Regime crackdown in Syria (2011-2017)
— unpacking violence against civilians

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Summary

This report sets out to explore and explain the overwhelming violence against civilians in Syria carried out by the regime and its allies from the beginning of the uprisings in 2011 until the end of 2017. The report employs the scenario-based framework developed by the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI) in trying to better understand the type of threats civilians in Syria have been subject to at different times and in different places throughout the armed conflict.

The report finds that violence against civilians in Syria can be divided into five phases, each representing an escalation in the regime's violence, and each portraying qualitative differences in the ways in which civilians have been targeted. It concludes that the regime's overarching motivation for targeting civilians throughout the conflict has been its own survival. Simultaneously, it shows how a number of overlapping motivations and a diversification of threats seem to have guided the regime's targeting of civilians. Military necessity drove the regime's escalation of violence against civilians, as failed attempts at defeating the opposition led to increasingly more destructive strategies and tactics. These findings can help make sense of the regime's seemingly mindless violence against civilians in Syria, ultimately providing insights on what could have been done to better protect them:

- The **first phase** of the conflict (March 2011–December 2011) was primarily characterized by the regime's violent efforts to repress the Syrian protests in order to remain in power. The regime's security apparatus shot directly at protesters and funeral processions, undertook hundreds of arrests, and embarked on a number of targeted operations in efforts to suppress and contain the unrest.

- The **second phase** (January 2012–June 2012) represented an escalation as well as a diversification of the regime's violence through the introduction of heavy weaponry and larger military operations. The regime continued to violently crack down on civilians to remain in power, but regime security forces also exploited the civilian population for their own profit, especially in the aftermath of military operations. Massacres aiming to expel certain parts of the population from particular areas were increasingly part of its approach.

- The **third phase** (July 2012–July 2013) witnessed the regime's turn to airpower, allowing it to attack opposition-controlled areas of the country outside the reach of its ground forces. The period also saw the introduction of deliberate attacks against hospitals, markets, bakeries and schools.

- The **fourth phase** (August 2013–August 2015) introduced the use of chemical weapons into the conflict. The period also saw the complete destruction of Sunni neighborhoods in Homs, reflecting the regime's broader efforts to destroy and forcibly displace civilians in opposition-held areas.

- The **fifth phase** (September 2015–December 2017) began with the Russian intervention into the conflict that led to intensified attacks on opposition-held areas and an escalation of the regime's siege tactic.

Sammendrag

Denne rapporten har som mål å undersøke og forklare den utstrakte volden som det syriske regimet og dets allierte brukte fra begynnelsen av det syriske opprøret i 2011 fram til slutten av 2017. I rapporten benytter vi det scenariobaserte rammeverket utviklet av FFI for bedre å forstå de ulike typene av trusler syriske sivile har vært utsatt for til ulike tider og ulike steder gjennom konflikten.

Rapporten viser at vold mot sivile i konflikten kan deles inn i fem faser, der hver av dem representerer en eskalering av regimets voldsbruk. I hver fase er det kvalitative forskjeller i måten sivile blir angrepet på. Rapporten konkluderer med at den overgripende motivasjonen for å rette vold mot sivile gjennom konflikten har vært regimets egen overlevelse. Samtidig belyser rapporten hvordan bruken av vold mot sivile i økende grad har gjenspeilet overlappende motiver, og har ledet til en diversifisering av typer trusler. Regimets gjentatte mislykkede forsøk på å overvinne opposisjonen førte til bruk av stadig mer destruktive taktikker og en eskalering av voldsbruken. Disse observasjonene har vært nyttige for å forstå regimets bruk av vold mot sivile i Syria:

- Den **første fasen** i konflikten (mars 2011–desember 2011) ble først og fremst kjennetegnet av regimets voldelige forsøk på å beholde makten ved å undertrykke de syriske protestene. Regimet skjøt direkte på demonstrantene og på begravelsesfølger, gjennomførte hundrevis av arrestasjoner, samt en rekke målrettede militæroperasjoner i forsøk på å undertrykke og begrense demonstrasjonene.

- Den **andre fasen** (januar 2012–juni 2012) representerte både en eskalering og en diversifisering av regimets voldsbruk gjennom introduksjonen av tunge våpen og større militære operasjoner. Regimet fortsatte å rette volden mot sivile for å holde på makten, men styrkene utnyttet også sivile for egen vinning, spesielt i etterkant av operasjoner. Det ble også stadig flere massakrer hvor formålet var å fordrive deler av befolkningen fra bestemte områder.

- Den **tredje fasen** (juli 2012–juli 2013) innebar en overgang til bruk av luftmakt, som tillot regimet å angripe opposisjonskontrollerte områder utenfor bakkestyrkenes rekkevidde. I tillegg så vi også de første overlagte angrepene på sykehus, markeder, bakerier og skoler.

- Den **fjerde fasen** (august 2013–august 2015) introduserte bruken av kjemiske våpen i konflikten. I denne fasen så vi også den fullstendige ødeleggelsen av sunni-nabolag i opposisjonskontrollerte Homs, et eksempel på regimets innsats for å ødelegge og fordrive sivile fra opposisjonskontrollerte områder.

- Den **femte fasen** (september 2015–desember 2017) begynte med den russiske intervensjonen i konflikten, som førte til intensiverte angrep på opposisjonskontrollerte områder og en eskalering av regimets beleiringstaktikk.

Content

Preface

This report forms part of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment's (FFI) research on protection of civilians (POC). Since 2008, FFI has studied perpetrators of violence and historic cases of military operations to protect civilians, in order to better answer what military force can and cannot do to protect civilians from different types of physical threats. FFI's research has informed and influenced both NATO and UN policies, guidelines and training on this topic.

Protecting civilians in today's conflicts involves much more than avoiding 'collateral damage,' assisting the delivery of humanitarian aid and respecting the laws of armed conflict. It involves protection from perpetrators who deliberately target civilians and who are responsible for the vast majority of civilian casualties in contemporary armed conflicts. Still, military forces have often failed to protect civilians under imminent threat. Considering perpetrators and threats against civilians vary, a thorough understanding of the particular nature of the different types of threats civilians might be faced with, aids our understanding of how intervening military forces may protect civilians more effectively in the future.

This report is primarily interested in understanding the violence against civilians committed by the Syrian regime and its allies, and builds on one earlier FFI-report in particular; "Protection of civilians – military planning scenarios and implications", by Alexander Beadle, (2014). The scenario-report identifies seven generic scenarios that describe situations where military forces may be expected to protect civilians from fundamentally different types of physical threats. The scenario-report provides a theoretical break-down of the range of different threats civilians may be faced with – GENOCIDE, ETHNIC CLEANSING, REGIME CRACKDOWN, POST-CONFLICT REVENGE, COMMUNAL CONFLICT, PREDATORY VIOLENCE, and INSURGENCY. All scenarios are based on in-depth case studies of previous perpetrators of violence.

This report provides a deeper understanding of the regime violence perpetrated against civilians from 2011 to 2017; how and why violence against civilians has varied. These insights can help inform potential future efforts to protect civilians from similar types of threats. As such, the report is part of the continuous revision of advice in light of new cases where civilians are attacked as part of a perpetrator's strategy, upon which all of FFI's guidance on the protection of civilians is based.

FFI has produced several other case studies of perpetrators of violence, including:

- Ulrik Hallén Øen (2014): Protection of civilians in practice – emerging lessons from the Central African Republic
- Anders Skeibrok Våge (2014): Violence against civilians: case-studies of perpetrators (LRA, Taliban, al-Shabaab, Lou Nuer vs. Murle, Libya and Syria)

FFI has also produced two guides for military planners and practitioners, tailored to UN and NATO-operations respectively:

- Stian Kjeksrud, Alexander Beadle and Petter Lindqvist (2016): Protecting Civilians from Violence — A Threat-Based Approach to Protection of Civilians in UN Peace Operations
- Alexander Beadle and Stian Kjeksrud (2014): Military planning and assessment guide for the protection of civilians

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Kjeller, 22 October 2018

1   Introduction

Inspired by the democratic protests that swept across the Arab world in the winter of 2010/11, peaceful protests against the Syrian regime erupted in March 2011. Within a year, protests had developed into an armed 'struggle for Syria.' By April 2013, the UN reported a staggering 93,000 documented casualties as a result of the conflict; with the real number of victims believed to be even higher. In only two years, Syria had experienced close to half the total casualties of the decade-long civil wars of Algeria and Sierra Leone, and close to two-thirds of the fatalities in the 15 year-long civil war in Lebanon. The death rate had also already surpassed that of the 16 year-long Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka and the 19 year-long civil war in Nicaragua, among others.[1] By early 2018 more than 400,000 had died as a result of the conflict, with the Syrian regime allegedly responsible for an overwhelming majority of the deaths.[2]

Civilians make up a large proportion of the documented casualties in the Syrian conflict, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.
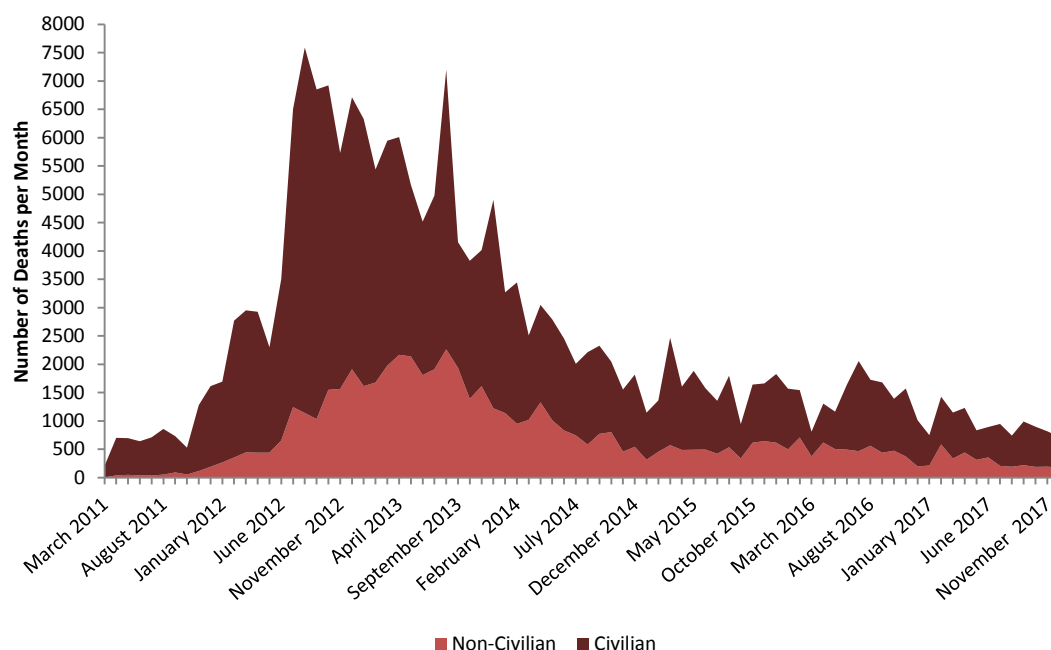
Figure 1.1   Documented casualties in the Syrian conflict (Source: Violence Documentation Center (VDC)).[3]

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[1] For the comparison between Syria and other conflicts mentioned in this paragraph see Bennett, Dashiell, 'How Syria's 93,000 Dead Compare to Other Terrible Wars,' *The Atlantic*, June 13, 2013 https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/06/syria-death-toll/314303/
[2] World Bank, 'The visible impacts of the Syrian war may only be the tip of the iceberg,' *World Bank*, July 10, 2017, http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/07/18/the-visible-impacts-of-the-syrian-war-may-only-be-the-tip-of-the-iceberg
[3] The use of data in figures in this report solely serves to illustrate the broader trends of casualties in the conflict.

This report seeks to better understand how peaceful protests against the Syrian regime evolved into a violent conflict in which civilians have endured a significant brunt of the violence. The report explores the regime and its allies' targeting of the Syrian civilian population from the start of the uprising until the end of 2017. In doing so, the report applies FFI's scenario-based method.[4] Understanding the regime's motivations for using violence against civilians in Syria, the strategies and tactics employed, and the capabilities at the regime's disposal help identify the particular threats civilians have been faced with at different times and in different areas throughout the conflict and better understand why the conflict turned so violent.

The report provides insight into how civilians are targeted by governments in today's conflicts, as well as how strategies and tactics of perpetrators change as conflicts evolve. The report finds that the regime's overarching motivation for targeting civilians throughout the conflict has been its own survival, in accordance with the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario. Simultaneously, the report finds that the regime's targeting of civilians increasingly involved a number of overlapping motivations and a diversification of threats, reflected in the ETHNIC CLEANSING, PREDATORY VIOLENCE, and COMMUNAL CONFLICT scenarios. Military necessity drove the regime's escalation of violence against civilians, as failed attempts at defeating the opposition led to increasingly more violent strategies and tactics.

The report first outlines the scenario-based method, which serves as the method to identify the threats civilians have been faced with in Syria. The following chapter provides a brief summary of the background to the Syrian conflict. The remaining chapters presents the violence against civilians in Syria through five phases, each phase identifying qualitative differences in the regime's violence. The report's concluding chapter summarizes the findings and offers some final thoughts on violence against civilians in Syria, briefly reflecting on what the Syrian case might tell us about the potential utility of force to protect civilians.

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[4] Beadle, Alexander William (2014), 'Protection of civilians – military planning scenarios and implications,' *FFI-rapport 2014/00519* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment).

2 Method

A core feature of contemporary conflicts has been the deliberate targeting of civilians by a wide range of armed actors. An outcome of this phenomenon has been that the protection of civilians from these armed actors has emerged as a principal objective in military operations.[5] There is a wide range of perpetrators of violence, who deliberately attack civilians for different reasons, and in different ways. An increased understanding of those perpetrating violence against civilians, particularly their motivations for doing so, is crucial for improving the protection of civilians.[6]

This report applies the scenario-based framework developed by FFI, which identifies and describes seven generic scenarios that capture the full range of situations in which civilians are under threat. These scenarios are meant to aid military planners in identifying the nature of the threat civilians are faced with as well as help derive the military responses most likely to be successful in protecting them.[7] Five parameters, selected on the basis of representing the most commonly discussed aspects of violence against civilians today, inform each scenario. The parameters are: (1) the *rationale* perpetrators may have for targeting civilians, (2) the *types of actors* usually responsible, (3) the *strategies and tactics* used, (4) the *capabilities* they are likely to require, and (5) the *expected outcome* if they succeed. The scenarios have been categorized based on the first parameter; the *rationale* perpetrators have for targeting civilians. The seven scenarios are:

Scenarios	Rationale	Examples
Genocide	**Exterminate** a certain group	Rwanda
Ethnic cleansing	**Expel** a certain group from a specific territory	Bosnia
Regime crackdown	**Control** populations affiliated with opposition	Libya
Communal conflict	**Avenge** previous attacks and **deter** retribution	South Sudan
Predatory violence	**Survive** or **profit**	DR Congo
Insurgency	**Control** populations and **undermine** rivals	Somalia
Post-conflict revenge	**Avenge** past crimes	Kosovo

Table 2.1   Scenarios.

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[5] Beadle, 2014.

[6] Beadle, 2014, p. 12; see also Sewall, Sarah, Raymond, Dwight and Chin, Sally (2010) *MARO: Mass Atrocity Response Operations: A Military Planning Handbook* (Harvard Kennedy School: Carr Center for Human Rights Policy); Beadle, Alexander William, (2011) 'Finding the 'Utility of Force to Protect' – towards a Theory on Protection of Civilians,' *FFI-rapport 2011/01889* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment); Kelly, Max (2011) *Military Planning to Protect Civilians: Proposed Guidance for United Nations Peacekeeping* Operations, September 2011 (Washington DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center); Mahony, Liam (2013), *Non-military strategies for civilian protection in the DCR*, Fieldview Solutions, March 2013.

[7] Beadle, Alexander William and Kjeksrud, Stian (2014), 'Military planning and assessment guide for the protection of civilians,' *FFI-rapport 2014/*00965 (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment).

In the forthcoming exploration of violence against civilians in Syria, the scenarios have been used in an effort to better understand the developments on the ground. Five scenarios have proved particularly helpful when exploring the Syrian regime's targeting of civilians throughout the conflict:

- The **GENOCIDE** scenario describes situations where a whole group of people is singled out for extermination. The perpetrators will typically be governments, using both regular and irregular forces, to entrap and kill as many people as possible in a short period of time. The targeted group will be under imminent threat of violence wherever they can be found throughout the entire area of operations. The threat will persist until the genocide is completed, the majority of potential victims killed, or the perpetrators defeated. A failed genocide may convert into ETHNIC CLEANSING, GOVERNMENT REPRESSION and COMMUNAL CONFLICT.

- The **ETHNIC CLEANSING** scenario is not as deadly as genocide but far more common. Here, the expulsion of a certain ethnic or religious group is the objective. The perpetrators will usually be states or state-like entities, primarily relying on irregular units to carry out cleansing operations designed to make people flee through excessive and demonstrative violence. The targeted group will be at particular risk in areas where the perpetrators are militarily strong, but do not have a clear majority, and immediately following the seizure of new territory. Fewer people will die compared to GENOCIDE, but the number of displaced victims will usually be very high. Ethnic cleansing may escalate into isolated acts of GENOCIDE, especially if it further increases the targeted population's incentives to flee.

- The **REGIME CRACKDOWN** scenario describes situations where a regime responds to threats against its survival with violent repression of its own population. Civilians are targeted on the basis of real or perceived affiliation with the opposition, not on the basis of ethnic or sectarian identity, although communal identity may be used as a proxy for targeting political opposition. Violence will be most severe where opposition is perceived to be strongest, e.g. where known opposition members hide and/or operate. The principal threat to civilians comes from the indiscriminate tactics and means used to suppress both armed and unarmed resistance (e.g. conventional weapons against civilian areas). This threat is likely to persist until the regime is overthrown, prevails, or it escalates into ETHNIC CLEANSING or GENOCIDE.

- The **COMMUNAL CONFLICT** scenario describes situations where whole communities are at war with each other and the roles of perpetrators and victims constantly change during continuous cycles of violence. The motivations for both sides are to avenge the last round of violence and deter further retribution, because not fighting back may increase the risks of being attacked again. The actors will, however, often lack the resources required to decisively defeat the other, precisely because they are organized as communities. Instead, means of survival, women and children, and heavily crowded areas are often targeted because of the maximum destruction it can wreak.

- The fifth scenario relevant to the report describes situations where civilians are subjected to **PREDATORY VIOLENCE,** such as plunder, murder and abduction, by armed groups who rely on exploitation of civilians to ensure their own survival or make a profit. This scenario is most likely in areas where there are 'lootable' resources or central authority has collapsed, which enables activities that otherwise would not have been possible. Civilians, especially women and children, will be under sporadic threats of violence, which is likely to persist until the perpetrators are disbanded or defeated.

The report uses the scenario-based method to identify the types of threats civilians have been faced with throughout the Syrian conflict, which in turn has informed the identification of five different phases of violence. Each phase represents a qualitative difference in the escalation of violence against civilians in the conflict, reflecting variations in the challenges a potential intervening force set to protect civilians would be confronted with. In exploring the violence within each phase, the report focuses primarily on the main trends of that period.

The report explores the violence carried out by both the regime and its allies; however, it is primarily the motivations behind the regime's targeting of civilians, not its allies, which is the focus of the analysis. As such, the report will not explore the allies' motivations for assisting the Syrian regime beyond their apparent interest in the continued survival of an ally in Syria. The analysis builds on open sources of information normally available during a conflict, such as news reports, military situation reports and human rights reports. The ongoing conflict has complicated the availability of information and accuracy of records of violent incidents. In seeking to identify broad trends and estimates, the report has relied on databases from Syrian human rights groups used by authoritative actors, such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR).[8]

The Syrian regime's long-term rationale for targeting civilians seems to be to defeat the opposition to remain in power. At the same time, the targeting of civilians by the regime serves multiple purposes, many of which are short-term and situation-specific in nature. For example, while violence in besieged cities has been driven by the immediate rationale of expelling civilians from strategically important places, forced displacement of Syrians in these situations is also part of the regime's broader strategy to defeat the Syrian opposition. Conversely, while some of the regime's armed divisions, along with pro-regime militias, have acted opportunistically on several occasions, this behavior does not necessarily reflect the broader rationale of the regime. These nuances are important to keep in mind when trying to make sense of the particular rationale the Syrian regime has for targeting civilians in the Syrian conflict in different phases and in different geographical areas. These nuances are also in accordance with FFI's emphasis on the *generic* character of the scenarios; that the targeting of civilians by perpetrators in armed conflicts often involves more than one strategic rationale and that perpetrators' rationales may vary across time and space.

Identifying and understanding the regime's rationale for attacking civilians, the regime's strategies and tactics, and how the regime's capabilities have impacted on its targeting of civilians help identify the type of military responses needed in order to protect civilians. Undertaking case studies such as this demonstrates that even though the Syrian regime's violence against civilians in many ways represents a clear case of REGIME CRACKDOWN, different threats can operate simultaneously and in different areas within the same conflict. This may increase our understanding of the different ways in which civilian targeting serves as a purpose for perpetrators of violence. By exploring the shifts and escalation in violence in Syria we may also be able to better understand why the conflict turned so bloody.

