

NO GOING BACK

Forced Displacement in the Syrian Conflict

If the Syrian conflict continues along its current trajectory, millions of Syrian refugees in Europe, North America, and the Middle East will likely be unable to return home due to a systematic policy of forced sectarian cleansing by the Assad regime and its allies. The U.S. must act now and give Syrians a path to go home -- or face a permanent refugee crisis that stokes regional sectarian war, fuels terrorist recruitment, and empowers Iran for years to come.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"We have always focused on providing humanitarian assistance and protection to refugees...so they can return home when the conflict ends."

– Secretary of State John Kerry, August 2016

"We expect that, once there is peace in Syria again...you [refugees] go back to your home country with the knowledge you have gained."

– German Chancellor Angela Merkel, January 2016

The above statements reflect a commonly expressed sentiment among American and European policymakers: that if the "conflict ends" and there is "peace in Syria," then the over 5 million Syrian refugees who have fled their homeland will be able to return home. The truth is not so simple.

December 2016 saw one of the largest mass displacements of the Syrian conflict, as over 100,000 Aleppo City residents were forcibly "evacuated" after a ferocious assault by Iran-backed extremist foreign fighters and Russian and Assad regime warplanes. The Iran-backed fighters that spearheaded the conquest of Aleppo -- the Harakat al-Nujaba -- have released propaganda implying that Aleppo should be a "Shiite city" in line with the religious leanings of Iran's theocracy. Nujaba has also moved in Iraqi Shiite families to replace local residents who were forcibly displaced from the town of Daraya.

If the conflict ends along current battle lines, there will be peace -- but only a negative peace that forecloses the return of millions of refugees. Over time, millions of refugees and internally displaced persons will then flee for Turkey and Europe after realizing that they have no more hope to return home. They will have been prodded to go by Russian and regime propaganda, forced out by starvation siege and massacres, and kept out by Iraqi Shiite foreign fighters who wish to turn Syria's main cities into Shiite enclaves and launch points for Iranian power to advance further.

The reason for this outcome is that **Iran-backed militias and the regime are pursuing a sectarian cleansing strategy in which they forcibly transfer residents from their homes** while allowing Shiites from abroad to replace them. This strategy helps the regime to alter the sectarian balance in a way that prevents further unrest; it also means that if the conflict ends with Assad still in power, it will only cement the displacement of millions of Syrians, not allow them to return.

Using on-the-ground reports from activists and multiple data estimates, this report shows that the scale of the regime's sectarian cleansing is far wider than is commonly conceived. It is estimated that **if the conflict ends with Assad in control of former protest centers, nearly 3 million Syrians -- some 14% of Syria's pre-war population -- will be permanently displaced.** This represents at least twice the number of refugees that surged into Europe during the height of the refugee crisis.

To be sure, defeating ISIS while cementing the regime's hold on power might temporarily reduce the violence. But the long-term effects would be devastating: **a permanent refugee crisis that would fuel long-term sectarian divisions and provide fertile ground for terrorist recruitment.** Millions of Syrians would be poor, dislocated, and embittered after having faced bombardment and displacement along sectarian lines. Many of these permanent refugees would become easy prey for terror recruiters.

Such an outcome would also further worsen American regional standing by effectively displacing instability from inside Syria into neighboring U.S. allies, such as Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon.

In order to prevent a permanent and long-term Syrian refugee crisis with devastating regional effects, the United States should begin to reverse the sectarian cleansing practices of the Assad regime and pro-Iranian militias, via the following measures:

RECOMMENDATIONS

Raise costs for Iran-backed extremists in Syria, who are the main drivers of long-term sectarian demographic change, through a combination of:

Increased sanctions:

- Pass the Preventing Destabilization of Iraq and Syria Act, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, and other more assertive measures.
- List Iranian proxies fighting in Syria such as the Iraqi Harakat Nujaba, the Afghani Liwa Fatimiyun, and the Pakistani Liwa Zaynabiyun as terror groups.

Military strikes:

- Begin targeted operations against Iranian or Iran-backed foreign commanders in Syria to obstruct coordination between local proxies and the "mother ship."
- Target key gathering points, supply warehouses, and headquarters of Iranian proxies, especially Hezbollah, to concretely degrade their fighting capacity.

Work with Russia on a long-term, nationwide ceasefire that halts regime attacks on civilians and thus halts the flow of refugees. The ceasefire should include the following basic elements:

Safe zones free from aerial bombardments or sieges. The zones should be established in all opposition areas of western Syria, as most refugees are displaced from those areas.

An end to fighting between Assad regime and rebel forces, with United Nations monitors at the front lines so that both sides can safely redeploy to fight ISIS.

Removal of terror groups such as Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Fatah al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa from all regime- and opposition-controlled territories.

Economic development in opposition areas so that it becomes more viable for Syrian refugees who fled those areas to return. This can be done by way of:

Development initiatives led by America's regional allies to rebuild schools, medical facilities, roads, and other public infrastructure damaged in the course of the war.

Trade agreements that grant international companies access to Syrian natural resources (petroleum, minerals, agriculture) in exchange for employing Syrian nationals.

Rebuilding contracts that allow displaced Syrians to take the lead in rebuilding their destroyed cities.

AREAS AFFECTED BY SECTARIAN CLEANSING

This paper will show that, if the conflict ends with the Assad regime in charge of the areas it currently controls, at least 13% of the Syrian population could be permanently displaced, sparking an even larger refugee crisis than the one now affecting the Middle East and Europe. The study arrives at this conclusion by comparing the pre-war populations and the current populations in three general areas:

(1) Areas that have been or are under extended siege by regime forces and their allies.

Using a strategy that is often called "starve and surrender," the regime's goal with long-term sieges is typically to deny an area food, medicine, and other basic necessities until rebel fighters and civilians alike are forced to depart due to the humanitarian crisis. Therefore, long-term sieges are best viewed as a prelude to sectarian cleansing. Some long-besieged areas such as Homs and Daraya have already seen near-100% displacement.

Affected areas: Homs City, the "Eastern Ghouta" suburbs of Damascus, the Jobar area of Damascus, southern Damascus suburbs, and the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp.

(2) Pro-opposition towns on the Lebanese border that were the main targets of Hezbollah intervention.

