CAPITALISING ON COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT:
SIEGE TACTICS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

A thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Arab Studies

By

William Todman, B.A.

Washington, DC
April, 2016
CAPITALISING ON COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT:
SIEGE TACTICS IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

William Todman, B.A.
Thesis Advisor: Rochelle A. Davis, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The conflict in Syria has had a devastating impact on its people – by the end of 2015, the United Nations estimated that over 250,000 people had died throughout the previous four years of conflict, over half of Syria’s population had been displaced, and more than 4 million Syrians had sought refuge in neighbouring countries. How has Bashar al-Assad clung on to power? How can we explain the longevity of the conflict in Syria? Rather than focusing on sectarian identities or third party interventions, this thesis investigates a new variable – siege tactics. Based on survey responses from residents of besieged areas in Syria, and interviews with diplomatic and humanitarian officials, the study argues that an exploration of siege tactics highlights various factors that contributed to the intractability of the fighting. A system of categorising sieges is also proposed.

Firstly, examining siege warfare as a feature of counter-insurgency is crucial to understanding how Bashar al-Assad’s regime managed to survive by isolating areas of dissent and protecting its key strongholds. Arguing that the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime helps explain its ability to conduct brutal campaigns of collective punishment, sieges are presented as a key element of the regime’s survival even as it suffered debilitating shortages in manpower.

Secondly, the thesis examines the emergence of the war economy in Syria, and its various manifestations in besieged areas. Exploring the legacy of corruption and illicit
economic practices conducted by the Syrian military and pro-government militias, the data exposes the significant financial incentives that armed actors have to besiege civilian populations. It is against the interests of the actors that benefit materially and financially from sieges to alter the status quo. Therefore, many armed groups seek to ensure the continuation of siege warfare, and work against truce agreements that limit their ability to profit. Humanitarian assistance from the United Nations and non-governmental organisations is supporting the war economy in sieges as armed groups and businessmen take fees in order to allow the entry of goods. The continuation of many sieges has resulted in various stalemates across the country, and has provided various armed groups with the financial ability to continue waging war.

This thesis concludes with the lessons we can learn from the Syrian conflict about the besiegement of civilian populations, the weaknesses of the international response and International Humanitarian Law, and with recommendations for future action.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to a number of people without whom I could not have reached this stage. Firstly, I am immensely grateful to my advisor, Dr Rochelle Davis, for giving me the opportunity to collaborate on her research, showing me how to conduct field research, and for her continued guidance and unfailing encouragement. I am also very grateful to Dr Marwa Daoudy whose advice proved invaluable, especially in terms of the formulation of the research question and structure, and to Dr Daniel Neep for his insights and suggestions early on in the process. I feel especially fortunate to have had received such useful feedback from Vicki Valosik and my classmates in the thesis colloquium – Michael Brill, Miranda Meyer, Ana Nikonorow, and Ari Sillman. Thanks must also go to Patrick Lim who incredibly kindly proof-read the final draft.

My family, even without understanding where my interest in Syria has come from, have provided unfailing support and advice through multiple mini-crises. I am also very grateful to Rotary International for sponsoring my studies at Georgetown and my research trip to Beirut.

Without Rebecca Thompson, I would never have thought to choose this topic for my thesis, and I am hugely grateful to her for trusting me to conduct this research, and then for her continual support and encouragement.

This thesis would not have been possible without the information a large number of people gave me, most of whom are not named in this thesis to ensure their confidentiality. They were incredibly generous with their time when allowing me to interview them.

But my greatest thanks of all must go to those Syrians living in besieged areas who provided me with information about the harsh realities in which they live. I do not know your names, and so cannot thank you personally, but I can only hope that this thesis represents a small step towards raising awareness of the horrors you endure.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1  
0.1 Methodology 5  
0.2 Explaining the longevity of the war in Syria 12  

Chapter One – Understanding sieges 17  
1.1 Definitions 17  
1.2 Sieges and International Humanitarian Law 21  
1.3 Categorising sieges 23  

Chapter Two – Isolating dissent: Sieges and counter-insurgency 26  
2.1 Counter-insurgency and the changing location of war 27  
2.2 Counter-insurgency and collective punishment 32  
2.3 The use of sieges in the current conflict 37  

Chapter Three – Profiteering from suffering: Sieges and the war economy 50  
3.1 The emergence of war economies 52  
3.2 Corruption and patronage in Syria 57  
3.3 Profiteering from sieges 61  
3.4 Humanitarian aid and the war economy 73  

Conclusion 78  

Appendices 83  
A.1 Pilot Questionnaire 83  
A.2 Final Questionnaire 83  
A.3 Recommendations 84  
A.4 Maps 86  

Bibliography 91
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AOG</td>
<td>Armed Opposition Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAO</td>
<td>Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSA</td>
<td>Free Syrian Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GoS</td>
<td>Government of Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICG</td>
<td>International Crisis Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICRC</td>
<td>International Committee of the Red Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHL</td>
<td>International humanitarian law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>International non-governmental organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRIN</td>
<td>Integrated Regional Information Networks (formerly attached to the UN)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCC</td>
<td>Local Coordination Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDF</td>
<td>National Defence Forces (pro-regime militia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIAC</td>
<td>Non-international armed conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHCHR</td>
<td>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGM</td>
<td>Pro-government militia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAA</td>
<td>Syrian Arab Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAMS</td>
<td>Syrian-American Medical Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANA</td>
<td>Syrian Arab News Agency (state-controlled)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARC</td>
<td>Syrian Arab Red Crescent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCPR</td>
<td>Syrian Centre for Policy Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNC</td>
<td>Syrian National Coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNPROFOR</td>
<td>United Nations Protection Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN OCHA</td>
<td>United Nations Office of the Commissioner for Humanitarian Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNRWA</td>
<td>United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VDC</td>
<td>Violations Documentation Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The conflict in Syria has had a devastating impact on its people – by the end of 2015, the United Nations estimated that over 250,000 people had died throughout the previous four years of conflict, over half of Syria’s population had been displaced, and more than 4 million Syrians had sought refuge in neighbouring countries. The uprising against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime began in March 2011 when peaceful protestors took to the streets calling for political change. However, the regime cracked down with brutal force and the protests soon developed into a bloody insurgency. By the summer of 2012, Syria had descended into civil war. Because regional and global powers viewed the outcome of the conflict as crucial to their interests, they provided opposing factions with financial and military support, entrenching the violence and effectively turning the conflict into a proxy war.

One ongoing element in this conflict are sieges of civilian populations. Since April 25, 2011, when the southern city of Dera’a was besieged by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), the Syrian regime and other military actors operating in Syria have deployed multiple sieges across the country. Some of these sieges, including the siege of the Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus, have been in place for over three years. Humanitarian conditions in besieged areas are often among the worst in the country, and the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon

---


2 UN News Centre, “Failure to end Syria crisis ‘diminishes us all’ – UN refugees’ envoy Angelina Jolie” (March 14th 2015).

3 According to the standard definition, a civil war is a conflict in which at least one side is a non-state actor, with at least 1,000 total battle deaths and at least 100 on each side.


5 The SAA first cut the Eastern Ghouta off from Damascus in December 2011, author’s interview with UN official, (June 2015).
described it as ‘shameful’ that such a large number of civilians are being ‘deliberately’ denied access to essential goods and services. In these areas, the provision of water, electricity and health services is severely limited, and this has led to a number of civilian deaths.

Sieges affect a large number of Syrians, and in August 2015, the UN Secretary General estimated that 422,000 people in Syria lived in areas besieged by armed groups, including those living in areas of Deir ez-Zor city controlled by the Syrian regime, which I consider to be a double siege. This included 163,500 by government forces in the Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus; 4,000 by government forces in Darayya; 26,500 by non-state armed actors in Zahra and Nubul in Aleppo governorate; and 228,000 by ISIS in the government-controlled western neighbourhoods of Deir ez-Zor city. However, other organisations have argued that the actual number of people living under siege in Syria is over one million.

At multiple points during the conflict, analysts have incorrectly predicted that the Syrian regime was about to collapse. In late 2012, rebel gains across the country led NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, to declare that Assad’s fall was ‘only a question of time’. Media reports also suggested that the CIA had predicted that Assad would fall

---

7 The Violations Documentations Center in Syria (VDC) is one organization that complies information of these deaths: https://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/.
10 The Syrian American Medical Society asserted that the number was 640,200 in March 2015, and so with the addition of those living in Deir ez-Zor city, an updated figure for August 2015 would be over 800,000, and if those living in partially-besieged areas in Eastern Aleppo were taken into account, SAMS argued that the total number of besieged people actually exceeded 1,000,000.
11 “Syrian regime ‘approaching collapse’: NATO’s Rasmussen” in Al Arabiya (December 13, 2012) [accessed online 02/28/16: http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/13/254933.html ]
within eight to ten weeks.\textsuperscript{12} Even Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister, acknowledged the possibility of a rebel victory, stating that ‘the government in Syria are losing more and more control, and more and more territory’.\textsuperscript{13} However, the Syrian regime held on and halted the rebels’ momentum, and in 2013 Assad received a boost from increasing foreign support, including from Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias.\textsuperscript{14} But in the summer of 2013, once again it seemed as if the war may finally be over. After the chemical weapon attack on the Eastern Ghouta in August 2013, threats of Western air strikes against the regime indicated that Assad’s regime may be on the verge of collapse. However, no such strikes materialised, and Assad was able to cling on to power. Despite gains made by the Syrian regime after the intervention of the Russian military in 2015, opposition groups still maintain control over large swaths of Syria. Indeed, at the time of writing in 2016, there are no signs that the conflict is entering its final stages.

This study explores some of the factors that have contributed to the longevity of the Syrian conflict, by isolating a variable that is not often linked to conflict duration – siege warfare. Focusing on sieges is not to discount other variables that have also contributed to the conflict’s longevity, including third party interventions and the manipulation of sectarian identities, as we shall see. However, using sieges as a unit of analysis explains the successes of the Syrian regime’s counterinsurgency strategy, as they proved a relatively effective means of quashing urban counterinsurgency despite problems of dwindling manpower. Sieges also exemplify how the war economy that has emerged during the current conflict has become so

\textsuperscript{12} Ian Black, “Defection or escape? Syria’s foreign ministry spokesman ‘on way to US’” in \textit{The Guardian} (December 4, 2012) [accessed online 02/28/16: \url{http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/04/syria-foreign-ministry-us}]

\textsuperscript{13} “Russia, in shift, sees rebel victory in Syria” in \textit{Wall Street Journal} (December 13, 2012) [accessed online: 02/28/16: \url{http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323981504578176752775162778}]

\textsuperscript{14} Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, “Iranian Strategy in Syria”, \textit{Institute for the Study of War} (May 2013).
deep-rooted as those who have benefited from it have been unwilling to allow any changes to the status quo that could harm their profits.

The introduction will discuss the methodology and will provide a brief review of some of the factors that are most commonly associated with the longevity of the conflict in Syria in the literature. The first chapter outlines definitions of sieges, including their status under international humanitarian law, and then lays out the different classifications of sieges that I have formulated for this analysis. These classifications include rural, urban, post-truce, and double sieges. The second chapter approaches sieges from a military perspective, examining their function as a tactic of warfare. Here, I analyse how it is that historical precedent in Syria and the particular nature of the current war prompted Bashar al-Assad’s regime to favour siege warfare over other military tactics. This section will situate siege warfare within the changing nature of military tactics and counter-insurgency, arguing that as armed conflict has shifted into the urban environment, political actors have increasingly justified the use of extreme levels of violence against populated areas. These global trends are also analysed in light of the influences on military doctrine in Syria. The impact of regime type on counter-insurgency tactics is an important element of this investigation, as I argue that authoritarian states are more likely to pursue siege tactics. The second chapter, then, will show how siege tactics contributed to the longevity of the conflict by proving a relatively successful means of quashing urban insurgency, and allowing the regime to hold on to key areas despite its problems of dwindling manpower.

The third chapter turns to the economic aspect of siege tactics, explaining why it is that certain illicit economic practices that directly contradict the siege’s military objectives have taken precedence in many besieged areas in Syria. This section explores the dynamics of those sieges that continued after they failed to achieve their military objective of forcing
the besieged population to surrender. I argue that sieges have become an integral part of the war economy that has emerged in Syria, and that it is often not in armed actors’ interests to lift sieges, given the economic benefits they accrue from taking bribes and manipulating market prices. I will also explore the impact of the provision of humanitarian aid to besieged areas, and the impact aid has on the duration of the conflict. Here, I will argue that sieges have been the sites of important aspects of the war economy, and that the entrenchment of this war economy is prolonging the war. As modern sieges have not been the specific subject of substantial academic study, I will survey the literature that is relevant to each of the approaches I am taking to investigate the imposition of sieges in Syria in each chapter in turn.

In my conclusion, I will discuss the broader lessons that we can learn from investigating the use of siege warfare in Syria. Siege warfare is a barbaric tactic of counter-insurgency that is currently being replicated in other locations across the world, including in Iraq and Yemen. As wars continue to be fought in an urban environment, it is likely that actors will increasingly turn to siege tactics unless international humanitarian law is clarified, and strong punitive measures are taken against those who deploy sieges to dissuade others. Furthermore, investigating the economic side of siege warfare highlights the pressing need to identify those who benefit financially and materially from conflict. As such, I include recommendations for the international community and humanitarian actors in relation to sieges in the appendices.

0.1 Methodology

The research for this thesis was primarily conducted during the summer of 2015 in Beirut. I was working for an INGO and conducted my interviews under their name, using their contacts and connections. This INGO then gave me permission to use the research for
my own purposes, provided I ensure the protection of its partners by maintaining the confidentiality of those individuals and organisations from which I collected data.\textsuperscript{15}

**Selection of case studies**

It was not within the scope of this thesis to collect data from all besieged areas in Syria. Considering the diversity of size, location and dynamics of sieges that various actors are employing in Syria today, the situation does not lend itself to a neat classification, but choosing four case studies on the basis of these rough categories is a way of examining a range of areas that are experiencing some of the most divergent conditions. Therefore, based on the broad categorisation detailed below in the first chapter, I have chosen Yarmouk as an urban siege, Douma in the Eastern Ghouta as a rural siege, al-Wa’er in Homs City as a post-truce siege, and Deir ez-Zor as a double siege. The factors that contributed to my choice of these four areas included the number of contacts that the INGO I worked for had in each area, the number of questionnaire responses which I received from those living within these areas, and the amount of information available from secondary sources about the particular areas.

Of the 16 responses to my questionnaires, 13 were collected from individuals living in Douma, al-Wa’er and Yarmouk. As Yarmouk and Douma are some of the sieges that have attracted most media attention, with some of the most severe humanitarian conditions, there is a wealth of media reports about these areas. I was not able to collect any questionnaire responses from civilians living in the besieged area of Deir ez-Zor, but interviewed one current resident by phone, and two who had escaped the area within the last month. Although these four areas will be the main focus of this study, insights from other sieges in Syria will also be employed to provide comparisons and contrasts.

\textsuperscript{15} These stipulations include not mentioning the organisation by name, or any of the partner organisations in Syria with which they work. Written confirmation of this was received on October 7, 2015, detailing these stipulations, and I have followed them carefully.
I recognise that these four sieges are imposed by the Syrian regime, pro-regime forces or ISIS, and that other armed opposition groups are also conducting sieges today.\textsuperscript{16} However, given that the vast majority of sieges are imposed by the Syrian regime and ISIS, and that it was the Syrian government that first imposed sieges on populated areas in Syria during the current conflict, it seems appropriate to compare the tactics and dynamics of these sieges.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Questionnaires}

The majority of my data from individuals living inside besieged areas comes from questionnaires.\textsuperscript{18} In order to protect the respondents’ identities and to reduce the impact of a foreign, unfamiliar researcher asking questions about what is undeniably a sensitive situation, a local colleague passed my questionnaires on to her own contacts. I drafted a pilot questionnaire in Modern Standard Arabic consisting of nine open questions (Appendix A). After having received a few responses, I adjusted this, adding two extra questions and modifying some of the wording in an attempt to elicit clearer responses (Appendix B).

Sixteen individuals completed the questionnaires. I did not personally select these respondents, and do not know any details about their identity. Rather, colleagues from the INGO distributed them among their own contacts. Therefore, the sample process was not random, and it is possible that many of the respondents were of the same gender, a similar age, and from a similar background. In order to maintain absolute confidentiality, I am not able to verify any of these details. Despite this concern, given that the questions asked about the general situation in their besieged area, rather than how it affected the respondent as an

\textsuperscript{16} Examples of armed opposition group-imposed sieges are Kefraya, Fuah, Nubul and Zahraa.
\textsuperscript{17} Just 6.2 percent of the total population officially recognised by the UN as being besieged in August 2015 were besieged by armed opposition groups.
\textsuperscript{18} As was noted above, I did not collect any questionnaire responses from residents of the besieged areas of Deir ez-Zor city.
individual, I do not imagine that the respondents’ different demographic profiles would have a significant impact on the answers they provided.