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[8] That said the UN stopped estimating the death toll in Syria due to lack of confidence in their data.

Generic scenario	1. Type of actor	2. Rationale	3. Strategies and tactics	4. Relevant mil. capabilities	5. Expected outcome
GENOCIDE Halabja ('88) Rwanda ('94) Srebrenica ('95)	States, or the militarily superior actor	To exterminate a certain group	Destroy existence of a group through several, simultaneous mass-killings, deportation, camps, systematic rape to prevent reproduction	Command and control, freedom of movement for special/irregular units, sufficient small arms	Majority of targeted civilians killed (50+%), in relatively short time
ETHNIC CLEANSING Bosnia ('92–95) Kosovo ('99) Kyrgyzstan ('10)	States, or the militarily superior actor	To expel a certain group from a specific territory	Force targeted group to leave through threats, demonstrative killings, brutality, mass-rape, destruction of property	Command and control, freedom of movement for irregular units, regular units for military control	Only a few per cent killed, but vast majority of victims expelled (~90%) Destruction of victim homes and cultural buildings
REGIME CRACKDOWN Iraq ('86-89) Darfur ('03–) Libya ('11) Syria ('11–) ISIS ('13–)	Authoritarian regimes, or de facto authorities in an area	To control restless populations, on basis of real or perceived affiliation with opposition	Violently repress the population at large, through selective and indiscriminate violence, threats, mass-detention, rape as terror, massive destruction, occasional massacres	Command and control from regime, freedom of movement for regular forces, heavy weapons, special/irregular units in support	Mostly combatant deaths, gradual increase in civilian deaths due to heavy weapons and in accordance with intensity of fighting, large-scale displacement, widespread destruction of population centres
POST-CONFLICT REVENGE Kosovo (post-99) Iraq (post-03)	Individuals or mobs	To avenge past crimes on a tit-for-tat basis	Settle personal scores through criminal acts of violence, such as murder, arson, kidnapping, looting	Freedom of movement for individuals and small groups to access victims	Only a few killed (dozens, hundreds), but groups associated with perpetrator may flee after relatively little violence
COMMUNAL CONFLICT Ituri ('99–03) Iraq ('06–07) Jonglei ('09–)	Whole tribal, ethnic or sectarian communities (possibly with outside support)	To avenge the last round of violence and to deter further retribution out of self-defence	Attempts to coerce other community into submission through massacres, abductions, raids, destruction of homes and means of survival, often seeking to maximise violence	Freedom of movement to reach other communities, access to deadlier weapons and means of communication is associated with higher lethality	Relatively high number of people killed and abducted, especially women and children Livelihoods stolen or killed Temporary displacement in homogenous areas, more gradual withdrawal to 'their own' in mixed areas
PREDATORY VIOLENCE Renamo ('75–92) RUF ('91–'02) LRA ('94–)	Rebel groups (predatory behaviour)	To survive or make a profit by exploiting civilians	Coerce civilians into compliance through plunder, taxation, forced recruitment, opportunistic rape, brutality, especially against 'easy targets'	Freedom of movement to pick time and place of attack, operational secrecy, outside support, possibly central command	Temporary, but large-scale displacement in affected areas and disproportionately many relative to the number of people actually attacked Many abductions, especially of young adolescents
INSURGENCY FARC ('64–) Taliban ('06–) al-Shabaab ('06–)	Rebel groups (classic insurgents with political or ideological objectives)	To control populations upon which they depend and undermine trust in their rivals	Selective and indiscriminate violence, through threats, targeted killings, bombings, retribution, depending on their level of control	Freedom of movement to pick time and place of attack, access to indiscriminate and explosive weapons	Fewer killed and injured than in other scenarios, most due to indiscriminate weapons Gradual displacement from areas of heavy fighting

Table 2.2 *Generic military planning scenarios for the protection of civilians.*

3 Background to the Syrian conflict

The Syrian uprising was triggered by the revolutionary protests that swept across the Arab world in the winter of 2010/11.[9] Despite the rapid speed with which protests spread across the region, President Bashar al-Assad, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* in January 2011, doubted Syria would be affected by the regional turmoil.[10] However, in mid-March, spontaneous peaceful protests broke out in Daraa, Syria, following the arrest and subsequent torture of a group of young schoolboys who had written anti-regime slogans on city walls.[11] The protests were violently suppressed by local regime forces. As word of the events spread across the country, protests in solidarity with Daraa, concerning issues of poverty in rural areas, corruption at the local level, as well as "freedom of expression, democratic rights and the release of prisoners" erupted in all parts of Syria.[12] While the initial protests were local in nature they soon took on a national character, and people called for countrywide political, economic, and social reforms, even the removal of the president himself.

The civilian uprising, beginning in mid-March 2011, put an end to almost five decades of relative stability under the authoritarian rule of the Assad family.[13] The Assads, belonging to the minority Alawite (Shia) sect in Syria, had ruled the country through a combination of repression and co-optation.[14] The family relied primarily on loyal family and tribal ties, and played on sectarian (Alawite) solidarity, or *aasabiya*, to build their base of political support.[15] Key positions, particularly within the intelligence and security services, were given to family members and other Alawites, as well as other Syrian minorities, "believing they would see [the]

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[9] Hale, Henry E., 'Regime change cascades: What we have learned from the 1948 revolutions to the 2011 Arab uprisings,' *Annual Review of Political Science,* 16 (2013) pp. 331–353; Herb, M. 'The people want the fall of the regime … or not: explaining the diffusion of the Arab spring,' (Georgia State University, 2014); Lynch, Marc et al, 'Syria in the Arab Spring: The integration of Syria's conflict with the Arab uprisings, 2011.2013,' *Research and Politics*, 1:3 (2013) pp. 1–7; Saideman, Stephen M., 'When conflict spreads: Arab spring and the limits of diffusion,' *International Interactions*, 38:5 (2012) pp. 713–722. More on the Arab Spring, see Cook, Stephen A., *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir* Square (New York: OUP USA, 2011); Dalacoura, Katerina 'The 2011 uprising in the Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications, *International Affairs*, 88:1 (2012) pp. 63–79; Filiu, Jean-Pierre, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (London: Hurst, 2011); Gelvin, James L., *The Arab Uprisings: What everyone needs to know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Lynch, Marc, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).
[10] President Bashar al-Assad in 'Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,' *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894
[11] Hokayem, Emile, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 42; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (International Commission), 1st report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/S-17/2/Add.1, *UN OHCHR,* 23 November 2011, p. 8. The International Commission was established on August 22, 2011, with a mandate to investigated alleged violations of international human rights law in Syria since March 2011.
[12] International Commission, November 2011, p. 8.
[13] Hinnebusch, Raymond, 'Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading to revolution?' *International* Affairs, 88:1 (2012) pp. 95–113; Hokayem, 2013; Lesch, David, *The fall of the house of Assad* (London: Yale Press, 2012); Lynch, 2013
[14] Farouk-Alli, Aslam, 'Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religious,' *Journal of Muslim Minority* Affairs, 34:3 (2014) pp. 33–58, p. 218.
[15] Lefévre, Raphaël, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in* Syria (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 71; Hinnebusch, Raymond, 'The Sectarian Revolution in the Middle East,' *Revolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues,* 4:1 (2016) pp. 120–152, p. 126.

regime as protection against any return to the Sunni persecution of the Ottoman era."[16][17] In efforts to balance the prevalence of Alawites in the regime, several individuals from Syria's Sunni Arab majority were afforded semi-central positions in the Syrian government.[18] The regime also used the liberalization of the economy to rally "the bourgeoisie to the regime through market adjustment."[19] While this balancing kept the country remarkably stable, the overrepresentation of Alawites in the regime did on a couple of occasions trigger unrest.[20] This was particularly evident in the late 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in a massacre in Hama city in 1982 where the regime brutally cracked down on anti-regime activities by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Fighting Vanguard. The regime collectively punished the people of Hama for the insurrection, killing between 10,000 and 40,000 people over a three-week period in February 1982.[21] The Hama massacre "…durably put an end to any political contestation to the regime for more than three decades."[22]

The uprising in 2011 grew out of a general dissatisfaction with the authoritarian ruling practices of the regime, as well as dismay among Syria's rural and peripheral population, first and foremost workers and farmers. Syrians in rural and peripheral areas had increasingly become economically marginalized as a result of the liberalization of the Syrian economy since the 1990s.[23] The liberalization led to increased social inequality in the country and drove many Syrians into poverty.[24] A drought between 2006 and 2010, coupled with weak governance and corruption at the local level, only intensified the divide between rich and poor put in motion by the liberalization.[25] The combination contributed to increasing rural-to-urban movement and the development of suburbs stricken with poverty.[26] To a certain extent the "geographic map of poverty and exclusion" overlapped with Syria's ethnic and sectarian boundaries, providing a potential source for communal tensions.[27] While successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt

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[16] Phillips, Christopher, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle* East (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016) p. 12. Minorities (Christians, Kurds, Yazidis, Druze etc.) were persecuted and discriminated against under the Ottoman Empire.

[17] Hokayem, 2013, p. 17.

[18] Lister, Charles, *The Syrian Jihad* (London: Hurst Publishing, 2015) p. 28; Lund, Aron, 'Syrian Jihadism,' *Swedish Institute of International Affairs,* UI Brief no.13, September 2012, pp. 1–50.

[19] Selvik, Ketil, 'It's the Mentality, Stupid: Syria's Turn to the Private Sector,' in Aurora Sottimano and Selvik (eds.) Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria, *Saint Andrews Papers on Modern Syrian Studies*, 2008, p. 38.

[20] Wimmen, Heiko, 'Syria's path from civic uprising to civil war,' *Carnegie Endowment for International* Peace, November 22, 2016, p. 14.

[21] Lefévre, 2013; Ismail, Salwa, 'The Syrian Uprising: Imagining and Performing the Nation,' *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11:3 (2011).

[22] Lefévre, 2013, p. 28.

[23] Azmeh, Shamel, 'The uprising of the marginalized: a socio-economic perspective of the Syrian uprising,' *LSE: Middle East Centre*, 2014.

[24] Wimmen, 2016, p. 3; Matar, Linda, 'The Socioeconomic Roots of the Syrian Uprising,' *Middle East Insights*, 58 (2012) The peasantry, the majority of which were Sunni, were worst affected (Phillips, Christopher, 'Sectarianism and conflict in Syria,' *Third World Quarterly,* 36:2 (2015) pp. 357–376, p. 367).

[25] De Châtel, Francesca, 'The role of drought and climate change in the Syrian uprising: Untangling the triggers of the revolution,' *Middle Eastern Studies,* 50:4 (2014) pp. 521–535; Berti, Benedetta and Jonathan Paris, 'Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War,' *Strategic Assessment*, 16:4 (2014) pp. 21–34, p. 22.

[26] Lister, 2015, p. 34.

[27] Berti and Paris, 2014, p. 23; Hinnebusch, 2016, p. 126. A Syrian-led civil society organization found that 62.1% considered sectarianism a political problem in Syria ('Sectarianism in Syria,' The Day After, 2016, pp. 1–107).

undoubtedly played important roles in inspiring protests in Syria, the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict cannot be understood without reference to the abovementioned internal dynamics and political and socio-economic grievances of Syrians.

Within a year, what were initially peaceful protests against an authoritarian regime evolved into an armed conflict between the Assad regime and the Syrians opposing it that is still ongoing at the beginning of 2018. Although the regime is not the sole perpetrator of violence, the regime and its allies have by most accounts been responsible for the vast majority of the violence inflicted on civilians throughout the conflict. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization, the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance was responsible for 94% of all documented killings perpetrated in Syria from March 2011 until March 2017.[28] The regime has deliberately targeted the civilian population in the struggle for Syria and for its survival. As such, it is important to study how the regime has inflicted violence on civilians and what purpose it has served in the regime's overall strategy.
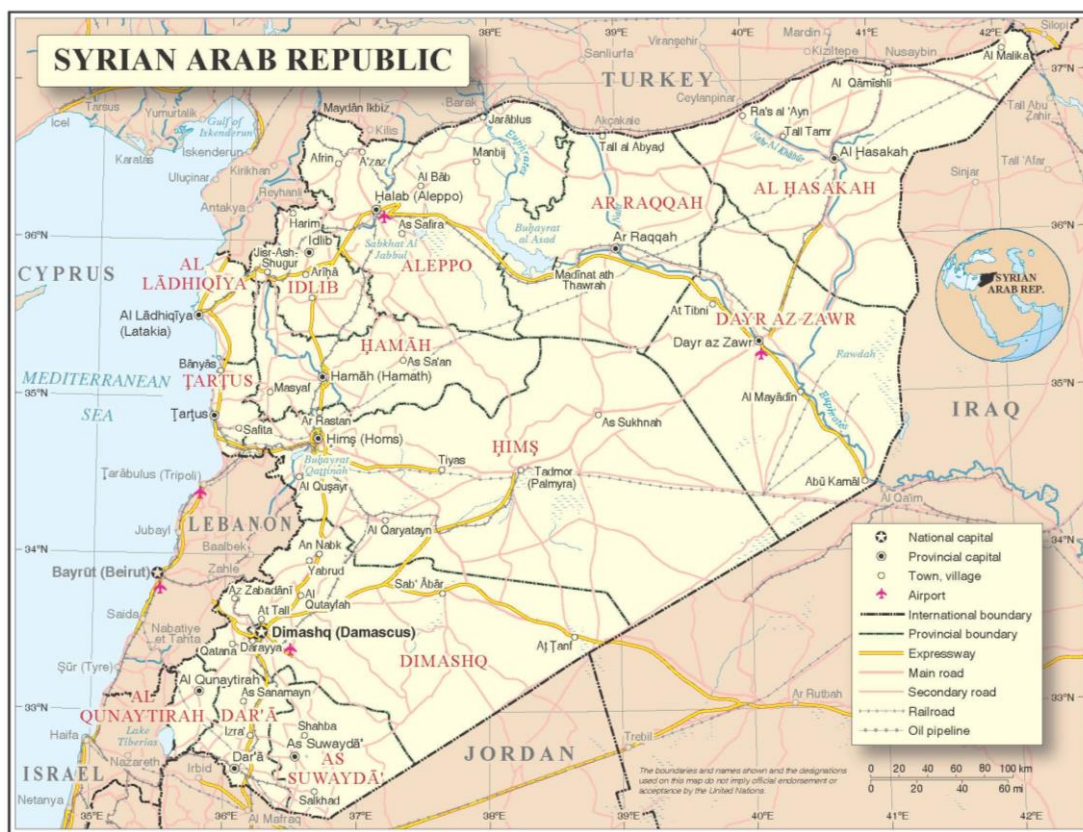
Figure 3.1   Map of the Syrian Arab Republic.[29]

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[28] Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 'The 6th Anniversary of the Breakout of the Popular Uprising towards Freedom, and the Killing of the First Civilians,' March 18, 2017, *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/207_thousand_civilians_were_killed_by_hands_of_the_Syrian_alliance_Iranian_Russian_en.pdf

[29] Reproduced with permission from UN, Syrian Arab Republic, Map No.4204, Rev. 3, *United Nations,* (April 2012), Department of Field Support, Cartographic Section, http://www.un.org/depts/Cartographic/map/profile/syria.pdf

4   First phase – Violent crackdown on peaceful protesters (March 2011–December 2011)

The first phase of the conflict saw the beginning of the regime's brutal crackdown on protests and the Syrian civilian population more generally. The vast majority of protests in this phase were peaceful, and the main perpetrator of violence in the first year was the Syrian regime. The regime's violence against peaceful protesters and bystanders throughout this period is best understood as a case of REGIME CRACKDOWN. The regime did its utmost to quell the protests and prevent them from spreading across the country without triggering a potential international intervention, as seen in Libya. The regime's actions reflected its motivation to regain control of the population and return to status quo.
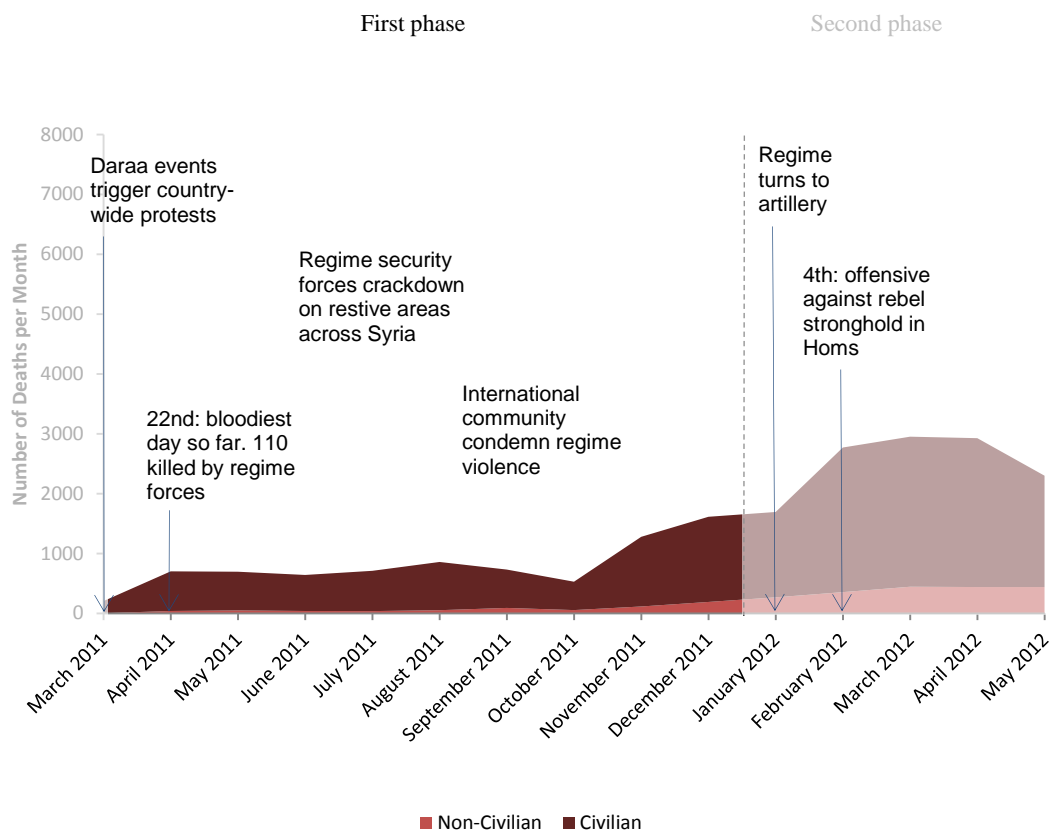

Figure 4.1   Timeline: casualties (VDC data) with key events.

4.1   Initial responses

The regime's initial response to the peaceful protests was twofold. The regime enacted several cosmetic political and legal reforms and other measures in an effort to appease some of the political demands of the protesters. In April 2011, the president announced several measures including the lifting of the state of emergency in Syria, the formation of a new government, the granting of general amnesties as well as new regulations concerning the right to participate in peaceful demonstrations. Furthermore, in August the president announced several policy initiatives, including a new law on political parties (Decree No.100) and a general law on elections (Decree No.101).[30] At the same time, Assad deployed his security apparatus – elite units of the Syrian Army, the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*), local police, as well as local thugs (*shabiha*) – to repress the protests through a range of violent activities. It has been suggested that the twofold response reflected disagreement within the regime's inner circle with regards to how to address the unrest.[31] The reforms represented the views of those favoring a negotiated solution, whilst the violent dealings with the protesters reflected 'the hardliners,' those favoring a security solution.

From the early days of the protests, Assad also began manipulating the country's sectarian antagonisms. While the initial protests adopted a non-violent, non-sectarian approach, sectarian identity and sectarian rhetoric soon became part of the conflict narrative as well as an element in the escalation of violence.[32] The Syrian president himself was a primary initiator of the sectarian narrative in his framing of the protesters as Sunni fundamentalist while portraying himself as the defender of Syria's religious pluralism.[33] In reality, the early Syrian opposition was composed of Syrians from different ethno-religious groups, including Sunnis, Alawites, Ismaili, Christians and Kurds, even though Sunni Syrians made up the majority of the protesters. Nevertheless, the Syrian regime claimed its forces were responding to violent attacks by "terrorist groups," "armed gangs" and "foreign elements." In his first national address after the uprising began, on March 30th, Assad claimed Syria was "facing a great conspiracy" orchestrated by "imperialist forces" and "that conspirators had spread false information, incited sectarian tension and used violence."[34] Assad sought to play into Syria's minorities' fears for their own survival in the face of a potential regime change, that the protests represented an existential threat to minorities' survival in Syria.[35] He used this framing not only to secure minorities' support for the regime but also to justify the regime's violent crackdown on protests.[36]

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[30] International Commission, November 2011, p. 9.

[31] Abboud, Samer N., *Syria* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 58–59.

[32] Berti and Paris, 2014, p. 24.

[33] Stolleis, Friederike, 'Discourses on Sectarianism and "Minorities" in Syria,' Playing the Sectarian Card: Identities and Affiliations of Local Communities in Syria, *Beirut: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung,*2015, pp. 7–10. http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/12320.pdf p. 9; Phillips, 2015, p. 359.

[34] International Commission, November 2011, p. 8.

[35] Berti and Paris, 2014, p. 24.