The Lebanese terror organization Hezbollah transformed the Syrian conflict when it launched a massive military incursion into Syria in spring 2013. From the start, Hezbollah fighters framed the war in highly sectarian terms, and they engaged in population cleansing along sectarian lines. The goal was to secure the Lebanese border by replacing anti-Assad civilian populations with individuals, sometimes from abroad, who supported Hezbollah's mission.

Areas affected: South Homs towns (Qusair/Tel Kalakh), western Qalamoun Mountains.

(3) The formerly opposition-held eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo City.

Aleppo City recently experienced one of the most extensive mass displacements of the Syrian conflict, as over 100,000 civilians were forcibly "evacuated" into neighboring Idlib Province in a matter of days.ⁱⁱ Aleppo has also seen previous mass displacements; the introduction of large-scale regime barrel bombings drove 500,000 civilians to flee Aleppo in a matter of weeks,ⁱⁱⁱ and an additional 70,000 people fled due to intensive Russian bombing raids^{iv} in early 2016.

Aleppo shares characteristics of both categories (1) and (2), as it was placed under a six-month siege before being overtaken by the Hezbollah-style Harakat al-Nujaba militia from Iraq, which has sent Iraqi Shiite families to replace local residents^v in Daraya. These two factors make it quite unlikely that displaced residents from east Aleppo will be allowed to return.

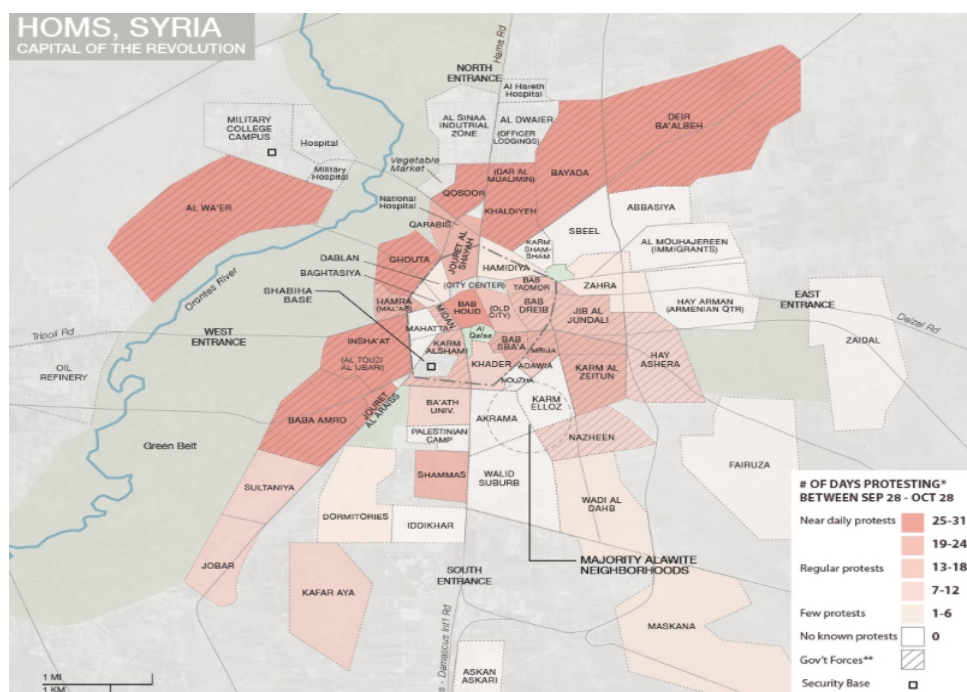
DEVELOPMENTS IN AFFECTED AREAS

Below are detailed overviews of developments in affected areas since the start of the Revolution, with a focus on how these areas came to be under siege and/or were attacked by Iran-backed militias to subsequently experience massive population displacement. In a subsequent section, the precise boundaries chosen for each affected area in this study will be outlined.

HOMS CITY

Homs was initially known as the "Capital of the Revolution" in Syria, with regular protests spreading to most of the city's residential areas (see below map) by late 2011. By early 2012, armed conflict in Syria was escalating and most of these residential areas -- with the exception of neighborhoods populated by Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect -- were under Free Syrian Army rebel control. However, the regime was able to increasingly shrink and block humanitarian access to this rebel-held pocket.

In February 2012, regime forces launched a massive artillery assault on the Bab Amr area, causing most civilian residents to flee^{vi} and leading to the regime's capture of the area. Similar regime attacks and advances continued throughout 2012;^{vii} in June 2012, an activist from Homs described regime bombardments as "systematically gutting neighborhood by neighborhood with artillery."^{viii} The regime's capture of "Ghouta" district that month denied humanitarian access to wide swathes of Homs City.^{ix}



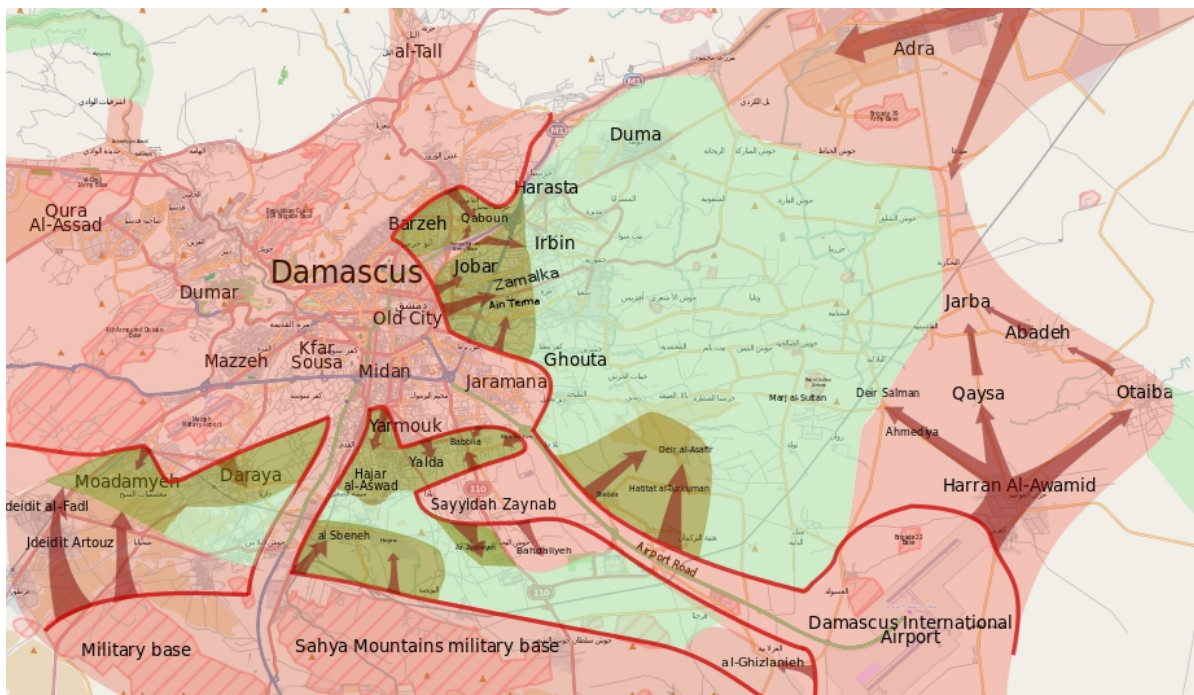
Control lines in April 2013, when regime and Hezbollah forces began sieges on hundreds of thousands of civilians in protest centers outside Damascus. This map shows the areas of East Ghouta (right), Moadamiya and Daraya (bottom left), and the Yarmouk-Babila pocket (bottom center). (Source: Wikipedia User MrPenguin20)