Ideally, I would have collected more responses, but given the practical challenges of communicating with those living in besieged areas, including electricity outages, limited phone networks and difficulties in accessing the internet, this was not possible. The quality and thoroughness of the answers I received varied significantly, with some giving very full answers, and others only providing a few words. Where contradictions occurred (beyond slight differences in estimated numbers, for example), I have discounted any data that are not corroborated by three separate respondents. Since the respondents knew, for the most part, that this information was going to be used by a humanitarian organisation, it is possible that they exaggerated the severity of the humanitarian situation in their area in order to provoke a more substantial humanitarian response. However, given that the humanitarian situation is not the primary focus of this thesis, and that there is such little humanitarian access in the first place, these concerns are of limited significance.

Interviews

A large portion of the data was collected through oral interviews in person, by phone, or on Skype. I interviewed a total of nine UN and governmental officials, and twelve local NGO and INGO representatives from various organisations. These individuals were initially selected based on contacts that colleagues in the INGO had, but then snowball sampling ensued as they recommended new individuals for me to contact. I conducted most of the interviews in English, but I also conducted three in Arabic and one in French. All of the interviews were semi-structured, with the interviewees able to direct the flow of the conversation as they wished. None of the interviews were recorded to protect the participants’ confidentiality, and therefore I relied on note-taking. All interviewees were assured that
details that would make them or their organisations personally identifiable would not be included in any publication.

Limitations of the data that I collected by interview include my own influence, the impact of the reputation of the organisation I was working for, and in some cases the biases of the interviewees and the organisations they represent. As a 24-year-old British male who was previously unknown to all interviewees, it is possible that some did not trust me. However, having the credibility of working for a large INGO helped, and I was careful to explain the aims of the interviews and allow the interviewees to ask me any questions before we began. Some of the organisations that the interviewees represented do not profess to be neutral, and other organisations operate under restrictions which may influence their responses. For example, many UN organisations working in Syria do so from Damascus and have the consent of the Syrian regime. Knowing that their continued operation inside Syria is not guaranteed, they may have downplayed the regime’s role and culpability in siege situations, so as not to provoke the Syrian regime into expelling them from Damascus. For other organisations that I interviewed, advocacy is an element of their role, and so they may have exaggerated certain information to create a more dramatic account of the situation in Syria and elicit a greater response.

I consider 21 long interviews to constitute a significant quantity of data, and yet there were some key individuals with whom I was not able to speak. For example, I did not interview any member of the Syrian government, the SAA or any pro-regime military group. Whilst this would have been an extremely valuable source of data, it was not possible for logistical and security reasons.
Additional sources of data

In addition to the primary data collected through interviews and questionnaires, this thesis draws from media reports in Arabic and English which include information on the situation in the besieged areas in Syria and attempts to end sieges, as well as statements from military officials and humanitarian workers. Speeches by Bashar al-Assad and articles from the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) are especially useful here as they provide evidence of the regime's official rhetoric. Monthly UN situation updates provide information about the situation in besieged areas, who is imposing the sieges, and UN access to these areas. I have also been given access to market information in various regions of Syria, including besieged areas, from the Overseas Development Institute which will be used in my discussion of the war economy. I will also draw upon open-source analysis and data provided in think tank reports and papers from advocacy and humanitarian organizations. For example, the siege dataset compiled by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) collects data of the causes of death of all casualties in besieged areas.19

Ethical considerations

Given that the conflict in Syria is ongoing at the time of conducting research and writing this thesis, many of the people who provided me with data should be considered to be vulnerable. I completed training on human research through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative which included sections on protecting vulnerable people. As stated above, I took measures to protect them, including not recording their names or affiliations, and only referring to them in general terms so that they are not identifiable. As with the paper I wrote for the INGO on humanitarian access to besieged areas, it is possible that if this research falls into the wrong hands, some elements of it could be used for negative purposes. I have been

19 Syria Under Siege dataset [accessed online 02/29/16: http://syriaundersiege.org/annex-a-siege-dataset/]
conscious of these concerns when writing the paper, and have carefully chosen to omit some information due to these fears.

**The importance of the research**

The limitations of my data listed above are a cause for concern. It is true that the difficulties of collecting reliable, accurate data from Syria since the beginning of the uprising in 2011 are significant, but I do not believe that they should prevent us from attempting to do so. A variety of parties in the conflict have deliberately prevented journalists and researchers from accessing information about the current situation in Syria, but those seeking to collect information about any aspect of the conflict have a duty to attempt to overcome these challenges and provide their audiences with as detailed an analysis of the situation as possible. As the humanitarian situation in many besieged areas is so dire that civilians are dying from lack of access to food or basic medical care, any attempt to better understand the factors that are motivating armed groups to employ siege tactics is a worthwhile endeavour. Therefore, despite the limitations and concerns detailed above, this study aims to fill an important gap in current scholarship and research about the dynamics of sieges in Syria.

By analysing siege tactics as an explanatory factor for the Syrian conflict’s longevity, I hope that this study will make a novel contribution to the field, and that its findings will have implications for other modern conflicts around the world. Indeed, although to a lesser extent, sieges were also employed in conflicts in Yemen and Iraq in 2016. Therefore, by drawing awareness to sieges as a tactic of war and punishing perpetrators, we can seek to prevent them from becoming a feature of modern warfare.
0.2 Explaining the longevity of the Syrian conflict

The current conflict in Syria began in March 2011 when pro-government forces fired on peaceful protestors with live ammunition. However, the insurgency that ensued in Syria in 2011 seemed to defy the literature’s model of the longevity of insurgency movements. James Fearon and David Laitin propose that insurgencies are ‘better able to survive and prosper if the government and military they oppose are relatively weak – badly financed, organizationally inept, corrupt, politically divided, and poorly informed about goings-on at the local level’. The Syrian regime had suffered from declining oil revenues, forcing it to cut back on social spending, and it certainly suffered from widespread corruption. However, at the onset of the uprising, the Syrian government did not appear to be weak, and so seems to challenge this model. The infamous mukhabarat intelligence apparatuses pervaded society, meticulously collecting vast quantities of information about Syrian citizens, and engaging in repressive measures to raise the cost of rebelling against the regime. Therefore, at least in the eyes of the Syrian population, the regime was acutely aware of the goings-on at the local level, and it was prepared to resort to high levels of violence to quash rebellion. But if the costs were so high, why did so many rise up?

Some scholars have pointed to the impact of the Arab Spring protests elsewhere in the Middle East as a motivation for the outbreak of the insurgency in Syria, describing an element of social movement theory known as ‘demonstration effects’. Lesch suggests that, ‘in the early, halcyon days of the Arab Spring’, having witnessed the protests in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere, Syrians felt the ‘power of the street’ and began to wonder ‘why not

here?"²⁴ For these analysts, the belief that the Arab Spring would have a domino effect across the region led dissatisfied Syrians to overcome fears of repression to go out on the street. Samir Aita agrees that the uprising began ‘in an environment much influenced by the events of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya’, and suggests that the concurrence of the bloody massacre at the Omari Mosque in Dera’a and the NATO-led military intervention in Libya was a turning point in the intensification of the uprising, as it gave Syrians the belief that the international community would intervene in Syria, too, to bring down the regime.²⁵

Aita argues that this uprising developed into an insurgency because of ‘a failure of negotiations’.²⁶ Negotiations failed as a result of two main factors: the ambiguity of the regime’s concessions, and the widespread nature of the uprising, which meant that any concessions made on a local level had no general impact on the country. Furthermore, the Syrian regime resorted to extreme force to put down protests, in the belief that the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt had fallen because they had not reacted strongly enough. These extreme levels of violence led many Syrians to seek arms to defend themselves, and significant increases in arms smuggling from abroad fuelled this.²⁷ As a result, an armed insurgency spread across the country.

A crucial step in the transformation of the insurgency into a civil war, which Joseph Holliday considers to have happened in the summer of 2012, was increasing foreign intervention.²⁸ More recent work in the literature has moved beyond P. M. Regan’s assertion that third parties enter internal conflicts in an attempt to halt the fighting, and identifies

---
²⁶ Ibid., p. 298.
various other motivations.29 Dylan Balch-Lindsay and Andrew Enterline state that although some third parties may enter conflicts ‘for humanitarian reasons’, others do so ‘with an eye toward plundering the natural resources of the civil war state, or draining the resources of a third party’.30 Regardless of motives, it is the distribution of these interventions that is most relevant to the conflict’s longevity. If there is an equitable distribution of third party interventions, then the likelihood of the civil war enduring for a significantly longer period of time and resulting in a stalemate greatly increases.31 Therefore, foreign states’ arming and funding of various armed groups on different sides has had a significant impact on the longevity of the Syrian conflict. Foreign states and military groups that have supported the Syrian regime include Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias. On the opposing side, some of the most important support has come from Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. At the time of writing in 2016, neither side had received sufficient military support from foreign powers to win an outright victory, and therefore we can consider the third party interventions to be roughly equitable. The levels of foreign intervention have led to assertions that the Syrian conflict is now a proxy war.32

These foreign interventions have also added to the increasing salience of sectarian identity in the conflict, which is seen as another key factor in explaining the conflict’s longevity. The Syrian regime deliberately spread fear among minority communities, and especially the Alawi minority, in an attempt to mobilise it and command their loyalty, as a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2012 detailed:

Security services circulated stories (and even a video) of a woman in Homs who not only drank the blood of Alawites brought to her by armed groups, but also

---

31 Ibid., p. 638
dismembered their bodies and dispersed their parts; systematically portrayed protesters as Salafist extremists establishing Islamic emirates in regions of Syria they controlled; and broadcast purported evidence of foreign involvement, such as wads of Israeli shekels found in insurgent hideouts in Baba Amro. At the same time, they recruited Alawites into the shabiba, armed them for self-defense and allowed them to form militia.33

The decision to release hundreds of Islamists in 2011 can be seen as another feature of this strategy, as the regime sought to radicalise, and thus delegitimise, the opposition, stoking sectarian tensions.34 Samir Aita argues that the armed opposition were also responsible for stirring sectarian identities, since leaders of the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army had ‘pointed out very early (2011) that the Hezbollah, Iranian forces, and Shi’ite militias from Iraq were participating in the fights in Syria in order to excite sectarian feelings and solidarities’.35 The same ICG report stated that ‘blatant hatred of Alawites [had become] commonplace’ among the Sunni population by the summer of 2012.36 The strategic manipulation of the salience of sectarian identities has contributed to the longevity of the conflict, as differences between warring sides have come to be seen as primordial, and minority groups have been convinced that they are fighting for their very survival.

Kheder Khaddour argues that a key element of the Syrian regime’s survival has been its ability to claim the unrivalled role of being the ‘irreplaceable provider of essential public services, even for Syrians living in the many areas that are outside of the regime’s control’.37 It has been able to do this by consolidating state agencies into highly defensible, urban power centres, and ruthlessly targeting any opposition attempts to become an alternative service provider.38 As so many Syrians rely on the services the state provides, this tactic has

compelled many Syrians to feel that for their well-being, they must keep supporting the state. As a result, civilians tend to cluster in regime-held areas, and this creates a disincentive for the opposition to attack. This tactic contributed to the longevity of the war, as it represented a crucial aspect of the regime’s legitimisation campaign, discouraging further defections to the opposition by cementing the link between Syrians’ wellbeing and the regime’s survival.

Therefore, it is beyond doubt that foreign interventions, the manipulation of sectarian identities, and the regime’s stranglehold on the state have had a significant impact on the duration of the conflict in Syria. However, while acknowledging the role that these factors have played, and continue to play, in the conflict’s intractability, this thesis will attempt to explain the longevity of the conflict by looking to the regime’s tactics of counterinsurgency, and the entrenchment of the war economy, as exemplified by siege tactics. The following chapter will explore definitions of sieges, their status under International Humanitarian Law, and the classifications I have adopted.
Chapter One  Understanding Sieges

“Government forces, anti-government armed groups and terrorist organizations employ sieges and consequent starvation, denial of humanitarian access and other forms of deprivation as instruments of war to force surrender or to extract political concessions”\(^{39}\)

1.1 Definitions

A siege is a military tactic that has been used throughout history.\(^{40}\) Enforced by erecting checkpoints at strategic access points to a target area and taking control of its supply lines, a siege’s primary is to force a restive population into submission by cutting off its access to food and other goods that are indispensable to its survival.\(^{41}\) Besieging forces often attempt to downgrade the capabilities of armed groups that operate from within the besieged area by shelling it with artillery, resulting in a further deterioration of humanitarian conditions. Such attacks sometimes represent a tactic of ‘urbicide’, defined as the systematic destruction of the infrastructure on which urban populations rely. The besieging forces aim to render life so difficult for a besieged civilian population that they pressure armed groups to make concessions in political negotiations in exchange for terms that alleviate their suffering. If a government or opposition armed group has limited forces, a siege is also an effective means of holding and subduing an area without having to launch a major offensive as it can be enforced with limited manpower.

But sieges also have non-military benefits. A siege provides ample opportunities for certain actors, including armed groups and middlemen, to exploit the situation and make considerable profit. In most siege situations, a criminal economy emerges including

---


\(^{40}\) This section is modified from, Mercy Corps, “Breaking Through: A Humanitarian Approach to Besieged Areas in Syria” (January 2016).

smuggling networks and bribery.\textsuperscript{42} As a result, prices of basic goods inside the besieged area are typically extremely high. In such circumstances, only the very wealthy (military commanders, local leaders etc.), those with connections with armed groups inside the besieged area, and those with connections outside the besieged area who send them money are able to buy food.

Different organisations have adopted varying definitions of what constitutes a siege. UN OCHA provides the following definition for Syria:

\textit{Besieged area}\hspace{1cm} An area surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter, and civilians, the sick and injured cannot exit.\textsuperscript{43}

UN OCHA compiles input from Syrian NGOs, INGOs and UN agencies regarding besiegement and two Resident Coordinators (who sit above all of the humanitarian agencies and are not attributed to one UN agency) make the decision about each area by consensus. According to this process, in July 2015 the UN recognised 13 sieges in Syria, listed by governorate:

\textit{Aleppo} – Zahraa and Nubul;

\textit{Rural Damascus} – Darayya, Douma, Harasta, Zamalka, Arbin, Saqba, Hammura and Maliha;

\textit{Deir ez-Zour} – Joura, Qusour, Al Jami` al Kabeer wa al Wasat.\textsuperscript{44}

This definition carries significance, as by designating an area as officially ‘besieged’, the UN highlights and documents the plight of those civilians who are living in the very worst conditions of the 12.2 million Syrians classified by UN OCHA as being in need of

\textsuperscript{42} Keith Proctor. “Inside Syria’s Siege Economy” in \textit{Fortune} (May 2013)
\textsuperscript{43} Taken from the UN OCHA Strategic Response Plan 2015.
\textsuperscript{44} See Figure 1.
humanitarian assistance.\textsuperscript{45} UN agencies can also make requests for access to besieged areas, which subject the responsible parties to continued pressure to comply with International Humanitarian Law. Indeed, classifying an area as besieged also makes it possible to identify certain parties who could be held accountable under international law at some point in the future.

In addition to those areas considered to be besieged, UN OCHA has a watch list of areas that could potentially fall under the above definition.\textsuperscript{46} Occasionally some areas from the ‘besieged’ list are delisted after a period of monitoring by its observers. This happened to Yarmouk Camp, which was declassified in June 2015.\textsuperscript{47} It should be noted that even after areas have been declassified as ‘besieged’, UN OCHA recognises that protection issues frequently still apply.\textsuperscript{48} Due to the Government of Syria’s access restrictions, traditional human rights monitoring systems are not applicable in Syria and so few international humanitarian actors have attempted comprehensive reviews of besieged areas in Syria.

One of the few organisations that attempted such a study of besieged areas in Syria is the Syrian-American Medical Society (SAMS), which criticised UN OCHA’s classifications and applied alternative methodology to add further locations to the list of besieged areas. In March 2015, SAMS argued that even under UN OCHA’s own definition, 38 additional locations should be considered ‘besieged’ or at least ‘semi-besieged’, but proposes the following new terminology for clarity:\textsuperscript{49}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} UN OCHA, ‘Syrian Arab Republic’ main page. [accessed online, September 2015]
\item \textsuperscript{46} Author’s interview with UN official, (June 2015).
\item \textsuperscript{47} IRIN, “Yarmouk Camp no longer besieged, UN rules” (July 24, 2015)
\item \textsuperscript{48} Author’s interview with UN official, (July 2015).
\item \textsuperscript{49} Syrian-American Medical Society, “Slow Death”, (March 2015), p. 33.
\end{itemize}
**Besieged area**

All communities that are surrounded by an armed actor who intentionally prevents food and medical supplies from entering the area and prevents civilians from exiting.\(^{50}\)

**Partially-Besieged**

Areas that experience all of the conditions of a siege but where the besieging party leaves a limited number of un-blockaded access points that are heavily or systematically attacked to hinder humanitarian aid.