[36] Similarly, Bouthaina Shabaan, advisor to President Bashar al-Assad argued: "It is obvious Syria is the target of a project to sow sectarian strife to compromise Syria and the unique co-existence model that distinguishes it" in Oweis, Khaled Y., 'Assad adviser warns of sectarian strife in Syria,' *Reuters*, March 26, 2011.

The use of violence quickly became central in Assad's efforts to preserve the status quo in the spring of 2011. The regime used a number of violent methods, both indiscriminate and selective, in its efforts to deal with the unrest and prevent the protests from spreading. Fearing the potential effects of a Tahrir Square situation, the regime did everything in its power to avoid it. From mid-March onwards, violence was therefore used to repress and to disperse the peaceful anti-government protests. While tear gas and shots fired in the air were used to disperse protesters, the security apparatus also fired directly at protesters and funeral processions without prior warning and without attempts to disperse protesters through non-lethal means.[37] One such incident occurred in Homs city on April 19th, when pro-regime forces attacked protesters that had gathered on the New Clock Tower Square, resulting in the deaths of at least 17 unarmed protesters.[38] Another took place in the town of Izraa, located north of Daraa, on April 22nd and 23rd, where government forces killed civilians during a protest and a funeral procession, claiming the lives of at least 34.[39] April 22nd came to be the most deadly day of protests in the early months of the uprising as regime forces killed at least 110 protesters across the country (see Figure 4.1).[40]

Large-scale military operations in restive towns were also conducted by the regime, resulting in mass killings, but also involving arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture. An important event during the early days of the uprising was the 11-day siege of Daraa, the birthplace of the Syrian uprising, in April 2011. Security forces moved into the city with military vehicles (including tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs)), "under a cover of heavy gunfire that lasted unabated for about 16 hours," before imposing a temporary siege on the city.[41] The siege reportedly led to the deaths of at least 115 people and resulted in hundreds of arrests.

The regime carried on with large-scale military operations into the summer of 2011, as security forces attacked the coastal city of Baniyas and the city of Tal Kalakh near the Lebanese border in May, the northern town of Jisr al-Shughur in June, Hama in July (killing as many as 200 residents in four days), and al-Ramel in Latakia in August.[42] The government also carried out several attacks on neighborhoods in Homs (Baba Sba, Baba Amr, Bayyada) in the period between May and September.[43] Furthermore, as a way to separate protest movements across the

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[37] Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'World Report 2012: Syria - *Events of 2011*,' *Human Rights Watch*, 2012, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/syria
[38] HRW, 'Syria: Rising Toll in Homs,' *Human Rights Watch*, July 2, 2011, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/02/syria-rising-toll-homs
[39] HRW, '"We've never seen such horror": crimes against humanity by Syrian security forces,' *Human Rights Watch*, report, June 1, 2011, https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/06/01/weve-never-seen-such-horror/crimes-against-humanity-syrian-security-forces
[40] HRW, 'We've never seen such horror,' 2011.
[41] HRW, 'We've never seen such horror.' 2011.
[42] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2012 .
[43] Holliday, Joseph, 'The struggle for Syria in 2011: an operational and regional analysis,' Middle East Security Report 2, *Institute for the Study of War*, December 2011, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Struggle_For_Syria.pdf

country from each other and prevent them from joining forces, the regime congested the country with military checkpoints and the extensive deployment of security forces.[44]

However, the regime struggled to suppress the protests, and over the summer and into the fall of 2011 the opposition to the regime grew both in strength and in size. Few believed that the regime was willing to change its ways and relinquish its power, especially as the reforms, which "never seriously threatened the regime's grip on power," were coupled with brutal regime violence.[45] Despite regional and international calls for an end to the violence, the regime continued to clamp down on protests in restive areas across the country.[46] Assad was not willing to compromise with the increasingly growing and capable opposition. By early 2012, thousands had been subjected to arbitrary arrests and brutal torture in detention centers and prisons, and wounded protesters were denied access to medical assistance by Syrian authorities.[47]

4.2   A typical case of regime crackdown

The regime's dealing with the Syrian uprising in this first phase is best captured by the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario. Typical for situations described within this scenario is that the perpetrator of violence, always an authoritarian regime, "responds to threats against its own survival with *violent repression of its own population.*"[48] In accordance with the typical rationale in this scenario, the Syrian regime's motivation for using violence against peaceful protesters and other civilians during this period was to secure its position in power. The regime viewed the democratic protests as a threat to the regime and turned to violence in its efforts to regain control of the Syrian population. The Assad family has a history of violently dealing with regime opposition, as reflected in the regime's brutal crackdown on anti-regime activities in Hama in 1982. Bashar al-Assad resorted to the use of force, as his father had done in 1982.

With an overwhelming mobilization of security forces, the regime sought to reinstate "the wall of fear" that much of its power had rested on but that had broken down with the Arab uprisings.[49] Through violence the regime aimed to "raise the cost of supporting the rebels

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[44] Droz-Vincent, Philippe, '"State of Barbary" (Take Two): From the Arab Spring to the return of violence in Syria,' *Middle East Journal*, 68:1 (2014) pp. 33–58, p. 40.

[45] Abboud, 2016, p. 54.

[46] 'US, France and Germany condemn Syria's Assad,' BBC, August 6, 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14428738; Blomfield, Adrian, 'Syria unrest: Saudi Arabia calls on "killing machine" to stop' *The Telegraph*, August 8, 2011 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8687912/Syria-unrest-Saudi-Arabia-calls-on-killing-machine-to-stop.html. The regime agreed to an Arab League initiative in early November, which called for the regime to stop its violent crackdown on protesters. An observer mission to monitor the implementation of the initiative commenced in December but failed to bring about an end to the violence, leading to the suspension of the mission in late January.

[47] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2012.

[48] Beadle, 2014, pp. 34–35.

[49] Beadle argues, "When their power is threatened, the natural response for authoritarian regimes is to follow this threat through with actual violence" (2014, p. 35). Also relevant: Kuran, Timur, 'The East European Revolution of 1989: Is It Surprising that We Were Surprised?' *The American Economic Review*, 81:2 (1991) pp. 121–125.

beyond what civilian society was willing to pay."[50] The regime sought to deter and/or coerce civilians from siding with the opposition and to incite insecurity and fear in society by making visible the consequences for taking the side of the protesters. While the regime first and foremost targeted those who actively participated in the protests in the streets, it also went after civilians affiliated with the uprising more generally, perhaps best reflected in the violent attacks on funeral processions and in arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture of people the regime believed to be associated with the opposition. Testimonies received by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (the International Commission), suggested the planned nature of the regime's operations, as orders of "shoot to kill" were given in efforts to crush demonstrations.[51] As described by a defector,

> We were ordered to either disperse the crowd or eliminate everybody, including children. The orders were to fire in the air and immediately after shoot at people. No time was allowed between one action and the other.[52]

Arrests followed similar patterns across the country. The International Commission explains how military and security forces would often encircle the protesters during protests, and those that were arrested were taken to detention centers run by security agencies. The arrested would in some instances first be held in sports stadiums or schools before being sent to the detention centers. Arrests were also carried out at checkpoints, based on lists of wanted persons compiled by the local security branch. Further, arrests would occur during large-scale raids, particularly in cities and areas perceived by the government to be supportive of the opposition as well as where the government presumed defectors were hiding. In such instances, the regular armed forces would usually encircle the area and the regime's security forces and/or elite units of the Syrian army (occasionally joined by the *shabiha*) would undertake house-to-house searches. [53]

Women were subjected to arbitrary arrests and detention, often as a way to force these women's male relatives to turn themselves in.[54] During house searches, which often would occur at night, security forces would destroy and sometimes pillage their personal possessions. Furthermore, the regime's security agencies would also carry out systematic arrests and undertake interrogations (often involving torture) of patients in state hospitals suspected of having partaken in opposition activities. Parts of hospitals were even transformed into torture centers, such as the Homs Military Hospital and Al Ladhigiyah State Hospital.[55] In undertaking the arrests and detentions the regime seemed, Droz-Vincent argues,

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[50] Våge, Anders Skeibrok, (2014) 'Violence against civilians – case-studies of perpetrators,' *FFI-rapport 2014/00520* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment) p. 40.
[51] International Commission, November 2011, p. 10.
[52] Testimony in International Commission, November 2011, p. 11.
[53] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2nd report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/19/69*, UN OHCHR*, 22 February 2012, p. 13.
[54] International Commission, February 2012, p. 13.
[55] International Commission, February 2012, pp. 13–14.

> …guided by the unwritten rule that a dead protester means his family will take part in demonstrations while a frightened protester having spent some time in custody or under torture means his family will stay at home for the next few days.[56]

Human Rights Watch (HRW) identified as many as 20,000 detained between March and September 2011, and found that at least 105 died in custody in 2011, their bodies bearing marks of torture.[57]

All violence seemingly aimed at tackling the uprising in a way that would secure the regime's survival, however, civilians in different regions and areas were imperiled to different treatment and targeting. Civilians in particularly restive cities and areas were subjected to overwhelming force (including shootings directly at protesters and funeral processions), such as in Daraa city in the Sunni-majority agricultural southwest of Syria, and in Homs and Hama in central Syria, which emerged as the center of the conflict in the spring and summer of 2011.[58] Both Homs and Hama were of particular strategic importance to the regime, as they remain central to the line of communication connecting Damascus and Aleppo, the country's most populous cities and biggest economic centers.[59] Protests in these areas were therefore violently clamped down on.

In contrast, the regime's dealing with the uprising in both Damascus and Aleppo involved far less overt violence as the regime did its best to avoid large gatherings of protesters in the cities' central districts, as seen elsewhere.[60] The regime's security forces carried out targeted operations and detentions, managing to suppress the dissent in the cities and thus avoid a Tahrir Square incident.[61] In both Damascus and Aleppo, security services did their utmost to isolate the city centers (where protests were slow to happen) from their more restive peripheries to contain the protests.[62] Furthermore, in eastern Syria, the regime acted with caution. The regime tried its best to avoid full-scale confrontation, keeping the relatively well-armed Arab tribal population along the Euphrates River at a distance.[63] The regime also showed restraint in several minority-inhabited areas, such as in predominantly Druze south and predominantly Kurdish northeast.[64]

Although the regime's dealings with the uprising reflected strategies and tactics often seen in the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario, where political opposition to the government is the foremost targeting criteria, the regime's operations also came to be defined along sectarian lines. The type of violence different areas and local populations became exposed to in the initial

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[56] Droz-Vincent, 2014, p. 52.
[57] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2012
[58] Holliday, 'The struggle for Syria,' 2011, p. 13.
[59] Holliday, 'The struggle for Syria,' 2011, p. 14.
[60] Phillips, 2016, p. 54.
[61] Holliday, 'The struggle for Syria,' 2011, p. 17, Phillips, 2016, p. 54.
[62] International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Syria's mutating conflict,' *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Briefing 128, August 1, 2012, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syria-s-mutating-conflict, p. 9.
[63] Holliday, 'The struggle for Syria,' 2011, p. 21.
[64] ICG, 'Syria's mutating conflict,' 2012, p. 9.

phase of the conflict seemed to correspond with sectarian divides.[65] Firstly, where protests occurred in mixed cities (Alawite/Sunni or Alawite/Christian/Sunni), as seen in clearing operations in Latakia, Tartous, and Homs, military and paramilitary violence was directed mainly, but not exclusively, towards Sunni neighborhoods.[66] The regime's security forces acted side by side the *shabiha*, often with *shabiha* violence preceding the regime's clearance operations, as seen in Latakia, Baniyas and Tel Kalakh.

Secondly, Sunni neighborhoods, villages and areas within Syria's Alawite regions were targeted early on, leading to large-scale displacement of these areas' Sunni populations, with many fleeing inland to Sunni-majority provinces, such as Idlib. The operations resulted in the shoring up of regime lines of communication as well as the consolidation of Alawite population centers.[67] The discriminate nature of these operations was strengthened in that members of other ethno-religious/sectarian communities in these cities and regions were treated differently. Instead of physically targeting these communities, the regime would *threaten* to punish entire communities if anti-regime activities of specific individuals were not repressed.[68]

While the expulsion of Sunnis in the Alawite coastal regions might have informed the regime's activities in these areas, it was not their sectarian identity per se that made the Sunni population targets. Rather, sectarian identities served as particularly potent proxies for the regime's crackdown on the uprising. The regime seemed driven by the need to create a setting that would keep the minority population on its side and prevent them from joining the protests. Clearing Alawite populated areas of Sunni Syrians, areas the regime counted on for support, was a way to signal to the population who the enemies were. It was also a way to keep Syria's minorities separated from the anti-regime protests.[69]

These efforts were arguably also reflected in the regime's activities in restive minority-inhabited areas such as in Ismaili Salamiya and in areas with large Christian populations. International Crisis Group (ICG) notes how the regime in these areas worked tirelessly to make certain that its sectarian narrative of the opposition (a group of Sunni fundamentalists) would not be weakened by minority group protests.[70] It seemed as though the rationale behind the discriminate violence was not expulsion per se but rather creating conditions that would work to the benefit of the regime and its survival. Deliberate displacement of people from areas through inciting fear or inflicting violence is fairly common in regime crackdown situations as a way to

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[65] For ethno-religious map of Syria see Dr. Izady, Michael, 'Syria Ethnic Composition in 2010,' The Gulf/2000 Project, http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_summary_lg.png

[66] Holliday, Joseph, 'The Assad regime: from counterinsurgency to civil war,' *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2013, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf, p. 7.

[67] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 7.

[68] Pinto, Paulo G. H., 'The Shattered Nation: the Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict,' in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds.) *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2017) pp. 135–6.

[69] That said, the opposition was made up both of Syria's Sunni-majority but also people from the minorities.

[70] ICG, 'Syria's mutating conflict,' 2012, p. 9.

remove the opposition's support base in particular areas.[71] Displacing people from the most restive cities in the Alawite majority regions seemed to be a case of just that.

Nevertheless, the regime's sectarian framing of the opposition and targeting of the Sunni population incited a sectarian element into the conflict. In fact, the regime's ability to play 'the sectarian card' reflects a contextual characteristic of this particular case of REGIME CRACKDOWN, Syria's particular history and economic developments. For example, the regime and other actors, at a time characterized by fear and insecurity, were able to take advantage of the fact that political and socio-economic grievances often overlapped with the ethno-sectarian map. The regime's security forces played a role in provoking sectarian incidents, inciting rumors into neighborhoods and communities of attacks against them being planned by other sects/communities.[72] Such actions, together with the discriminate violence against Sunni Syrians, Pinto explains,

> …created a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the violence that the state claimed was necessary to crush sectarianism became the very mechanism through which sectarian tensions were inscribed or enhanced in the social fabric.[73]

It might be suggested that these dynamics, coupled with the development of an armed opposition into the fall of 2011, contributed to situations in some areas and cities often seen in the COMMUNAL CONFLICT scenario. In situations of COMMUNAL CONFLICT, revenge is a key driver for conflict between communities who resort to violence as a way of self-protection and surviving.[74] COMMUNAL violence may be triggered by the breakdown or absence of central authority, where communities do their utmost to secure themselves, which often includes arming themselves, increasing the threat they pose to others.

While the regime's manipulation of the conflict's narrative invoked fear amongst Alawites for their own survival, the discriminate targeting of Sunni Syrians by regime forces put them in a particularly vulnerable position. These dynamics may have laid the foundations for the inter-communal tension between Alawite and Sunni communities, where violence came to be driven by revenge and a need for self-protection. Particularly in central Syria clashes between opposition groups and the regime's security forces (predominantly Alawite), the *shabiha* and local pro-regime fighters developed into communal strife, where tit-for-tat killings evolved into a daily pattern.[75] Since these communities lived peacefully side-by-side prior to the uprising and subsequent conflict in Syria, one might suggest that the conflict triggered some sort of security

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[71] Beadle, 2014, p. 36.
[72] Droz-Vincent, 2014, p. 39
[73] Pinto, 2017, p. 136.
[74] Beadle, 2014, pp. 44–45.
[75] ICG, 'Syria's phase of radicalization,' *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Briefing 33, April 10, 2012, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b033-syria-s-phase-of-radicalisation.pdf, pp. 2–3.

dilemma often seen in communal conflicts.[76] That said, the triggering of communal conflict was first and foremost a by-product of the regime's efforts to secure support and justify its violence.

Finally, as Assad's interview in the *Wall Street Journal* suggested, the regime did not expect an uprising in Syria. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the regime's initial dealings with the protesters were the result of a pre-planned strategy.[77] The regime's twofold response to the uprisings and the rapid escalation of violence that took place in this period reflected the regime's failure to effectively clamp down on the protests. At the same time, the manipulation of sectarian antagonisms, the different ways of dealing with unrest in different parts of the country, and the prioritization of specific security and military units, were arguably all indicators of a regime equipped with an apparatus capable of planning operations and carrying out violent strategies. In fact, Holliday suggests Assad drew on his father's counterinsurgency approach from the early 1980s, in his attempt to regain control over Syria, among other things reflected in his selective deployment of elite units and the use of pro-regime militias.[78] Further, the regime went out of its way to control the country's electronic and print media to suppress any news coverage of the protests taking place in the country, among other things by expelling foreign journalists.[79] However, by mid-2011 state media had lost the power of narrative to alternative media sources.[80] Nevertheless, the regime continued to frame the conflict according to its own narrative, and used Syrian state television to support it.

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[76] For more on the security dilemma and communal/ethnic conflict see Posen, Barry, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,' *Survival*, 35:1 (1993) pp. 27–47. Communal tensions also occurred between other communities, such as tribes. For more see Khaddour, Kheder and Kevin Mazur, 'The Struggle for Syria's Regions,' *Middle East Report 269:Struggling for Syria*, 43 (2013); Khaddour, Kheder and Kevin Mazur, 'Eastern Expectations: The Changing Dynamics in Syria's Tribal Regions,' *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 28 February 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/02/28/eastern-expectations-changing-dynamics-in-syria-s-tribalregions-pub-68008
[77] Våge, 2014, p. 41.
[78] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, pp. 9–10.
[79] Droz-Vincent, 2014, pp. 44–45.
[80] Droz-Vincent, 2014, pp. 44–45.

5 Second phase – A military solution to a growing armed opposition (January 2012–June 2012)

The second phase of the regime's operations began in late January 2012 and should be seen as a response to an increasingly growing and increasingly militarized opposition. While the main motivation for inflicting violence on civilians in this period remained to regain control of the country and defeat the opposition (REGIME CRACKDOWN), a number of events now more clearly reflected elements of ETHNIC CLEANSING due to the particular targeting of specific groups, most noticeable through the strategy of forced displacements of populations in certain areas. More generally, the period was characterized by the diversification of threats to civilians as PREDATORY behavior in the form of widespread looting at the hands of regime forces and pro-regime militias became more pronounced following the regime's military operations.
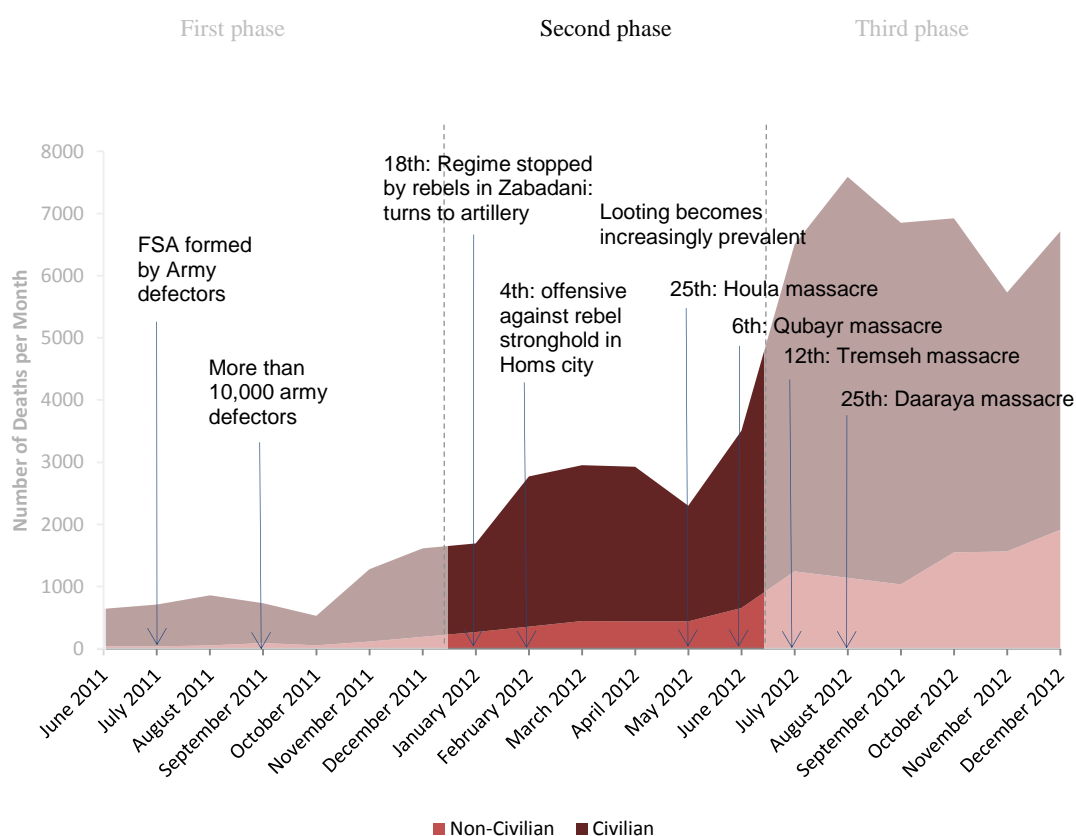

Figure 5.1   Timeline: casualties (VDC data) with key events.

