held enclave of Idlib in north-west Syria, displacement camps or subsumed back under regime control via the

quasi-legalistic terms the agreements.[12] The twin tactics of military and political denial, combined with the goal of mass punishment in Syria (through indiscriminate aerial bombardment, scorched-earth campaigns, and the mass-arrest and torture of political opponents), allowed the Syrian regime to gradually contain the rebellion and in the process guarantee its survival.

In many ways, the Syrian example is but the latest in a series of successful counterinsurgency campaigns to adopt coercive measures that include both elements of punishment and denial. What the regime of Bashar al-Assad has done so masterfully is to intertwine punishment with two denial strategies – military and political – through the use of siege of warfare and population control. Consequently, while the Syrian case is not unique, it is of vital importance that academics and policy-makers better understand how coercive counterinsurgency strategies have been used in the Syrian civil war. This is precisely because the twin denial tactics of siege and population control have been so effective at quelling the insurgency. Our concern is that this strategy will become a blueprint for future counterinsurgency campaigns that similarly disregard civilian rights, safety and security. However, it should also be noted that these tactics of military and political denial have not been used in isolation in Syria. Rather, they have been combined with a variety of additional tools, from mass-propaganda and indoctrination, the distribution of social benefits, to other forms of social, political and economic co-optation in order to construct a coercive counter-insurgency framework *par excellence*.[13]

From hearts-and-minds to coercive counter-insurgency

Coercive counterinsurgency can be defined as a strategy centered on the strategic and widespread use of indiscriminate violence in pursuit of military and political goals. The violence is primarily targeted at individuals and communities based on principles of collective punishment rather than individual responsibility.[14] The strategy has also been described as authoritarian conflict management – not only because authoritarian regimes are expected to employ it with greater frequency (albeit by no means exclusively), but also because they generally possess a number of traits that make them better suited to pursue this strategy.[15] These include generally extensive coercive/repressive apparatuses, robust systems of internal surveillance and control, strong powers to censor and control public narratives, weak checks and balances, muzzled civil societies, media and opposition, considerable ability to sustain casualties and war-related costs, in addition to limited concerns over public legitimacy.[16] Coercive counterinsurgency strategies have a long history and have been used with effect over many decades in numerous asymmetric wars and low-intensity conflicts.[17] Most recently, these include by

the Sri Lankan government to violently eliminate the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; by Russia in Chechnya and by China against the Uighur insurgency in Xinjiang.

Conceptually, this type of counterinsurgency strategy can be contrasted with the population-centric 'winning hearts-and-minds' doctrine that aims to separate the insurgents from the population by gaining the latter's trust and loyalty, primarily through protection and good governance.[18] In other words, at one end of this idealized spectrum, the focus on 'hearts and minds' would lead to a counterinsurgency approach that prioritizes security-provision for the civilian population, seeking to foster trust and voluntary cooperation and, in doing so, attempting to isolate and weaken the insurgents by severing their bond with the civilian population. At the other end of this spectrum, coercive counterinsurgency seeks to achieve the very same goal, but it relies on deliberate violence against the civilian population to violently crush the enemy's fighters and forcibly separate insurgents, political opponents, and others considered traitors from a population that is deemed politically loyal.[19] As a result, in coercive counterinsurgencies civilians are profoundly and deliberately victimized. They are killed in military campaigns that aim to destroy rebel forces by maximizing enemy casualties, regardless of the cost to non-combatants. In addition, they are deliberately targeted through mass repression, forced displacement, collective punishment and/or ethnic cleansing.[20]

In contrast to recent attempts to implement a hearts-and-minds approach to counterinsurgency followed by costly and extended stabilization efforts, coercive counterinsurgency has been effective at quelling restive populations and civil strife but can best be described as a form of barbarism – the systematic flaunting of international humanitarian law to win wars.[21] Of course, both coercive counterinsurgency and the hearts-and-minds approach, in their idealized forms, should be merely interpreted as heuristic devices useful to contrast distinct COIN strategies. Indeed, from an empirical point of view, these strategies are rarely pursued in their pure form, and should be examined on a spectrum.