SAMS also proposes that sieges be classified according to three tiers of intensity, largely based upon the different quantities of goods that are able to be smuggled into the besieged area.\(^{51}\) The author of the SAMS report, Valerie Szybala, raised concerns of ‘political influence’ being behind UN OCHA’s designations, given that organisations such as UN OCHA only operate from Damascus with permission from the Syrian regime.\(^{52}\) SAMS believes that this delicate political arrangement leads UN OCHA to downplay the magnitude of the cases of sieges in order to appease the Syrian regime. Indeed, UN OCHA’s strategy seems to be to focus their efforts on a smaller number of cases where they stand a greater chance of being allowed access.

In reality, the dynamics of sieges shift over time, and there is significant diversity in the conditions in various besieged and hard-to-access locations in Syria. Indeed, even if aid deliveries are allowed into a besieged area on a semi-regular basis, or if some civilians are allowed to leave, it may not be appropriate to say that the siege has actually been lifted. Many other people may still be unable to leave the area, and may still be being deliberately deprived of certain basic goods required for survival, including basic medical assistance.

---

\(^{50}\) SAMS, “Slow Death”, p. 43.

\(^{51}\) For the definition of the three tiers, see SAMS, “Slow Death”, pp. 43-44. This system has since been adapted by ‘Siege Watch’, an initiative run by PAX and the Syria Institute, which releases a quarterly update on besieged areas in Syria.

\(^{52}\) Author’s interview with Valerie Szybala (July 2015).
Therefore, this thesis adapts SAMS’ definitions by arguing that the central element in identifying the existence of a siege should be the intent of one or more actors to force a certain population either to surrender or to act in a certain way by surrounding them, curtailing their movement, and restricting their access to goods.\textsuperscript{53} Such actions have a complicated status in IHL.

\subsection{1.2 Sieges and International Humanitarian Law}

Sieges are not explicitly prohibited under International Humanitarian Law (IHL). However, starvation as a method of warfare and, by extension, the imposition of sieges that endanger the lives of the civilian population by depriving it of goods that are essential for survival are illegal.\textsuperscript{54} Under the Statute of the International Criminal Court, ‘wilfully impeding relief supplies’ from reaching civilian populations is a war crime in international armed conflicts.\textsuperscript{55} A state may only refuse to provide consent for the provision of humanitarian assistance to civilians with ‘valid reasons’ that are not ‘arbitrary or capricious’.\textsuperscript{56} However, the term ‘arbitrary’ is not defined, and therefore, as Emanuela-Chiara Gillard argues, it is ‘extremely difficult to determine – legally and factually – whether consent to relief operations has been withheld arbitrarily in a particular situation’.\textsuperscript{57} These ambiguities help explain why the Syrian government has been able to prevent humanitarian aid from reaching besieged areas in Syria. For example, between January and August 2015, the UN submitted 81 requests for aid convoys and just nine of these (11.1 percent) were

\textsuperscript{53} For example, this definition would classify the SAA as besieging the population of Deir ez-Zor city \textit{in addition} to ISIS besieging them, since the GoS also restricts access to food and goods to the city’s inhabitants in an attempt to force their loyalty to the regime, author’s interview with UN official (July 2015).
\textsuperscript{56} Germany, CDDH/II/SR.87, pp. 336-337.
completed.\textsuperscript{58} In conclusion, only if siege warfare leads to the starvation of civilians or involves the prevention of humanitarian access in a manner that amounts to collective punishment, then it is a war crime.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite the ambiguous status of siege warfare in IHL, a number of UN resolutions have been adopted during the Syrian crisis which condemn the actors employing them. UN Security Council Resolution 2139, adopted in February 2014, called on all parties in the conflict to immediately lift all sieges from populated areas; end violations of human rights and IHL; and allow rapid, unhindered and safe access for humanitarian agencies to reach people in need.\textsuperscript{60} Two further UN Security Council resolutions, UN 2165 (July 2014) and UN 2191 (December 2014), confirmed that non-compliance with UN 2139 would result in ‘further measures’ being taken according to the UN Charter, but did not specify precisely what these would involve.\textsuperscript{61} To date, no punitive measures have been taken against parties responsible for employing siege tactics in Syria by the UN.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was established on August 22, 2011 by the UN Human Rights Council through resolution S-17/1 with a mandate to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since March 2011 in Syria. In June 2015, it stated that ‘government sieges are imposed in a coordinated manner. Soldiers at checkpoints regularly conduct arbitrary arrests, confiscate food

\textsuperscript{60} UN Security Council Resolution 2139 (February 22, 2014).
\textsuperscript{61} UN Security Council Resolution 2165 (14\textsuperscript{th} July 2014); UN Security Council Resolution 2191 (December 17, 2014)
and other basic supplies, and prevent sick and wounded persons from seeking medical attention’. 62

However, despite these damning international reports, the Syrian government denies that it is imposing sieges on civilian areas in Syria. The Syrian ambassador to the UN Bashar Jaafari wrote to the UN Secretary General in February 2015, saying "if weapons and instruments of death are reaching those areas … how can they be said to be besieged?”63

1.3 Categorising sieges

It has been stated above that the dynamics of sieges can vary considerably. In this section, I attempt to categorise sieges that have occurred in the current conflict in Syria and elsewhere in the world in modern times, according to these different dynamics. 64 One of the main differences in the use of siege tactics can be attributed to whether the siege is urban or rural. Certain sub-categories can then be identified, which include ‘post-truce’ or ‘double’ sieges. It should therefore be clarified that the four categories described below are not mutually exclusive – for example, a siege may simultaneously constitute elements of an ‘urban siege’ and a ‘double siege’. Examples of urban and rural sieges can be found throughout history, but I am not aware of examples of ‘double sieges’ or ‘post-truce’ sieges beyond the Syrian context.

**Urban sieges** involve a more thorough blockade than rural sieges with all entrances and exits to the besieged area controlled by military checkpoints or covered by snipers. As a

---

64 These categories are not, however, exclusive - i.e. an ‘urban’ siege could also be a ‘double’ siege.
result, smuggling networks are limited, with the besieging force having almost complete control over the entry of goods. The besieged population is unlikely to have a means of growing food internally, often having only minimal access to agricultural land and only household-level means of productivity. There are fewer possibilities for constructing tunnels as a means of getting out of the besieged area, as the besieging forces have tighter control over the perimeters of the siege. As a result, an urban siege is more intense than a rural siege and commonly results in extremely poor humanitarian conditions. As a humanitarian worker with experience of conditions of an urban siege in Syria stated, “you either get food through bribes or smuggling, or you starve”. Due to the high population density of an urban area, attacks usually result in far greater casualties. Examples of urban sieges include the siege of Leningrad in World War Two, the siege of Sarejevo from 1992-1996, and the besieged areas of Deir ez-Zor city, and Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus during the Syrian conflict.

Rural sieges are likely to cover a larger geographical area than urban sieges, and the blockade is often less comprehensive, with fighting centring on trade and access routes into and out of the besieged area. The population is more likely to have access to agricultural land, although this is often the target of attacks by the besieging force, typically just before or during the harvest. The rural landscape may provide greater opportunities to conceal the construction of tunnels to get out of the besieged area. Smuggling networks and bribes may be able to provide limited goods to besieged populations, in a somewhat more regular manner, but at extremely high prices. Casualty rates are often lower than in urban sieges because rural areas are less densely populated. Examples of rural sieges include those imposed on villages in Ukraine by Soviet forces during the 1940s and 1950s, and in Syria today the siege of the Eastern Ghouta, including Douma, is a rural siege.

---

65 Author’s conversation with resident of al-Waer, June 2015.
After the establishment of a cease-fire or truce, some areas still remain under effective siege, even if the majority of the fighting has stopped. Under post-truce sieges, armed forces often maintain heavy restrictions on movement and access to food and other goods. In Syria, these locations are commonly removed from the official UN list of locations that are considered besieged, but other humanitarian organizations consider them to remain under siege. Therefore, this category is most relevant in terms of the UN’s definitions of besieged areas in a given conflict. Examples of post-truce sieges in the Syrian conflict are the al-Waer area of Homs city and al-Qaboun in Damascus.

In some situations, the armed actors operating inside the besieged area restrict civilians’ access to goods to such an extent that a double siege effectively exists. Under these circumstances, opportunities for the besieged populations to access basic goods through smuggling networks and bribery are even more restricted, as there are two separate, opposing groups of armed actors controlling the flow of goods. Double sieges occur to varying degrees, but one of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the ISIS- and Syrian regime-imposed siege of Deir ez-Zor.66

The following chapter will discuss examples of the first two of these categories of sieges, urban and rural sieges, as it examines how sieges have been used as a military tactic in the Syrian conflict.

---

Chapter Two Isolating Dissent: Sieges and Counter-insurgency

“The revolution died the day the siege began”67

On April 25, 2011, after seven weeks of unrest, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) surrounded the city of Dera’a and besieged it as part of a ten-day military operation that would leave over 500 Syrians dead, and 2,500 detained.68 It then began imposing longer-term, partial sieges in Rural Damascus in 2012, with limited entry and exit of civilians and goods. The first instance of a pro-government area being besieged by opposition forces came in July 2012 when fighters from the Free Syrian Army surrounded two Alawi-majority towns in rural Aleppo, Nubul and Zahraa. In the spring of 2013 the government intensified its sieges in Rural Damascus with all goods prevented from reaching many besieged areas, and the besieged populations were subjected to aerial bombardment and shelling.69

This chapter will explore why the Syrian regime adopted sieges by applying the lenses of the urbanisation of modern warfare and counter-insurgency. Arguing that Syria’s status as an authoritarian state affects the choice of counter-insurgency tactics, the first section will trace the evolution of urban locations as the site of the practice of war, and explore the geographies of counter-insurgency tactics, the justification of collective punishment and the concept of ‘urbicide’.70 The second section will examine the tactics currently employed by the Syrian regime in light of the history of counter-insurgency and urban warfare in Syria in the twentieth century. Here, I will investigate how the Syrian regime’s military doctrine evolved and came to include the siege tactics that were first deployed in Hama in 1982 as Hafez al-

67 Author’s interview with former resident of Yarmouk Camp (June 2015).
70 ‘Urbicide’, as discussed below, is the systematic destruction of the means of urban life.
Assad quashed Islamist rebellion. The final section of the chapter will explore the imposition of sieges since April 2011, looking at how armed groups employed sieges to achieve its military objectives. I will focus on two of my case study areas to illustrate the differences in military tactics between urban and rural sieges here, looking at the sieges of Yarmouk Camp and the Eastern Ghouta. Therefore, this chapter will explain how adopting siege tactics allowed the Syrian regime to isolate and contain sources of rebellion, and prevent them from spreading to areas of high strategic importance. Thus, siege tactics contributed to the Syrian regime’s ability to survive during the current conflict.

2.1 Counter-insurgency and the changing location of war

The Syrian regime’s counter-insurgency tactics were a crucial element of its ability to survive even as it suffered from increasing military defections, dwindling finances, and growing international condemnation. I propose that siege warfare in Syria emerged as a specific tactic of counter-insurgency during the early stages of the conflict from 2011-2012, and exemplify various features of the regime’s behaviour. It is clear from its rhetoric, as we shall see below, that the Syrian regime considered itself to be fighting an insurgency rather than all-out war. When sieges were first imposed on restive areas of the country, the asymmetric military capabilities of the conflicting parties and the guerrilla tactics employed by the rebels support this belief. An insurgency is defined in modern times as:

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

---

Counter-insurgency, then, refers to the tactics that a government or occupying power employ to defeat an insurgency. Laleh Khalili provides a useful differentiation between ‘enemy-centric’ and ‘population-centric’ counter-insurgency tactics. Population-centric counter-insurgency involves the attempt by the government or occupying power to provide security, protection and services to populations living in the areas in which insurgents operate. Enemy-centric counter-insurgency, however, aims to undermine insurgents’ support by imposing punitive measures on the entire population living in insurgents’ zones of operation, be they militants or civilians. Examining the impact of regime type on choice of counter-insurgency tactics, David Ucko argues that authoritarian regimes are more likely to adopt brutal enemy-centric tactics in a way that ‘punishes the people for the insurgency and severs the bonds between the two not through politics but with force’. Authoritarian regimes are able to adopt such methods as they are unconstrained by law, uncontested by rivals, and can often control the information available to their citizens through the state-owned press. Thus, for an authoritarian regime the focus of counter-insurgency is not on winning ‘hearts and minds’, but rather on ‘selling the threat to the broader populace, surging support for both party and state, and whipping up a chauvinistic hatred for the perfidious rebels that justifies whatever response is deemed necessary’. This chapter will focus on these facets of enemy-centric counter-insurgency tactics, which the Syrian regime has overwhelmingly favoured during the current conflict.

The differentiation between urban, rural and post-truce and double sieges, as outlined in the introduction, helps explain the particularities of the dynamics of different sieges in Syria. However, even rural sieges contain many elements of urban warfare, as they target populated

---

centres within those rural areas and seek to destroy the infrastructure upon which modern life
relies, as will be described below. Therefore, somewhat counterintuitively, many elements of
the shift towards urban warfare that is described in this chapter are applicable to both urban
and rural sieges.

The emergence of modern urban warfare

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

Twentieth century urbanisation coincided with major global developments including
increasing social polarization and inequality, violent political and economic structural

---

78 Mike Davis. *Dead Cities and Other Tales*, (2003), ch.3.
adjustment, the heightening salience of ethnic and fundamentalist religious identities and the growing scarcity of many essential resources. This rapid urbanisation brought these new tensions into the urban sphere and resulted in an ‘implosion of global and national politics into the urban world’. As a result, many of the conflicts arising from these tensions have occurred in the urban space, and so bloody, urban insurgencies proliferated.

The geographies of counter-insurgency

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

During the French occupation of Syria, the French Troupes du Levant were forced to alter their military tactics in response to rebel insurgency. French forces traditionally used military column formations to march through areas and command the obedience of native populations. As the rebels exploited the new spatial opportunities that tactics of insurgency afforded them, attacking the French sporadically and then swiftly retreating, the occupying forces attempted to reshape Syria’s physical geography in such a way that their military advantage over rebel groups could be restored. As would be the case once again nearly a century later, one of the most important insurgencies operated in the Ghouta, the rural

---

82 Neep, p. 136.
farmlands surrounding Damascus, after rebel groups failed to take the Syrian capital in October 1925. Here, the Troupes du Levant’s military columns were ineffective in quashing the insurgents, as the rebel groups could flee oncoming columns, hide in the rural landscape, and then re-form to strike in a non-linear, random fashion.\(^83\) Initially unable to encircle such a wide area, the French employed an ‘inverted siege’ on Damascus to ensure that the rebels couldn’t enter the city.\(^84\) This tactic involved the construction of 12 miles of new boulevards and barbed wire fences around the capital.\(^85\) After the landscape had been altered to ensure that the rebels could not penetrate the city, the French positioned some 9,000 troops around the Ghouta and swept through, forcing the rebel groups out to the North. This method of restricting movement to deal with insurgency in the rural Ghouta shares parallels with how the Syrian regime has attempted to quash rebellion in the Ghouta during the current conflict, as we shall see.

In urban settings too, counter-insurgency operations seek to reshape space to their advantage and this often includes constructing physical barriers, such as walls. Geographical partitions often have the effect of solidifying boundaries between different population categories, be they ethnicities, communities or nations.\(^86\) Walls have been constructed as a tactic of counter-insurgency in many modern conflicts including in Northern Ireland, by the US army in Iraq, and by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The new spatial realities that emerge enable increased military control by curtailing the environments in which rebels can operate. These new geographies have the effect of turning entire populations of urban spaces into objects of ‘study, warfare and manipulation’ as the traditional separation between military and civilian targets is blurred.\(^87\) To justify this, armed actors employ

\(^{83}\) Neep, p. 133.
\(^{84}\) Idem.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., p. 137.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 43; Graham, p. 20.
Manichaean, dichotomised constructions of ‘us’ and an othered ‘them’ in rhetoric in a way that renders all human subjects living in an urban environment legitimate targets, being seen as real or potential fighters, terrorists or insurgents.\(^\text{88}\) Sieges also aim to curtail the space in which insurgents can operate, affecting entire populations, and the Syrian regime has employed rhetoric to justify such tactics.