5.1 Responses to defections and the armed opposition

The summer of 2011 saw the beginning of the militarization and the organization of the opposition, exemplified in the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) by defected Syrian army officers in late July. While the opposition grew in strength and numbers throughout the second half of 2011 and into 2012, the regime increasingly began to experience defections from its conventional forces. By the end of September 2011, Riad al-Assad, commander of the FSA and defected Colonel in the Syrian Air Force, claimed more than 10,000 soldiers had deserted the Syrian army.[81] Regional and international powers came to position themselves into pro-regime and anti-regime camps, with parts of the international community increasingly critical of Assad's violent treatment of the protesters. The regime agreed to an Arab League initiative and subsequent observer mission aimed to put an end to the regime's violent crackdown on protesters beginning in December 2011. However, the regime continued to suppress opposition in to 2012, leading to the suspension of the observer mission in late January.[82] In fact, as the regime's crackdown on largely peaceful protests evolved into an armed conflict in early 2012, regime violence became increasingly brutal.[83]

January 2012 represented a shift in the regime's approach to the uprising in the sense that it began employing heavy weapons, including artillery, in its military operations against restive areas and opposition strongholds. The shift was reflected in a series of operations staged by the Syrian armed forces, among other places, in the town of Zabadani and the Damascus suburb Douma at the beginning of 2012.[84] While regime forces had dealt with the opposition by employing ground troops alone up until then, opposition groups managed to halt the regime's ground offensive in Zabadani in January 2012. In response, the regime prefaced the ground offensive in Zabadani by shelling the opposition-held town.[85] The turn to artillery allowed the regime to weaken the opposition while avoiding unnecessary losses to its own troops.[86] The increasing strength of the opposition, coupled with the many defections from the regime's conventional forces, the external support to the armed opposition, and more generally, the lack of success in the regime's attempts to repress the protests help explain the regime's escalation of violence against the opposition.[87]

The shift towards using artillery in operations represented a qualitative difference in the threat civilians were faced in Syria, among other things reflected in the increase in civilian casualties seen in the first half of 2012 (see Figure 5.1). In the case of Zabadani, the International Commission explains how the regime issued no warning of the shelling attack and did not give

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[81] Reuters and DPA, 'Over 10,000 soldiers have deserted Syria army, says high-ranking defector,'*Haaretz*, October 1, 2011, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/over-10-000-soldiers-have-deserted-syria-army-says-high-ranking-defector-1.387494

[82] The mission was deemed a failure and came to an end already in late January 2012.

[83] HRW, 'World Report 2013: Syria - *Events of 2012*,' *Human Rights Watch*, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/syria

[84] ICG, 'Syria's mutating conflict,' 2012, p. 6.

[85] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 15.

[86] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 15.

[87]The regime also experienced pressure from within and from its social base to quell the protests. See ICG, 'Syria's phase of radicalization,' 2012, pp. 3–4.

civilians the time or chance to evacuate, leading to high civilian casualties.[88] This became the start of a recognizable *modus operandi* and comparable patterns of violence in the regime's large-scale military operations in cities and areas of unrest, as seen in Idlib, Homs, Aleppo and the Damascus suburbs.[89] Operations typically started with the Syrian army surrounding areas where rebel groups would be located, before shelling the area using artillery. This was done in an indiscriminate manner, punishing civilians for the presence of opposition groups.[90] Ground operations would then follow.

The regime's operations in Northern Idlib between March 22nd and April 6th were representative of the broader pattern: forces would carry out tank shelling in the mornings before tanks and infantry would advance into the villages and stay for a couple of days.[91] During ground operations in Idlib, security forces and pro-regime militias carried out summary executions, detentions, as well as burning, destroying and looting houses and stores. At least 92 civilians were killed in the operations, 35 of them summarily executed.[92] Other villagers were killed when regime forces indiscriminately opened fire in areas where rebels were present, or when regime forces shot and killed civilians attempting to flee. The operations exposed the regime's failure to separate between civilians and armed fighters as well as its disregard for the protection of civilian lives.[93] Moreover, the identifiable *modus operandi* and pattern of violence suggested that the operations were the result of "uniform directives from the state," seemingly carried out in most restive areas.[94]

On February 4th, government forces embarked on an operation aimed to crush the resistance in Homs. The restive Baba Amr neighborhood, a rebel stronghold since the beginning of the uprising, was subjected to overwhelming violence before rebel forces surrendered after a month of attacks with tanks, mortars and snipers. Like in Zabadani, indirect fire preceded the ground operation.[95] The shelling alone reportedly killed at least 200 people.[96] After clearing the city of rebel forces, the regime held the city so as to prevent the opposition from regaining its position. While regime forces rarely stayed behind to hold restive areas they had cleared in the previous phase of the conflict, the regime adjusted its operations to maintain control over these areas in early 2012.[97] When Syrian forces took control of Baba Amr on March 1st, most buildings in the neighborhood had been destroyed and an estimated 50,000-60,000 people had been displaced

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[88] International Commission, February 2012, p. 11.

[89] International Commission, February 2012, p. 11; HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2013.

[90] International Commission, February 2012, p. 18; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 3rd report of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic – A/HRC/21/50, *UN OHCHR*, 15 August 2012, p. 21.

[91] HRW, '"They burned my heart": War crimes in Northern Idlib during Peace Plan Negotiations,' *Human Rights Watch*, report, May 2, 2012, https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/05/02/they-burned-my-heart/war-crimes-northern-idlib-during-peace-plan-negotiations

[92] HRW, '"They burned my heart,"' 2012.

[93] HRW, '"They burned my heart,"' 2012.

[94] International Commission, February 2012, p. 18; International Commission, August 2012, p. 21.

[95] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 15.

[96] The Syria Institute (TSI) with PAX, 'No Return to Homs: a case study on demographic engineering in Syria,' February 2017, https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/no-return-to-homs, p. 21.

[97] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, pp. 15–16.

from that neighborhood alone.[98] The regime continued carrying out similar operations in other restive Homs neighborhoods in the spring of 2012, imposing sieges, depopulating and reclaiming large parts of the city, including Karam al-Zeitoun, Job Jandali, Ashera, Bab Sbaa, Marija, Deir Baalabah and Bayada.[99] As with Baba Amr, many of these neighborhoods were Sunni majority, and most bordered Alawite majority areas of the city.

In the spring of 2012, looting, during house searches and in the aftermath of regime operations, became more pronounced than it had been in the first phase. This became particularly apparent in the aftermath of regime military operations in Homs. As noted by ICG, looting at the hands of regime forces "assumed industrial-scale proportions."[100] Military forces were accompanied by the regime's security services and *shabiha,* as looting evolved into an institutionalized practice in Homs. Army trucks would transport out the war booty, and stolen goods were then sold in so-called 'Sunni markets' in Alawite parts of the city.[101] A person interviewed by The Syria Institute (TSI) described these activities as "*an active offensive to keep people from re-populating and going back to their home.*"[102] TSI also notes how in some instances the looting went so far that even the pipes and flooring were taken from houses and sold at the markets, often making it impossible for people to return to live in their former homes. The looting seen in Homs came to be representative of a broader pattern.

In addition, sexual violence against women, men, and children by regime forces and pro-regime militias was also increasingly reported in this phase. The International Commission concluded based on investigations that sexual violence was carried out during military operations, at checkpoints, and in detention centers and that they qualified as crimes against humanity.[103] In the case of Homs, an interviewee described how the fear of rape explained why many women fled the city in the spring of 2012.[104] Documentation suggests that rape served as part of the regime's policy of repression, as a tactic and a weapon in the regime's effort to defeat the opposition.[105] The threat of rape served as a tool regime forces used against men, women and children perceived to be associated with the opposition, as a form of punishment and as a way to terrorize.[106]

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[98] TSI with PAX, 2017, pp. 21–23.
[99] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 24, see also Nakkash, Aziz, "The Alawite Dilemma in Homs," *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, March 2013, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09825.pdf
[100] ICG, 'Syria's mutating conflict,' 2012, p. 8.
[101] Reuters, "Alawite fortress and Sunni wasteland in Syria's Homs," 19 June 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-homs-feature/alawite-fortress-and-sunni-wasteland-in-syrias-homs-idUSBRE85I0EI20120619
[102] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 25.
[103] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 6th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria - A/HRC/24/46 *UN OHCHR*, September 11, 2013, p. 14.
[104] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 24.
[105] Forestier, Marie '"You want freedom? This is your freedom": rape as a tactic of the Assad regime,' *LSE Centre for women, peace and security*, 3/2017, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69475/1/Forestier_You_want_freedom_this_is_your_freedom_WP3_2017.pdf, p. 9; The UNSC describes sexual violence as a tactic of war when used to "*humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic groups*".
[106] International Commission, September 2013, p. 13.

5.2   A string of massacres

The spring and summer of 2012 also witnessed a number of massacres against opposition strongholds, such as in Houla in May, Qubayr in June, Tremseh in July, and Darayya in August.[107] The regime denied any involvement in these massacres, however, the massacres shared similar *modus operandi* to other regime military operations. They would typically begin with a blockade and shelling of the neighborhood/city/area, followed by ground operations by regime forces assisted by the *shabiha*. During the operations men of fighting age, as well as defectors and activists were identified and executed. In addition, many of their family members along with several randomly selected individuals were executed.[108] The incidents shared demographic and geographic traits, all specifically targeting Sunni populations in areas bordering Alawite neighborhoods or villages.

On May 25th, at least 108 civilians (including 49 children and 34 women) were killed by pro-government armed men in the predominantly Sunni village Taldou in Houla, near Homs. The majority of those killed were executed by pro-government militias at close range, stabbed or shot, while the Syrian armed forces supported the militias by shelling the town with artillery.[109] No more than two weeks later another 100 Sunni villagers (including 40 children and women) were killed by militias in Qubeir, in Hama province. Houla and Qubeir are both Sunni agricultural villages bordering Alawite villages, part of the mix of Christian, Sunni and Alawite villages located along the Orontes river valley between Hama and Homs.[110] In early July more than 100 people were killed in a massacre that occurred in the Sunni village of Tremseh, also along the Orontes River.[111] Witness accounts tell of a similar situation to that in Houla and Qubeir, with civilians executed at close range during house searches or when trying to escape.[112]

Massacres also took place in districts of Damascus bordering Alawite and Shia neighborhoods, such as in the Sunni suburb Daraya in late August. The suburb had been a center for protests since the beginning of the uprising, and its location, close to downtown Damascus and the Mazzeh military airport, made it strategically important to the regime's position in Damascus.[113] Government forces killed at least 100 people (estimates range up to 500). S*habiha* forces allegedly supported government forces in Daraya by carrying out house searches, seeking out fighting aged men. In the aftermath, bodies were found in shelters around Daraya, bearing

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[107] Massacres understood as "an intentional mass killing of civilians not directly participating in hostilities or hors de combat fighters by organized armed forces or groups in a single incident" - Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 4th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria - A/HRC/22/59, *UN OHCHR,* February 5, 2013, p. 44.
[108] International Commission, August 2012, p. 69.
[109] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 21.
[110] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 22.
[111] International Commission, February 2013, p. 46; Gladstone, Rick and Neil MacFarquhar, 'Massacre Reported in Syria as Security Council Meets,' *The New York Times*, July 12, 2012,
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/world/middleeast/syria-says-defecting-ambassador-is-fired.html
[112] Blomfield, Adrian, 'Syria massacre in Tremseh village shocks Annan,' *The Telegraph*, July 13, 2012,
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9398361/Syria-massacre-in-Tremseh-village-shocks-Annan.html
[113] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 22.

marks of summary execution.[114] Even though Syrian state media claimed terrorist groups had been cleansed from the area; documentation suggests the regime forces' violence was directed against *hors de combat* fighters and civilians.[115]

5.3   Regime crackdown supported by ethnic cleansing?

The escalation of violence witnessed in this phase of the conflict can be seen as indicative of the pressure the regime felt in Syria. The regime's early approach to the uprising had failed to suppress the opposition and so the regime embarked on larger and more extensive military operations. The shift in the regime's strategy to employ artillery was a way to deal with its manpower shortage in the face of a growing and increasingly militarized opposition. The escalation of violence was also indicative of the risks the regime was willing to take to secure its own survival. Still early in the conflict, Assad could not be certain his actions would not trigger an intervention similar to that seen in Libya. Furthermore, by escalating the violence, Assad weakened his chances of taking a conciliatory role in Syria, a role the international community had urged him to take. The Syrian regime's violence escalated in accordance with the regime's perceived threat to its own survival, as often seen in situations of REGIME CRACKDOWN.

Whilst the previous phase witnessed a number of discriminate attacks, this phase saw an increase in indiscriminate attacks against opposition-held towns and areas, affecting the population at large. The regime's operation in Homs was illustrative of the broader shift, moving towards an approach to the uprising that increasingly featured collective punishment.[116] In its efforts to defeat the opposition and force civilians out of the city, the regime first embarked on an indiscriminate shelling campaign that affected both the armed opposition and the city's civilian population. The regime then turned to tactics involving the implementation of sieges, the deliberate and collective targeting of civilians and the destruction of civilian neighborhoods and infrastructure.[117] The regime deliberately bombed neighborhoods, made no meaningful efforts to protect civilians or assist the displaced, and made no attempts to reconstruct the areas that had been destroyed during the operations.

The destruction of opposition strongholds can be understood as a tactic often found in the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario when it seeks to "deny rebels any sanctuary or potential support from the local population."[118] A regime may target civilian buildings and infrastructure, or it may target civilians directly as they represent the rebel groups' support base. In the case of Homs, it is possible to argue that the regime's military operation grew out of a typical 'draining the sea' logic, that the regime used violence to force civilians to leave certain areas in efforts to expose the opposition so as to defeat them. The destruction could be viewed in the context of

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[114] International Commission, February 2013, p. 4; di Giovanni, Janine, 'Syria crisis: Daraya massacre leaves a ghost town still counting its dead,' *The Guardian*, September 7, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/07/syria-daraya-massacre-ghost-town?newsfeed=true
[115] International Commission, February 2013, p. 11.
[116] ICG, 'Syria's mutating conflict,' 2012, p. 8.
[117] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 21.
[118] Beadle, 2014, p. 36.

the regime's motivation to capture the strategically important rebel-held city, central to its broader efforts to regain control of Syria. At the same time, the scale of destruction (seemingly aimed to make neighborhoods unlivable) and the specific targeting of Sunni neighborhoods (often surrounded by Alawite neighborhoods) arguably reflected efforts aimed to permanently displace a particular population, as seen in situations of ethnic cleansing.

In situations of ETHNIC CLEANSING, the objective of the perpetrator, most often a state or a state-like entity is the expulsion of a particular group of civilians based on their identity.[119] There may be different underlying reasons for expelling a population, such as 'military necessity,' grand nationalist projects, racist ideologies and ethno-territorial conflict but there is a shared view that expulsion is the most viable solution. Since the strategy relies on physically clearing geographic areas of a certain population, violence plays a central part in coercing the population to leave. As TSI argues with reference to Homs, the "disproportionate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure suggests that the government had motivations beyond just dislodging armed opposition groups or fighting "terrorism.""[120] The attacks on specific neighborhoods seemed to be conducted as part of state policy, given the scale, repetitiveness, and excessiveness, not to mention the indiscriminate and coordinated nature of the attacks.[121] The neighborhoods targeted were primarily Sunni neighborhoods, and in Alawite-majority neighborhoods the regime selectively sought out Sunni residents for expulsion, leaving Alawites in the neighborhoods be. Such efforts arguably suggest deliberate efforts to displace Homs' Sunni population.[122]

The regime's operations in Homs clearly featured in the regime's broader efforts to defeat the opposition through the indiscriminate destruction of opposition strongholds. At the same time, the regime's efforts seemed tailored to force the displacement of Homs' Sunni population. Relatedly, the string of massacres in the spring and summer could be seen as one tactic among many to defeat the opposition in a regime crackdown manner. By seeking out and killing fighting-aged males and others thought to be associated with the opposition, the regime both signaled the consequences for siding with the opposition and eliminated potential fighting power for the opposition. At the same time, the particular targeting of Sunni villages in Alawite majority areas suggested the attacks were aimed at clearing Alawite majority areas of Sunni Syrians. The massacres served as demonstrative killings intended to make civilians flee.

Furthermore, on the one hand, sexual violence during operations and at checkpoints served to show that the regime used all tools available in its efforts to defeat the opposition in Syria. Sexual violence seemed to serve as a force multiplier in the regime's efforts to repress the opposition, a tactic often seen in REGIME CRACKDOWN situations.[123] On the other hand,

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[119] Beadle, 2014, p. 30.
[120] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 48.
[121] International Commission, August, 2012, p. 13, See also International Commission, February 2013, p. 47.
[122] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 48.
[123] Forestier, Marie in 'Sexual violence used as a tactic of repression in Syria: report,' *Syria Deeply*, March 14, 2017, https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/03/14/sexual-violence-used-as-tactic-of-repression-in-syria-report

victims' accounts from Homs explained how women fled the city in fear of rape, suggesting that sexual violence might also have served as a tactic to cleanse neighborhoods. While at the strategic level the regime's overarching motivation to regain control of the country and to crush the threat to its own survival seemed to explain its actions, at the tactical level, in certain places, the regime's motivation seemed aimed at displacing certain populations.

Looting in the aftermath of military operations by the regime's forces and pro-regime militias introduced elements of the PREDATORY VIOLENCE scenario into the conflict. In this scenario armed groups rely on the exploitation of civilians, in order to either ensure their own survival or make a profit, because attacking them is less risky and more profitable than confrontation with other armed forces.[124] While Syrian regime forces and pro-regime militias did not engage in looting primarily to ensure their own survival, their activities seemed motivated by profiteering. That said, the predation could also be seen to support the overall aims of the regime's crackdown on civilians. Looting complicated the re-population of areas, which contributed to the regime's effort to depopulate areas as part of the broader strategy of keeping support away from the opposition. In addition, the looting of homes, making them unlivable, arguably also indicated intent to expel certain groups from certain areas of the country.

Finally, a by-product of the brutal repression of protesters by the conventional forces was that the Syrian military's reputation and credibility shattered.[125] Elite units of the military were already tasked with dealing with the uprising, but the conventional forces' association with the violence discredited it as an independent actor, something that almost certainly worked to Assad's favor. It eliminated the possibility for it to serve as an alternative to the regime, as a potential national unifier in Syria. The military was clearly seen as an extension of the regime, not an alternative to it. As such, although Assad's turn to larger military operations and the employment of conventional forces primarily grew out of the regime's difficulties with defeating the opposition, it also served to discredit a potential contender to the rule of Syria.

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[124] Beadle, 2014, p. 51.
[125] ICG, 'Syria's mutating conflict,' 2012, p. 8.

6 Third phase – The turn to airpower (June 2012–July 2013)

The third phase of the regime's operations was in many ways a continuation of the second, simply another step up the ladder of escalation against a resilient Syrian opposition. At the same time, the employment of airstrikes in the Syrian regime's operations represented an important development with regards to the type of threats civilians were exposed to. While the regime's rationale for targeting civilians more or less remained constant throughout this period (REGIME CRACKDOWN), developments in the conflict forced the regime to pursue its goals differently. This period was characterized by great numbers of indiscriminate killings through airstrikes, shelling as well as massive destruction. As in the previous period, the regime's large-scale destruction of Sunni neighborhoods prompted the question of whether these actions also reflected the ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario, and the increasing reliance on militias and foreign forces led to more PREDATORY VIOLENCE.
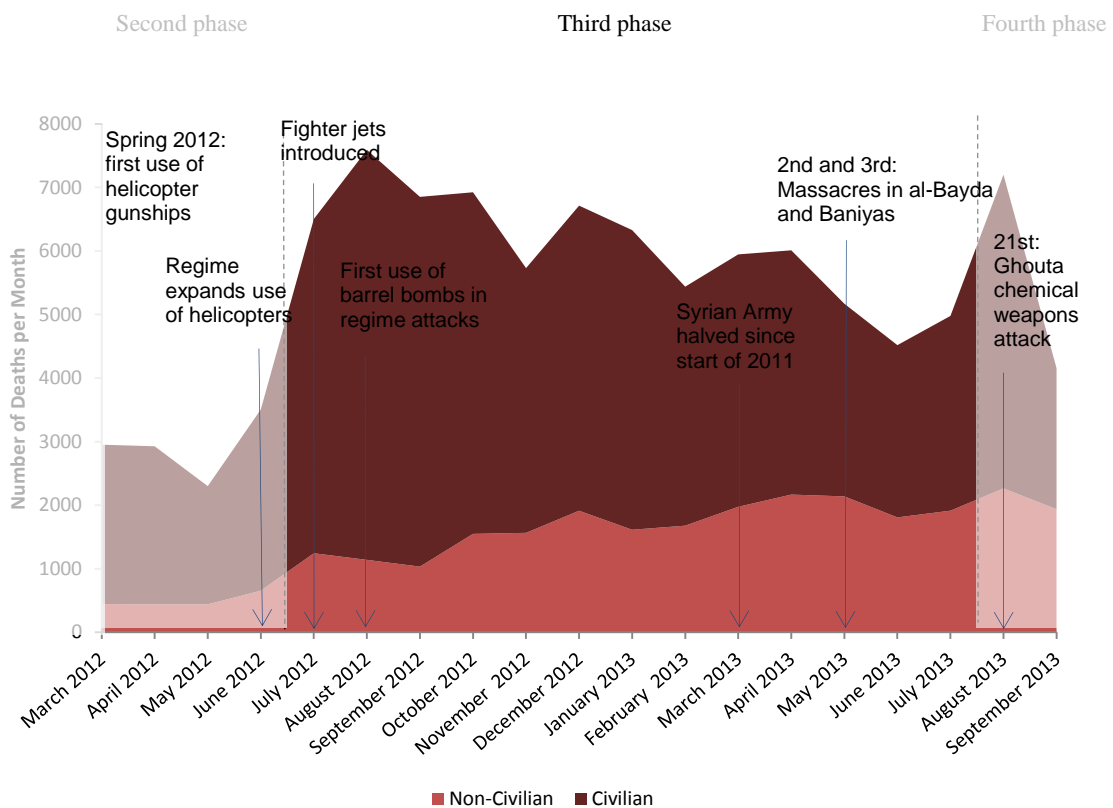

Figure 6.1   Timeline: casualties (VDC data) with key events.