By December 2012, the regime had regained control of most of Homs save for three neighborhoods, and in mid-2013, Hezbollah's invasion and capture of the border town of Qusair^x cemented the siege on remaining rebel areas of Homs. By fall 2013, having been denied food for over 500 days, many civilians were showing signs of severe malnutrition and eating leaves to survive.^{xi}

Opposition negotiators and other diplomats made efforts to restore aid access to Homs through diplomatic pressure during the "Geneva II" talks of early 2014, but this effort came up short. Meanwhile, the regime began permitting "evacuations" from Homs to reduce the anti-regime population size in an act of demographic re-engineering. In May 2014, the last rebels and civilians evacuated from Homs^{xii} following a regime offensive on Homs Old City. Numerous reporters who have visited the former opposition-held areas of Homs since then describe the areas as a "ghost town."^{xiii}

EASTern GHOUTA AND JOBAR

Like Homs, the "East Ghouta" suburbs of Syria's capital Damascus were also initial protest centers that came under near-total rebel control as armed conflict picked up in 2012. By early 2013, rebels in East Ghouta had advanced into Damascus proper by capturing the Jobar area.^{xiv} But the regime launched a major counterattack in April 2013, seizing the town of Otaiba and several nearby towns to sever the only opposition supply route.^{xv} Reports at the time indicated a mass exodus of civilians and a possible chemical weapons attack, and regime soldiers filmed themselves ransacking civilian homes.^{xvi} A drive through Otaiba even three years later showed a town deserted.^{xvii}



Control lines in April 2013, when regime and Hezbollah forces began sieges on hundreds of thousands of civilians in protest centers outside Damascus. This map shows the areas of East Ghouta (right), Moadamiya and Daraya (bottom left), and the Yarmouk-Babila pocket (bottom center). (Source: Wikipedia User MrPenguin20)

In the three years since then, the rebel-held pocket in East Ghouta has dramatically contracted and been reduced to generally include only the most populated areas, to which hundreds of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee. Lack of aid access to East Ghouta has triggered a growing humanitarian crisis, with at least 200 dead from starvation by August 2015.^{xviii} In May 2016, regime forces captured many of East Ghouta's agricultural areas,^{xix} further worsening the siege. Several pieces of evidence suggest that the regime's ultimate intention in East Ghouta is to carry out mass population transfers -- and that the effort is already in progress.

Even before the siege began, the regime in 2012 began "slum demolitions" of high-protest areas outside Damascus -- both in East Ghouta and elsewhere -- while claiming that nearly 20% of Damascus was similarly occupied by illegal settlements.^{xx} Reports at the time suggested that the regime's true motives were to displace residents, prevent protests, and ensure open firing lines onto rebel-held suburbs.^{xxi} Regime forces reportedly engaged in the wide-scale looting of Mleiha town in 2014, and there was recently an uptick in sales of property to Iranian buyers in the area. The United Nations estimates that 9000 civilians "evacuated" East Ghouta in 2015 because this was their only means to escape the siege.^{xxii}

Given that rebels have suffered substantial losses in East Ghouta over the past year, this area will likely be the next major target for mass displacement following Aleppo City.

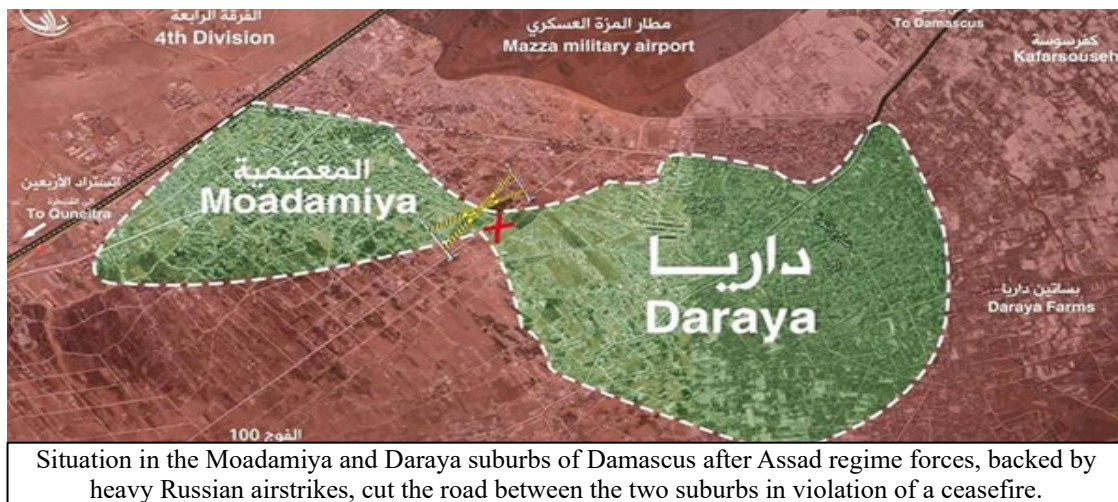
SOUTH DAMASCUS SUBURBS AND YARMOUK

There are two besieged rebel pockets south of Damascus, one on each side of the "M5" highway leading from Damascus to Jordan. As in East Ghouta, both rebel pockets south of Damascus have contracted over time, but civilians could only flee inward to other besieged areas.