The logic of coercive counterinsurgency in Syria

When non-violent political demonstrations began in Syria in early 2011 within the context of the regional wave of socio-political demonstrations and uprisings, initial calls to end regime brutality and coercion soon evolved into larger demands for political change. Protesters wanted to see reform in a regime they perceived as authoritarian, corrupt and unable to address rising socio-economic inequality within the country.[22] However, rather than compromise, the regime reacted by mobilizing its coercive apparatus to apply a deliberate and comprehensive strategy to induce fear through violent repression.

Accordingly, the Syrian regime focused on suppressing early demonstrations by retaliating against the communities and areas where anti-regime activism occurred, arresting, torturing and killing protest leaders, and intimidating supporters.[23] This deliberate and increasingly violent campaign played a key role in pushing the opposition from non-violent to violent protest. The militarization of the conflict played into Assad's hands, enabling the regime to exacerbate internal sectarian dynamics and to rally minorities behind Assad. It also led the regime to shift its counterinsurgency strategy from early mass-repression by the security apparatus to a more robust coercive counterinsurgency campaign that primarily came under the purview of the Syrian Armed Forces.[24]

The Assad regime's adoption of a coercive counterinsurgency strategy is in-line not only with Syria's authoritarian regime and its governance record, but it also reflects the regime's existential fears with respect to the rebellion.[25] Historically, the Assad regime had relied on a combination of repression and co-optation to ensure its hold of power, in the process awarding minorities like the Druze, Ismailis, and most of all, the Alawites – who account for roughly 10% of the Syrian population – with disproportionate access to power and privileges. With the beginning of the Syrian revolution, and faced with a thin and largely fixed base of support, the regime concluded it would have a higher chance of succeeding if it terrorized the opposition into submission rather than shifting loyalties and winning hearts-and-minds.

As early as April 2011, sieges were used as part of military campaigns in southern Daraa and in Homs to subdue what were considered then to be the centers of the uprising. In these cases Syrian forces would move in to 'clear' and then 'hold' towns.[26] This approach by Bashar al-Assad was likely shaped by his father's successful crushing of an Islamist rebellion between 1976 and 1980.[27] On that occasion, Hafez al-Assad dealt with the uprising by carefully selecting and deploying his most trusted military units; by encouraging the formation of loyal non-statutory armed groups; and by relying on massive armed force and armored units to hunt down rebels and clear cities.[28] The culmination of that military campaign was the three-week siege of the city of Hama. In that operation, Syrian armored units sealed off the rebel-held town; heavy artillery pounded it; and then elite units and paramilitary forces entered the besieged area to physically destroy opponents.[29] The operation led to massive destruction and civilian casualties, but – from the regime's perspective – also to the permanent crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood-led rebellion.[30] In 2011, the same playbook was used to crush the early stages of non-violent rebellion and evolved into a coercive counterinsurgency strategy that combines mass punishment coupled with elements of military and political denial premised on the twin pillars of siege and population control.

Military denial through siege warfare

By 2012, sieges began to be used in a deliberate and strategic fashion by the Syrian regime, first to seal rebel-held towns and cities militarily in order to cut off food and medical supplies, and later, with Iranian and Russian military assistance, as a more advanced strategy to displace Syrians unable to 'reconcile'. This shift towards a more systematic and purposeful use of sieges came as the war progressed, especially from late 2012, as part of the regime's increased reliance on indirect attacks, and, as the locus of fighting moved north and its forces were stretched thin, fighting in areas that were less mixed ethnically and less populated.

Sieges certainly served as a tool of mass punishment but, even more importantly, they were key to implementing a strategy of military denial. They did this by allowing the regime to isolate the enemy and prevent its advance while avoiding direct confrontation. The Syrian regime needed to rely on the military denial logic of sieges, especially from late 2012, largely because of force considerations.