2.2 Counter-insurgency and collective punishment

Many aspects of this new military doctrine of counter-insurgency equate to collective punishment. Whilst collective punishment was formerly accepted as a necessary element of warfare, the 1899 Hague Conventions broke this tradition and forbade collective punishment, stating: ‘[n]o general penalty, pecuniary or otherwise, can be inflicted upon the population on account of the acts of individuals for which they cannot be regarded as jointly and severally responsible’.\(^\text{89}\) The 1949 Geneva Conventions expanded upon these provisions, stating that ‘[n]o protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited.’\(^\text{90}\)

However, despite these provisions, governments and occupying powers have frequently employed measures which equate to collective punishment. Unable to locate insurgents responsible for hostile acts, powers have used collective punishment in an attempt to reduce violence and force obedience.\(^\text{91}\) Historically, collective punishment included preventing food and other supplies from reaching a restive area. In Malaya, British colonial forces prevented

---

\(^{88}\) Graham, p. 36; Ibid., p. 16.


\(^{90}\) Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Article 33(1), 1949,75 UNTS 287.

the sale of anything but precooked rice to villages believed to be harbouring insurgents. Field
Marshal Gerald Templer even ordered a reduction of rice rations as a punitive measure
following certain insurgent attacks.\textsuperscript{92} More recently, throughout Operation Vigilant Resolve
during the US occupation of Iraq in 2004, US forces allowed just three of sixty vehicles
carrying relief supplies, food and medicine into the city Fallujah as part of their counter-
insurgency operations.\textsuperscript{93} This blockade was designed to force an end to the support of
insurgents by downgrading the living conditions of all of the city’s inhabitants. In 2015, a UN
OCHA study asserted that Israeli and Egyptian blockade on the Gaza Strip had undermined
the living conditions of its 2 million inhabitants, saying “[the] restrictions have reduced
access to livelihoods, essential services and housing, disrupted family life, and undermined
the people’s hopes for a secure and prosperous future”.\textsuperscript{94}

Given technological advances in the modern day, governments and occupying powers
have increasingly sought to destroy the means of modern urban life in a systematic manner, a
tactic known as ‘urbicide’. Employed as a facet of counter-insurgency, urbicide targets the
modern infrastructure upon which urban populations rely, including systems of electricity,
communications, water, sanitation, and transportation.\textsuperscript{95} Tactics of urbicide aim to render a
city uninhabitable, forcing the residents into submission by turning daily life into a ‘massive
struggle against darkness, cold, immobility, hunger, isolation, fear of crime and violence, and
a catastrophic and rapid degeneration in public health’.\textsuperscript{96}

Other forms of urbicide reshape the physical geography of a city to assert the complete
dominance of a power over its enemy. War mobilizes a charged dialectic of attachment to

\textsuperscript{92} Khalili, p. 194.
\textsuperscript{93} Dahr Jamail, \textit{Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Embedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq}, (2007), 124.
\textsuperscript{94} UN OCHA, “Gaza Crossings: Trends in Movement of People and Goods” (March 2015) [accessed online 02/04/16: \url{http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/gaza_crossings_trends_in_movement_of_people_and_goods.pdf}]
\textsuperscript{95} Graham, p. 84.
\textsuperscript{96} Graham, p. 265.
place: the idea that ‘our’ places are the antithesis of those of the demonized enemy.\textsuperscript{97}

Therefore, the very physicality of cities is also rendered a legitimate target of violence in counter-insurgencies, with whole neighbourhoods sometimes razed to the ground in retaliation for having harboured insurgents. Given that tactics of urbicide do not discriminate between armed fighters and civilians, they constitute a form of collective punishment.

The 1982 Hama uprising provides one of the first examples in which Hafez al-Assad used urbicide as a tactic of counter-insurgency. Following the Muslim Brotherhood’s calls for Hama’s population to rise up against Assad’s regime in 1982, the regime carefully employed rhetoric in a way that would mobilize society for a brutal campaign of counterinsurgency, with Patrick Seale describing Hafez al-Assad as having turned from a recluse into an orator ‘able to set large audiences alight and to do so night after night’ with his fiery speeches.\textsuperscript{98}

Two divisions of the SAA, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Armoured Division under the command of General Shafiq Fayyad and the Defence Brigades under the command of Rifaat al-Assad joined forces to quash the rebellion. These loyal divisions were joined by pro-regime paramilitary forces which had been carefully recruited and armed by the regime.\textsuperscript{99} Rifaat al-Assad employed rhetoric that was consistent with collective punishment, stating that ‘those who are not with the regime must now be considered against it’.\textsuperscript{100}

The assault began with several days of street battles, but then, after this proved insufficient, a high-intensity siege was imposed, and indiscriminate shelling destroyed whole neighbourhoods of the city.\textsuperscript{101} Following this assault, army bulldozers were sent to flatten the smoking shells of buildings, allowing ground troops to advance, but also wiping the sites of


\textsuperscript{100} Seale, (1988), p. 327.

rebellion from Hama’s geography. Tens of thousands of the city’s fleeing inhabitants were arrested at the security ring the regime forces had imposed. Estimates of the dead range from 10,000 to 40,000.

**Syrian military doctrine**

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

The Soviet Union adopted siege tactics resembling those employed in rural areas of Syria today when fighting Ukrainian separatists in the 1940s and 1950s, as it established outposts and checkpoints on all roads and trails connecting villages thought to be harbouring insurgents, thus cutting off their access to provisions and critical supplies. However, until the occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, the Soviet Union had little experience in counter-

---

104 Robert Fisk estimates that the number of casualties was ‘as high as 10,000’ in *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon* (Nation Books: 2002), p. 186; Lefevre estimates the figure of 40,000 in *Ashes of Hama* (2013) p. 59.
106 Idem.
107 Ibid., p. 550.
insurgency, and had not developed a nuanced military doctrine that could respond to such threats.\footnote{Scott McMichael. “The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War” in Parameters (December 1989), p. 23.} As a result, the Soviet Union relied on a tactic in Afghanistan that had previously proven successful, and which exploited an advantage it maintained over mujahedeen – overpowering military force through its superior artillery.\footnote{Idem.} In Herat, a city that was a centre of urban guerrillas, the Soviets engaged in such extensive shelling that three-quarters of the urban centre was reduced to rubble.\footnote{Zukhov, p. 290.} Rifaat al-Assad, one of the key commanders in the Hama offensive, trained at the Soviet Yekaterinberg Artillery Academy, and it was there that he likely learned such tactics. Thus, it seems probable that the tactic adopted by the SAA of overwhelmingly relying upon tank artillery fire in the operations against the insurgents in Hama was a product of Soviet military doctrine.\footnote{Eisenstadt and Pollack, p. 558.}

The military relationship between Russia and Syria has continued until the present day, and during this time Russia has honed its doctrine of counter-insurgency through its involvement in other conflicts. During the second Chechnyan war in the late 1990s, the Russian military combined the heavy bombardment that had characterised many of its previous military operations with a military and economic blockade designed to choke any external support.\footnote{Robert Schaefer. The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad, (2011), p. 210.} Given that reports of Russian military advisors embedded with the SAA have surfaced throughout the conflict, it seems probable that Russian military doctrine has had an impact on the tactics employed by the SAA.\footnote{For example, see: The Guardian, “Russian Military Presence in Syria Poses Challenge to US-led Intervention” (December 23, 2012) [accessed online, 01/10/16: \url{http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/23/syria-crisis-russian-military-presence}]} However, it is also important to remember that many of the same Syrian military officers who played a role in the 1982 Hama offensive retain roles in the SAA today. While Rifaat al-Assad and Shafiq Fayyad were
respectively exiled from Syria and retired from the SAA in 1995, younger officers remained in the SAA.\textsuperscript{115} Since the Syrian regime’s brutal crackdown in 1982 and up until March 2011, opponents of the government suffered from torture, detention and long prison sentences, but no military operations of the same scale were attempted.\textsuperscript{116} This implies that the Syrian military’s tactics of quashing rebellion in Hama were highly successful, and so it is understandable that the regime would look to siege tactics as a proven means of putting down rebellion. Having witnessed the toppling of Tunisian president Ben Ali and Egyptian president Mubarak, the Syrian regime’s response was also based on the premise that they did not repress the popular protests quickly enough. The following section will explore how and why the Syrian regime employed this tactic of counter-insurgency during the current conflict.

\textbf{2.3 The use of sieges in the current conflict}

During the early stages of the uprising that erupted in Dera’a in March 2011, the Syrian regime employed rhetoric in a manner that is typical of Ucko’s model of authoritarian counter-insurgency. In his national address on 30\textsuperscript{th} March 2011, President Bashar al-Assad argued that Syria was ‘facing a great conspiracy’ at the hands of ‘imperial forces’ who were supported by foreigners and media groups.\textsuperscript{117} This rhetoric reflects the established tactic of counter-insurgency to create divisions between those ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the nation.\textsuperscript{118} Until late March 2011, all protests were depicted as a ‘decisive threat’.\textsuperscript{119} However, in subsequent speeches in early April, as it became clear that the protests were not dying down and due to external pressure, Assad changed tack and proposed limited political reforms.

\textsuperscript{115} Author’s interview with Syrian military analyst (June 2015).
\textsuperscript{117} Syrian Arab News Agency, President al-Assad’s Speech to the Syrian Parliament (March 30, 2011)
\textsuperscript{118} Graham, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{119} Crisis Group, (July 2011), p. 9.
acknowledging the presence of some protestors with legitimate demands.\textsuperscript{120} When this too failed to quell the protests, once again Assad differentiated between categories of people. In a speech at Damascus University on June 20, 2011, he argued that there were three different categories of people involved in the unrest in his country: those with legitimate concerns; outlaws; and \textit{takfiri} extremists who tried to ‘sneak into Syria’. This rhetoric represented another attempt to paint all dissenters as foreigners or criminals, distinguishing between ‘Syrians’ and ‘saboteurs’.\textsuperscript{121}

Military operations conducted by Syrian authorities to quash the growing insurgency mirrored the broad dichotomy between those who were with the regime and those who were against it, and whole geographical areas were categorised as being one or the other, making no attempt to distinguish between legitimate protestors and those allegedly involved in violence.\textsuperscript{122} The SAA’s military operations were all-encompassing and unforgiving, constituting collective punishment in a way similar to Hama in 1982.\textsuperscript{123} Having failed to stop protestors continually taking to the streets chanting anti-regime slogans by firing upon them, the Syrian military opted to deploy all-out military force in a way that would reduce the spatial possibilities for insurgency. The first siege was imposed on the city of Dera’a.

On April 25, 2011, the army surrounded Dera’a, cut water and electricity supplies, shelled the city and prevented the entry of humanitarian aid to the besieged population by either aid agencies or civilians.\textsuperscript{124} Security forces opened fire on residents who attempted to

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{120} See: Decree No. 146 (April 14, 2011); Decree No. 161 (April 21, 2011); and Decree No. 151 (April 21 2011)
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{121} Syrian Arab News Agency, \textit{President al-Assad’s Speech at the University of Damascus} (June 30, 2011).
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{123} Zisser, Eyal. \textit{“Alone at the Top” in Strategic Assessment} Vol 16, No. 3 (October 2013), p. 60.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}
leave their houses in search of food or medicine for the wounded during the 11-day siege.\textsuperscript{125} The SAA would replicate this pattern across many sites of unrest across the country in their attempt to quash the current uprising. The justification employed for the high levels of political violence in official rhetoric was that after the reforms Assad had promised, the grounds for continued demonstrations had been removed.\textsuperscript{126} On April 16, Assad had declared ‘with these laws, we draw a line between reform and sabotage’.\textsuperscript{127}

The Syrian military considered the first siege in Dera’a to have been successful, withdrawing on May 5, 2011. Sieges were also imposed on Douma, Zabadani, Baniyas and the Bab al-Seba’a and Baba Amr areas of Homs city between April 25 and May 6, 2011. The sieges aimed to restrict the geographical possibilities of insurgents’ attacks by hermetically sealing populated areas thought to be harbouring fighters, preventing their escape. Checkpoints were erected at strategic entry points to the encircled urban areas, and snipers often covered areas in between, shooting all those attempting to escape.\textsuperscript{128} Restrictions on movement were combined with artillery shelling, although at this early stage in the conflict, it did not specifically target infrastructure required for urban life as is common with tactics of urbicide. Rather, these attacks seem to have constituted a common tactic of authoritarian counter-insurgency by seeking to terrorise the besieged populations and turn them against the rebels, thus preventing their mobilisation.\textsuperscript{129} The initial tactic of besieging restive areas was intended to be a short-term military tactic, using enemy-centric methods of counter-insurgency including violence and terror to force populations to withdraw perceived support for armed insurgents. However, as these tactics proved insufficient to control areas of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{125} Human Rights Watch, “We’ve Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces” (June 2011), p. 5.
\textsuperscript{126} Crisis Group (July 2011), p. 9.
\textsuperscript{127} Syrian Arab News Agency, President al-Assad’s Speech to the Syrian Parliament (April 16, 2011).
\textsuperscript{128} Author’s interview with former resident of Dera’a, (May 2015).
\textsuperscript{129} Author’s interview with resident of Homs, (June 2015); Ucko (2015), p. 16.
\end{flushleft}
rebellion, the SAA shifted to a systematic campaign of destroying vital sites of civilian infrastructure in a way that would force besieged populations to surrender by starving them. Investigating how siege tactics were deployed in specific areas helps explain how the regime protected its grip over Damascus, which was crucial to its hold on power. The regime first employed tactics of urbicide in a besieged area in the southern suburbs of Damascus, in Yarmouk Camp.

An Urban Siege – The siege of Yarmouk, Damascus

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

---

130 These are commonly cited figures (see Nidal Bitari, “Yarmuk Refugee Camp and the Syrian Uprising: A View from Within” in *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 43, No. 1, (2013/14).) but these numbers are likely to include the populations of surrounding areas including Hajar al-Aswad, Yalda and Babila.
131 Nidal Bitari, “Yarmuk Refugee Camp and the Syrian Uprising”.
132 Idem.
133 Author’s interview with former resident of Yarmouk camp, (May 2015)
In August 2012, the SAA shelled the camp for the first time, reportedly killing 21 civilians. In December 2012, hostilities reached a climax and a battle between armed opposition groups and pro-government forces erupted. In an important escalation in the conflict, on December 16, 2012, Syrian jets were used for the first time during the conflict to bomb densely populated areas of the camp. The regime claimed this was a mistake, but indiscriminate bombing was to become a common feature of the SAA’s counter-insurgency tactics, especially as the regime’s forces were increasingly stretched after continued defections and mounting casualties.

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

Systematically destroying the infrastructure upon which the camps’ residents relied, including water, sanitation and electricity networks, the SAA prevented the movement of all people and goods in and out of the camp until April 2014. During this time, humanitarian conditions deteriorated to become some of the worst in the whole conflict. Amnesty International estimates that at least 194 civilians died, most by starvation (128), and others

134 Al-Arabiya, “At least 21 killed in shelling on Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Syria: NGO” (August 3, 2012) [accessed online 01/09/16: http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/03/230127.html]
136 Author’s interview with UN official (May 2015).
137 Author’s interview with UN official (June 2015).
138 The Syrian government provided Yarmouk camp with sanitation services, which is one of the reasons why it is not formally recognised as a camp by UNRWA.
due to lack of adequate medical care or shooting by snipers while foraging for food.\textsuperscript{139} In early 2014, the camp’s residents broke into an abandoned spice factory and survived for months from boiling weeds, spices and water into a kind of broth, drinking just one cup a day.\textsuperscript{140} A number of residents reported having survived off nothing more than this for many weeks at a time.\textsuperscript{141} A fatwa was also issued by Salah al-Khatib, imam of Yarmouk’s largest mosque, in October 2013, lifting religious restrictions on eating cats and dogs in a desperate attempt to stop people starving.\textsuperscript{142}

Beyond malnutrition, as a result of the tactics of urbicide the medical situation deteriorated with the destruction of the camp’s infrastructure. With no electricity networks and severely limited supplies of fuel, residents of Yarmouk resorted to burning wood salvaged from destroyed buildings and SAMS cites smoke inhalation as the cause of death for a resident Yarmouk.\textsuperscript{143} Severe shortages in medical supplies and the inability to operate what medical equipment was not damaged due to a lack of electricity led to fatalities from easily-treatable medical problems. For example, several women died during childbirth.\textsuperscript{144} As a further result of the breakdown of sanitation, communicable diseases have proliferated. After months of fears of the spread of typhoid in the camp, UNRWA detected as many as 90 cases among those residents of Yarmouk who were able to exit the camp to UNRWA mobile health units in the neighbouring area of Yalda in September 2015.\textsuperscript{145} The Syrian regime has attempted to justify the blockade on basic medical supplies, including bandages and baby formula, on the basis that they could be used to treat wounded opposition fighters.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{139} Amnesty International, “Squeezing Yarmouk”, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{140} Author’s interview with resident of the Yarmouk, (June 2015).
\textsuperscript{141} Author’s interview with former resident of Yarmouk, (June 2015).
\textsuperscript{142} Telegraph, “\textit{Eat cats and dogs, imam tells starving Syrians}” (October 15, 2013)
\textsuperscript{143} SAMS, “\textit{Slow Death}”, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{144} Steele, Jonathan, “How Yarmouk Camp became the worst place in Syria” in \textit{The Guardian} (March 5, 2015).
\textsuperscript{146} Author’s interview with Yarmouk resident (July 2015).
Because of the difficulties in getting basic goods into the camp during the most severe times of the siege, prices of basic food items increased exponentially, as seen in the table below (in Syrian pounds and U.S. dollars to control for the inflation of the Syrian pound).