Moadamiya and Daraya

These two Damascus suburbs came under opposition control in a similar manner to other protest centers, as residents responded to regime crackdowns by expelling regime troops from their neighborhoods. The siege on Moadamiya and Daraya began after Daraya residents expelled regime forces in November 2012, and regime forces cemented the siege by capturing the nearby "Jdaidet al-Fadl" suburb with a large massacre in April 2013.^{xxiii}

Under the pressure of siege, Moadamiya in October 2013 became one of the first areas in the country to sign a "local ceasefire" with the regime in order to restore humanitarian access. By that point, many Moadamiya residents were eating weeds and dogs to survive and some were too weak to even walk.^{xxiv} Thousands of civilians fled upon the signing of the ceasefire because this was their only option to escape the siege. The regime also forced thousands of displaced persons from Moadamiya to return, driving up the town's population from 6,000 to 45,000.^{xxv} However, many activists from Moadamiya believe that this was a pressure tactic to exacerbate any humanitarian crisis that arose from future sieges.



While conditions were equally dire in neighboring Daraya, the Daraya town council did not agree to a "local ceasefire" and became one of the primary targets of regime barrel bombs.^{xxvi} The town held out for two more years despite fierce bombardments and a crushing siege; but Russia's September 2015 intervention in Syria turned the tide. In December 2015, the regime reinstated its blockade on Moadamiya in violation of the October 2013 ceasefire.^{xxvii} The next month, the regime cut the Moadamiya-Daraya road, worsening the siege in both areas.

Aid access to Daraya amid a deteriorating humanitarian situation was one of the focal points of the 2016 "Geneva III" talks on Syria, and the town did receive some limited aid in June 2016.^{xxviii} But the regime launched a fierce offensive soon after the aid delivery that broke through rebel lines and forced all Daraya residents to evacuate on threat of extermination in August.^{xxix} This ultimatum paralleled one made to Moadamiya residents by the regime's chief ceasefire negotiator, Hassan Ghandur, in April 2015,^{xxx} leading to a strong possibility that the fate of Daraya will be repeated in Moadamiya at some point in the future.

Yarmouk-Babila pocket

The "Yarmouk-Babila pocket" is the term used here to describe an arc of anti-Assad population centers in the southern Damascus suburbs, including the Yarmouk Palestinian Refugee Camp in Damascus, the adjoining suburb of Al-Hajar al-Aswad, and the nearby suburbs of Yalda, Babila, Beit Sahm, Aqarba, Sbeina, and Bweida. Unlike in other areas of Syria, protests in these areas generally did not pick up steam until early- to mid-2012. Rebels expelled regime troops from the suburban areas by August 2012, and they moved into Yarmouk with support from a local Palestinian faction in December 2012.

The "Yarmouk-Babila pocket" never had clear supply lines to the outside world. In December 2012, the regime's siege on this pocket began, with major restrictions placed on food and medical supplies. The regime shut down all aid routes in July 2013, placing the entire pocket under a starvation siege.^{xxxi} Months of starvation forced residents of the pocket to accept "local ceasefires" in early 2014 to restore aid access,^{xxxii} leading to the iconic image (right)^{xxxiii} of hundreds of Palestinians lining up to receive aid.

However, the ceasefires broke down within a month -- in Yarmouk, because the regime reneged on restoring aid access,^{xxxiv} and in the southern suburbs, because the regime demanded access for its troops to a local police station, which was not a provision of the ceasefire deal.^{xxxv} The regime captured Sbeina and Bweida in November 2013, but continued to bar former residents from returning until at least July 2014.^{xxxvi} Humanitarian conditions in the remaining opposition areas continued to worsen, forcing rebels to approach the regime for a new ceasefire in early 2015.^{xxxvii}



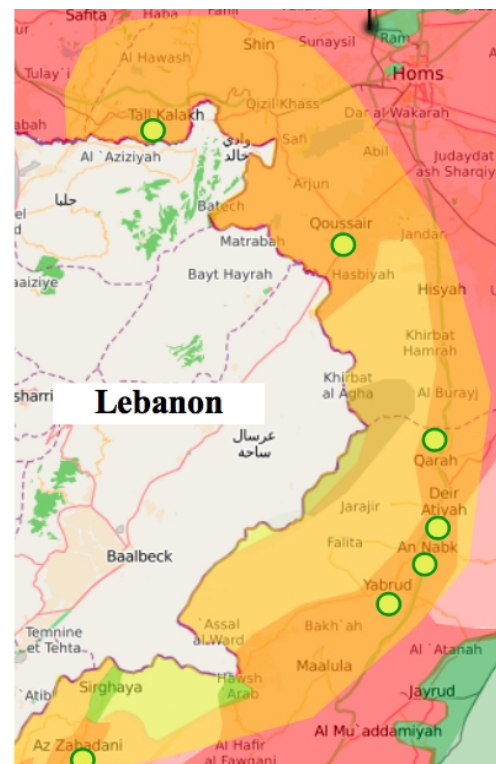
Desperate residents of regime-besieged Yarmouk line up by the thousands to receive aid in early 2014. (Source: Reuters)

In July 2014, rebels expelled ISIS from Yalda and Beit Sahm and ISIS set up a base in Al-Hajar al-Aswad, later expanding into parts of Yarmouk. ISIS then established a "siege within a siege" that further worsened the humanitarian crisis in both Yarmouk and the southern suburbs.^{xxxviii} Dire conditions obtain in both of these areas until today.