In 2011, the strength of the Syrian Armed Forces was estimated to be only around 250,000–300,000 soldiers (without including roughly 300,000–350,000 reservists); but since the beginning of the war the regime lost considerable manpower due to a combination of casualties and defections.[31] Additionally, from the outset the regime worried about loyalty, and thus chose to rely only on a portion of its fighting forces, reportedly up to one-third.[32] The losses in manpower, combined with Assad's significant concerns about loyalty, concretely meant that the regime had to concentrate its military forces on key battlegrounds. This resulted in a focus on the country's main urban centers, military bases and communication lines, while temporarily relinquishing areas not deemed as strategic.[33] With a troop-to-population ratio lower than what is conventionally deemed necessary for a successful counter-insurgency campaign, Assad compensated by relying on foreign and domestic militias as well as by investing in cost-effective, largely indirect, tactics. This included siege warfare coupled with a massive reliance on air-power that enabled it to pound areas out of reach of ground troops.[34] Siege warfare allowed the regime to keep its enemies isolated in place and to prevent their advance without having to commit or divert combat resources from other theaters. In heavily populated and dense urban terrain, like Daraya or the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, it also offered an alternative to highly-risky and costly ground offensive operations.[35]

Heavily enforced sieges were imposed in cities and towns in strategically located and embattled provinces such as Homs, Aleppo, Damascus and Rif Damascus (rural Damascus), freezing the battle-lines and preventing the advance of the insurgency. Infamous examples include the brutal siege of Madaya, a town in Damascus governorate, where a Syrian regime and

Hezbollah-backed siege that started in June 2015 led to a severe humanitarian crisis. With goods prevented from entering the besieged area, and with civilians forbidden from leaving through the use of military checkpoints or anti-personnel landmines, Syrian citizens in Madaya were literally starved to death.[36] While coming under repeated international scrutiny amid accusations of employing indiscriminate violence against civilians and carrying out a policy meant to starve the opposition into surrender, these sieges were perceived as effective by the regime because they denied the expansion of the armed rebellion while also weakening the rebels' political motivation by targeting their capabilities and will to fight as well as their solidarity with other revolutionary forces and groups.

Sieges also provided a form of collective punishment for entire populations that were increasingly being branded as terrorists. According to an August 2016 report by the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, over 600,000 civilians were besieged at that time, with an additional 6 million located in zones where assistance was scarce and intermittent (and these numbers tend to err highly on the side of caution, as noted by groups like Siege Watch).[37] Siege Watch estimates that there has been nearly 60 urban sieges in Syria during the civil war.[38] These have overwhelmingly been enforced by the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and have led to the besiegement of over 2.5 million Syrians.

A key example of how the siege strategy has been employed as an instrument of military denial is the case of Eastern Ghouta, a district in rural Damascus that became an early bastion of opposition. At first, the regime sought to fight the opposition by combining aerial bombardments with troops and tanks to retake and hold over ten embattled cities and towns including Douma, Mesraba, Arbin and Harasta. Yet, after finding itself drawn in to costly and difficult urban warfare, the regime changed tactic and, by the Spring of 2013, shifted its focus to containing the rebellion by gradually encircling and besieging an area of just over 100 square kilometers with a population density of around 4000 inhabitant/km^2.[39] The siege completely changed the military dynamic: it forced the rebels on the defensive and arrested their momentum, while allowing the regime to conserve its forces.

Sieges also produced perverse economic incentives. From regime statutory and non-statutory forces benefiting from informal taxation/extortion and protection rackets related to controlling access points; to non-state armed groups involved in the smuggling business by controlling informal entry points and underground tunnels, to the rise of new professional 'brokers' in charge of exporting and/or importing goods; sieges led to a rise of a new conflict elite that actively benefits from the besieged community's misery.[40] Checkpoints in besieged areas became a key source of income, with armed actors able to impose a system of informal taxation of all goods, including humanitarian assistance. While on paper this system of

smuggling was illegal, it has often been conducted with the implicit and at times explicit consent of the regime, allowing its troops to make money on the side.[41] To an extent, the economic incentives derived from besieging a city or town have also been used by the regime to reward and ensure loyalty, especially in the case of its militias.