6.1 Fighter jets and gunships as response to a more capable opposition

By mid-2012, the regime was facing a growing and increasingly capable insurgency that enjoyed both local support and better knowledge of the terrain in which they were operating.[126] The growing strength of the opposition, coupled with the regime's limited ground forces, seemingly influenced the regime's decision to adapt its strategy to the changing circumstances. While in the early months of 2012 regime forces aimed to hold all the terrain they cleared, the regime turned its focus towards primarily controlling provincial capitals and areas critical to the regime's survival into the summer of 2012, such as "Damascus, Aleppo, the central region (including the cities of Homs and Hama), the highways linking them and the infrastructure supporting them."[127] This shift was in many ways made possible by the regime's turn to airpower in the same period.

The regime began employing helicopter gunships in the spring of 2012, however, expanded the employment after a rebel offensive in northern Syria in June and after it became clear that the international community would not impose a no-fly-zone.[128] In late July the regime also began employing fighter jets in its campaign against opposition-controlled cities, towns and neighborhoods.[129] The absence of a no-fly zone gave the regime an advantage over the armed opposition and (again) the regime could limit the deployment of its overstretched ground troops.[130] Artillery had primarily been used by regime forces prior to ground offensives as part of the regime's *modus operandi* since early 2012. However, by the summer of 2012 artillery and airstrikes, in addition to being used in the context of large-scale ground offensives, were increasingly employed independently from such operations, as bombardment would periodically occur in towns and neighborhoods without forces trying to clear these locations. By utilizing artillery and airpower in areas of lower strategic importance, the regime limited casualties and defections from its own forces. At the same time, it helped disrupt rebel governance in rebel-controlled areas beyond the reach of the regime's ground troops.[131]

The turn to airpower led to an increase in the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian populated areas under rebel-control and contributed to a significant surge in the number of civilian casualties in the conflict (see Figure 6.1). The majority of the regime's airstrikes did not seem to serve as tactical support to ground forces, as most of them occurred in opposition-controlled areas without reported clashes that day.[132] In fact, the majority of the airstrikes were directed towards "soft" civilian targets, not rebel targets as such. Furthermore, the airstrikes were highly

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[126] Hokayem, 2013, p. 59 The International Committee of the Red Cross found the fighting so widespread it declared the conflict a civil war in July 2012. See BBC, 'Syria in civil war, Red Cross says,' BBC, July 15, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18849362

[127] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 19; Hokayem, 2013, p. 59.

[128] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 22.

[129] HRW, 'Death from the skies: deliberate and indiscriminate air strikes on civilians,' *Human Rights Watch,* report, April 10, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/10/death-skies/deliberate-and-indiscriminate-air-strikes-civilians

[130] Hokayem, 2013, pp. 58–9.

[131] Hokayem, 2013, p. 59.

[132] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, pp. 22–23.

indiscriminate in nature, reflecting the regime's use of imprecise and unguided munitions with wide-area effects.[133]

The indiscriminate nature of the aerial bombardments became particularly evident in the regime's use of barrel bombs, first documented in August 2012, in Homs city and Al-Qusayr in Homs governorate.[134] In contrast to precision weapons, barrel bombs are highly inaccurate and lack technical specifications when it comes to lethality. Still, the regime embarked on barrel bomb campaigns, treating military targets within densely populated areas as a single military objective.[135] The campaigns not only led to mass civilian casualties but also induced terror into civilian society. The regime did not warn the civilian populations leading up to attacks, robbing them of the chance of finding shelter. Civilians interviewed by the International Commission described "…the extreme fear and mental suffering they felt as they came under attack."[136]

With the turn to airpower the regime increasingly began to strike markets, hospitals, and bakeries behind the frontlines, indicating the deliberate and systematic targeting of civilians central to the regime's strategy.[137] For example, government forces repeatedly attacked the Dar al-Shifa hospital in Aleppo city over the span of four months, from August to November 2012, eventually leading to destruction rendering the hospital unable to operate. While there might have been opposition fighters in or near the hospitals, regime forces failed to issue warning of the impending attacks. The expected military gains from such attacks also seemed disproportionately low compared to the high loss of civilian lives.[138]

Further, attacks on bakeries were increasingly seen and would also incur high civilian losses. The regime would often strike when people were waiting in line for bread, such as in the small Sunni rebel-held town of Halayah in rural Hama in December 2012, resulting in the deaths of 23 people.[139] The law of war prohibits the destruction, removal or rendering useless of civilian objects as well as objects crucial for the survival of the civilian population. Hospitals are considered such objects, and so are bakeries when, as was increasingly the case in opposition-held areas in Syria, they represented the sole source of bread for civilians.[140] In spite of this, the regime targeted these spaces in what seemed to be its broader effort to depopulate rebel-held areas through the use of airpower, "reducing the opposition's ability to provide basic services for populations under rebel control."[141]

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[133] Pinheiro, Paulo Sérgio, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria Arab Republic, 'The use of barrel bombs and indiscriminate bombardment in Syria: the need to strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law,' Presentation at a side event hosted by the Permanent Mission of Austria and Article 36, March 12, 2015, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/Documentation.aspx
[134] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 7th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria - A/HRC/25/65, *UN OHCHR*, February 12, 2014, p. 50.
[135] International Commission, February 2014, p. 50.
[136] International Commission, February 2014, p. 50.
[137] HRW, 'Death from the skies,' 2013.
[138] HRW, 'Death from the skies,' 2013.
[139] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 24.
[140] HRW, 'Death from the skies,' 2013.
[141] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 24.

The regime continued employing increasingly deadly and indiscriminate attacks into 2013.[142] Regime and pro-regime forces conducted several large-scale military operations across the country prioritizing strategically important cities and lines of communication.[143] In regions that had come under rebel control in northern and eastern Syria, the regime embarked on a campaign of shelling, resorting to aerial bombardment, the firing of ballistic missiles, and the use of cluster and thermobaric bombs. The attacks primarily targeted rebel-controlled towns or neighborhoods, suggesting the centrality of the deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure in the regime's overall strategy. The regime also began carrying out large-scale demolitions of residential buildings in opposition held areas during this phase. Using explosives and bulldozers, the regime deliberately destroyed residential buildings, at times whole neighborhoods, in cities such as Damascus and Hama.[144] Furthermore, the use of sieges came to play an increasingly important role in the regime's strategy to defeat the opposition, as suburbs and villages in Homs, Damascus, Daraa, Al-Qunaytirah and Deir ez Zor came under siege.[145] The siege tactic involved the denial of food and medical supplies, and aimed "to prevent the expansion of armed groups and to force the displacement of the population."[146]

Facing rebel advances in the winter of 2012/13, especially in northern Syria, the regime began receiving increasing support from foreign fighters, primarily Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian-backed Shia militias. In the initial phases of the conflict, Iran's support to the Syrian regime was "limited" to financial and technical support as well as providing advisors, training and logistical support to the Syrian Army. Starting in 2012, Iran began facilitating "the deployment of foreign Shia militias" into Syria.[147] With Iran's assistance, Assad also developed the National Defense Forces (NDF) in the winter of 2012/13, by reorganizing local popular committees and other pro-regime armed groups.[148] In contrast to the regular army, the paramilitary NDF fighters,

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[142] HRW, 'World Report 2014: Syria - *Events of 2013*,' *Human Rights Watch*, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/syria

[143] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 5th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria - A/HRC/23/58, *UN OHCHR*, June 4, 2013, p. 6.

[144] HRW, 'Razed to the ground: Syria's unlawful neighborhood demolitions in 2012-2013,' *Human Rights Watch*, report, January 30, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/01/30/razed-ground/syrias-unlawful-neighborhood-demolitions-2012-2013

[145] Szybala, Valerie, 'Assad strikes Damascus: the battle for Syria's capital,' *Institute for the Study of War,* Middle East Security Report 16, January 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISWAssadStrikesDamascus_26JAN.pdf p. 6; International Commission, September, 2013, p. 21.

[146] International Commission, June 2013, p. 6.

[147] Ansari, Ali and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, 'The View from Tehran,' in Ansieg Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci (eds.) 'Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict,' *Royal United Services Institute*, Occasional Paper, August 2016, pp. 3–10; Sadjadpour, Karim, 'Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* August 27, 2013, http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/27/iran-s-unwavering-support-to-assad-s-syria-pub-52779 The militias were to varying degrees recruited, trained, and financed by Iran. Mahmood, M. and M Chulov, 'Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines,' *The Guardian,* June 4, 2013 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers; Smyth, Phillip, 'The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects,' *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy focus 138, 2015, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138-v3.pdf

[148] Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016; Lund, Aron, 'Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2, 2015, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215 The Popular Committees reflected the popular mobilization for the regime.

primarily Alawites, served in their own communities. Like most of Syria's minorities, they appeared to be motivated by a perceived threat to the existence of their own communities.[149] In addition to fighting for the survival of the Assad regime, local NDF commanders reportedly also engaged in predatory behavior, involving murders, kidnappings and extortions, as well as robberies and thefts.[150]

The influx of fighters was desperately needed as by March 2013, the regime's regular army troops had been cut in half, from approximately 220,000 before the war to 110,000.[151] An important victory for the regime was the battle for Al-Qusayr in the spring of 2013, where Lebanese Hezbollah played a key role in the offensive.[152] The battle led to the displacement of thousands of rebel fighters and civilians, and at least 450 casualties, of which half were estimated to be civilians.[153] The prominent role played by Hezbollah in the battle reflected the regime's increasing reliance on foreign forces in its military operations. Furthermore, the entry of the Iranian-backed Shia militias seemed to influence the sectarian dynamic on the ground, contributing to inter-communal tensions. The militias were defined in religious (Shia) terms and the fighters recruited to defend holy Shia sights in Syria, such as the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus.[154] The groups fought alongside the regime's forces but would at times carry out what seemed to be religiously motivated acts against Sunnis.[155]

6.2   Killings based on sectarian backgrounds?

On May 2nd and 3rd 2013, in the towns of al-Bayda and in the Ras al-Nabaa quarter in Baniyas in Tartous governorate, regime forces and the NDF allegedly carried out what until that point in the conflict represented the deadliest cases of mass summary executions.[156] Interestingly, the operations did not take place in the context of military confrontations in the area.[157] Government forces blocked main access roads to the villages, and extensive shelling preceded ground operations. Accompanied by the NDF, government forces would raid houses, carry out arrests and perform executions. Regime forces, assisted by pro-regime militias, killed between 150 and

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[149] The Carter Center, 'Syria: Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces,' *The Carter Center,* November 5, 2013, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/progovernmentparamilitaryforces.pdf

[150] Kozak, Christopher, '"An army in all corners": Assad's campaign strategy in Syria,' *Institute for the Study of War,* May 26, 2015, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%201.pdf, p. 15.

[151] International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 'The Military balance 2013,' *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 113 (2013).

[152] Pierret, Thomas, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict,' *United States Institute of Peace,* Peace Brief 162, November 18, 2013, pp. 1–4, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB162.pdf

[153] International Commission, September 2013, p. 57.

[154] Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad, 'Shi'i militias in Iraq and Syria,' *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 19:1 (2015) pp. 79–83, p. 80.

[155] Pinto, 2017, p. 140.

[156] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2014.

[157] International Commission, September, 2013, pp. 31–32; Margon, Sarah, 'The sarin gas attack is just one Syrian atrocity the ICC should pursue,' *Human Rights Watch*, September 20, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/20/sarin-gas-attack-just-one-syrian-atrocity-icc-should-pursue

250 in al-Bayda and between 150 and 200 in Baniyas, including women and children.[158] The identifiable *modus operandi* and the participation of government forces arguably suggested that the attacks were carried out as a part of regime policy.[159]

The events in al-Bayda and Baniyas led some to accuse the government of sectarian cleansing, pointing to the fact that both are Sunni-majority locations in a primarily Alawite populated province.[160] SNHR claimed the events should be seen as part of a string of massacres perpetrated by the Syrian regime (at times accompanied by local and foreign militias and Lebanese Hezbollah) involving a pattern of killing based on sectarian backgrounds. SNHR found that whilst countless massacres had been perpetrated since the beginning of the conflict, some involved criminal acts, such as the slaughtering, burning and maiming of bodies, sexual violence, and the plundering and burning of homes, that could be seen to possess sectarian traits.[161] At the same time, the events in Baniyas and al-Bayda were far from isolated and could be seen as part of the Syrian government's widespread and systematic attacks against Syria's civilians with presumed links to the opposition.

6.3   Regime crackdown with genocidal intent?

The most obvious reason for the escalation of violence and the turn to airpower on the part of the regime during this phase of the conflict was the lack of success the regime had with previous efforts to defeat the opposition. The opposition was growing increasingly capable whilst the regime was lacking in manpower, and so the regime compensated for its lack of ground forces by employing capabilities the opposition did not have access to. Although the regime had to give up the objective of regaining control across all of Syria, the turn to airpower allowed it to interfere with the governance and overall conditions in rebel-held areas beyond the reach of ground troops. The escalation in violence, involving the turn to airpower and a rise in attacks behind the frontline, reflected the regime's concern with what it perceived as a growing threat to the regime's survival, the increasingly capable opposition.[162] This type of escalation is often seen in situations of REGIME CRACKDOWN. Furthermore, the turn to airpower showed how systematic attacks against civilian targets were becoming increasingly central to the regime's strategy to defeat the opposition and its efforts to survive.

Civilians were victims of the regime's escalation both on and off the frontlines. On the frontlines they would suffer from the regime's indiscriminate employment of shelling and airstrikes in an effort to relieve pressure before ground operations. In rebel controlled areas behind the frontlines, civilians and civilian locations served as deliberate targets in the regime's efforts to defeat the opposition. The regime used airstrikes as a way to terrorize the civilian

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[158] International Commission, September 2013, pp. 31–2.
[159] International Commission, September 2013, p. 8.
[160] Muir, Jim, for BBC, 'Syrians flee 'massacres' in Baniyas and al-Bayda, BBC, May 4, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22410392
[161] SNHR, 'The Society's Holocaust: most notable sectarian and ethnic cleansing massacre,' *The Syrian Network For Human Rights,* June 2015, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_Societys_Holocaust.pdf
[162] Beadle, 2014, p. 35.

population and to deter them from joining the rebels. It also used it as a way to damage the rebels' relations with local populations.[163] The regime's use of airpower in the battle for Aleppo is illustrative of the latter. Starting in July 2012, the regime's air campaign in Aleppo served to disrupt the rebels' governance of the areas of the city it controlled, turning the people against the insurgency as civilians blamed the armed opposition for bringing destruction with them to Aleppo.[164] Four defected Syrian Air Force officers talking to HRW explained that even though the Air Force lacked the technology needed to locate and strike military targets in highly populated (particularly urban) areas their commanders still ordered airstrikes in towns and cities, "in part to instill fear in the civilian population in opposition strongholds, and also to deprive the opposition of its support."[165]

At the same time, barrel bombs and aerial attacks more generally seemed to play a role in the regime's strategy of population displacement from rebel controlled areas, due to their destructive power.[166] The regime's targeting of hospitals, bakeries, schools and markets, as well as civilian infrastructure behind the frontlines, increasingly seen in this phase, had devastating impacts on living conditions in opposition-controlled areas. In addition, the regime carried out extensive neighborhood demolitions, seemingly serving no military purpose beyond punishing the civilian population for residing in opposition-occupied areas, giving them no option but to leave.[167] The regime's unrestrained violence resulted in many thousands losing their homes.[168]

The destruction of rebel controlled areas has been used by perpetrators of violence in REGIME CRACKDOWN situations as a way to defeat the opposition through denying them sanctuary and local support. The regime's aerial bombardments of civilian populated areas under rebel control arguably contributed to such efforts. At the same time, the destruction of neighborhoods and urban centers, making them unlivable, can also be seen as direct attempts at displacing certain populations from certain areas, as seen in the ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario.

Civilians continued to suffer from the predatory behavior of pro-regime forces during this phase. The regime's increasing reliance on Syrian paramilitary and foreign pro-regime militias weakened the regime's command and control abilities over the pro-regime flank. Since the formation of the NDF in the winter of 2012/13, its members reportedly engaged in predatory behavior across regime-held areas of Syria, profiteering on the chaos caused by war. Civilians residing in regime-held areas were therefore exposed to PREDATORY VIOLENCE at the hands of pro-regime paramilitary and militias. Looting also continued to be seen in the aftermath of military operations in Homs and other opposition-held cities and areas, complicating the return to these places by their former residents. Local and foreign pro-regime militias also acted predatorily in the aftermaths of (what seemed to be sectarian) massacres. The predatory behavior in the aftermath of operations and massacres could be seen as opportunistic

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[163] Hokayem, 2013, pp. 58–9.
[164] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 23.
[165] HRW, 'Death from the skies,' 2013.
[166] Holliday, 'The Assad regime,' 2013, p. 24.
[167] HRW, 'Razed to the ground,' p. 1.
[168] International Commission, February 2013, p. 19.

profiteering, however also served to complicate the return of civilians as well as a way to terrorize those affiliated with the opposition.

Finally, the regime's massacres in al-Bayda and Baniyas, especially because the acts did not seem to be carried out in coordination with the regime's military operations, raised the question of the regime's motivation for brutally attacking and killing civilians in these towns.[169] While there has been speculation as to whether the regime attacked al-Bayda because rebels were suspected of hiding there, one might wonder why the regime killed such large numbers of people, many of which were civilians or *hors de combat* fighters.[170] In many ways, the massacres demonstrated the lengths to which the regime was willing to go in its efforts to defeat the opposition and spread fear among Syrian civilians, and could be seen to reflect the occasional massacres often seen in situations of both REGIME CRACKDOWN and ETHNIC CLEANSING.

At the same time, the brutality of the killings, the specific targeting of Sunni inhabited areas, and the lack of clear connections with the regime's military operations shares similarities with GENOCIDE situations. In the GENOCIDE scenario, the intent of the act is to physically destroy the existence of a certain group, either in whole or in part.[171] To some extent, al-Bayda and Baniyas, as well as other Sunni-populated villages and neighborhoods, seemed to be singled out by the regime with no other purpose than for its inhabitants to be killed. While on a strategic level the massacres served to instill fear in society as part of the regime's broader efforts to defeat the opposition, on a tactical level the events in al-Bayda and Baniyas seemed to represent individual acts of genocide. That said, the regime's overarching strategy in Syria has not been to exterminate its Sunni population in entirety.

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[169] International Commission, September 2013, pp. 30–32.
[170] International Commission, September 2013, p. 31.
[171] Beadle, 2014, p. 25.