Figure 1 Comparison of prices of staple goods in Yarmouk before the siege and when they reached their height during the siege based on author’s data collected from residents of the camp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food item</th>
<th>February 2011 Prices (pre-siege)</th>
<th>April 2014 Prices</th>
<th>Increase (in USD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SYP</td>
<td>USD</td>
<td>SYP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice (1 kg)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (1 kg)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flour (1 kg)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread (1.5 kg)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

A Rural Siege – The siege of Douma, the Eastern Ghouta

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

By the end of 2012, after a prolonged period of fighting, large areas of the Eastern Ghouta had fallen under the control of an array of 16 different armed opposition groups. Unlike the urban Yarmouk camp which could be surrounded and cut off with comparative ease, the rural lands of the Eastern Ghouta proved much more difficult to isolate, and this explains the proliferation of the various armed groups in the area. In 2013, leaders and civil servants from Douma who had defected from the regime created a local council that provided some services autonomously from the regime, including street cleaning, and the issuance of birth and death certificates. In this way, Douma represented one of the only credible attempts for opposition factions to establish an alternative administrative system to that of the regime, and became a military and administrative centre for opposition-held areas of the Eastern Ghouta. Determined to destroy this rival administration, but lacking the resources to

147 Author’s interview with Kheder Khaddour, Carnegie Middle East Center (February 23, 2016).
148 Author’s interview with Kheder Khaddour (February 23, 2016).
launch a full-scale attack into the area, the SAA established a full siege around the whole of the Eastern Ghouta area in October 2013, mirroring the second stage of the occupying French forces’ counter-insurgency operations against rebels in the area. A number of towns and villages fell inside the siege, including Harasta, Douma, Adra, Al-Marj, Siqba, Maliha, Irbin and Kafr Batna.\textsuperscript{151} The SAA imposed the siege by establishing a number of checkpoints at strategic entry points around the perimeter of the area, with snipers covering the farmland in between, in which they planted mines.\textsuperscript{152}

The siege that ensued destroyed much of the infrastructure in Douma, delivering a critical blow to opposition factions’ ability to use it as an administrative centre, and meaning that Doumanis primary concern became ‘simply avoiding death and finding food and shelter’.\textsuperscript{153} In June 2015, residents of Douma reported that the only water extracted from wells by hand pumps was available, and generators provided a maximum of 2 hours of electricity a day. In February 2015, local councils made the decision to restrict school hours, only opening early in the mornings “before air strikes begin.”\textsuperscript{154} In addition to almost daily shelling and airstrikes on civilian areas, an infamous Sarin chemical attack on August 21, 2013 is considered to be one of the most serious human rights abuses during the Syria conflict, killing hundreds of civilians.\textsuperscript{155} Although the regime denied responsibility for the attack and a UN investigation was careful not to apportion blame for the attack, a report conducted by Human Rights Watch came to the conclusion that Syrian government forces were ‘almost certainly responsible’.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{151} See Map 2 in the Appendices.
\textsuperscript{152} Author’s interview with resident of Douma, (May 2015).
\textsuperscript{153} Author’s interview with resident of Douma, (May 2015).
\textsuperscript{154} Teacher in Douma, quoted in Amnesty International “Left to Die Under Siege,” p. 22.
\textsuperscript{155} Amnesty International. “Left to Die Under Siege” (August 2015), p. 16, using data from the VDC: http://www.vdc-sy.info/
\textsuperscript{156} Human Rights Watch, “Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria” (September 10, 2013).
Unlike the urban siege of Yarmouk, the presence of agricultural lands inside the besieged area of the Eastern Ghouta produces dynamics that render the nature of the siege distinct from those that the SAA imposed in urban areas. Firstly, the farmland inside the siege provides a limited source of food for the besieged population. While limited access to water and the lack of diesel to power agricultural equipment have meant that agricultural output has been severely damaged, farmers have continued to cultivate crops and orchards in an attempt to provide food for the besieged market. However, airstrikes frequently bomb crops during or just before the harvest period, showing that even in the case of rural sieges, starvation remains a key aim of the SAA’s siege tactics. An UN official who entered Douma as part of an aid convoy described the besieged population as ‘skeletons floating in their clothes’. 

As with Yarmouk Camp, the medical situation in the besieged areas of the Eastern Ghouta is dire. After regime strikes destroyed the electricity, water and sanitation networks in the winter of 2012-13, residents resorted to irrigating agricultural lands with sewage-contaminated water, which the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) linked to the outbreak of typhoid in Douma in August 2014. SAMS staff operating in the Eastern Ghouta estimate that even with bribes, the amount of medical supplies that they can smuggle in amounts to less than 5 percent of what is needed. As with the siege of Yarmouk, many people living in Douma and the wider Eastern Ghouta area have died as a direct result of the conditions brought about by the siege. During the period between October 21, 2012 and January 31, 2013 alone, SAMS collected evidence of at least 208 civilians in the Eastern Ghouta having died from malnutrition or lack of access to medical care.

---

157 Questionnaire responses from residents of Douma (June 2015).
159 Author’s interview with UN official (June 2015).
Besieging the Eastern Ghouta served two principal purposes in terms of the regime’s problems with manpower. Firstly, planting mines around the besieged area and manning the checkpoints was a means of isolating the area with limited manpower. Secondly, the siege of the Eastern Ghouta was one of the first instances in which the regime exploited the conditions of the siege to conscript young males into the army. The regime detained and forcibly conscripted some of these young men at checkpoints, but for others, unemployment, the dire humanitarian conditions and the continued military attacks led them to the conclusion that joining the SAA was the only means of escaping the situation. Therefore, siege tactics not only helped the regime to operate with limited manpower, but they were also a means of remedying these problems, as conscription is a common feature across various sieges.

Conclusion

Because the Syrian regime is authoritarian, its counter-insurgency campaign has not been subject to many of the constraints that affect other governments. In a comparable manner to authoritarian counter-insurgencies elsewhere, the Syrian regime has utilized indiscriminate violence and countered this with narratives that sought to mobilise the Syrian population against those deemed to be foreign insurgents. Seen as a tried-and-tested tactic of counter-insurgency based on Hafez al-Assad’s brutal quashing of the Islamist insurgency in Hama in 1982, sieges were imposed early on in the conflict across the country, in an attempt to mirror this past success. When the insurgency evolved into civil war in 2012, and as the SAA became increasingly over-stretched, sieges proved an even more effective tactic for the regime, as they required limited manpower, and provided opportunities for conscripting civilians into the army. Sieges also allowed the regime to utilise the military advantage that

163 Author’s interview with Valerie Szybala, (February 23, 2016).
164 Author’s interview with INGO worker (June 2015)
its air-force provided. Air attacks intensified the sieges, transforming the military blockades into a systematic campaign of urbicide in an attempt to render life in the besieged areas impossible.

Therefore, siege warfare is a military tactic that helps explain the longevity of the conflict in Syria. The Syrian regime’s tactics of counter-insurgency were instrumental in its strategy of protecting certain key strongholds, and sieges were a central element of this strategy. As we have seen, whenever a threat to Damascus emerged, such as in Yarmouk camp or in the Eastern Ghouta, the regime employed sieges to isolate the centres of rebellion and cut them off from external support, thus staving off the threat to the city. This logic also explains the prolonged siege the regime imposed on the city of Homs, which occupies a strategic location in between Damascus and Aleppo, and on the corridor from the capital to the Mediterranean coast.165 Controlling these key cities was crucial for the regime to maintain the legitimacy it was afforded by presenting itself as the sole actor capable of providing stability and services to the Syrian people, which explains its continuing support from a segment of Syrian society.

However, as they cause such severe humanitarian conditions and extreme levels of destruction, it may seem surprising that many sieges failed to force the besieged populations to surrender, and instead have endured for many years. Some scholars, including Stathis Kalyvas, have argued that indiscriminate violence is often counter-productive, and that it actually provokes rather than dissuades insurgent violence.166 However, the following chapter

will turn to a different factor that explains why sieges have endured, and in turn which has fuelled the continuation of the conflict – the war economy.
Chapter Three  Profiteering from Suffering: Sieges and the War Economy

“Only corruption can explain how this siege has lasted so long”

If the aim of a siege is to force the besieged population into submission by preventing its access to the goods that are necessary for its survival, then the widespread practice of paying bribes to besieging forces to allow certain goods into those areas is difficult to explain. The prevalence of bribery would seem to indicate that, to some extent, economic incentives have superseded the military objectives of siege tactics in Syria. Other illicit tactics of revenue generation which benefit armed groups, including extortion and new trading arrangements, have also emerged in besieged areas. As we shall see, some armed groups in Syria have sought to protect these economic practices by resisting attempts to alter the dynamics of the siege. In this chapter, I will argue that these economic practices have entrenched stalemates in various key areas across the country, thus prolonging the conflict.

As the previous chapter described, the Syrian regime pursued enemy-centric counter-insurgency tactics in an attempt to uproot armed opposition groups in populated areas. In some areas of Syria, including Homs city, this military tactic ultimately proved successful as the regime’s relentless bombardment forced armed opponents to negotiate the terms of their evacuation from the besieged areas. As the conflict devolved into a war of attrition and the regime suffered from debilitating shortages, siege warfare became an increasingly attractive tactic. However, this chapter looks beyond the military aspect of sieges, to the illicit economic practices that occur in many sieges across Syria. Definitions of illicit economic

---

167 Questionnaire response from resident of Douma (July 2015).
168 All of the 19 responses to the questionnaires, across six different besieged areas, indicated the existence of bribery at checkpoints around the besieged area.
169 Loveday Morris. “Syrian rebels evacuating Homs after cease-fire deal that also calls for them to release prisoners” in The Washington Post (May 7, 2014) [accessed online 02/08/16 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-evacuate-homs-after-cease-fire-deal/2014/05/07/3433c858-3699-40ba-8b53-39a9d23708a8_story.html]
practices tend to view them in light of a shadow economy, referring to the production of goods and services that are deliberately concealed from public officials.\textsuperscript{171} Yet in Syria, as we shall see, many of these practices are conducted by Syrian state officials themselves, or condoned by them. Thus, in this chapter, ‘illicit economic practices’ refer to informal monetary or material exchanges, including those performed by state officials. These illicit economic practices have often worked against the military objectives of a siege, and have facilitated sieges’ longevity. For example, the siege of the Eastern Ghouta has endured from its initial imposition in October 2013 until the time of writing in 2016.

Siege warfare has certainly resulted in high casualties, as a result of both the deprivation of basic goods and the military bombardments that so frequently constitute an element of the siege warfare. Indeed, cases of civilian casualties have been documented systematically by SAMS, which collected evidence of 565 siege-related deaths between August 2012, and January 2015.\textsuperscript{172} However, hundreds of thousands of other besieged civilians have survived despite the horrific conditions that armed groups impose on them. I contend that apart from the ingenious survival techniques that many besieged populations adopted, these besieged populations survived because they adapted to the new economic structures that emerged as part of the siege economy, involving smuggling and bribery.\textsuperscript{173} Furthermore, I will argue that armed groups do not want besieged populations to die, as doing so would reduce the financial benefits they have grown accustomed to extracting from these populations and those who support them.

\textsuperscript{171} See the discussion of the shadow economy in Friedrich Schneider “The Size of the Shadow Economies of 145 Countries all over the World: First Results over the Period 1999 to 2003” IZA Discussion Paper No. 1431 (December 2004)
\textsuperscript{172} For a detailed breakdown of the casualties’ names, ages, causes of death and evidence, see http://syriaundersiege.org/annex-a-siege-dataset/
\textsuperscript{173} These methods are not discussed, so that armed actors cannot access information about them, enabling them to clamp down.
Therefore, the main focus of this chapter will be an investigation of the extent to which economic factors can help explain the longevity of the sieges, and in turn, the longevity of the Syrian conflict as a whole. I will begin by examining the emergence of the war economy in Syria and will then explore the legacy of corruption in the Syrian regime, and some of its manifestations in the current conflict. This background will provide the context for my discussion of the economic structures that underlie siege tactics in Syria, as I attempt to identify those who seek to prolong sieges as a result of benefiting both economically and materially from their imposition. Here, I will analyse the economic data I collected from my case-study siege of the Eastern Ghouta, including rates of smuggling and bribery, and the internal market prices. I will then discuss the two remaining categories of sieges from my classifications, ‘post-truce’ sieges and ‘double’ sieges, by looking at the case-study sieges of al-Wa’er and Deir ez-Zor city. Finally, I will turn to the impact of humanitarian aid on besieged areas, and the relationship between external assistance and the longevity of the siege.

3.1 The emergence of war economies

Waging war is a costly endeavour. In addition to the expenses of weapons, military equipment and ammunition, military actors have to pay, feed, treat and transport troops, repair damage to vital infrastructure, and provide social services to those living in the areas under their control. Therefore, wars represent a ‘continuation of economics by other means’, as new economic structures emerge to sustain these costs.174 During situations of war, governmental structures often decay and the state loses its monopoly of the legitimate use of

violence. As such, the economies of war are characterised by new economic networks and means of generating income, and these are often illicit. Indeed, war erodes the separation between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ means of generating revenue. It should be recognised that new illicit economic structures are especially prevalent in rebel-held areas where the state can no longer control economic activity, but that in some cases governments also adopt such economic practices to increase their revenues from the areas under their control. Examples of these illicit economic practices include bribery, extortion, smuggling, and unregulated trade.

Actors who gain financially or materially from these illicit economic practices have an interest in preserving them, and often resist any attempts to counter them. Therefore, those who control the economic structures of war and benefit from them have more to gain from a situation of conflict than one of peace, and thus act against attempts to end the conflict. As those who benefit from the situation of the conflict become richer and more powerful, those exploited become less influential in equal measure, and are thus less able to counter the new economic practices. Thus, a discussion of the emergence of the war economy and its entrenchment is crucial to my analysis of the longevity of the conflict in Syria.

Military groups’ economic incentives are likely to outweigh their desire to win the support of the populations in the areas under their control, as the pressing need to fund the

---

175 The idea of a state monopolising the legitimate use of physical force was developed by Max Weber in his 1919 essay “Politics as a Vocation”; Jurgen Endres. “Profiting from war: Economic rationality and war in Lebanon” in Dietrich Jung (ed.) Shadow Globalization, Ethnic Conflicts and New Wars: A Political Economy of Intra-State War (Routledge: 2003) p. 121.
war effort makes short-term tactics prevail over longer-term strategies.\textsuperscript{179} Beyond illicit practices of bribery and extortion, the demand for revenue encourages new trading arrangements. These new economic relationships may even develop between two conflicting sides in a war. For example, in Syria the main buyer of oil generated from ISIS-held areas is reportedly the Syrian regime, despite the two factions claiming to be staunch enemies and engaged in clashes throughout the country.\textsuperscript{180} On November 25, 2015, the U.S. Treasury announced sanctions against George Haswani for ‘materially assisting and acting for or on behalf of the Government of Syria… [Haswani] serves as a middleman for oil purchases by the Syrian regime from [ISIS]’\textsuperscript{181}

Before examining the economic practices that prevail in Syria during the current conflict, and specifically those operating in besieged areas in Syria, it is necessary to provide the context in which they emerged by assessing the overall economic impact of the Syrian conflict.

The Syrian economy during the current conflict

Accurately assessing the impact of the war on Syria’s economy is a challenge given the lack of reliable data. However, it is beyond doubt that nearly five years of conflict have had a considerable and highly detrimental impact on the Syrian economy. Assets and infrastructure have been destroyed, economic output has dropped, and investment has dramatically declined.\textsuperscript{182} In a UN-sponsored report released in March 2015, the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) estimated that 82.5 percent of Syrians lived in poverty, with 64.7

\textsuperscript{179} Endres, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{182} Yazigi, Jihad. “Syria’s War Economy”, p. 1.
percent in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, unemployment rose from 14.9 percent to 57.7 percent between 2011 and 2015. Jihad Yazigi, a Syrian economist, estimated that $200 billion would be needed to rebuild the country to pre-war levels.

Yazigi highlights a number of stages of economic decline during the war. The first was the collapse of the tourist industry in the summer of 2011, which contributed to declining levels of consumption and investment. To combat this, the regime attempted to stimulate consumption by increasing public sector salaries and subsidies on heating oil. The next phase came in the autumn of 2011, when Syria’s fiscal revenues dropped dramatically as a result of Western sanctions on Syria. Particularly harmful to the economy was the European Union’s imposition of sanctions on Syrian oil exports, which represented 90 percent of the state’s foreign currency revenue before the war in 2011. As a result, the regime turned to its foreign currency reserves, which have now been depleted considerably. Yet as Iran began providing the regime with financial assistance for imports in 2013, including for oil, the impact of the sanctions was lessened, and they failed to achieve their goal – regime change.