HOMS SOUTHERN SUBURBS AND QALAMOUN

The southern suburbs of Homs (namely, Qusair and Tel Kalakh) and the major towns of the western Qalamoun Mountains (Qara, Nabk, Yabroud, and Zabadani) were among the earliest centers of pro-democracy protests and were generally outside of regime control by June 2012.^{xxxix} However, the Iran-backed extremist organization Hezbollah began major operations in Syria by attacking precisely these towns, which lie close to Hezbollah's home base of Lebanon. Hezbollah's approach was sectarian from the start; it raised a Shiite banner over the main mosque in Qusair, the first big town it conquered.^{xl}

Reports since these battles show clear indicators that Hezbollah plans to establish a permanent presence in the region, while minimizing or eliminating the presence of pre-war residents. In 2015, almost two years after Hezbollah seized Qusair, reports described the town as almost deserted with most residents unable to return.^{xli} Hezbollah is now constructing a military base near Qusair complete with tunnels into Lebanon.^{xlii} Meanwhile, Tel Kalakh's population has declined from 25,000 before the war to a few thousand, the majority of whom are Shiites or pro-



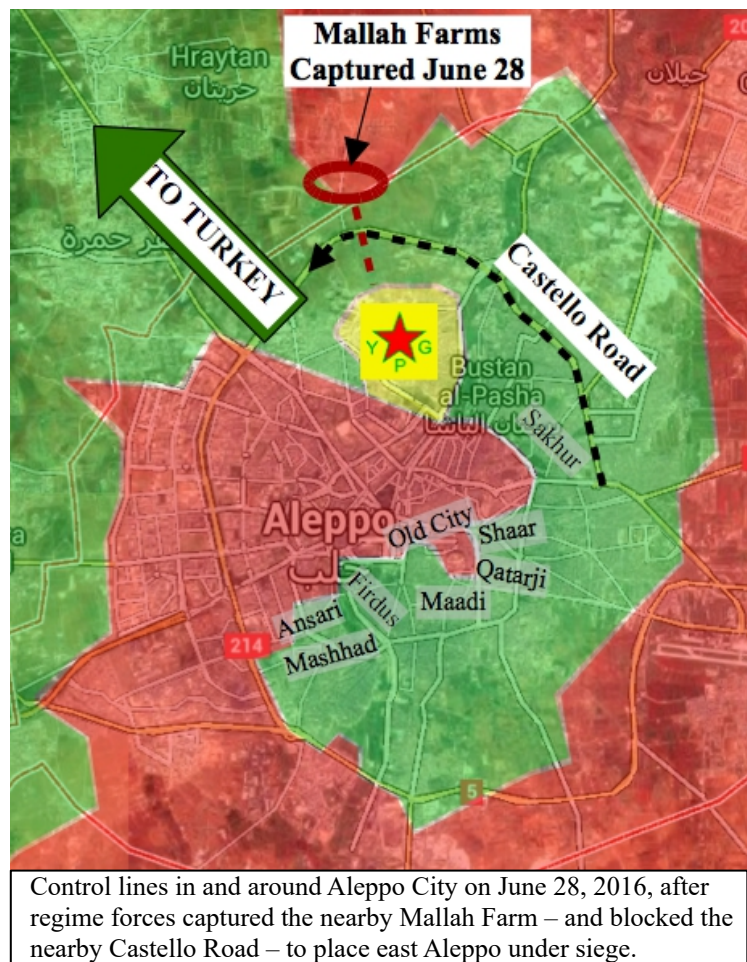
Map showing main Hezbollah zone of influence in Syria (yellow area), including major population centers, on the border with Lebanon (white area).

Assad Sunnis who moved into Tel Kalakh from other areas. Sunnis and Turkmen have reportedly been barred entry from towns near Qusair.^{xliii}

In the West Qalamoun Mountains, similar events are at work, especially in the main population center of Yabroud. Activists report that hundreds of residents, including 300 families in Yabroud, have had their houses confiscated and given or sold to family members of Hezbollah fighters.^{xliv} One neighborhood in Yabroud was even renamed "Zahra" (after a Shiite religious figure) because Hezbollah families have moved in in such high numbers. Qaa is now replete with Shiite religious propaganda, and former residents who have attempted to re-enter their properties have faced arrest.^{xlv} In March 2016, the opposition Yabroud Local Council estimated that under 25% of former residents have been able to return.

EASTERN ALEPPO CITY

The eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo City have constituted the main opposition-held population center for the bulk of the Syrian conflict. They did not begin that way, as Aleppo City itself was slow to join the initial anti-Assad protests; but residents of the Aleppo suburbs held a steady stream of protests throughout 2011, with Free Syrian Army activities picking up steam in spring 2012. By the summer, large protests had reached Aleppo proper, and most suburbs were under rebel control. This paved the way for the main suburban rebels to merge under Tawhid Brigade and enter the city in July 2012. The Tawhid Brigade captured most of eastern and southern Aleppo, initially turning these areas into a model for Syrian democracy by electing the first democratic provincial council in Syria since the 1960s.^{xlvi} But Aleppo rebels then lost ground to both ISIS and Assad as the regime deployed barrel bombs on a massive scale, causing 500,000 east Aleppo residents to flee within weeks.^{xlvii} ISIS and Assad



forces, while rarely fighting each other, both fought the suburban Aleppo rebels until Aleppo fell under siege (right). Russian air raids starting late 2015 enabled Assad forces to emplace the siege and also caused another massive wave of displacement.^{xlviii}

It should be noted that Iran-backed foreign militias, especially from Iraq, were integral to regime advances here from the start.^{xlix} The Washington Institute for Near East Policy recorded six such militias present in Aleppo in early 2014. Naame Sham, which tracks Iranian presence in Syria, noted in March 2014 that the Iraqi Shiite "Nujaba" militia had turned the

Aleppo Military Academy into its headquarters.ⁱ

In late 2016, it was this same "Harakat al-Nujaba" militia that led the conquest of eastern Aleppo after sending thousands of its fighters to reinstate a siege briefly broken by the rebels.ⁱⁱ Because Assad regime and Nujaba forces were blocking all food access, the United Nations warned in November 2016 of imminent mass starvation unless aid was allowed in.ⁱⁱⁱ Meanwhile, Russian warplanes began dropping leaflets threatening residents with destruction unless they "evacuated" the city, while the Nujaba militia released propaganda suggesting that "Aleppo is Shiite" (its population was overwhelmingly Sunni).ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Now that east Aleppo residents have been forcibly displaced due to Nujaba and regime advances -- after a horrifying week that saw women commit suicide to avoid mass rape, young men disappear by the hundreds after being captured by advancing militias, and rescue workers stop counting the dead because there were too many -- the Harakat al-Nujaba are the dominant ground forces in Aleppo and are unlikely to consent to the return of its former residents. This means that east Aleppo, with a pre-war population estimated at about a million,^{liv} could remain largely deserted for many years to come.