The smuggling economy linked to sieges also has a tremendously punitive effect on the civilian population in besieged areas. While the smuggled goods could at times provide a form of relief, the economic dynamics created by the siege led to steep increases in prices of basic commodities in besieged areas, taking a further toll on the already impoverished population and adding further pressure on the rebels in charge of those areas to capitulate.[42] These dynamics were also prevalent in Eastern Ghouta, where prices of basic commodities, including fuel, rose exponentially since the beginning of the siege, dramatically impairing civilians' livelihoods.[43]

Political denial through population control

In addition to sieges proving highly successful at denying the spread of the insurgency militarily, siege warfare also became the basis upon which political denial through population control could be enacted and enhanced. Indeed, sealing the entry and exit points into and out of cities and towns denied rebel groups the chance to establish any alternative political order. With minimal access to food, water or medical supplies, let alone political solidarity from other rebel-fighters or the political opposition and international community, basic survival needs very quickly trumped all other political and revolutionary considerations stunting rebel governance efforts in numerous Syrian communities.[44]

For example, in Eastern Ghouta, the siege exacerbated existing divisions and infighting within the rebel factions, who at times became engulfed in fratricide over access to and distribution of resources.[45] Initially, Eastern Ghouta had emerged as a stronghold of rebel governance under the leadership of Zahran Alloush and his group the Islamic Army (*Jaish al-Islam*), showcasing the ability of the opposition to withstand repression when working together.[46] However, following the killing of Alloush in December 2015 and the tightening of the siege, infighting between the different opposition groups in the area erupted. The combination of resource scarcity and tensions over controlling access points and smuggling fueled conflict between different rebel factions, undermining their unity and, in doing so, their capability to produce an alternative system of governance to the state or withhold the regime militarily.

This dynamic was observed over and over in the course of the conflict; with prolonged siege warfare, coupled with aerial bombardment of civilian infrastructure, leading to the disintegration of the rebel groups' ability to

focus on governance. For example, with the impending siege of eastern Aleppo by the Syrian regime, groups in the rebel-held pockets of the city were forced to downsize their delivery of public goods and their govern-ance activities in order to concentrate their resources on preparing for the siege to come.[47]

After having been weakened by long and crippling sieges coupled with heavy shelling and aerial bombardment, rebel-held cities and towns are forced to accept the terms of a type of strangle contract (a highly asymme-trical contract in which the weaker party is forced to agree to unsatisfactory terms) branded as a political settlement, or be subject to continued siege and an increase in aerial attacks. By taking advantage of the situation of need and deprivation it created through the urban siege, the Syrian regime put itself in a position to further deny citizens any political rights through triaging the population into those that could be subsumed back into the state, albeit in a highly securitized way, and those exiled from it completely. Because of their dire circumstances, the leadership of besieged communities were essentially strong armed into accepting these surrender agreements, euphemistically known as 'reconciliation agreements', as a way to alleviate the siege.

Reconciliation agreements have proved a highly effective way for the regime to reinstate its control over rebel-held areas and triage the population of cities and towns into those deemed completely incapable of reconciling with the state – usually members of the political and armed opposition and their families but also civil society leaders active in the opposition movement that have been bussed to rebel-held Idlib – from Syrian citizens that are considered disloyal but nevertheless can still be subsumed back into the state as a body to be used militarily or as a form of resource extraction, all under increased surveillance.[48] This parsing of the population into traitors and supporters is done via a specific term of reconciliation agreement that says that members of a rebel-held community must 'reconcile their situation/status' (*taswiyat al-wadahum*) with the regime.

Under this term of these quasi-contractual agreements, community mem-bers are supposedly given a choice about whether they will reconcile their status or relocate to rebel-held Idlib. This process creates a bifurcation of Syrian citizenship along the lines of those that can be settled or reconciled and those that are entirely barred from accessing any rights.[49] Even those willing to reconcile are obliged to undergo invasive security checks by the regime as it reasserts control of an area it has effectively de-populated of any meaningful opposition. Once community members are reconciled, security checks enable another level of population control whereby the regime can weed out anyone else it deems a potential security threat, recruit army conscripts (that may have previously evaded military service) and boost

a population that has dwindled due to over half a million deaths and 10 million displaced in order to derive both informal and formal economic benefits.