The third phase of economic deterioration began in the summer of 2012 when Aleppo, Syria’s economic powerhouse, was engulfed in violence. Almost all manufacturing exports halted, and significant numbers of individuals from the middle class business community fled

---

184 Syrian Center for Policy Research, p. 34.
185 Katarina Montgomery, “‘Syria Won't Recover for Decades’ - An Expert's View on The Cost of War on The Country” in Syria Deeply (June 16, 2015) [accessed online 02/20/16: http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/06/7440/syria-recover-decades-experts-view-cost-war-country/]
186 The Syria Report, “Syrian President Announces Significant Increases in benefits for Civil Servants” (March 29, 2011).
187 Yazigi, p.2
188 The Syrian government has not released data, but multiple reports (Yazigi, SCPR etc) confirm this.
189 Yazigi, p.2
the country.\textsuperscript{191} The fourth stage occurred when the government lost control of many of Syria’s natural resources, including oil facilities in the northeast of the country in 2014. After this point, the government had to rely on international assistance from states such as Iran and Russia to an even greater extent.\textsuperscript{192}

However, in spite of these economic challenges, Bashar al-Assad has expended considerable resources to ensure that services are still provided for areas under regime control, knowing that the continued support of elements of the Syrian population is contingent on the relative stability that the regime can provide. As discussed in the previous chapter, this has been a significant factor in explaining the regime’s survival, and thus the longevity of the conflict as a whole. With this in mind, throughout the conflict the state has continued to provide water, electricity, education, health services and basic commodities to the majority of those living under its control.\textsuperscript{193} This has been possible due to the cuts in government spending, economic assistance from external allies, the support of many of the business elite, and finding new sources of revenue. The Syrian government stopped all investment projects except in a few strategic projects of high importance, such as new power plants. Exact figures of Iranian credit assistance to Damascus are not available, but estimates suggest that $5.8 billion was offered as early as July 2011, and in 2013, Iran granted two credit facilities to Assad to the value of $4.3 billion.\textsuperscript{194} Bashar al-Assad’s economic reforms during the first decade of his presidency resulted in the concentration of vast wealth in the hands of a few in the business elite, such as Rami Makhlouf.\textsuperscript{195} These individuals have proved to be an indispensable source of financial support for the regime during the conflict,

\textsuperscript{191} Yazigi, p.2.
\textsuperscript{192} Idem.
\textsuperscript{193} Kheder Khaddour “The Assad Regime’s Hold on the Syrian State”, \textit{Carnegie Middle East Center} (July 2015).
\textsuperscript{194} Yazigi, p. 4.
with their loyalty guaranteed by the fact that their financial interests are so closely linked to the survival of the regime.

The final survival mechanism involved finding new internal sources of income. In this process, the Syrian regime has not been able to prevent – and indeed as we shall see, has encouraged – the emergence of a war economy. This economy is ‘decentralized, fragmented and globalized’, and the main economic activities largely depend on violence. However, these illicit economic practices did not suddenly emerge in Syria in the chaos of the current conflict, but rather have a long precedent. The next section will discuss the legacy of corruption and patronage in Syria.

3.2 Corruption and patronage in Syria

Illicit economic practices in Syria have existed as long as the modern state itself. The borders of the Sykes-Picot Agreement created barriers to the traditional trading routes that had existed throughout the Ottoman period. In an attempt to evade these colonial borders and their high tariffs, smuggling networks proliferated during the mandate period and continued after Syria’s independence in 1945. Smugglers in the Levant not only dealt in basic commodities, but also in narcotics, and some estimates suggest that as much as 50 percent of Lebanon’s economy depended on smuggling hashish. When Syria began its occupation of Lebanon in 1976, drug traders were forced to enter into relationships with Syrian regime officials, and especially members of the SAA. Threatening smugglers with arrest, Syrian

---

196 Turkmani et al. “Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria”, p.11.
officials profited from the drug trade and other forms of illicit commerce by collecting bribes and imposing informal taxes on smuggled goods. Therefore, the Syrian government either directly facilitated or directly taxed smuggling networks, and at times this revenue constituted a large proportion of Syria’s GDP. In addition to Syrian officials, another important group also benefited from Syria’s occupation of Lebanon as a result of smuggling – the shabiha. These infamous militias grew out of predominantly Alawite smuggling networks which operated between Lebanon and Syria following 1976. Yassin al-Haj Salih argues that the shabiha are defined by four basic characteristics: sectarian ties to the President; a predisposition to violence; unwavering obedience to leaders; and profiting economically from criminal activities. Many shabiha come from low socio-economic backgrounds with very limited levels of education, but have built power and wealth through state-sanctioned racketeering and exploitation, such as smuggling from Lebanon.

In the 1990s, pressure from the United States and European countries forced the Syrian government to reduce its involvement in drug smuggling. As a result, the regime searched for new forms of economic revenue, and the UN sanctions against Iraq after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1991 provided this opportunity. Illicit trade between Syria and Iraq rose dramatically during the 1990s, as Syria attempted to benefit from Iraq’s need to circumvent the sanctions. When Syria finally withdrew from Lebanon in 2006, the regime’s revenues from illicit trading in Lebanon declined further. Desperate to compensate for these losses, the regime once again looked to Syria’s eastern border. Smugglers report that exactions by government officials on illicit transactions almost doubled in 2007 alone – from

---

201 The origins of the name shabiha are contested, but it is believed to relate to the Arabic word shabh (ghost), whereas others contend that it refers to Mercedes’ ‘Shabih’ model which has a large trunk, and was often used for smuggling goods from Lebanon.
10-15 percent of a transaction to almost 30 percent.\textsuperscript{204} Therefore, the Syrian government either directly facilitated or taxed smuggling across its borders, adding to its revenues and also cementing the allegiance of low level government officials who took a small portion of these profits.\textsuperscript{205}

Beyond smuggling, the Syrian regime has maintained the loyalty of state officials and army officers by allowing them to profit from other illicit economic practices. Elie Elhadj argues that corruption is the ‘glue’ that has held the military, the Ba’th party, and the regime’s leadership together.\textsuperscript{206} Volker Perthes wrote in 1997:

‘The security apparatus accounts for much petty and grand corruption and other illegal business in [Syria]. Most of the military and security bosses have become patrons of and partners in private business, or have taken commissions on contracts between the state and international suppliers… Many officers have become conspicuously wealthy… Non-commissioned officers and privates may [also] engage in petty smuggling and corruption.’\textsuperscript{207}

Therefore, the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad allowed members of the SAA to engage in illicit economic practices as a means of ensuring their loyalty, by sanctioning their rapid wealth-accumulation. As a result, networks of corruption and patronage infested Syria, and expanded further after the outbreak of the uprising in 2011.

Smuggling practices have evolved over several distinct stages during the current conflict. Firstly, most smuggling centred around the transportation of weapons and ammunition to insurgent groups.\textsuperscript{208} As the Syrian regime lost control of border areas, smuggling increased substantially and benefited civilian populations in the conflict zone as

\textsuperscript{205} Herbert (2014), p. 75.
\textsuperscript{208} Daou, Rita. “Arms smuggling into Syria flourishes: experts,” AFP, (October 16, 2011) [accessed online 02/12/16: http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/features/arms-smuggling-into-syria-flourishes_2220]
well as insurgents, providing them with food, aid and opportunities for safe passage out of the fighting zones.\textsuperscript{209} One of the groups with the most experience of engaging in cross-border smuggling, as we saw above, was the \textit{shabiha}.

In times of crisis, the regimes of both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad turned to these loyal and ruthless forces to bolster their military capabilities as they represented a relatively cheap shield to bolster the regime’s defences.\textsuperscript{210} When the uprising in Syria broke out in March 2011, the ranks of the \textit{shabiha} swelled. Protestors reported that it was members of the \textit{shabiha} who were responsible for firing upon them during anti-government demonstrations.\textsuperscript{211} Many poor young men who suffered from the deteriorating economic conditions in Syria have seen joining the \textit{shabiha} as a means of providing for themselves and their families. Before the current conflict, the \textit{shabiha} were predominantly Alawi, but since the uprising in 2011, thugs from other sects also joined. In Aleppo, for example, the \textit{shabiha} are mainly Sunni thugs. The \textit{shabiha} have been accused of committing some of the worst atrocities in the Syrian conflict, including murder, rape, kidnapping, and theft.\textsuperscript{212} As well as the Syrian government, business owners (of various sects) have also employed pro-regime militias to protect their assets.\textsuperscript{213}

One of the most lucrative means by which pro-government militias (PGMs), including the \textit{shabiha}, have benefited economically from the conflict is from their control over checkpoints in Syria. Residents of Aleppo report that the Syrian regime gave PGMs free rein

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[209] Herbert (2014), p. 76.
\item[210] Estimates suggest that \textit{shabiha} members earn 7,000-10,000 SYP a day for working on Fridays, and 2,000 SYP for other days, Al-Haj Salih, p. 6.
\item[211] Peter Kellier (pseudonym). “Ghosts of Syria: Diehard Militias Who Kill in the Name of Assad” in The Guardian (May 31, 2012) [accessed online 02/13/16: \url{http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/31/ghosts-syria-regime-shabiha-militias}]
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
over areas of the city as a reward for joining the SAA in military offensives.\textsuperscript{214} Indeed, in mid-2012, the regime grew wary of PGMs growing power, and attempted to bring them under their control and institutionalise them. Militias were integrated into the National Defence Forces (NDF), and the regime gradually increased its material support and recognition for the group until, by spring 2013, the NDF had become a formal institution.\textsuperscript{215}

While the NDF followed the regime’s orders, many of the illicit economic practices they had previously engaged in continued. For example, the NDF are accused of demanding significant fees from civilians to pass through their checkpoints, and frequently seizing their valuables. Given that sieges are surrounded by checkpoints manned by armed forces, many of these practices are replicated in besieged areas, meaning that siege warfare has been a lucrative tactic for certain actors in the Syrian conflict.

### 3.3 Profiteering from sieges

Controlling the checkpoints that surround besieged areas has provided opportunities for many illicit economic practices, including bribery and informal taxation. The forces controlling the checkpoints of regime-imposed sieges are most often a combination of factions of the SAA and pro-government militias, both of which have a history of benefiting from these practices, as we have seen. Instances of armed groups allowing in goods to besieged areas in exchange for bribes are most common in rural sieges. Here, agricultural land is often contained within the perimeter of the siege in these areas, and so the population

\textsuperscript{214} Nizar Muhammad. “Shabiha Checkpoints in Aleppo. Pay to Pass” (hawājiz al-shabiḥa b- ḥalab. idfā’ tamurr) in \textit{Al-Jazeera} (March 3, 2015) [accessed online 02/13/16: http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/3/%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1 ]

\textsuperscript{215} Kheder Khaddour. “Securing the Syrian Regime” in \textit{Carnegie Middle East Center} (June 3, 2014).
has an (often limited) source of food. Thus, the tactic of attempting to starve the besieged population into submission is less feasible, which helps explain the prevalence of bribery.

Neither SAA soldiers nor members of the NDF are told how long they will be deployed to checkpoints. With the regime unable to pay their wages in full due to its increasing economic troubles, those posted to checkpoints are incentivised to exploit their position to its full potential before they are moved to another posting which may have limited opportunities for revenue generation, if at all.\(^\text{216}\) Indeed, soldiers are allowed to take a portion of the money they make through bribes, and the rest goes to the regime.\(^\text{217}\)

It is rare for civilians to pay armed groups at checkpoints directly for goods, but rather, intermediaries known as ‘traders’ perform the exchanges. Traders inside the besieged areas coordinate with businessmen outside the besieged area to deliver goods to the checkpoint. Both of these individuals must have relationships with regime or the armed forces manning the checkpoint, and pay them fees along the way. Businessmen outside the besieged areas can buy contracts from the highest levels of the regime in order to have an effective monopoly over the supply of a certain good into the besieged area. The trader inside the siege must also have a relationship with the armed groups operating inside the besieged area, and leave their zone of control to approach the government checkpoint. Again, fees or goods must be paid for the trader to pass between these zones of control and thus, the internal armed groups also profit from this process.\(^\text{218}\) Once these goods are inside the besieged area, the traders often hoard them and release them strategically to make maximum profit. As a result of these fees, the traders strategically releasing the supplies, and the high demand caused by the general lack of availability, basic goods are enormously expensive inside

\(^\text{216}\) Author’s interview with Kheder Khaddour (Feb 23, 2016). Mr Khaddour suggested that both militias and regular soldiers experience this phenomenon, as both groups are under the regime’s control.

\(^\text{217}\) Idem.

\(^\text{218}\) Sometimes these fees may constitute a portion of the goods rather than a cash payment, questionnaire response from resident of the Eastern Ghouta (June 2015).
besieged areas. Given extreme levels of unemployment poverty in besieged areas, civilians are only able to pay for these goods as a result of money transfers from relatives or connections living outside the besieged area, or due to assistance from humanitarian organisations. The financial and material exchanges between various actors in the siege of the Eastern Ghouta are summarized in the diagram below.

Figure 1 Exchanges of goods and money between various actors to get goods into the besieged area of the Eastern Ghouta

This diagram shows the number of different actors who benefit financially from the existence of the siege. It also shows how many different stages that aid provided by NGOs goes through in order to reach the besieged civilian population. Convoys from the UN are also unable to avoid interacting with the war economy, as there have been many occasions in

---

219 See Figure 3, below for an example of this.
220 This information is based on discussions between humanitarian and political experts at a round table event hosted by the British Embassy in Beirut (March 15, 2016).
221 The impact of humanitarian aid is discussed in great detail below in Section 3.4.
which aid has been removed at checkpoints. The actors in red are those in the Syrian regime; those in yellow are in armed opposition groups; those in blue are non-armed organisations; and the traders on each side of the siege are represented in two colours because they are not formally affiliated with armed groups, but in reality must have close connections with them in order to operate.

Traders also control the flow of goods out of besieged areas. Although goods tend to be severely depleted in besieged areas, at times farmers sell agricultural products to traders to be exported outside of the siege, and civilians also sell personal belongings to traders. Given the lack of electricity in the besieged areas, people inside do not have the means to use electrical goods and so traders purchase them and sell them on the outside. At each checkpoint that they pass, traders have to pay armed groups fees to pass with these goods. Therefore, exporting goods from besieged areas is another way in which both traders and armed groups benefit financially.

In response to the question ‘who benefits financially or materially from the siege?’, all 19 respondents to the survey from the various case study besieged areas in Syria answered that armed groups on both sides benefited. The extent to which armed groups on the inside exploit the situation for financial or material gain varies considerably. However, besieged residents expressed widespread resentment at the armed groups for hoarding supplies, diverting humanitarian aid, and profiting from the smuggling. Riots and protests against armed groups in besieged areas are common. Armed groups are not alone in having been accused of hoarding limited supplies. In the Eastern Ghouta, civilians rioted against a hospital

---

222 These transfers are less common and are not represented in Figure 2 for the sake of clarity.
223 A resident of Douma described having sold all of her gold to a trader in order to pay for basic supplies in a questionnaire response (June 2015).
224 Turkmani et al. “Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria”, p. 49.
225 Various questionnaire responses from Douma, Khan al-Shih, al-Qaboun, al-Wa’er and Yarmouk.
in 2015, accusing it of hoarding fuel.\textsuperscript{226} Civil society groups seem unable to constrain armed actors’ exploitation of the siege conditions, and struggle to challenge their relationships with traders.\textsuperscript{227}

Beyond smuggling and trading goods, armed actors on both sides often demand significant sums of money for civilians to leave the besieged area. This practice either involves the passage of civilians through checkpoints, through the besieged airport (in the case of Deir ez-Zor), or through tunnels controlled by armed groups inside the besieged areas. As the control of these tunnels is a lucrative source of income, various armed groups have clashed in order to win their control. Residents of Douma stated that armed groups had developed a semi-official system for use of a tunnel out of the Eastern Ghouta in 2015, with a formal application process necessary for civilians’ passage out of the besieged area.\textsuperscript{228}

It is important to recognise that these practices do not occur at all sieges. During the siege of Yarmouk, for example, smuggling was severely restricted and there is little evidence of armed actors benefiting financially from the siege. Likewise, after Hezbollah forces took control of the checkpoints surrounding the town of Madaya, north of Damascus, in late 2015, Médecins sans Frontières reported that at least 16 people died from malnutrition.\textsuperscript{229} The siege of Douma in the Eastern Ghouta, however, provides an example of the standardised patterns of economic exploitation that besieging forces employ, and how prices inside besieged areas are constantly re-negotiated and so subject to change.