A note on the upcoming section:

The areas described above have already witnessed some level of population depletion due to siege or sectarian cleansing. In the upcoming section, this paper will attempt to measure the extent of population loss by comparing current population sizes with pre-war population data. The goal will be to measure the number of civilians *already displaced* by starvation sieges and sectarian cleansing.

However, an additional 1.5 million Syrians live in towns that are surrounded by the regime on all sides, but have yet to see true starvation sieges. These 1.5 million Syrians -- equalling 7% of the Syrian population -- are individuals who *could be displaced by sectarian cleansing* in the future. They live mainly in the north Homs suburbs (Houla, Talbiseh, and Rastan); the Madaya town of West Qalamoun; and various towns in the "East Qalamoun" region north of Damascus.

Many individuals in these towns have already been victims of demographic re-engineering because they were forcibly transferred to their current locations from other besieged towns. For instance, many current residents of the north Homs suburbs were forced out of Homs City, and the majority of current Madaya residents were displaced from nearby Zabadani. However, since residents of these towns came from other besieged areas and were already displaced once, they are excluded from the upcoming numerical analysis to avoid double-counting.

Areas besieged in part or in full by ISIS are also excluded from the numerical analysis. This study takes as a given that ISIS must be defeated; that said, this study is focused on how a *regime* victory or retention of certain areas would affect population displacement. As a result, the rebel-held towns Jayrud, Ruhaiba, and Dumair in East Qalamoun are excluded from this analysis, as they are surrounded by ISIS on one side and the regime on the other. The regime-held eastern city of Deir Ezzor, which is besieged by ISIS only, is also excluded for the same reason.

THE SCALE OF SECTARIAN CLEANSING

Solid population estimates from areas besieged or subject to sectarian cleansing are not easy to come by. Areas retaken by the regime, such as Homs or West Qalamoun, are kept under tight wraps, making it difficult to acquire on-the-ground information. Areas that are still besieged are subject to extensive bombardments and other risks that make collecting population data not only difficult, but dangerous.

Furthermore, measuring sectarian cleansing requires some idea of the pre-war populations in affected areas. But no authoritative estimates on population sizes in these areas have emerged since the 2004 Syrian Census, even as populations surged in many areas that saw mass protests in 2011. Due to these twin limitations -- on estimating current populations, and estimating pre-war populations -- the data in this section is best viewed as a tentative and approximate estimate.

Nonetheless, even a rough estimate of the scale of sectarian cleansing by pro-Assad forces is enormously valuable. As will be seen shortly, sectarian-based displacement in Syria has occurred on such a massive scale that it will impact and limit long-term policy options in the region.

This analysis will -- using the data available, however imperfect -- attempt to arrive at an approximate estimate for how many displaced Syrians *will be unable to return home after the war if battle lines hold*. Generally, displaced Syrians might be unable to return home for one of two reasons:

- (1) The areas were subject to regime-led starvation sieges lifted only on condition that local residents "evacuated" to other areas. Given these circumstances, it is doubtful that these former residents will be able to return to these areas if they remain under Assad's rule.
- (2) The areas, whether or not they experienced siege, were seized by Hezbollah or other Iran-backed militias. Such militias have repeatedly expressed their intentions to carry out sectarian cleansing and have already done so in multiple areas (detailed above).

METHODS OF MEASUREMENT

Arriving at an estimate on the scale of sectarian cleansing in Syria requires comparing the current populations (if any) in affected areas with the *estimated* (because no precise record exists) populations of these areas in 2011. These numbers are measured as follows:

(1) Current populations in affected areas:

(a) **Besieged areas** -- Population numbers are based on estimates of Siege Watch's third quarterly report. The "Siege Watch" project releases regular reports on the situation in besieged areas of Syria, including the total number of civilian residents currently besieged by locality.

(b) **Hezbollah-conquered areas** -- It will be assumed that 25% of the pre-war

population in Hezbollah-conquered areas has returned, in line with the Yabroud Local Council's 2016 estimate for returnees to Yabroud. This estimate most likely *underestimates* the displacement level, because reports from Qusair and Tel Kalakh (the other main towns seized by Hezbollah) indicate much lower levels of returnees and therefore much higher levels of displacement.

(2) Pre-war populations in affected areas:

There are no authoritative estimates of Syria's 2011 population on the detailed level needed for this study. Furthermore, the populations of most high-protest areas increased rapidly in the six years prior to protests. Rather than rely on the 2004 Syrian Census data, which is out of date, this analysis instead uses two methods to estimate the 2011 pre-war population:

Method A -- Gathers informal estimates from government officials, opposition local councils, research institutes, and media outlets of the populations in these areas on the eve of the Syrian Revolution. Where estimates conflict, the more conservative estimate is taken as correct.

Method B -- Looks at 2004 Census data from the affected areas, then assumes that the populations in these areas grew at the same rate as the provinces of which they are a part (as measured by the Central Bureau of Statistics' 2011 Population Study).

Method A (informal estimates) is less precise, as it includes only the main population centers, but it has the advantage of using actual population estimates from soon before the Revolution. Method B (Census projection) is more precise and includes nearly all affected areas, but has the disadvantage of relying on projection rather than actual estimates. Because individual neighborhoods of Aleppo City are not listed on the 2004 Census, only Method A is used to assess pre-war populations in Aleppo. The two methods give displacement figures within 2% of each other by percentage of pre-war Syrian population.

BOUNDARIES OF AFFECTED AREAS

This study gauges the extent of population cleansing in Homs City; East Ghouta and Jobar; the south Damascus suburbs (Moadamiya-Daraya and Yarmouk-Babila pockets); the south Homs suburbs; west Qalamoun; and east Aleppo. As most of these areas do not align with formal administrative boundaries, determining which towns and neighborhoods to include in the analysis therefore involves some discretion. Below are the precise boundaries of each area included in this analysis:

Homs City -- Nearly all of Homs City is included, because the regime siege on Homs initially targeted the vast majority of populated neighborhoods. Exceptions are: (1) the majority-Alawite areas of Homs that generally remained loyal; and (2) the Wa'er area, to which many Syrians were forcibly expelled from Homs Old City in 2014. Though quite relevant to any discussion of sectarian cleansing, Wa'er must be excluded to avoid double-counting residents who were forcibly "evacuated" there from Homs Old City.