Cities and towns across the country, ranging from Daraya on the outskirts of the capital, to eastern parts of Aleppo city, to Daraa the cradle of the revolution, have now all been subject to the reconciliation process. The process in each community has followed a similar playbook. One example is the al-Waer neighbourhood of Homs that reached a preliminary deal with the regime in December 2015.[50] The agreement was signed as a way to end a two-year long siege affecting some 75,000 residents of al-Waer.[51] As a result of the siege the community leaders had little choice but to agree to the terms of the agreement that were implemented under the observation of UN representatives and signed by representatives of the Syrian regime and the three main rebel groups operating in the area. Opposition negotiators for the Waer agreement thought that the regime was serious about improving living conditions for the population once around 200 to 300 rebel fighters had been evacuated with their light and heavy weaponry. After the initial evacuation, the siege was re-imposed and continued for another two-years until a final reconciliation agreement was reached on 13 March 2017. During the two-month implementation phase of the final deal, nine batches of people, totaling nearly half of the majority Sunni population (around 20,000 people) were forcibly displaced and remain unable to return to their homes.[52] Additionally, despite a term in the agreement that supposedly enabled citizens to reconcile their situation, many were still detained and subjected to abuse by the Syrian regime.[53]

Over the past decade, the Syrian regime has implemented a brutal counter-insurgency strategy aimed at quashing internal dissent. To do so, the regime has relied on siege warfare to militarily prevent the geographical spread of the insurgency. In tandem, the regime has focused on political denial through the suppression of rebel governance efforts and also by systematically separating the civilian population from rebel forces through dynamics of deliberate displacement, whereby civilians are first, collectively punished and then pushed to leave *en-masse*.[54] The displacement and depopulation of key embattled areas deprives the insurgents of human resources and demoralizes the rebellion while bringing the regime renewed manpower and, just as importantly, contributing to the regime's claims to legitimacy since it still rules over the majority of the Syrian population. In addition, the triaging of the population of rebel-held towns and cities into those that are able to enjoy limited citizenship rights from those exiled from the state contributed to the long term strategy of regime neutralization of any form of civil or political opposition, whilst also demographically reengineering the socio-political milieu.

A blueprint for future wars?

The coercive counterinsurgency strategy of siege warfare and population control employed by authoritarian regimes such as Syria's across scores of urban areas appears here to stay precisely because it has been so effective at securing both military and political wins. These include preserving vital military and economic resources, debilitating and ultimately destroying rebel governance efforts and effectively banishing anyone considered a threat to state security. Understanding the strategic logic behind the dynamics of besiegement and deliberate population engineering in contemporary civil wars is therefore key to better conceptualizing and responding to the needs of communities within government *and* rebel controlled areas, as well as in refugee-receiving states. The uptick in the occurrence of coercive counterinsurgency poses not only a challenge to existing templates for humanitarian assistance, but also to proponents of the dominant Western model of liberal peace-building and post-conflict stabilization, recovery and reconstruction. Our concern is that because the strategy of collective punishment coupled with military and political denial has been so successful at quelling the revolution in Syria, the tactics used by the regime will act as a blueprint for governments in subsequent counterinsurgency campaigns.

An obvious problem is that besiegement is not defined in international law therefore establishing whether an area is besieged or not is a complex and often controversial undertaking. Additionally, population transfers for 'security reasons' are actually permitted under IHL and likewise, sieges in wartime are not *ipso facto* illegal. The Hague Convention (1907) regulates the use of siege warfare in international armed conflict and while it does not prohibit besiegement *ex toto*, the Convention does urge conflict parties to take all necessary steps not to target key civilian infrastructure.[55] What is more, the legality of siege warfare in the conduct of hostilities has to be analyzed in tandem with the obligations warring parties have to the civilian population, including the obligation to, 'allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of all relief consignments, equipment and personnel ... even if such assistance is destined for the civilian population of the adverse Party'.[56] As a result of this vagueness, the Syrian regime has set about creating a veneer of legal legitimacy by branding what are essentially tools of forced displacement and population control 'reconciliation agreements' and by trying to claim displacement is for security reasons via branding all those that oppose it terrorists.[57] This should give peace-makers and the policy community pause to examine how weasel words and euphemisms such as 'reconciliation', 'settlements' and 'security checks' are being used as stand-ins for what are in fact highly violent and coercive processes of collective punishment and demographic change. Additionally, providing effective assistance to besieged and displaced communities in contexts where sieges are utilized to pursue

a displacement-by-design strategy introduces a series of complex dilemmas at the practical, legal and ethical level for humanitarians and policy-makers. There needs to be a serious conversation about how to best protect civilians in contexts of deliberate siege-and-displace campaigns without inadvertently rewarding the besieger.