\textsuperscript{226} Author’s interview with Valerie Szybala (February 24, 2016).
\textsuperscript{227} Turkmani et al. “Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria”, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{228} Author’s interview with Valerie Szybala (February 24, 2016).
\textsuperscript{229} Médecins Sans Frontières, “Syria: Starvation Continues in Madaya – MSF Denounces Continued Blockage of Essential Aid and Medical Evacuations (January 29, 2016) [accessed online 02/20/16: \url{http://www.msf.org/article/syria-starvation-continues-madaya-msf-denounces-continued-blockage-essential-aid-and-medical} ]
Market prices inside the besieged area - Douma, the Eastern Ghouta

In 2015, the UN estimated the besieged population of the Eastern Ghouta to be 163,500. The siege of the Eastern Ghouta was most intense during the winter of 2013 and 2014, when basic goods reached some of the highest prices witnessed during the conflict. However, during the spring of 2014, a quasi-standardised system of bribery emerged in which government forces would allow certain basic goods into the besieged area in exchange for a bribe of roughly $2.00 per kilogram of food. Other goods, including medicines, diapers for babies, and milk for babies have been consistently removed from shipments into the Eastern Ghouta, and not even bribes have changed these restrictions.

The main regime checkpoint on the perimeter of the besieged area of the Eastern Ghouta where this system occurred was at al-Wafideen Refugee Camp which is nicknamed the ‘one million crossing’ as it is believed to generate £1 million SYP (roughly $5,000) an hour from bribes to allow goods into the besieged area. During this time, civilians from the Eastern Ghouta were also able to pay SAA troops bribes of around $800 to leave the besieged area.

In November of 2014, Jaysh al-Islam took over the Mleha checkpoint from the SAA and cracked down on the practice of paying bribes for goods, accusing civilians engaging in such acts of supporting the Syrian regime. To compensate for the reduced income from bribes, government troops raised the price of the bribes to approximately $3.40 per kilogram of food in the spring of 2015. In the summer of 2015, residents of Douma reported that armed

---

231 The government forces imposing the siege on the Eastern Ghouta are predominantly from the Presidential Guard and the Air Force Intelligence.
232 Data from questionnaire responses (June 2015); SAMS, “Slow Death”, p. 24
233 Questionnaire response from resident of Douma (June 2015).
234 Idem.
235 Idem.
237 Turkmani et al. “Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria”, p. 41.
groups opened up the use of one of their tunnels out of the besieged area for humanitarian purposes, and as a result, prices of basic foods dropped slightly as traders were forced to lower their prices to compete with the new goods. However, with 1kg sugar costing $17.06 in Douma in June 2015, as opposed to $1.57 in Damascus City, prices were still exorbitant. These figures provide evidence the complicity of traders inside the besieged areas in the war economy.

The Syrian military has also conducted aerial attacks on the Eastern Ghouta to increase food insecurity and use starvation as a weapon of war, but also as a tactic of further raising prices. In October 2014, Syrian jets bombed agricultural land, including wheat crops, in the besieged area of the Eastern Ghouta just before harvest. Amnesty International has collected numerous testimonies confirming regime strikes on markets in the Eastern Ghouta, seemingly far from military targets. The Violations Documentation Center, which documents the identities of casualties in the war, found that no fighters died in the January 29, 2015, attack on the market in Hamouria, or the February 5 strike on the market in Kafr Batna. An attack on the vegetable market in Douma on August 16, 2015, killing at least 111 people, provoked international condemnation.

238 See Figure 3 below, p. 68.
239 Author’s interview with INGO worker, (July 2015).
241 See the Violations Documentation Center in Syria’s website for lists of the casualties. Hamouria attack: [accessed online 02/20/16: http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs/1/c29ydGJ5PWu2lsbGVkX2RhdGV8e29ydGRpcj1ERVNDfGFwcHJvdmVkJXZpc2libGV5ZXh0cmFkaXNwbGF5PTB8c3RhdHVzPTF8cHJvdmluY2U9Mnxjb2RNdWx0aT0xM3xzdGFydERhdGJ9MjAxNS0wMS0yM3xlbnREYXR1PTiwMTUuMDEtMjIYW1vdXJpYWw] and the Kafr Batna attack: [accessed online 02/20/16: http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs/1/c29ydGJ5PWu2lsbGVkX2RhdGV8e29ydGRpcj1ERVNDfGFwcHJvdmVkJXZpc2libGV5ZXh0cmFkaXNwbGF5PTB8c3RhdHVzPTF8cHJvdmluY2U9Mnxjb2RNdWx0aT0xM3xzdGFydERhdGJ9MjAxNS0wMS0wM3wzPUthZnIrQmF0bnF8].
242 UN News Centre, “‘Horrified’ by immense human suffering in Syria, UN relief chief urges all parties to protect civilians” (17 August 2015) [accessed online 02/20/16: http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=51649#_VsfM5MrLJY]
The destruction of the agricultural produce in each of these attacks increased shortages of food stuffs inside the besieged market, resulting in further price increases. The attacks on wheat fields also caused bread factories to shut down due to the unavailability of flour. Through these tactics, the SAA increased residents’ reliance on goods smuggled into the area through regime checkpoints, and thereby increased their profits. Since these attacks coincided with the more standardised system of bribery when more goods were allowed into the besieged area, they should not be considered an attempt to starve the besieged population. Rather, the bombing of agricultural land implies that the SAA coordinates its attacks as a means of increasing its control over the internal market of the besieged area, and provides further evidence of the siege’s economic rather than exclusively military objectives.

Figure 3 Comparative prices of staple goods in the Eastern Ghouta and Damascus at different stages of the conflict (USD). Data from responses to author’s questionnaires and from Reach International.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Winter 2013/14</th>
<th>Spring 2014</th>
<th>Summer 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Damascus City</td>
<td>Besieged Eastern Ghouta</td>
<td>Damascus City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(before bribery system)</td>
<td>(with bribery system)</td>
<td>(after crackdown on bribery system)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (1 kg)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice (1 kg)</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread (1.5 kg)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Douma also provides evidence of armed groups from inside the besieged area benefiting from the siege. A UN official said the siege of Eastern Ghouta was not the type of siege ‘where the aim is to defeat the other side’.244 Indeed, some residents questioned the very existence of the siege:

“There is no siege, this is a lie. How can there be a siege when the head of [Jaysh al-Islam] can go in and out of Ghouta several times this year and appear in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, or when 1000 of his fighters leave Ghouta last month to go and allegedly fight ISIL in Qalamoun? The newly released 1000 SYP note is already common in Ghouta, so what siege? There are arrangements in place to suck the best out of this area, allowing certain actors to benefit, while civilians suffer.”245

Jaysh al-Islam reportedly imposed informal taxes and duties on items inside the besieged area of Douma, further raising the prices of foodstuffs, fuel and medicines.246 Residents of the Eastern Ghouta demonstrated against Jaysh al-Islam on multiple occasions between November 2014 and July 2015, calling for the armed group to lower the price of goods.247 Jaysh al-Islam has also prevented civilians from leaving the besieged area, and some residents suggested that they did this so that they would be forced to buy products inside the besieged area.248 Even when the Syrian regime agreed to allow high school students in the Eastern Ghouta to leave to take their baccalaureate exams in central Damascus in the summer of 2015, Jaysh al-Islam prevented them from doing so.249 A resident of Douma said ‘people who tried to request permission from [Jaysh al-Islam] to allow them to leave were arrested as a result’.250

244 Author’s interview with UN official, (June 2015).
245 Resident of Douma, quoted in Turkmani et al. “Countering the logic of the war economy in Syria”, pp. 36-7.
248 Author’s interview with INGO worker (June 2015).
249 Questionnaire response from resident of Douma (July 2015).
Therefore, the siege of Douma provides evidence of both sides in the conflict benefiting financially and materially from the existence of the siege. Given that the government forces imposing the siege and taking the bribes are from some of the most elite factions of the SAA, the Presidential Guard and the Air Force Intelligence, this suggests that the highest levels of the Syrian regime encourage the war economy. In other areas, however, PGMs appear to have influenced the regime’s siege tactics, or even acted against its wishes, in a way that has increased their profits.

A post-truce siege – The Siege of al-Wa’er

Further evidence for the importance of the economic benefits that besieging forces accrue from sieges comes from looking at what happens after truces that lift sieges are agreed. After a truce was agreed between armed groups in al-Wa’er and the Syrian regime, a series of car bombs in traditionally Alawi areas of Homs exploded, but with no casualties. Apparently in retribution, the NDF, swiftly reasserted the siege on al-Wa’er which allowed them to resume their revenue-generating extortion activities. The besieged population of al-Wa’er was estimated to be between 100,000 and 125,000 in August 2015. Five separate sources, including a UN official, asserted that it was highly likely that the car bombs were in fact planted by the NDF themselves, in an attempt to conserve their sources of profit.

The terms of the truce agreement included increased access for humanitarian organisations, but certain items are routinely removed from aid shipments into al-Wa’er. Maintaining a monopoly over baby’s milk is a key source of revenue for the NDF, and therefore, no baby’s milk has reached al-Wa’er through an aid convoy. For mothers, many

---

251 For a map of al-Wa’er, see Map 5 in Appendix 4.
252 Author’s interview with head of the Homs Media Center (May 2015).
253 Questionnaire responses from residents of al-Wa’er (June 2015).
254 Author’s interviews with local activists, residents of al-Wa’er and a UN official (May-June 2015).
255 Questionnaire response from resident of al-Wa’er (June 2015).
of whom suffer from malnutrition and are thus unable to lactate, their only option is to pay the NDF significant bribes. No medicines are allowed into al-Wa’er, and the passage of civilians remains severely limited. Some women and children are allowed to leave through regime checkpoints at certain points in the day, but they are not permitted to take food back into the besieged area. As such, the regime is able to circumvent the UN’s definition of a siege, ostensibly allowing some movement of people and the entry of some goods, but while maintaining its illicit economic practices. Therefore, the case of al-Wa’er provides compelling evidence that sieges have become such an integral part of the war economy, and that truces are insufficient to bring an end to armed actors’ profiteering activities. Elsewhere in Syria, financial incentives have also produced unexpected behaviour in relation to sieges. In Deir ez-Zor city, civilians are effectively being besieged by two separate armed factions.

A Double Siege – The Siege of Deir ez-Zor256

The siege of Deir ez-Zor, a city in eastern Syria, began in November 2014 when ISIS militants attacked regime checkpoints between Damascus and Deir ez-Zor city, surrounding the city. In January 2015, ISIS announced a 10-day ultimatum at checkpoints and in mosques for citizens to leave the besieged areas of the city or be considered kuffar.257 These statements clearly professed ISIS’ intention to besiege the city, which is significant in terms of IHL. The estimated besieged population in August 2015 was 228,000.258 Even though the regime’s military airport, that is inside the besieged area [see Map 4 in Appendix 4], remained in operation, allowing for the entry of goods and the movement of people, UN OCHA swiftly designated Deir ez-Zor city as besieged.259 Deir ez-Zor is one of the regime’s last remaining

256 For a map of Deir ez-Zor city, see Map 4 in Appendix 4.
257 Kuffar is an Arabic term used in the derogatory sense to mean ‘unbelievers’; Interview with international organization monitoring human rights abuses in Syria (July 2015).
259 Critics of the UN cite this as further evidence for the politicisation of the UN’s process of siege classification, as the continued access through the military airport seems to contradict UN OCHA’s definition of besieged.
strongholds in Eastern Syria, and therefore they have committed considerable resources to preventing its fall to ISIS. With no known tunnels, the military airport has proved to be the lifeline for the city, as it has remained in operation throughout the siege.

However, the SAA has not used its military aircraft to transport all of the citizens to leave the besieged area, and in March 2015, it even fired upon civilians who attempted to leave government-held areas. Therefore, this effectively signals the existence of a double siege, with the civilian population besieged by both ISIS and the regime. It is unclear exactly why the Government of Syria has prevented civilians from leaving, but their motivation may be to conscript them forcibly, to use them as human shields, or for financial gain.

The regime has profited from the siege in Deir ez-Zor in various ways. Although comparatively little movement of goods and people has been possible through the checkpoints on the perimeter of the besieged area, the military airport has proved highly lucrative. Three separate former residents of Deir ez-Zor city confirmed that they had paid the regime between £150,000 SYP and £300,000 SYP (c.$625-$1360) for places on a military aircraft to escape the siege. Being on the list of besieged areas, the UN has also made frequent requests to airlift aid to the besieged areas of the city. Negotiations about the logistics proved difficult, but the SARC delivered a shipment in the spring of 2015. Subsequent reports suggested that the majority of the aid had been distributed to SAA soldiers and regime loyalists, with the remainder sold in the market. A UN official

261 In January 2016, the regime arrested 400 young men in the besieged areas of Deir ez-Zor on charges of evading military conscription, and forced them to fight. Fikram, “Russian and the Regime’s War on Civilians in Deir Ezzor” in The Atlantic Council (February 29, 2016) [accessed online 03/05/16: http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/russia-and-the-regime-s-war-on-civilians-in-deir-ezzor]
262 Author’s interviews with former residents of Deir ez-Zor city and a UN official, (June-July 2015)
263 Even the Lebanese publication ‘Al-Akhbar’, often seen as pro-regime, denounced the levels of corruption in Deir ez-Zor city, including unfair distribution of aid. Ayham Merhi, “Corruption in alliance with Daesh: We are all against the people in Deir ez-Zor” (al-fasād yataḥāla‘af ma’ då‘sh: kulna (February 9, 2016) [accessed online 03/06/16: http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/251719]
described how the selective provision of food to besieged civilians is a way of maintaining loyalty and recruiting soldiers.\(^{264}\) The regime has also controlled market prices in the besieged area of Deir ez-Zor city. After the local economy collapsed, cheap Russian and Iranian goods have flooded the markets. Market prices rise with inflation (against the US dollar), but then are kept high as the dollar depreciates.\(^ {265}\)

The regime seems to benefit financially from the siege in Deir ez-Zor to a greater extent than ISIS, although there are signs of some kind of agreement. It has already been mentioned that the Syrian regime is reportedly the biggest buyer of oil produced in ISIS-held areas. Four separate sources, including two UN officials, remarked that ISIS’ lack of attempts to launch a serious attack on the military airport is strong evidence for their desire to keep it in action, signalling an informal agreement between ISIS and the Syrian regime. One UN official remarked ‘all it would take would be a couple of mortars on the runway’ to cut all access to the besieged areas of the city, remarking that ISIS had reached ‘the airport’s fence’, without attacking.\(^ {266}\) The logic for this claim goes that the airport is not only used to bring goods into the city, but also money, and that ISIS soldiers benefit from this influx of money, by taking bribes at checkpoints. Therefore, both ISIS and the regime benefit from aid sent to the besieged area of Deir ez-Zor. Investigating the role of humanitarian aid in the war economy is an important element of this analysis, as many of the economies in besieged areas rely heavily upon external aid.

### 3.4 Humanitarian aid and the war economy

As pictures and testimonies trickle out, we know how little humanitarian assistance to besieged areas gets in. In July 2015, just 1.8 percent of the population considered by the UN

\(^{264}\) Author’s interview with UN official (June 2015).
\(^{265}\) Author’s interview with former resident of Deir ez-Zor (June 2015).
\(^{266}\) Author’s interview with UN official (June 2015).
to be besieged were reached with medical assistance by the UN and partners, and no food or other types of humanitarian relief reached any of the besieged areas.\textsuperscript{267} This figure was even lower than the previous month, June 2015, when 5 percent of those in officially recognised besieged areas were reached with medical aid, but no other assistance of any kind (e.g. food or non-food items) reached them.\textsuperscript{268} However, many NGOs provide assistance to besieged areas in Syria. Due to operational risks of data falling into the hands of parties in the conflict who wish to control aid delivery into besieged areas, figures for aid delivered through informal humanitarian aid mechanisms such as local organisations and INGOs operating covertly are not collected.

While this aid has been instrumental in preventing further civilian fatalities from starvation or easily treatable medical problems, it is inevitable that the aid interacts with the war economy described above. The moral aspect of providing aid that interacts with a war economy is hugely complex. I asked every humanitarian provider that I interviewed about the moral issues surrounding the provision of aid to besieged areas, and all responded that to abandon the besieged population for fear of aid diversion would be to break the most basic principles of humanitarian assistance. Pictures of starving children that emerged from the siege of Madaya in January 2016 show the devastating impact of what happens when humanitarian assistance does not reach a besieged population.