East Ghouta and Jobar -- All towns under opposition control following the regime's April 2013 seizure of Otaiba are included (see map on page 7). The fall of Otaiba placed Eastern Ghouta under siege, and from that point on, civilians could only move within the besieged East Ghouta pocket, unless they were forcibly "evacuated" as part of the sectarian cleansing process. Therefore, all towns under opposition control in April 2013 are relevant to the analysis.

Moadamiya and Daraya -- Only the towns of Moadamiya and Daraya are included, since only these two towns were placed under siege starting in late 2012 and therefore experienced sectarian cleansing.

Yarmouk-Babila pocket -- Although the Yarmouk-Babila pocket has shrunk over time, it initially included the towns of Aqarba, Beit Sahm, Bweida, Babila, Sbeina, and Yalda in addition to Yarmouk Camp. All of these major population centers are included because, as with East Ghouta, residents could only move within the besieged pocket once the siege began. Smaller towns caught up in the siege are excluded due to negligible population size.

Southern Homs suburbs -- The two key towns in this area are Qusair and Tel Kalakh, but Hezbollah conquered nearly all of the "Qusair" and "Tel Kalakh" administrative districts, which together include over 150 small towns and villages. The full pre-war populations of the "Qusair" and "Tel Kalakh" districts are therefore included.

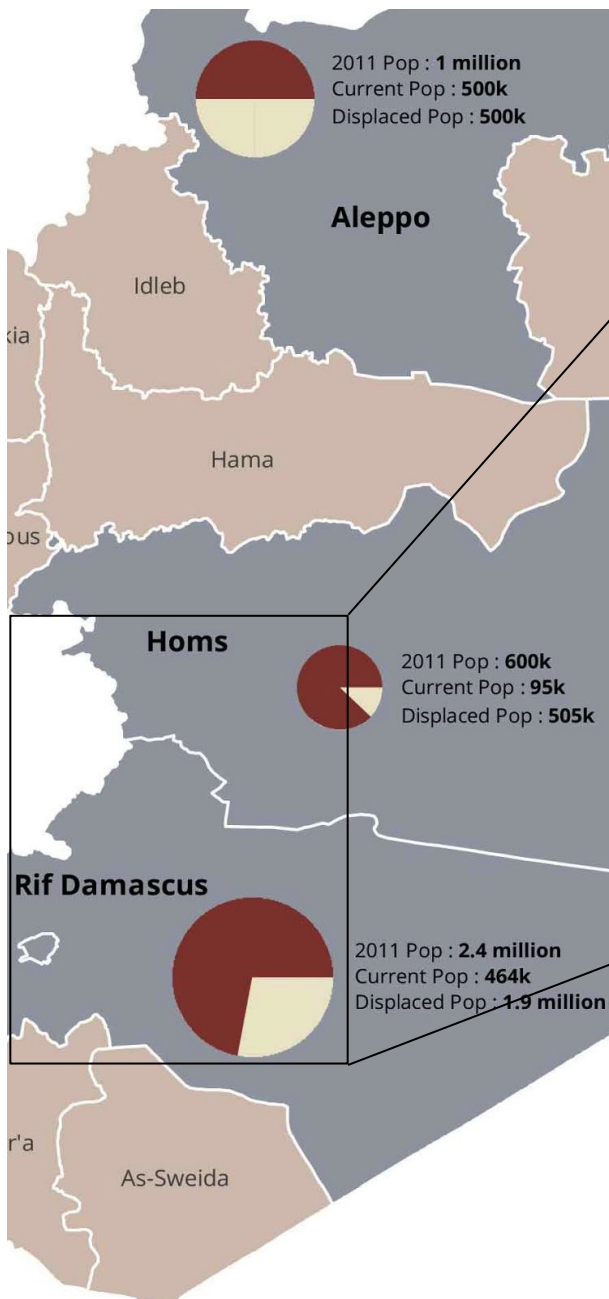
West Qalamoun Mountains -- All towns in the administrative districts of "Nabk" and "Yabroud" are included. These two districts include all of the major towns conquered by Hezbollah in Qalamoun including Nabk, Yabroud, Qara, and Deir Atiya. The forcibly-evacuated town of Zabadani is also included. Madaya is excluded to avoid double-counting the vast majority of Zabadani residents who were forcibly "evacuated" from Zabadani to Madaya.

Eastern Aleppo City -- Battle lines in Aleppo City proper scarcely moved between the initial 2012 incursion by Tawhid Brigade and the encirclement of opposition neighborhoods in 2016. Therefore, the neighborhoods "east Aleppo" are fairly well-defined (see map on page 12) and are in keeping with the territorial divisions after fighting in Aleppo stalemated in 2012.

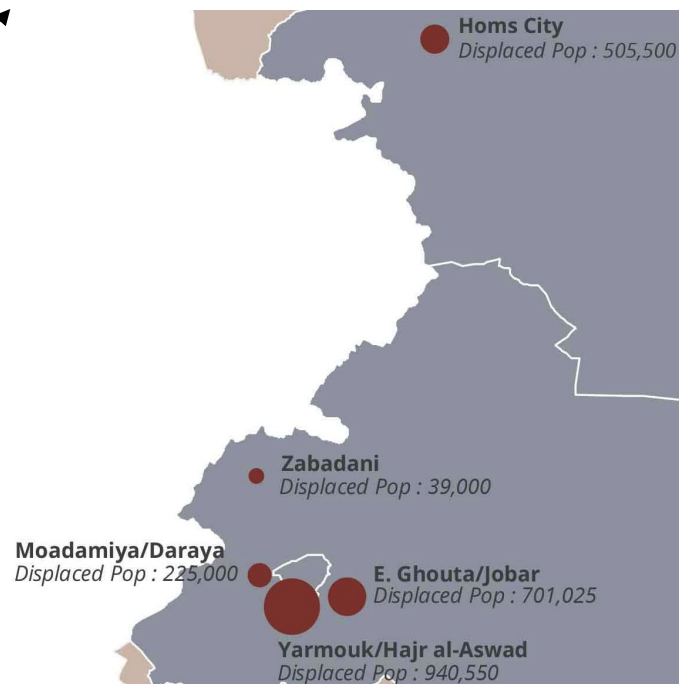
DATA RESULTS: METHOD A

2.9 million Syrians permanently displaced due to sectarian cleansing, representing 13% of Syria's pre-war population.