Likewise, there needs to be more attention paid to the fact that aid distribution, and later in the conflict, development assistance, can become a hostage of war logic. In Syria, the regime benefitted from international aid by ensuring that the bulk of assistance was delivered through a system of coordination with the central government.[58] This enabled the Assad regime to ensure that the majority of internationally-supplied aid was distributed to areas it controls or through vetted partners. In this way, the regime was simultaneously able to reward loyalty, further civilian dependency and shape displacement dynamics. As the economic crisis in Syria has worsened, humanitarian assistance has also became a precious resource for the regime, enabling it to free up some of its own funds and supplies by relying on external assistance. Simultaneously, the regime has displayed what the UN Security Council labelled an 'arbitrary and unjustified withholding of consent to relief operations'.[59] This resulted in limited access for the international humanitarian sector to besieged communities.[60] Both these factors only exacerbated the politicization of the principle of neutrality and impartiality and the unequal distribution of aid between regime and opposition-controlled areas, in turn contributing to determine the patterns of internal displacement.

The same moral hazards that are linked to aid distribution also exist when thinking about reconstruction and the dynamics of refugee return. A major outcome of the siege, starve and surrender strategy has been demographic change and this is inherently linked to reconstruction efforts. The historically unequal distribution of power and economic disparity in Syria that favored Alawites, Christians and a select few Sunni *bourgeoisie* is one major reason that led to the overwhelmingly working-class Sunni opposition to the regime in cities and towns such as Daraa, Old Homs and Daraya. Many people from such communities have now been forcefully displaced via the terms of reconciliation agreements and their homes taken over by predominantly Alawi and Shi'a supporters of the regime.[61] The permanent displacement of Sunni families from their homes, and a subsequent raft of laws which relieves them of legal title, paves the way for reconstruction projects such as the Basilia City (which ironically means 'Peace City' in Old Aramaic) and the Marota developments which will permanently reconfigure these strategically located areas to populations more amenable to the regime.[62] The above are all important considerations for the international community as Syria moves into a supposedly 'post-conflict' era where the allocation of funds for recon-struction and humanitarian relief will take on even more meaning.[63, 64]

By expanding the denial pillar of Monica Toft and Yuri Zhukov's coercive counterinsurgency framework, this paper has argued that the Syrian regime has masterfully used both military and political denial in its counterinsurgency campaign. These manifest most obviously via the twin pillars of siege and population control. As the relative use and success of coercive counterinsurgency strategies grows across the globe, and as more civil wars and internal conflicts are not terminated via a negotiated settlement but instead through military victory, further research on dealing with illiberal peace contexts and coercive counterinsurgency methods is urgently needed. First, in the hope of improving contextual awareness to provide more targeted policy-making; second, in the hope of more carefully crafted (military and/or humanitarian) assistance and interventions; and finally (but most importantly), in the hope of however minimally, improving the lives of the many civilians who are directly targeted as a result of these strategies.

Notes

1. Höglund and Kovacs, "Beyond the absence of war: the diversity of peace in post-settlement societies', 367–390.
2. Kreutz, "How and when armed conflicts end: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination dataset," 243–250.
3. Wenger and Mason, "The civilianization of armed conflict: trends and implications," 835–852.
4. Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, 271–72.
5. 'Insurgency is a protracted political and military set of activities directed toward partially or completely gaining control over the territory of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. The insurgents engage in actions ranging from guerrilla operations, terrorism, and sabotage to political mobilization, political action, intelligence/counterintelligence activities, and propaganda/psychological warfare. All of these instruments are designed to weaken and/or destroy the power and legitimacy of a ruling government, while at the same time increasing the power and legitimacy of the armed insurgent group.' Shultz et al, *Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority*, 17–18. See also: Sewall et al, *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*; Killcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One.*
6. See e.g. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era.*
7. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*; Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence against Civilians in Civil War: Looting or Terror?," 461–485.
8. See e.g. Hazelton, "The "Hearts and Minds" Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," 80–113; Toft and Zhukov, "Denial and punishment in the North Caucasus," 785–800.
9. Counterinsurgency can be both 'enemy-centric' – focused on defeating the enemy military – or 'population-centric'; focusing on separating the insurgents from the civilian population.
10. Toft and Zhukov, "Denial and punishment in the North Caucasus," 791.