7 Fourth phase – Chemical weapons, sieges and destruction (August 2013–August 2015)

This phase of the regime's operations began with the chemical attack on Ghouta on August 21st, 2013, an attack that would mark a further escalation of the violence against civilians in the conflict. The regime continued to use increasingly deadly weapons against civilians in this period. This was reflected in the employment of chemical weapons, an escalation in the regime's use of siege tactics, and an expansion of the regime's starvation policy. While there were no drastic changes in the regime's operations as such, the complete destruction of Homs' urban center by mid-2014 and the forcible displacements of its residents showed that the regime's activites could not simply be understood in light of the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario. As with the previous phases, different scenarios seemed to come together in the regime's strategies and tactics within this phase. The ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario, in particular, can aid our understanding of the regime's targeting of civilians in certain areas and periods of the conflict.
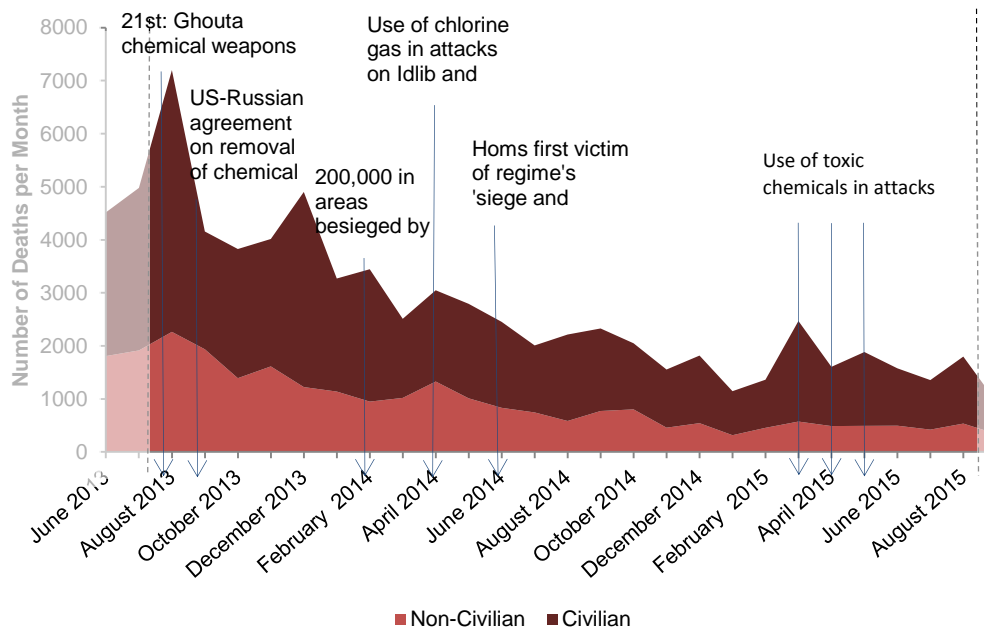
Figure 7.1   Timeline: casualties (VDC data) with key events.

7.1   The Ghouta chemical weapons attack and its aftermath

Rebel groups embarked on a series of offensives against the regime in the city of Damascus throughout the summer of 2013. These offensives and the rebel groups' use of increasingly sophisticated weaponry were seen as threatening for the regime.[172] The regime's perceived threat was arguably heightened by international developments in the same period, such as the White House's acknowledgement of the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in June 2013, followed by the US' announcement of increased support to the armed oppositions. Indications of even greater support to the armed opposition by the Friends of Syria group, as well as news about Jordan hosting 900 US military personnel in July further contributed to this perception.[173] The combined developments may have influenced the regime's escalation in Damascus, as it embarked on its largest-ever offensive in the city on August 20th, Operation Capital Shield. The operation "aimed at preempting a rebel attack on the city and decisively ending the deadlock in key contested terrain around the city."[174]

On August 21st, in what seemed to be part of the offensive, the regime carried out two chemical weapons attacks in the opposition-controlled Damascus suburbs of eastern and western Ghouta. The attacks were followed by military offensives across Damascus, taking advantage of the chaos caused by the chemical attacks.[175] Hundreds were killed (estimates range from 300 to 1,800) and the subsequent UN investigation determined that the nerve agent sarin was used.[176] The attacks were denounced by US, British and French leaders who immediately considered retaliatory attacks. However, Russia, China and Iran opposed military action, which made a united response from the UN Security Council impossible. Ultimately, no retaliatory attacks were carried out and instead a US-Russian agreement concluded that Syria had to remove its chemical weapons. The regime denied responsibility for the attacks in Ghouta but agreed to the Chemical Weapons Convention and to the elimination of its chemical weapons stocks in the first half of 2014.[177]

The attack and the events that followed would come to influence the escalation of violence in the conflict. Up until then, many of the key actors of the conflict considered a US-led military intervention, similar to that seen in Libya, a realistic possibility.[178] Regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, had offered the majority of their support to the more moderate groups within the opposition, hoping it would encourage western intervention. They felt somewhat betrayed when the regime's chemical weapon attack did not lead to such a scenario and increasingly began supporting more radicalized groups, who seemed to have greater success

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[172] Szybala, 'Assad strikes Damascus,' 2014, p. 6.
[173] Szybala, 'Assad strikes Damascus,' 2014, p. 6. Accusations concerning the regime's use of chemical weapons occurred as early as December 2012, after a regime attack in Homs, but were more pressing after allegations of chemical weapons use in an attack near Aleppo in March 2013. See Shachtman, Noah and Column Lynch, 'The fog of war,' *Foreign Policy,* August 19, 2013, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/19/the-fog-of-chemical-war/
[174] Szybala, 'Assad strikes Damascus,' 2014, p. 6.
[175] Szybala, 'Assad strikes Damascus,' 2014, p. 6.
[176] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2014.
[177] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2014.
[178] Phillips, 2016, pp. 168–184.

on the battlefield.[179] In a similar manner, among the rebel groups that had pursued strategies with eventual US military support in mind, it could be seen that the more radical groups now had less of an incentive to moderate their profiles and strategies. As such, the lack of repercussions contributed to the changing character of parts of the opposition in the fall and winter of 2013/14, as many groups radicalized and as regional powers increasingly supported these groups.

The lack of repercussion also seemed to influence the regime's behavior. As Phillips notes, fear of provoking a potential intervention explained the regime's slow (but steady) escalation of violence in the conflict. Once it became clear that the chemical weapons attack would not lead to a US-led intervention, the regime and its allies felt less restricted with regards to the use of conventional weapons.[180] This was arguably reflected in the regime's aerial campaigns. By the fall of 2013 air raids had become a central feature of Assad's military strategy in Syria. The regime would bomb rebel-held areas from a distance, whether from the air or with conventional artillery, before engaging on the ground with tanks and infantry. The Air Force would also carry out repeated airstrikes against civilian targets, the majority of the strikes indiscriminate and seemingly deliberate in nature. In their investigation of nine apparent ballistic missile attacks in 2013, together resulting in the deaths of at least 215 people, HRW concluded that no military targets were hit in the attacks.[181] In fact, in seven of the nine cases, HRW failed to locate any apparent military targets in the surrounding areas, suggesting the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian areas. The government continued to use cluster bombs throughout 2013 and the use of barrel bombs could increasingly be seen in the second half of the year, particularly in Aleppo and Idlib provinces.[182] These were areas where the regime had a lighter ground presence.

In mid-December 2013, the regime embarked on a barrel bombing campaign against Aleppo's civilian population.[183] The campaign was illustrative of how vulnerable Syria's civilian population had become as a result of the regime's dependency on airstrikes in certain areas, with barrel bombing alone killing at least 517 civilians in the first two weeks of the campaign.[184] Shelling and airstrikes, aimed to relieve pressure and gain ground, seemed to justify to the regime the mass civilian casualties these activities resulted in. In fact, part of the regime's strategy seemed to be to directly target Syria's civilian population, "to create a humanitarian catastrophe and depopulate rebel-held districts, as part of a doctrine that blurs the line between military tactics and collective punishment."[185] The regime continued these practices into 2014, carrying out airstrikes with barrel bombs in populated areas, in defiance of UNSC Resolution

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[179] Phillips, 2016, p. 184.
[180] Phillips, 2016, p. 187.
[181] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2014.
[182] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2014; Nassief, Isabel, 'The campaign for Homs and Aleppo: The Assad regime's strategy in 2013,' *Institute for the Study of War*, January 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Nassief-BattleforHomsAleppo-web.pdf, p. 36.
[183] Nassief, 'The campaign for Homs and Aleppo,'2014, p. 36.
[184] Civilian deaths from SOHR; also BBC, 'Barrel bombs 'kill 517 in Aleppo since 15 December,' December 29, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25541726
[185] ICG, 'Rigged cars and barrel bombs: Aleppo and the state of the Syrian war,' *International Crisis Group*, Report 155, September 9, 2014, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/rigged-cars-and-barrel-bombs-aleppo-and-state-syrian-war, pp. 8–9.

2139, passed on February 22nd, 2014.[186] Between February and July 2014, HRW identified over 650 new major impact strikes indicating the use of barrel bombs in Aleppo neighborhoods.[187]

Furthermore, although the regime claimed to have handed over the last of their declared chemical weapons for destruction in June 2014, it continued to source chemicals typically used in industrial chemical processes, for the use in their offensives and attacks against rebel-held areas.[188] For example, HRW's evidence suggests that the regime carried out attacks on three towns in northern Syria, using barrel bombs containing chlorine gas in mid-April 2014.[189] Accounts on the ground described symptoms indicating the use of chemical weapons in the attacks, such as respiratory problems, vomiting, and skin and eye irritation.[190] Civilian populated areas in both Idlib and Hama governorates were subjected to the regime's attacks.[191] Such use put them in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention, which strictly prohibits the use of any industrial chemicals in weapons. HRW also reported the use of toxic chemicals in barrel bombs in regime attacks on Idlib governorate in March, April, and May 2015 in the context of several rebel advances in Idlib.[192] Moreover, the regime responded to military defeats into the spring of 2015, such as the consolidation of rebel-control in Idlib, with indiscriminate aerial bombardment, barrel bombs and attacks using chemical gasses primarily punishing civilians for the regime's losses.[193]

The regime's increasing reliance on chemical weapons was telling of the importance of unconventional tactics in the regime's success against the opposition.[194] Whilst the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta in August 2013 seemed to be triggered by pressured circumstances, the chemical attacks that came after reflected the fact that chemical attacks had become just another weapon in the regime's arsenal in the struggle for regime survival. The regime began using chemical weapons in the same way as it was already using aerial attacks. The employment of toxic chemicals in strikes served to disrupt local rebel operations, aimed to

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[186] UNSC, 'Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2139 (2014) to Ease Aid Delivery to Syrians, Provide Relief from 'Chilling Darkness', February 22, 2014, https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11292.doc.htm

[187] HRW, 'World Report 2015: Syria - *Events of 2014*,' *Human Rights Watch,* 2015, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/syria

[188] Reuters, 'Syria hands over remaining chemical weapons for destruction,' Reuters, June 23, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-chemicalweapons/syria-hands-over-remaining-chemical-weapons-for-destruction-idUSKBN0EY18T20140623

[189] HRW, 'World Report 2016: Syria - *Events of* 2015,' *Human Rights Watch,* 2016, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/syria

[190] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 8th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria - A/HRC/27/60, *UN OHCHR*, August 13, 2014, p. 19.

[191] International Commission, August 2014, p. 19.

[192] HRW, 'New chemical attacks in Idlib: Security Council should urgently determine responsibility,' June 3, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/03/syria-new-chemical-attacks-idlib ; Cafarella, Jennifer, 'Second Idlib stronghold falls to Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces,' *ISW Research Blog,* April 26, 2015, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2015/04/second-idlib-stronghold-falls-to-jabhat.html

[193] Cafarella, Jennifer, 'The Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel campaign for Idlib province,' *ISW Research Blog,* May 29, 2015, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2015/05/the-jabhat-al-nusra-and-rebel-campaign.html

[194] Ferris, Jared and Theodore Bell with Jennifer Cafarella, 'Alleged chemical weapons use in Syria since August 19, 2014,' *ISW Research Blog,* October 10, 2014, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2014/10/alleged-chemical-weapons-use-in-syria.html

prepare for ground operations whilst saving own forces, and was used as an effective way of dealing with the opposition in areas the regime did not deploy ground troops.[195]

7.2   Assad's strategy of siege and destroy

While the regime had employed sieges in its efforts to defeat the opposition from the early days of the conflict, the consequences of the sieges for the civilian population became particularly visible in this phase. The regime's increasing reliance on sieges and destruction help explain the decreasing civilian casualties seen in this phase of the conflict (see Figure 7.1), given that such efforts first and foremost led to the forced displacement of civilians. That said, decreasing death rates did not mean less suffering for the civilian population; throughout this phase of the conflict the number of people in need increased, from 9.3 million in September 2013 to 13.5 million by September 2015.[196] By February 22nd, 2014, they were thought to affect 200,000 civilians in besieged areas controlled by the government and 45,000 in areas controlled by the opposition.[197]

The International Commission noted the coordinated manner in which the regime's sieges were imposed, and how "[s]oldiers at checkpoints [would] regularly conduct arbitrary arrests, confiscate food and other basic supplies, and prevent sick and wounded persons from seeking medical attention."[198] The government's denial of humanitarian aid deliveries over longer periods led to malnutrition and starvation in the besieged areas. For example, for the civilians trapped within besieged neighborhoods of Homs city, the situation was dire in early 2014. Civilians lacked food, clean water, access to medical care and electricity.[199] By the summer of 2014, Homs became the first key city center to fall victim to the regime's siege and destroy strategy, as the regime successfully (and forcefully) depopulated restive Sunni-majority neighborhoods of Homs.

For more than two years, the regime had used tactics such as siege, starvation, denial of medical care, massacres, rape, deliberate bombing of civilians and civilian infrastructure, sectarian militias as well as psychological warfare in its efforts to depopulate restive Sunni-majority neighborhoods in Homs city.[200] The targeted neighborhoods, all Sunni with the exception of the Christian majority Hamidieh neighborhood, were by June 2014 either totally or partially destroyed. After years of suffering under the regime's siege, the civilian populations of these Homs neighborhoods were forced to leave their homes, with the last residents (forcibly) transported out of the city in May. Following the final transportation, the regime put in place bureaucratic and legal barriers, first and foremost around property ownership, to prevent their

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[195] Ferris and Bell with Cafarella, October 10, 2014.
[196] Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), November 21, 2017, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2018_syr_hno_english_3.pdf
[197] UNSC, 2014.
[198] International Commission, August 2014, p. 20.
[199] TSI with PAX, 2017.
[200] TSI with PAX, 2017.

return.[201] Such efforts added to the physical barriers that already prevented them from returning. In addition, unexploded remnants of war (landmines and cluster munitions) further complicated the return to such areas.[202]

The regime's depopulation strategy through sieges and its efforts to render opposition-held areas unlivable more generally, through destruction of whole neighborhoods and areas, increasingly featured in the regime's broader efforts to defeat the opposition in this period.[203] Due to aerial bombardments and widespread destruction of opposition-held areas, many civilians had no choice but to evacuate to safer regime-held areas. However, the regime complicated the process of resettling here, for example by putting up barriers for renting homes in Damascus.[204] Nevertheless, the regime used the fact that most people had been forced to live in regime held areas as "evidence" of its popularity, arguing that it reflected the Syrian people's support to the regime.[205] Rather, the situation was the result of mass punishment of Syria's civilian population. Through sieges and starvation, forced displacement, and highly systematic and indiscriminate bombing of opposition-held areas the regime gave large parts of the civilian population no choice but to seek refuge in regime-controlled areas.[206]

More generally, the regime was increasingly dependent on Hezbollah and other foreign pro-regime Shia militias in 2014-2015 and relied heavily on its own militarily superior capabilities, such as its air force, its ballistic missile arsenal, and the employment of toxic chemicals in its attacks.[207] During this phase of the conflict the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias were joined, and to some degree replaced, by Afghan and Pakistani militias, as many of the Iraqi fighters remobilized to Iraq following ISIS's capture of Mosul in June 2014.[208] Furthermore, Russian and Iranian support in the form of military equipment and weapons, as well as an increase in Iranian military personnel on the ground in Syria were essential to keeping the regime going.[209] While crucial for the regime's survival, neither the regime's militarily superior capabilities nor the influx in foreign manpower, weapons, and equipment enabled the regime to overcome the

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[201] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 49.

[202] TSI with PAX, 2017, p. 49.

[203] International Commission, August 2014, p. 16.

[204] Szybala, Valerie, 'The Grim Spectacle of Syrian Faux-lections,' *ISW Research Blog*, May 29, 2014, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2014/05/the-grim-spectacle-of-syrian-faux.html

[205] ICG, 'Rigged cars and barrel bombs,' 2014, p. 14; Foreign Affairs, 'Syria's president speaks: a conversation with Bashar al-Assad,' *Foreign Affairs,* March/April 2015 issue, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2015-01-25/syrias-president-speaks

[206] Kozak, '"An army in all corners,"' p. 11.

[207] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 10th Report of Commission of Inquiry on Syria - (A/HRC/30/48), *UN OHCHR*, August 13, 2015, p. 4.

[208] Nadimi, Farzin, 'Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?' *The Washington Institute*, August 22, 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-afghan-and-pakistani-proxies-insyria-and-beyond; Ostovar, Afshon, 'Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* November 30, 2016 http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranianforeign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288

[209] Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016, pp. 4–5; Saul, Jonathan and Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad,' *Reuters*, February 21, 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/iran-boosts-military-support-in-syria-to-bolster-assad-idUSBREA1K09U20140221

opposition.[210] It nevertheless provided the regime with resources needed to continue its crackdown on the armed opposition as well as its systematic attacks on Syria's civilian population.

The regime continued to target unmistakably civilian locations such as schools, markets, and hospitals through aerial collective punishment attacks and its indiscriminate barrel bomb campaign of residential neighborhoods across the country.[211] The Violations Documentation Center (VCD) documented 609 civilian deaths (including 203 children and 117 women) in Daraa from aerial attacks between February 22nd, 2014 and February 18th, 2015, and 2576 civilian deaths in Aleppo governorate (including 636 children and 317 women) during the same period. While Daraa served as a battlefront, large parts of Aleppo were out of the regime-controlled areas. The high civilian casualties in Aleppo reflected how vulnerable civilians in rebel-controlled areas behind the frontlines were to indiscriminate airstrikes. The regime also carried out arbitrary arrests, particularly of fighting-age men, and especially at checkpoints near strategically important cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo, and along communication lines connecting Damascus and Daraa governorates. The arrests limited the freedom of movement of men wishing to leave opposition-controlled areas and those who had to pass checkpoints in accessing work.[212] In areas with heavy clashes or aerial bombardment these men were effectively trapped.

7.3   Regime crackdown through ethnic cleansing?

The targeting of civilians during this phase of the conflict reflected characteristics and elements from different scenarios. First and foremost, and as in previous phases, the regime's violence against civilians could be placed within its broader efforts to defeat the Syrian opposition, much in accordance with the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario. The regime directly targeted civilians and civilian areas and infrastructure as part of its strategy to secure its own survival in Syria and defeat the opposition. Similarly, the use of chemical weapons in the aftermath of the August 2013 attacks reflected the regime's efforts to defeat the opposition. In many ways, the attacks manifested the regime's total disregard for civilian lives and the extent to which the regime was willing to inflict suffering and death on its population for the sake of military gains and to assure its own survival. The chemical attacks in Ghouta, followed by an increasing use of chemical weapons in 2014 and 2015, reflected the gradual escalation of violence in Syria, often seen in REGIME CRACKDOWN situations.[213] Previous strategies and tactics had not led to the defeat of the opposition, and so the use of chemical weapons represented a step up the ladder of escalation.

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[210] Smyth, 2015, p. 1; Kozak, '"An army in all corners,"' 2015.
[211] HRW, 'World Report 2017: Syria - *Events of 2016*,' *Human Rights Watch*, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/world report/2017/country-chapters/syria
[212] International Commission, August 2015, p. 8.
[213] Beadle, 2014, p. 35.

Further, the development of an increasingly radicalized opposition following the chemical weapons attacks provided Assad with an opportunity to (verbally) align his efforts in Syria more closely to the international community in this phase. In REGIME CRACKDOWN situations, perpetrators do their utmost to avoid intervention, such as concealing war crimes and maintaining a convincing narrative.[214] The growing strength of and regional support for more radical opposition groups into the winter of 2013/14, coupled with the increasing success of Jabhat al-Nusra (from January 2012) and ISIS (from April 2013) on the Syrian battlefield, played into Assad's narrative of fighting terrorists and fundamentalists, that Syria was facing a transnational threat.[215] Simultaneously, the regime largely ignored ISIS on the ground. Some even suggested that the regime deliberately allowed rising numbers of jihadi fighters, particularly Western jihadi fighters, hoping it eventually would "motivate Western governments to accept continued Assad rule and renew ties."[216] While the summer of 2014 witnessed a significant increase in the regime's use of airpower against ISIS, the regime continued to direct the majority of its forces and efforts towards the fight against the anti-Assad opposition and the targeting of the civilian population.[217]

The presidential election held in the summer of 2014 also reflected the regime's attempt at maintaining ambiguity to avoid intervention, all while continuing to target its civilian population. Reforms enacted in efforts to appease the uprising in the spring of 2011 had opened up for the creation of opposition parties, meaning that the election held in 2014 would represent the country's first multi-candidate presidential election. However, voting only took place in regime-controlled areas of the country and was supervised by Assad's security services.[218] Instead of actually representing a step towards a more democratic system, the election, together with the regime's framing of the opposition as terrorists, its participation in peace talks, and agreeing to chemical weapons disarmament, gave "Assad the chance to throw the language of democracy and freedom back in the face of the international community and Syrian opposition."[219]

The regime's destruction and depopulation of neighborhoods in Homs city in the summer of 2014 demonstrated the significance of the regime's siege tactic and displacement strategy in Syria. The events in Homs showed the lengths to which the regime was willing to go in its struggle for Syria - from besieging areas in order to seek out the opposition, to the complete destruction of such areas. As previously mentioned, depopulation may serve as a tactic in authoritarian regimes' broader efforts to secure their own survival in REGIME CRACKDOWN situations. The regime's siege and ultimate destruction of restive neighborhoods in Homs, a strategically important city for the control of the country more generally, clearly served the regime's broader aims to disrupt rebel operations. At the same time, the regime's displacement

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[214] Beadle, 2014, p. 37.
[215] Kozak, "'An army in all corners,'" 2015:10, for examples of this radicalization see for example Dark, Edward, 'Syrian FSA fades in shadow of Saudi-backed opposition front,' *Al-Monitor*, December 11, 2013.
[216] ICG, 'Rigged cars and barrel bombs,' 2014, p. 13.
[217] ICG, 'Rigged cars and barrel bombs,' 2014.
[218] Szybala, May 29, 2014.
[219] Szybala, May 29, 2014.

strategy, which became particularly prominent in this phase of the conflict as reflected in government-imposed sieges as well as barriers to returns and resettlements, also resembled characteristics of the ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario.