A number of recent studies have investigated the relationship between the provision of aid and the duration of a conflict, although their conclusions are somewhat contradictory. Some argue that inflows of aid into a conflict situation have the effect of increasing violence


against civilians and perpetuating a conflict.²⁶⁹ These studies are largely based on quantitative analyses of large data sets from conflicts across the world. Other studies have argued the positive impact of aid, suggesting that it can promote local security and support for local authorities.²⁷⁰

In siege situations in specific, providing aid may prolong the conflict in various ways. By stocking local markets, aid may fuel pre-existing illicit economic practices such as looting and predation.²⁷¹ As can be seen in Figure 2 above, many NGOs deliver aid to besieged areas by setting up relationships with traders who are aligned to various armed groups, either to get goods through checkpoints, or to smuggle it through tunnels. UN convoys also interact with this system as the Syrian regime maintains a large degree of control over the timings and contents of convoys.

Providing aid may also give credit or other benefits to those responsible for enforcing the siege. During the siege of Srebrenica in 1995, Radovan Karadzic, ‘one of the most visible war criminals’ in the former Yugoslavia was given credit for allowing a relief convoy into the besieged area, enhancing his image in the international arena.²⁷² In March 2016, he was sentenced to 40 years in prison by the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal for his role in the siege of Srebrenica.²⁷³ In the case of Syria, enhancing Assad’s image is less relevant than the regime’s ability to use access to besieged areas as a bargaining chip in negotiations. Indeed, besieging forces are in a position to demand what they want in exchange for humanitarian access to a besieged area. For each convoy of aid delivered to the Muslim community in

²⁶⁹ See: Barber (1997); Cooley and Ron (2002); and Narang, (2014).
²⁷³ Financial Times, “Radovan Karadzic found guilty by UN court of Srebrenica genocide” (March 24, 2016) [accessed online 04/02/16: https://next.ft.com/content/0c440104-f1c7-11e5-9f20-c3a047354386]
Srebrenica, the Serbian authorities demanded the equivalent for their own community.\textsuperscript{[274]}

Finally, after the establishment of a ceasefire, the provision of aid appears to be linked to shorter spells of peace. Aid is likely to be disproportionately directed towards the loser, and so may strengthen them to the extent that they seek to renegotiate the terms of the settlement.\textsuperscript{[275]} The Syrian regime has been acutely aware of the dangers of this phenomenon, and this may explain why many of the features of a siege continue after the agreement of a ceasefire, as we have seen above in the case of al-Wa’er.

Therefore, evidence seems to suggest that the delivery of aid to besieged areas, while being crucial for civilians’ survival, also contributes to the longevity of a conflict. Armed groups are able to profit financially, exploit aid deliveries to strengthen their own position, and allow for continued fighting. However, the consequences of the alternative, not attempting to provide humanitarian assistance for those living in besieged areas, would break the most fundamental principles of humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the various ways in which armed actors benefit from the existence of sieges in Syria. Many features of the war economy that has spread across the country have become entrenched in various siege situations. As certain individuals on different sides of the conflict in Syria have profited considerably from illicit economic practices, including bribery, extortion and smuggling, they have grown more powerful. It is therefore not in their interests to end these practices, and so some sieges have endured for many years. These new economic practices seem to undermine the military tactics, as discussed in the previous chapter. While necessary from a humanitarian perspective, the

\textsuperscript{[274]} Médecins Sans Frontières,(2015), p. 29.

\textsuperscript{[275]} See: Narang, (2014).
provision of humanitarian aid has also had the unfortunate effect of contributing to the longevity of certain siege situations.

Without a major shift in the dynamics of the conflict, it is unlikely that siege warfare will end, as such tactics serve the interests of a minority who wield significant power. Since so many sieges have entered an effective stale-mate, the most likely scenario for ending them would be for an external actor to intervene, or exert significant pressure on those imposing the siege. Aid convoys alone will not be able to end sieges, but humanitarian providers must seek to target their assistance in a way to circumvent those actors who benefit from the existence of the siege.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ For recommendations, see: Mercy Corps, “Breaking Through” (2016).
Conclusion

This study defined siege warfare as a tactic of counter-insurgency, and proposed the classifications of ‘rural’, ‘urban’, ‘post-truce’, and ‘double’ sieges to help understand their different dynamics. It also located siege warfare within International Humanitarian Law, by highlighting elements of sieges that constitute war crimes.

Two major ways in which siege tactics have contributed to the longevity of the conflict in Syria were explored. Firstly, sieges were a relatively effective and efficient means of isolating pockets of rebellion, and preventing them from spreading to areas that could threaten the Syrian regime’s survival. The siege tactics employed during the current conflict mirror previous counter-insurgency campaigns in Syria, including during the French occupation and Hafez al-Assad’s brutal quashing of the Islamist insurgency in Hama in 1982. Syrian military doctrine was influenced by the SAA’s strong relationship with the Russian military, which helps explain the choice of siege warfare as a method of counter-insurgency. Indeed, as the Syrian regime is an authoritarian system, it was not subject to the same constraints that other governments face when conducting campaigns of counter-insurgency. Therefore, the regime was able to employ brutal tactics which combined elements of collective punishment and urbicide. These tactics of counter-insurgency were successful in defeating the uprising in Homs, and shielding Damascus from the worst of the violence, and thus can be considered a crucial element of the regime’s survival strategy. As sieges require little manpower and resources to enforce, the regime was able to maintain a large degree of control over the besieged areas even as defections, casualties, and financial problems debilitated its military power.

Secondly, the war economy that has spread across Syria during the current conflict became entrenched in besieged areas, as armed actors exploited the revenue-generating
possibilities of controlling access to goods. Syria’s legacy of corruption facilitated the spread of these illicit economic practices, as the SAA and pro-government militias both had a history of corruption, and they are the armed groups imposing most sieges. The regime not only allowed these practices to take place, but also benefitted directly from them. Many of these economic activities contradict the military aims of the sieges, as they benefit certain armed groups inside the besieged areas, rather than forcing them to surrender. However, the evidence suggests that economic motives outweigh the military objectives. Traders with links to armed groups also benefit from sieges by buying contracts to have monopolies over the provision of certain goods into besieged areas, and then selling their goods at extortionate prices. While successfully preventing widespread cases of starvation, humanitarian organisations also contribute to the war economy by providing humanitarian aid, as armed groups frequently demand fees in the form of money or goods to allow humanitarian access. Those actors who benefit financially from the sieges have resisted efforts to lift the sieges, and thus the war economy has proved a crucial factor in the longevity of the war in Syria.

However, this study does not intend to exaggerate the importance of siege tactics as an explanatory factor of the conflict’s duration. Even if the numbers of sieges in Syria are higher than those officially recognised by the United Nations, sieges have been imposed in a limited number of locations in the conflict. Clearly, other tactics have contributed to the relative success of the regime’s counter-insurgency campaign, and many manifestations of the war economy occur beyond besieged locations. Rather, this thesis has attempted to shine light on a widespread phenomenon which is not often linked with the longevity of the conflict, by highlighting two important factors.

Indeed, this study has not attempted to disprove or disregard other, more commonly held explanations for the longevity of the conflict in Syria, but rather to complement them.
The careful manipulation of sectarian identities has undoubtedly contributed to the intractability of the conflict, as certain religious and ethnic groups have come to consider the conflict as an existential threat. By employing these tactics, the regime successfully consolidated a core support base which was prepared to continue fighting even as it appeared at its weakest. Third party interventions have also fuelled violence and produced a broad stalemate. Re-arming, financing and bolstering various sides in the conflict, external actors have prevented the defeat or surrender of any of the major armed factions in the conflict.

In certain ways, sieges have played a role in these two phenomena. At the outset of the uprising, a common sense of Syrian-ness spread among protestors, based on common membership of a single political community.\(^{277}\) This sense of national identity decreased the salience of local or sectarian identities, and constituted a significant threat for Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Sieges played a role in breaking down this common sense of identity, and bringing local identities back to the fore.\(^{278}\) By imposing sieges on populated areas, the regime forced the besieged populations to concern themselves primarily with their own survival, and cut them off from the broader protest movement. In some locations, the resurgence of local identities correlated with the increasing salience of sectarian identities, such as in Homs city.\(^{279}\) Controlling the movement of people in and out of besieged areas, the regime was able to clear certain groups from an area, and homogenize the population.\(^{280}\) As such, siege warfare contributed to the sectarianisation of the conflict.

The intervention of external actors has also played a role in siege tactics, bolstering the regime’s ability to hold on to areas of strategic importance and overcome problems of


\(^{278}\) Idem.

\(^{279}\) Author’s interview with resident of al-Wa’er (July 2015).

\(^{280}\) Author’s interviews with a UN official, a former resident of al-Wa’er and a former resident of the Eastern Ghouta (June-July 2015).
manpower. The town of Madaya constituted a ‘red line’ for the regime, given its strategic location near the Lebanese border.\textsuperscript{281} The regime opted to replace its own fighters at checkpoints surrounding the mountain town with Hezbollah’s more disciplined forces, to defeat the besieged rebel group, Ahrar al-Sham. The siege intensified, levels of bribery dropped, and as many as 50 people inside the besieged area starved to death.\textsuperscript{282} As such, the external intervention of Hezbollah forces helped the regime to maintain control over areas of strategic importance.

Therefore, sieges are important to our understanding of the longevity of the conflict in Syria, and this investigation has broader implications for other conflicts. Sieges are a tactic of counter-insurgency which are more likely to be adopted by an authoritarian regime as they are not subject to the same restrictions on collective punishment as other, more liberal political systems. Syria’s history of corruption fuelled siege warfare’s transformation into a revenue-generating scheme, and so a legacy of corruption can have a significant impact on the spread of illicit economic practices that constitute a war economy, which can prove very difficult to reverse. With the global shift towards urban conflicts, and the prevalence of insurgencies rather than more conventional warfare, the international community must be prepared to confront future sieges. International Humanitarian Law must be clarified to forbid siege warfare\textsuperscript{283}.

The description of the prevalence of smuggling networks and bribery is not intended, in any way, to downplay the extreme levels of human suffering in besieged areas. Those who have suffered most in Syria’s sieges are the very poorest, and those with no connections or

\textsuperscript{281} Author’s interview with Kheder Khaddour (February 23, 2016).
\textsuperscript{282} A Hezbollah commander stationed outside Madaya claimed that they had sent food into the besieged city for the civilians, but that members of Ahrar al-Sham had confiscated and sold it: Avi Asher-Schapiro. “Meet the Syrian Rebel Commander in the Besieged City of Madaya” in \textit{Vice News} (January 30, 2016) [accessed online 03/06/16: https://news.vice.com/article/exclusive-meet-the-syrian-rebel-commander-in-the-besieged-city-of-madaya].
\textsuperscript{283} More detailed recommendations can be found in the Appendices.
loyalties to armed groups. These civilians do not have the means to purchase enough food or medicines at their extortionate prices to survive, and receive no preferential treatment from armed groups. They also lack the ability to pay human smugglers or armed groups to escape the besieged areas, and so are trapped. One such individual said to me:

‘I want you to tell the world that I have played no role in this conflict. I am not with any armed group, faction, or sect. I have no job, no food for my children, and no means of escaping this hell. Every day, we see the barrel bombs and we expect to die. We are waiting for death. May God protect our souls, just let us die.’

284 Questionnaire response from a resident of Douma (June 2015).
Appendices

A.1 Pilot Questionnaire

1. Tell me about the current conditions in your area.
2. What is the current security situation?
4. Is there a truce? What are the conditions?
5. Do humanitarian organizations access your area? How? Which organizations?
6. What kind of aid do these organizations provide? Is it sufficient? Is it effective?
7. Where is this aid sourced? Is it from inside or outside the besieged area?
8. What are people’s greatest needs?
9. How much is a kilogram of rice, flour, sugar and bread?

A.2 Final Questionnaire

1. Tell me about the current conditions in your area (services - water, electricity, health, education etc.)
2. What is the current security situation?
4. Is there a truce? What are the conditions? Do people support the truce?
5. Do humanitarian organizations access your area? How? Which organizations? Do they have agreements with the regime?
6. What kind of aid do these organizations provide? Is it sufficient? Is it effective?
7. Where is this aid sourced? Is it from inside or outside the besieged area? Are there any agricultural lands inside the besieged area?
8. What are people’s greatest needs?
9. How much is a kilogram of rice, flour, sugar and bread? How much was it before the siege was imposed? When was it at its highest? What caused the change in prices?
10. Who benefits from the siege (materially, financially etc.)?
11. Is there anything else you want to tell me?
A.3 Recommendations

To the international community:

• Exert more pressure on the various groups enforcing sieges to cease this barbaric tactic which violates many aspects of international law;

• Strive to implement the various resolutions that have been adopted calling for the lifting of all sieges in Syria;

• Identify individuals and groups responsible for imposing sieges, and document human rights abuses to be used in future trials at the International Court of Justice;

• Ensure that humanitarian access is not be politicised and used as a chip in negotiations;

• Define humanitarian access in broader terms, needing to be seen as a continued process rather than single convoys, as these do not lift sieges;

• Ensure careful monitoring of formerly besieged areas after truces to ensure that access is not still being restricted by armed forces.

To humanitarian providers

• Undertake comprehensive conflict and market analyses of besieged areas to identify the actors exploiting the situation;

• Use this understanding of a siege’s micro-dynamics to develop more impactful and responsive programming;

• Focus on supporting civilians’ livelihoods and on interventions that foster resilience and self-dependency to reinvigorate local economies, reduce civilians’ reliance on sporadic deliveries of aid, and limit the benefit that certain parties get from the sieges.
• Continue to place pressure on the United Nations to maintain a neutral role in the conflict, as it is unacceptable that it is under so much pressure from the Syrian regime that it removed all references to sieges from its 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan.285

A.4 Maps

Map 1 Overview of hard-to-reach and besieged locations in Syria, UN OCHA (March 2015)
Map 3 The besieged area of al-Wa’er, Homs city, *Mercy Corps* (September 14, 2015)
Map 4 The besieged area of Deir ez-Zor city (showing location of military airport), Mercy Corps (September 14, 2015)
Map 5 The besieged area of Yarmouk Camp, *Mercy Corps* (September 14, 2015)
Bibliography


Al-Arabiya, “At least 21 killed in shelling on Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Syria: NGO” (August 3, 2012) [http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/03/230127.html accessed online 01/09/16]


--- “Left to Die Under Siege” (August 2015).


Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa. “The Syrian Regime’s Slow-Motion Suicide” in Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East, No. 109 (July 13, 2011)


Davis, Mike. Dead Cities and Other Tales, (2003).


Fikram (pseudonym). “Russian and the Regime’s War on Civilians in Deir Ezzor” in The Atlantic Council (February 29, 2016) [accessed online 03/05/16: http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/russia-and-the-regime-s-war-on-civilians-in-deir-ezzor]

Financial Times, “Radovan Karadzic found guilty by UN court of Srebrenica genocide” (March 24, 2016) [accessed online 04/02/16: https://next.ft.com/content/0c440104-f1c7-11e5-9f20-c3a047354386]


92


IRIN, “Yarmouk Camp no longer besieged, UN rules” (July 24, 2015)


--- “Securing the Syrian Regime”, Carnegie Middle East Center (June 3, 2014).


Merhi, Ayham. “Corruption in alliance with Daesh: We are all against the people in Deir ez-Zor” (al-fasād yataḥālaf ma’ dā’sh: kulna) (February 9, 2016) [accessed online 03/06/16: http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/251719 ]

Montgomery, Katarina. “‘Syria Won't Recover for Decades' - An Expert's View on The Cost of War on The Country” in Syria Deeply (June 16, 2015) [accessed online 02/20/16: http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/06/7440/syria-recover-decades-experts-view-cost-war-country/ ]

Morris, Loveday. “Syrian rebels evacuating Homs after cease-fire deal that also calls for them to release prisoners” in The Washington Post (May 7, 2014) [accessed online 02/08/16 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-evacuate-homs-after-cease-fire-deal/2014/05/07/3433c858-3699-40ba-8b53-39a9d23708a8_story.html]
Muhammad, Nizar. “Shabiha Checkpoints in Aleppo.. Pay to Pass” (hawājiz al-shabiḥa b-ḥalab.. idfa’ tamurr) in Al-Jazeera (March 3, 2015) [accessed online 02/13/16: http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2015/3/3/%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1 ]


Proctor, Keith. “Inside Syria’s Siege Economy” in Fortune (May 2013)


Solomon, Erika. “Syria’s ‘surrender or starve’ sieges prolonged for profit” in The Financial Times (January 15, 2016).


Syria-News, “Protest in Saqba calling from the Army of Islam to release all prisoners and holds them responsible for the inflation of prices”, (May 30, 2015), (accessed online 02/14/16 [www.syria-news.com/readnews.php?sy_seq=179764 ].

The Syria Report. “Syrian President Announces Significant Increases in benefits for Civil Servants” (March 29, 2011).


Syzbala, Valerie. “Slow Death” *Syrian American Medical Society* (March 2015)


UN News Centre, “Failure to end Syria crisis ‘diminishes us all’ – UN refugees’ envoy Angelina Jolie” (March 14, 2015).