11. See e.g. Beals et al, "Breaking Aleppo," 2; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Without a Trace: Enforced Disappearances in Syria," 8–9; Human Rights Watch, "Death from the skies: Deliberate and Indiscriminate Air Strikes on Civilians."
12. Sosnowski, "Reconciliation Agreements as Strangle Contracts: Ramifications for Property and Citizenship Rights in the Syrian Civil War," 13–14, 16.
13. Khalili, "The Roads to Power: The Infrastructure of Counterinsurgency," 95.
14. Zhukov, "Examining the Authoritarian Model of Counter-insurgency: The Soviet Campaign against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army," 439–466.
15. Lewis et al, "Illiberal Peace? Authoritarian Modes of Conflict Management," 493–494.
16. Byman,'Death Solves All Problems," 62–93; Ucko, ""The People are Revolting": An Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency," 29–61.
17. Valentino et al, ""Draining the Sea": Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," 375–407.
18. Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*.
19. Toft and Zhukov, "Denial and punishment in the North Caucasus," 785–800.
20. Ratelle and Souleimanov, "Perfect Counterinsurgency? Making Sense of Moscow's Policy of Chechenisation," 1287–1314.
21. Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," 93–128.
22. International Crisis Group, "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution'; Meininghaus, "Humanitarianism in intra-state conflict: aid inequality and local governance in government- and opposition-controlled areas in the Syrian war," 1454–1482; Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*.
23. See e.g. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War*, 37–45.
24. Mucha, "Does counterinsurgency fuel civil war? Peru and Syria compared," 140–166.
25. al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, 73, 153–154.
26. Todman, "Siege Warfare in Syria'; Todman, "Isolating dissent, punishing the masses: siege warfare as counter-insurgency," 1–32.
27. Conduit, "The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011," 85.
28. Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War."
29. Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War."
30. Conduit, "The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980–1982 and Homs in 2011," 73–87.
31. Kozak, "'An Army in All Corners' Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria."
32. See above 29..
33. See above 28.
34. See above 31.
35. Amnesty International, "Squeezing the Life out of Yarmouk," 13.
36. Baker et al, "Madaya: Portrait of a Syrian Town Under Siege."
37. Siege Watch argues that the actual number of Syrians under siege in fact surpasses 1 million. The UN revised its number of people under siege from 350,000 people to 486,700 in February after it came under criticism for under-estimating the figure. Yet Siege Watch, using OCHA's own criteria for

designating sieges and based on interviews with an extensive network in besieged locations, puts the number at over a million; Slemrod, "UN changes Syria siege list, adds Madaya and Yarmouk."

38. Pax for Peace and The Syria Institute, Siege Watch project: https://siegewatch.org/.
39. Lund, "Into the Tunnels: the Rise and Fall of Syria's Rebel Enclave in Eastern Ghouta," 1.
40. Abboud, "Marketization, underdevelopment, and social instability: The political economy of Syria's uprising," 682–689; Abboud, "Social Change, Network Formation and Syria's War Economies," 92–107.
41. Turkmani et al, "Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria; evidence from three local areas."
42. Todman, "Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery'; Turkmani et al.
43. Sadaki, "The Siege Economy of Eastern Ghouta."
44. José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, 'Stifling stateness: The Assad regime's campaign against rebel governance'.
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47. Lund, "Into the Tunnels."
48. Cafarella and Casagrande, "Syrian Armed Opposition Forces in Aleppo."
49. Abboud, "Reconciling Fighters, Settling Civilians: The Making of Post-Conflict Citizenship in Syria," 751–768.
50. Sosnowski, "Ceasefires as Violent State-Building: Local Truce and Reconciliation Agreements in the Syrian Civil War," 276.
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52. Abu Zeid and Wilkofsky, "Waer: Fighters will not leave. Neighborhood to retain "revolutionary character."'
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54. Turkmani et al, 54.
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56. Power, "Siege Warfare In Syria: Prosecuting The Starvation Of Civilians."
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59. Sosnowski and Hastings, "Assad regime maintains strangle-hold over humanitarian access in Syria."
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62. Clerc, "Informal settlements in the Syrian conflict: urban planning as a weapon", 34–51; Ruhe, "Weaponization of the Land and Property Rights system in the Syrian civil war: facilitating restitution?", 453–471.
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