The complete destruction of Sunni neighborhoods and the forcible displacement of these neighborhoods' residents are reminiscent of the expulsion of particular groups found in ETHNIC CLEANSING situations. The regime deliberately imposed conditions on and deteriorated the living conditions in these neighborhoods in such a way that it no longer was possible to live there. Its actions reflected more than just a strategy to defeat the opposition; it reflected efforts designed to coerce certain parts of the cities/areas' population to leave.[220] In fact, TSI suggests that the destruction of Homs' Sunni neighborhoods should be seen as part of the regime's demographic engineering, that its activities reflected a clear intention to expel a certain group and establish a "pure" territory, much in accordance with the ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario.[221] As seen in the previous phase, while the events in Homs might be understood as serving the regime's overarching strategy to defeat the opposition in accordance with the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario, at the tactical level it represented a situation close to others captured within the ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario.

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[220] Beadle, 2014, p. 30.
[221] TSI with PAX, 2017.

8 Fifth phase – Intensified aerial bombardment and surrender or die (September 2015–December 2017)

The Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015 secured the regime's survival and allowed it to continue to indiscriminately target the Syrian civilian population. Over long periods in this phase, civilians across the country were subjected to Russian airstrikes almost daily. Furthermore, the battle for Aleppo, commencing in July 2016, represented an important moment in the conflict. It exemplified the regime's intensification of its siege strategy from "surrender or starve" to "surrender or die." As has become increasingly evident throughout previous phases, while the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario serves as the best starting point for understanding the Assad regime's motivation for attacking civilians in the Syrian conflict, this phase included, other scenarios operated interchangeably, such as PREDATORY VIOLENCE, ETHNIC CLEANSING, and also instances reminiscent of acts of GENOCIDE.
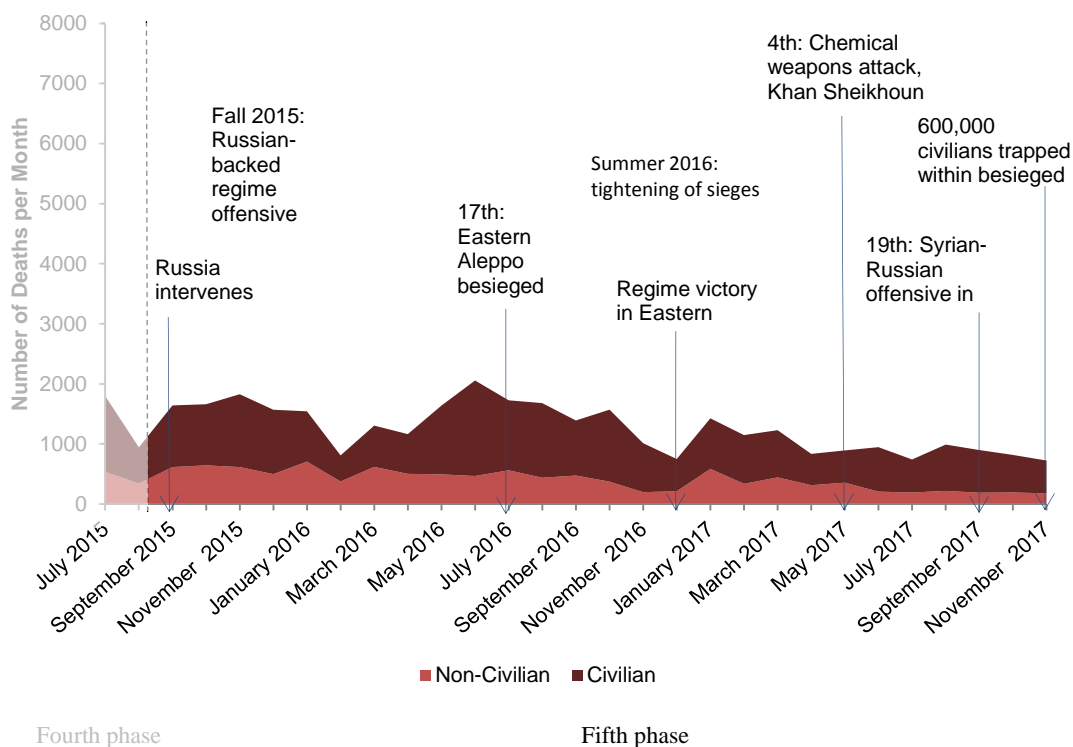

Figure 8.1   Timeline: casualties (VDC data) with key events.

8.1   The Russian aerial campaign

In the spring of 2015, the regime experienced a number of setbacks. Assad was suffering on the battlefield due to his manpower shortage and lost his second provincial capital, Idlib, to the rebels in late April. The regime was pressured in the northwest, as regime forces in Idlib were being pushed by armed rebels towards the coastal province of Latakia, as well as in the south, as the rebel coalition 'Southern Front' embarked on a number of offensives.[222] On a couple of occasions in the summer Assad even acknowledged some of the challenges the regime was facing.[223] Russia's direct intervention in the conflict in the fall of 2015 should be seen in connection with these developments.

On September 30th, at the request of President Assad, Russia launched its first airstrikes in Syria.[224] Russia claimed it intervened to support the regime in its fight against ISIS in Syria, however, Russian assistance in offensives against rebel positions suggested Russia's ambition to bolster the regime's position vis-à-vis the Syrian opposition.[225] Russia's support boosted the regime's military capabilities, and in early November, the Syrian regime was successful in reestablishing an important ground line of communication east of Aleppo city, the Kuweires Airbase, and made important gains south of the city.[226] Less than a month into Russia's air campaign, local sources reported Russian airstrikes in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Homs and Damascus.

Russian aerial bombardment in the final months of 2015 illustrated Russia's willingness to inflict civilian suffering in support of the Syrian regime. Between September 30th and October 26th, at least 254 civilians were reported killed by Russian airstrikes.[227] On October 12th, at least two air strikes, killing a total of 59 civilians, were reported by local residents in northern Homs.[228] The attacks were believed to be Russian due to the sound of the planes and because the Russians tended to fly at higher altitudes than the Syrian Air Force.[229] Activists claimed they were given no warnings or announcements of the air strikes carried out by Russia in Homs, only

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[222] Phillips, 2016, p. 217.

[223] Samaan, Maher and Anne Barnard, 'Assad, in rare admission, says Syria's army lacks manpower,' *New York Times,* July 26, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/middleeast/assad-in-rare-admission-says-syrias-army-lacks-manpower.html; 'Assad admits "setbacks" in war against Syrian rebels,' *Al Jazeera*, May 6, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/150506185408811.html

[224] ISW, 'Russian deployment to Syria: Putin's Middle East game changer,' *Institute for the Study of War*, Warning Intelligence Update, September 17, 2015, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Deployment%20to%20Syria%2017%20September%202015%20%281%29.pdf p. 1.

[225] Kozak, Christopher, 'Syrian regime launches ground offensive with Russian air support,' *ISW Research Blog*, October 7, 2015, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2015/10/syrian-regime-starts-ground-offensive.html

[226] Kozak, Christopher, 'Pro-regime forces relieve besieged airbase in symbolic victory,' *Institute for the Study of War*, November 10, 2015, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/pro-regime-forces-relieve-besieged-airbase-symbolic-victory

[227] SNHR, 'Russian airstrikes kills 254 civilians including 83 children and 42 women,' *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, November 2, 2015, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Russian_aviation_caused_the_deaths_of_254_people_en.pdf

[228] HRW, 'Russia/Syria: possibly unlawful Russian air strikes: entire extended family killed in Homs,' October 25, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/25/russia/syria-possibly-unlawful-russian-air-strikes

[229] HRW, 'Russia/Syria: possibly unlawful Russian air strikes,' 2015.

regime forces calling for the FSA to surrender. On October 23rd, Russian airstrikes struck several hospitals in Al Latamneh, a town in northern Hama, resulting in the deaths of at least 151 civilians.[230] Furthermore, on December 20th, Russian airstrikes struck residential neighborhoods in Idlib city, resulting in at least 200 killed or wounded.[231] On the same day Russian warplanes also struck a food distribution center and a relief organization in eastern Ghouta, Damascus. The abovementioned attacks seemed to intentionally target civilian areas and infrastructure as a tactic in the regime's broader strategy in the conflict.[232]

Although Russia's entry into the conflict did not lead to a significant increase in the documented number of civilian casualties (see Figure 8.1), the period represented an intensification of the regime and its allies' violence against civilians even so, considering the tactics pursued and weapons employed. The Russian intervention led to a notable escalation in the use of cluster munitions in Syria, of which 99% of the recorded attacks targeted civilian populated areas.[233] SNHR witnessed a significant rise in the use of several types of cluster munitions not used much during earlier phases of the conflict and documented 212 cluster munitions attacks by forces believed to be Russian in the period from September 2015 through September 2017. 207 of these attacks hit opposition-held areas, 5 struck areas under control of ISIS. [234] Further, Syrian and Russian attacks using incendiary ammunition in populated areas behind the frontlines, attacks on civilian facilities, and the targeting of medical and civil defense personnel could increasingly be seen from the summer of 2016.[235]

Furthermore, while the regime's use of barrel bombs has been continuous since the first documented use in the summer of 2012, the use saw an increase in 2015. It reached an all-time high at the end of the year, with 17318 barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian regime in total in 2015.[236] Like cluster munitions, civilians make up 99% of the victims killed by barrel bombs.[237] The intensification in the targeting of civilians following the Russian intervention was also reflected in numbers of people fleeing and people displaced from their homes. This was

[230] Casagrande, Genevieve, 'Russian airstrikes in Syria: September 30-October 24, 2015,' *ISW Research Blog,* October 25, 2015, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2015/10/russian-airstrikes-in-syria-september_23.html

[231] Kozak, Christopher, Jodi Brignola, Genevieve Casagrande and Jared Ferris, 'Russian airstrikes in Syria: December 13-21, 2015,' *ISW Research Blog,* December 22, 2015, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2015/12/russian-airstrikes-in-syria-december-13.html

[232] Kozak et al., December 22, 2015.

[233] SNHR, 'The Second Anniversary of the Russian Intervention in Syria,' *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, October 1, 2017, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_second_anniversary_of_Russian_intervention_in_Syria_2017_en.pdf; HRW, 'Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions,' *Human Rights Watch*, December 20, 2015, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/20/russia/syria-extensive-recent-use-cluster-munitions

[234] SNHR, October 2017, pp. 4–5.

[235] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2017.

[236] SNHR, 'The Syrian regime has dropped nearly 70,000 barrel bombs on Syria,' *Syrian Network for Human* Rights, December 25, 2017, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_Syrian_Regime_Has_Dropped_Nearly_70,000_Barrel_Bombs_en.pdf However, there has been a decrease in the use of barrel bombs since, with 12985 in 2016 and 6243 in 2017. SNHR, 'The Syrian regime dropped no less than 6,243 barrel bombs on Syrian 2017,' *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, January 7, 2018, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/No_less_than_312_barrel_bombs_were_dropped_by_Syrian_regime_warplanes_in_December_2017_en.pdf

[237] SNHR, December 25, 2017, p. 2.

especially the case following the Syrian regime's offensive that commenced in the fall of 2015, backed by Russian air power in Homs, Hama and Aleppo provinces.[238] The UN could report that in October 2015 alone at least 120,000 had been uprooted from their homes in Aleppo, Idlib and Hama.[239] Moreover, the number of people in need remained high, higher than in previous phases.[240]

That said, on February 11th, 2016, Russia together with the US reached an agreement involving a cessation of hostilities in Syria (as well as the delivery of aid to Aleppo). The cessation of hostilities, which excluded ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as al-Nusra), would represent the first formally declared pause to the fighting since the beginning of the conflict. It was set to begin on February 27th.[241] While the agreement initially led to a decline in armed violence in large parts of the country it did not last for long.[242] In late March fighting resumed and so did the indiscriminate attacks against civilian areas and infrastructure.[243] The cessation of hostilities eventually collapsed on April 28th, and was followed by heavy aerial bombardment of Aleppo over the next week, killing at least 226 civilians.[244] Attempts at reviving the ceasefire by US and Russian officials resulted in a new partial truce extended into Aleppo on May 5th but that too soon broke down.

8.2   From "surrender or starve" to "surrender or die"

The escalation in violence against civilians during this phase was also reflected in the regime's siege strategy. In the second half of 2016, the Syrian regime intensified its siege strategy, as it tightened its sieges and increased its attacks on civilian areas and infrastructure in Daraya, Madaya and Zabadani in Damascus Countryside, the al-Waer neighborhood in Homs, and in eastern Aleppo beginning in the summer of 2016.[245] TSI and PAX described this intensification as a shift in the regime's strategy from "surrender or starve" to "surrender or die," where the regime would alternate "intense attacks with periods of negotiation" in attempts to crush the opposition.[246] Through coercion and an escalation in the use of military force the regime sought

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[238] Fahim, Kareem and Maher Samaan, 'Violence in Syria spurs a huge surge in civilian flight,' *New York Times*, October 26, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/27/world/middleeast/syria-russian-air-strike-refugees.html
[239] OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: Developments in Northern Governorates – Situation Report No. 1'*United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, October 24, 2015, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/syria_northern_governorates_situation_report_final.pdf
[240] UNOCHA, 2017, p. 20.
[241] Syrian Accountability Project (SAP), 'Covered in dust, veiled by shadow: the siege and destruction of Aleppo,' *Newhouse Center for Global Engagement Syracuse University*, April 27, 2017, http://syrianaccountabilityproject.org/, p. 15.
[242] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/33/*55 UN OHCHR*, September 6, 2016
[243] International Commission, September 2016, p. 1.
[244] SAP, 2017, pp. 15–16.
[245] Amnesty International, ''We live or we die' Forced displacement under Syria's 'Reconciliation' agreements,' *Amnesty International*, November 13, 2017, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/MDE2473092017ENGLISH.pdf p. 16.
[246] The Syria Institute (TSI) and PAX, 'Siege Watch Fourth Quarterly Report, August-October 2016,' *PAX*, December 12, 2016, https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-TSI-Syria-SiegeWatch-report-4.pdf

to force the submission of rebels within the besieged areas and ultimately displace them.[247] The siege of and battle for eastern Aleppo is illustrative of the regime's broader "surrender or die" strategy while also representing a significant event in the conflict.

After months of air raids and attacks against eastern Aleppo, the regime and its allies were able to impose a siege on the rebel-held part of the city following the closing of the rebel's final supply line into the city, Castello Road, on July 17th. While rebel groups managed to break the siege in August, pro-regime forces retook the supply line the rebels had opened in early September, re-establishing the siege. [248] The regime then embarked on an air campaign, starting on September 22nd, leading to a significant increase in civilian casualties in eastern Aleppo. An estimated 300 people were killed in the first four days alone.[249] Moreover, in the period from mid-July to mid-December, Syrian and Russian air forces carried out intense and nearly constant attacks on eastern Aleppo, using unguided air-delivered munitions. In addition to employing aerial bombs, and air-to-surface rockets, there were confirmed uses of cluster munitions, landmines, incendiary bombs and improvised air-delivered munitions (barrel bombs), as well as weapons delivering toxic chemicals.[250] Airstrikes would often be coupled with the activities of ground forces, where national and foreign paramilitary forces and militias played prominent roles.[251]

The attacks were primarily indiscriminate in nature and systematically targeted civilian institutions and areas, deteriorating the humanitarian conditions within eastern Aleppo. Medical centers, markets, water stations, and schools inside the besieged area were frequently struck; some completely razed to the ground.[252] A consequence of the nearly constant bombardments of civilian targets and areas was that civilians in need of medical assistance avoided hospitals, among them pregnant women giving birth at home instead. Women and children were disproportionately affected by the targeting of residential buildings, as they "typically spent more time at home."[253] Although the regime opened designated safe exits along the frontline and encouraged inhabitants as well as the armed opposition to leave the city, many chose to stay. The fear of being detained at checkpoints and the uncertainty of whether they would be safe when in regime-held territory seemed to outweigh the fear and risks that involved staying put.[254]

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[247] TSI and PAX, Fourth Quarterly Report, 2016.

[248] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Special inquiry into the events in Aleppo" - A/HRC/34/64, *UN OHCHR,* March 1, 2017, p. 7.

[249] International Commission, March, 2017, p. 8.

[250] International Commission, March 2017, p. 5; HRW, 'Death by chemicals: the Syrian government's widespread and systematic use of chemical weapons,' *Human Rights Watch*, May 1, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/01/death-chemicals/syrian-governments-widespread-and-systematic-use-chemical-weapons p. 1.

[251] International Commission, March 2017:7 Including IRGC's Quds force, Hezbollah, and Iranian-backed militias.

[252] International Commission, March 2017, p. 7; TSI and PAX, 'Siege Watch First Quarterly Report, November 2015 – January 2016,' February 10, 2016, https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-RAPPORT-SIEGE-WATCH-FINAL-SINGLE-PAGES-DEF.pdf

[253] International Commission, March, 2017, p. 7.

[254] Lund, Aron, 'The slow, violent fall of Eastern Aleppo,' *The Century Foundation,* October 7, 2016.

Further, the regime carried out attacks on aid convoys and prevented the delivery of aid, such as food, fuel and medications, to besieged parts of the city. On one occasion the Syrian Air Force struck an aid convoy in Aleppo countryside, resulting in the death of at least 12 aid workers and the destruction of aid supplies.[255] The denial of aid was also seen in other besieged parts of the country. The government complicated aid agencies' access to besieged areas, setting up a bureaucratic approval system where agencies had to obtain permits to access besieged areas. In instances where aid was allowed into areas, the regime often removed vital aid supplies from the convoys, such as "diarrhea kits, emergency health kits, antibiotics, and other medicines."[256] These were active efforts by the regime and its allies to target the civilian populations within the besieged areas.

By December 2016, residents of eastern Aleppo were lacking in food, water, heating, and medical assistance, living in an ever-shrinking territory constantly bombarded by Syrian and Russian air forces.[257] The Syrian regime's campaign, in part directed by Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps leading the Iranian-backed Shia militias on the ground, and supported by the Russian Air Force, eventually led to the fall of rebel-held eastern Aleppo in mid-December.[258] Systematic looting of property and the systematic arrests of civilians by government forces marked the aftermath of the siege.[259] In fact, the situation reached such critical heights that the head of security in Aleppo issued a statement in which a pro-regime militia was ordered out of the city on accounts of "acts of theft, plunder, stealing and attacks on public property, the freedoms of citizens and their private property."[260] These activities greatly complicated the resettling of residents in the city, not to mention reflected a broader trend of predation seen in previous phases of the conflict.[261]

The regime and its allies' intensification of violence and the dire conditions within besieged areas during this phase also resulted in several other forced surrenders and local agreements signed in cities and areas such as Daraya, al-Waer neighborhood of Homs and in Madaya, Zabadani, Kefraya and Foua.[262] Surrender usually occurred after years of suffering under siege, such as in Daraya where the population had been under government siege since November 2012.[263] Still, as of mid-November 2017 as many as 600,000 civilians remained trapped within besieged areas across the country, with 400,000 within the besieged enclave of eastern Ghouta where conditions at the beginning of 2018 were dire.[264] Despite being located in one of four de-

[255] International Commission, March 2017, p. 1.
[256] HRW, 'World Report: Syria,' 2017.
[257] International Commission, March 2017, p. 12; HRW, 'Syria: Urgent Need for Aleppo Aid Access,' *Human Rights Watch*, December 12, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/12/syria-urgent-need-aleppo-aid-access
[258] Naylor, Hugh, 'In Syria's Aleppo, Shiite militias point to Iran's unparalleled influence,' *Washington Post*, November 20, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syrias-aleppo-shiite-militias-point-to-irans-unparalleled-influence/2016/11/20/2f1a47c2-92cd-11e6-bc00-1a9756d4111b_story.html?utm_term=.ad2cf368928b
[259] Lund, Aron, 'Eastern Aleppo under al-Assad,' *IRIN,* April 12, 2017, http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/04/12/eastern-aleppo-under-al-assad
[260] Lieutenant-General Zaid Ali Saleh quoted in Lund, April 12, 2017.
[261] MEMO, 'Reports: Assad's thugs are pillaging Aleppo,' *Middle East Monitor*, May 4, 2017, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170504-reports-assads-thugs-are-pillaging-aleppo/
[262] Amnesty International, ''We live or we die,' 2017.
[263] TSI and PAX, Fourth Quarterly Report, 2016, p. 26.
[264] International Commission, September 2017, p. 5.

escalations zones established in primarily opposition-held parts of the country over the summer and fall of 2017, the regime and its allies carried out attacks on the rebel enclave in eastern Ghouta, where civilians faced malnutrition, famine and lack of medicine and medical care.[265]

Furthermore, while a noticeable drop in the casualty rate was seen in areas where de-escalation zones were established, breaches of the ceasefire agreements also occurred in other areas. On September 19th, 2017, the Syrian-Russian alliance embarked on a major offensive in Idlib, in an area where a de-escalation zone had been established during the Astana talks in mid-September.[266] While claiming the attacks were in response to a rebel-offensive, HRW found evidence that some of the attacks struck populated residential areas and markets. In addition, the weapons used in the attacks, cluster munitions and wide-range explosive weapons, indicated the Syrian-Russian alliance's disregard for civilian lives and their continued targeting of civilians and civilian areas.[267]

Moreover, the Syrian government continued using chemical weapons against regime-held areas also in this phase of the conflict.[268] On April 4th 2017, regime forces carried out airstrikes using sarin on Khan Sheikhoun in southern Idlib. The attack proved to be the deadliest chemical weapons attack since August 2013, killing at least 90 civilians and wounding another 300.[269] The town had been fought over since the start of the conflict as it was strategically located along the M5 highway connecting the regime-controlled cities of Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo.[270] The chemical attack was followed by pro-regime attacks (believed to be Russian) that struck a field hospital where victims of the chemical attack were being treated.[271] The regime was also reported using weaponized chlorine in other parts of Idlib, as well as in Hama and eastern Ghouta, Damascus, during this phase of the conflict.[272] While several of these attacks targeted armed groups on the frontlines, some struck residential areas behind, with no military targets in near vicinity and where civilians were the ones injured and killed. The attacks behind the frontlines arguably pointed towards the deliberate and direct targeting of the civilian population living in these areas.[273]

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[265] Miles, Tom, 'Syria's Eastern Ghouta faces 'complete catastrophe': U.N.,' *Reuters*, November 9, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-egeland/syrias-eastern-ghouta-faces-complete-catastrophe-u-n-idUSKBN1D91P2?il=0; SNHR, '923 civilians killed in October 2017,' *Syrian Network for Human Rights,* November 1, 2017, p. 1, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/923_Civilians_Killed_in_October_2017_en.pdf
[266] SNHR, November 1, 2017, pp. 3–4.
[267] HRW, 'Russia/Syria: Deadly airstrikes on trapped civilians,' Human Rights Watch, October 31, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/31/russia/syria-deadly-airstrikes-trapped-civilians
[268] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/36/55, *UN OHCHR*, September 6, 2017
[269] HRW, 'Death by chemicals,'2017; ISW and Syria Direct, 'Syria situation report: March 30 – April 14, 2017,' *ISW Research Blog,* April 14, 2017, http://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2017/04/syria-situation-report-march-30-april.html
[270] International Commission, September, 2017, p. 22.
[271] ISW, April 14, 2017; Casagrande, Genevieve and Ellen Stockert, 'Russia's unrelenting attacks on Syrian civilians,' *ISW Research Blog,* April 29, 2017, https://iswresearch.blogspot.no/2017/04/russias-unrelenting-attacks-on-syrian.html
[272] International Commission, September 2017:1; HRW, 'Death by chemicals,' 2017.
[273] HRW, 'Death by chemicals,' 2017; Casagrande and Stockert, April 29, 2017; International Commission, September, 2017, p. 1.

8.3   Successful crackdown with external support

Despite internationally brokered ceasefires, which contributed to decreasing numbers of civilian casualties in certain periods during this phase, the Russian intervention was followed by an intensification of unlawful attacks against civilians and civilian facilities. The motivations behind Syrian and Russian airstrikes against opposition-held areas across the country in this period seemed to be to secure the regime's survival and position vis-à-vis the opposition in Syria. The indiscriminate manner in which the attacks were carried out and the lack of precision targeting suggest the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure. As in previous phases of the conflict, this served as part of the regime's strategy to defeat the armed opposition.[274]

The aerial campaigns led to devastatingly high numbers of civilian casualties and contributed to a sense of constant fear for the lives of those living in opposition-held areas of the country.[275] As expected in a case of REGIME CRACKDOWN, the Syrian regime's violence in areas out of its control sought to disrupt rebel operations and governance as well as induce insecurity into these areas. Civilians were being punished simply for living in opposition-held areas. The regime's continued use of chemical weapons, especially the chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun, further shows how the regime's overarching motivation in the conflict was to regain control of the country within a REGIME CRACKDOWN context.

In its September 2017 report, the International Commission noted how sieges have "affected civilians more tragically than any other tactic employed by warring parties in the conflict."[276] In the case of eastern Aleppo, eastern Ghouta and elsewhere, repeated bombardments of civilian areas and infrastructure, the lack of warnings and the absence of military objectives in the surrounding areas of the attacks suggested the deliberate and systematic targeting of civilians and vital civilian infrastructure within besieged areas.[277] In many ways, the regime's shift from a "surrender or starve" to a "surrender or die" approach can be understood through the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario. The escalation of violence and the worsening of conditions can be seen as a direct result of the regime's failure to bring about the surrender of armed opposition groups, often seen in regime crackdown situations.

In tightening its "surrender or starve" approach in besieged areas during this phase, the regime used military force to "destroy opposition strongholds to deny rebels any sanctuary or potential support from the local population."[278] Through intense and unrelenting attacks and the tightening of conditions within the besieged areas, the regime made life unbearable inside the enclaves. The denial of humanitarian aid and the daily airstrikes, which failed to distinguish between civilian and military targets, arguably aimed to put pressure on the armed opposition within the areas, ultimately forcing their surrender or evacuation. Until the opposition gave in to

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[274] Weapons used have been cluster munitions, wide-range explosives, barrel bombs and incendiary weapons.
[275] International Commission, September, 2016, p. 6.
[276] International Commission, September, 2017, p. 5.
[277] International Commission, March 2017.
[278] Beadle, 2014, p. 36.

the pressure, the attacks served to lead some civilians to leave the besieged areas to escape the violence and some perhaps also to turn against the opposition.[279]

Simultaneously, the ruthless violence inflicted on civilians living within the besieged areas made many draw links to acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing.[280] Both during and in the aftermath of the battle for Aleppo, the regime's treatment of civilians within the enclave was likened to former acts of genocide, such as Srebrenica in 1995.[281] The regime's constant bombardment of civilian populated areas and civilian infrastructure, such as homes, hospitals, schools, markets and places of worship, coupled with the denial of aid deliveries, made life in besieged areas insufferable. The tightening of government sieges and the escalation of violence against besieged areas in this period reflected clear efforts on the part of the regime to forcibly clear the areas of its residents, as seen in the ETHNIC CLEANSING scenario. Furthermore, the shift towards more destructive efforts, as seen so clearly in the battle for Aleppo, was also suggestive of Assad's willingness to destroy, not just displace. However, Aleppo was not Srebrenica.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the events in eastern Aleppo and Srebrenica concerned the intent of the actions, whether the violence was aimed at destroying the existence of a specific group of people or violently expelling them from a specific area while accepting the deadly costs of such a strategy. The regime's actions in Aleppo seemed to be closer to the latter. Rather than aiming to exterminate the people of Aleppo, the regime and its allies sought to forcibly displace them in a highly coordinated and intentional manner. While the regime's overarching aim was to secure its own survival in accordance with the REGIME CRACKDOWN scenario, the regime's actions in Aleppo as well as in a number of other besieged areas should be understood as specific cases of ETHNIC CLEANSING serving the overarching aim.

At last, the continued looting in the aftermath of military operations reflected the PREDATORY VIOLENCE scenario. What became particularly apparent in the aftermath of the battle for Aleppo, where looting got so out of control that pro-regime militias were ordered out of town, was how the regime was unable to control the actions of those fighting alongside it on the ground.[282] Despite the fact that the regime's own forces partook in plundering as a way to further complicate the return of civilians to areas formerly controlled by the opposition, some of the pillaging by forces fighting on the side of the regime was out of the regime's control and thus not part of any particular regime strategy or tactic.

[279] Lund, October 7, 2016.

[280] Narayan, Chandra, 'Aleppo joins the events that define modern evil, UN envoy said,' *CNN*, December 15, 2016, http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/15/world/samantha-power-aleppo-srebrenica/index.html; See also Agee, Jacob, Jason Giannakis and Timo Leimeister, 'How to Define Violence in Aleppo?' *Pax et Bellum,* March 23, 2017, http://www.paxetbellum.org/2017/03/23/how-to-define-violence-in-aleppo/

[281] Avdić, Nedžad, 'Aleppo's people are being slaughtered. Did we learn nothing from Srebrenica?' *The Guardian*, December 13, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/13/aleppo-people-slaughtered-srebrenica-genocides-atrocities-syria; Noack, Rick, 'Two decades before Aleppo, there was Srebrenica. "Never again," the world promised,' *Washington Times*, December 14, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/12/14/europes-aleppo-continues-to-haunt-the-continent/?utm_term=.3d42f567d7f6

[282] Lund, April 12, 2017.

9 The potential utility of force to protect in Syria

This report has explored the violence carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies against civilians in the period from the Syrian uprising in March 2011 until the end of 2017. The report has found that the regime's escalation in violence throughout the conflict to a large degree has been driven by military necessity. The regime escalated its violence at times it felt particularly threatened. Escalation occurred in response to the growing and increasingly capable opposition, defections from its own military ranks and a lack of ground forces, or due to failures in its own strategies and tactics aimed to defeat the opposition. The regime's heavy weaponry stock, coupled with the absence of repercussions from the international community, and strong external support, allowed the regime to continue to target civilians and to escalate the violence.

The report finds that whilst the regime's overarching rationale for targeting civilians throughout the conflict has been to secure its own survival and defeat the opposition, the regime's violence has come to involve increasingly overlapping motivations and tactics for targeting civilians. This has led to a diversification of the threats civilians have been faced with. As the conflict dragged on, these other motivations and methods, such as the expulsion of certain groups from certain areas and predatory behavior for profit, increasingly featured alongside the overarching rationale at the tactical level. Although the Syrian conflict has not triggered outside intervention to protect civilians, the analysis underlines the value of understanding variations and nuances of what happens on the ground for those set to protect in similar situations in the future.

Through the analysis of the Syrian case, the report shows how different threats to civilians can feature in the same conflict and how perpetrators' motivations for targeting civilians may multiply and overlap as conflicts drag on. It also portrays how military necessity can be a driver for the escalation of violence against civilians in armed conflicts. These are important insights. They demonstrate the importance as well as the difficulty of identifying the specific nature of threats civilians may be faced with, particularly the motive behind the targeting. They also demonstrate that the threat to civilians will significantly increase when a perpetrator seeking to survive fails in his/her initial chosen strategy of violence.

Despite the Syrian regime and its allies' deliberate and indiscriminate targeting of civilians throughout the conflict, there has been no military intervention aimed at protecting civilians in Syria. Nevertheless, the above analysis of the Syrian regime's violence against civilians provides a basis from which to reflect upon the potential utility of force to protect civilians in the conflict. Furthermore, the mapping of the regime's violence against civilians in Syria can help inform potential future efforts to protect against similar types of threats. Given the scope of the report – focusing solely on the regime and its allies' violence – the forthcoming paragraphs should simply be considered a starting point for further and more in-depth reflection on what could have been done to protect civilians in Syria.

First, the regime's escalation in violence against civilians as a result of military necessity, that the regime did what it had to do in order to survive, seems relevant when reflecting on the potential utility of force to protect civilians. The longer the conflict went on the more destructive the regime's violence became. Based on what we already know about historic cases of regimes' motivation to use violence against its own civilian population to survive, this aspect could have been expected, although precise predictions about future behavior are challenging at best. Still, this observation suggests that an early intervention in Syria would have been beneficial from a protection perspective; many civilian lives could most probably have been spared, if the intervening force was able to influence the regime's will and ability to attack civilians. However, a military intervention in Syria would at any time have been highly controversial, and could potentially have run the risk of triggering more aggression from the Assad regime, especially as the targeting of civilians became increasingly integral to the regime's broader strategy of survival. We also know that external military interventions seeking to topple or influence a regime bring with them the risk of collateral damage, possibly increasing the level of threat to civilians. That said, an intervention early on in the conflict would have provided better options for the intervening force to find utility of force to protect.

Second, the regime's rationale for targeting civilians in the conflict evolved from a typical case of regime crackdown, in which violence was used to regain control of an unruly population, to involving increasingly overlapping motivations and methods for attacking civilians. As the threats against civilians diversified, the nature of the threats, particularly the motives behind the targeting, became increasingly blurry. For example, the regime's forced displacement seemed both aimed at exposing rebel forces and physically clearing certain areas of certain populations. Moreover, for a potential intervening force, the existence of plural threats, some more pressing than others, might have required the prioritization between threats, ultimately accepting that some types of violence against civilians must be left unchecked, potentially undermining the overall efforts. For example, predatory violence typically occurs alongside other forms of violence, as most armed conflicts provide numerous opportunities to exploit the population for profit. Although less of an immediate threat to civilians than indiscriminate shelling, aerial attacks and forced displacement, failing to address this type of violence also carries potential to delegitimize an external intervention. Again, this points to the need to respond in time, before escalation into a more diverse set of threats to civilians, which dramatically increases the complexity of the task.

The absence of intervention partly facilitated the regime' opportunity to continue its escalation of violence against civilians. The regime first escalated its violence to use heavy weapons, followed by airpower, then chemical weapons, in the face of an increasingly capable armed opposition. The escalation made up for the regime's lack of ground forces and for failures to pacify the opposition through less indiscriminate means. Eliminating the regime's heavy weapons in the early phases of the conflict, as well as imposing a no-fly-zone as the regime began employing helicopters and jets in the spring and summer of 2012, would have greatly reduced the regime's ability to fight the growing and increasingly capable opposition as well as target the civilian population. However, a no-fly-zone might also have led to a more rapid escalation in regime violence, perhaps through the use of chemical weapons at an earlier stage

or a greater reliance on foreign proxy forces.[283] Increasing reliance on foreign proxies could potentially have amplified the predatory behavior seen in the conflict as well as strengthened the sectarian dynamic, fueling inter-communal tensions. Furthermore, the lack of repercussions in the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack in August 2013 arguably opened up for the regime's continued use of increasingly deadly and indiscriminate weapons, without having to fear external intervention, a necessary criteria to succeed with a regime crackdown.

Finally, the analysis of the regime and its allies' violence against civilians somewhat paradoxically shows how the regime turned to increasingly destructive tactics and weapons at the same time as the civilian death toll decreased.
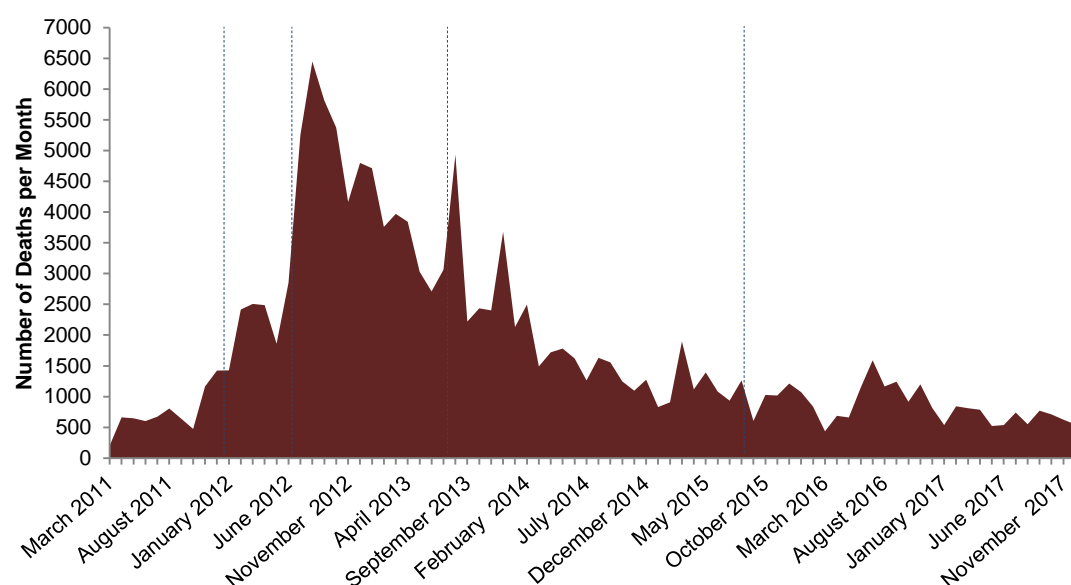
Figure 9.1   Civilian casualties in the Syrian conflict. (Source: VDC).

While the death toll peaked and began to decline in the fall of 2012 (see Figure 9.1), the report found that the regime continued to escalate its violence against civilians, an observation seemingly in line with the increasing number of people in need in Syria as the conflict evolved.[284] This development may in part be explained by the regime's increasing reliance on its "siege and destroy" and displacement tactics. These are tactics that tend to lead to deterioration in living conditions and the expulsion of civilians in great numbers but not necessarily increasing civilian casualties. Regardless of the reason behind such a development, the very observation itself is noteworthy; a decreasing death rate is not by itself necessarily an adequate indication of the intensity of the violence against civilians. The Syrian case shows that knowledge of what happens on the ground is crucial for understanding the character and intensity of the threats civilians are faced with at different times and in different areas of a

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[283] Comments on an earlier draft from Petter H.F. Lindqvist.
[284] The Strategic Steering Group with humanitarian partners, 'Syrian Arab Republic,' *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018,* https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2018_syr_hno_english.pdf

conflict. For a potential intervening force, the rapidly increasing civilian death rates in the first few years of the conflict also suggests the need for an early intervention, if saving lives was the main priority, despite the risks such an intervention involves.

The Assad regime's crackdown on the Syrian opposition throughout the conflict has come to have a devastating impact on Syria's civilian population. Moving in to its eighth year, the Syrian regime continues to target civilians. Since the end of 2017, the regime, backed by Iran and Russia, has stepped up its violence against the last major opposition-held areas of the country, with Idlib governorate and the besieged enclave of eastern Ghouta bearing the brunt of the violence. More than 400 civilians have been killed by government strikes in eastern Ghouta in the first one and a half months of 2018, an estimated 300,000 people have fled fighting since mid-December, and a UN investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in attacks against Douma, in eastern Ghouta, and Saraqib, in Idlib governorate, is ongoing. [285] Based on historic cases of regime crackdowns, the regime could be expected to continue targeting civilians until the last of the opposition is defeated, to ensure its own survival. However, opposition against the regime and efforts to unseat the president will likely continue in years to come. Furthermore, alongside the regime's war against the Syrian opposition a number of other local, regional, international and transnational actors, dynamics and disputes persist in Syria. While Assad increasingly seems to have "won his war to stay in power," the question of how much longer the conflict in Syria will go on for and how much more violence Syrians will have to endure remains. [286]

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[285] International Commission, 'UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria Condemns Upsurge in Violence in the Idlib Governorate and eastern Ghouta: Syrian Arab Republic,' *UN OHCHR*, February 6, 2018, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=22636&LangID=E; 'Civilian death toll rising in Syria's Eastern Ghouta,' *Al Jazeera*, February 19, 2018, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/civilian-death-toll-rising-syrias-eastern-ghouta-180219141444322.html; Barnard, Anne and Hwaida Saad, 'It's hard to believe, but Syria's war is getting even worse,' *The New York Times*, February 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/world/middleeast/syria-war-idlib.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FSyria
[286] Barnard and Saad, 2018; Karlin, Mara, 'After 7 years of war, Assad has won in Syria. What's next for Washington?' *Brookings*, February 13, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/13/after-7-years-of-war-assad-has-won-in-syria-whats-next-for-washington/

Abbreviations

FFI	The Norwegian Defence Research Establishment
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
NDF	National Defence Forces
OHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights
POC	Protection of civilians
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
TSI	The Syria Institute
UN	United Nations
VDC	Violations Documentation Center

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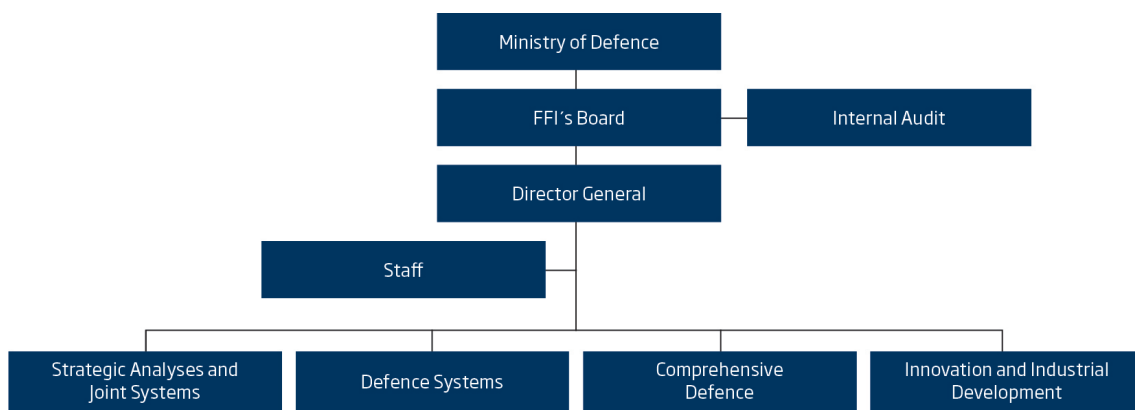
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