SYRIA WIDE (only Western Syria show)



HOMS/DAMASCUS INSET



IN-DEPTH RESULTS: METHOD A

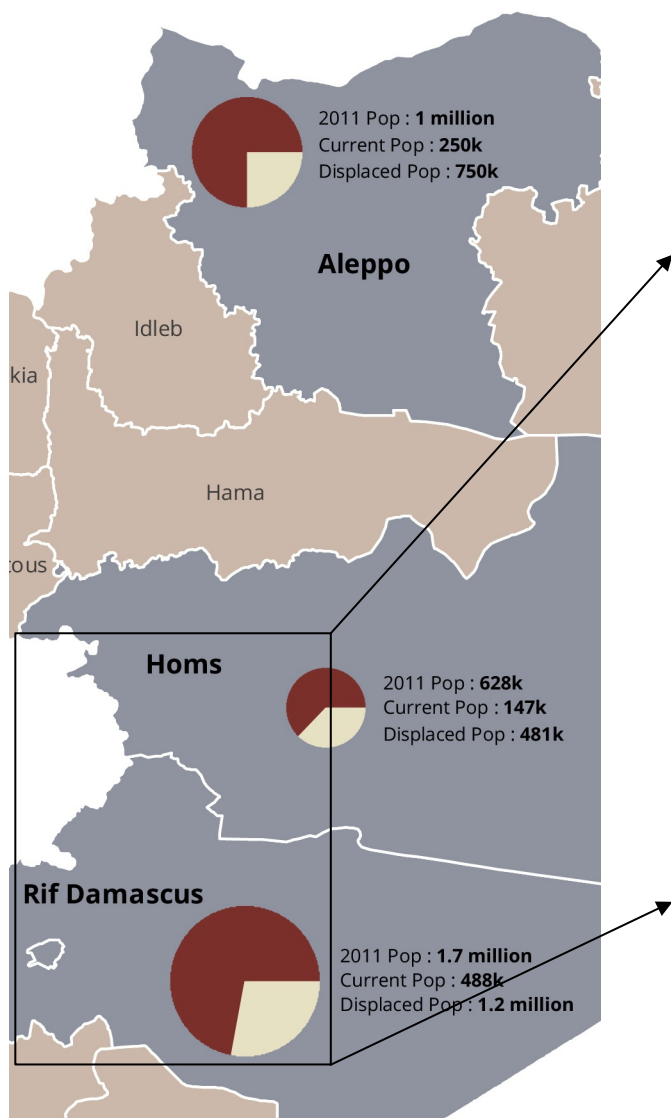
Populations in 2011 are derived from informal estimates produced by government officials, opposition local councils, research institutes, and media outlets. Data on current populations comes either from Siege Watch or from estimates by the UN Envoy to Syria and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

<u>AREA/REGION</u>	<u>Pop. 2011 (Informal)</u>	<u>Current Population</u>	<u>Number Displaced</u>	<u>Notes</u>
HOMS CITY	600,000	95,000	<u>505,000</u>	- Source for 2011 estimate: AP. ^{lv} - Estimates exclude Alawis; assumed to be 25% of residents, in line with estimate by scholar Fabrice Balanche. ^{lvi} - Current population lives in Wa'er, last rebel area in city.
DARAYA	200,000	0	<u>200,000</u>	- Source for 2011 estimate: Sky News. ^{lvii} - Town forcibly evacuated 8/2016.
MOADAMIYA	70,000	45,000	<u>25,000</u>	- Source for 2011 estimate: Syrian Center for Statistics and Research. ^{lviii}
E. GHOUTA	800,000	398,750	<u>401,250</u>	- Source for 2011 estimate: Omran Center for Studies and Research. ^{lix} - Current estimate represents a summation of populations of East Ghouta towns listed by Siege Watch.
JOBAR	300,000	225	<u>299,775</u>	Source for 2011 estimate: 2008 official statistics as quoted in Al-Jazeera. ^{lx}
HAJR ASWAD	600,000	11,000	<u>589,000</u>	Source for 2011 estimate: Violations Documentation Center. ^{lxi}
YARMOUK	359,550	8,000	<u>351,550</u>	Source for 2011 estimate: Lebanese Center for Research and Consulting. ^{lxii}
ZABADANI	40,000	1,000	<u>39,000</u>	Source for 2011 estimate: <u>Human Rights Watch</u> . ^{lxiii}
EAST ALEPPO	1 million	500,000*	<u>500,000</u>	* Current population of east Aleppo is in the low thousands. This figure adds in the maximum number of residents that <i>might</i> have been displaced to regime-held west, based on statements by UN Envoy to Syria and Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on IDP figures in Aleppo in late 2016. ^{lxiv} Chances are that a lower number of residents displaced from Aleppo went to the west of the city, so that the true number of displaced is far higher.
TOTAL POPULATION DISPLACED: 2,911,075 people ~ 13 % of Syria's pre-war population				

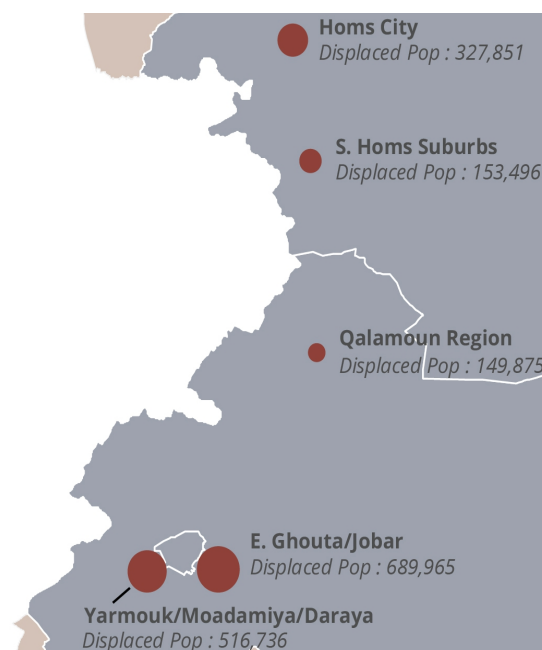
DATA RESULTS: METHOD B

2.4 million Syrians permanently displaced due to sectarian cleansing, representing 11% of Syria's pre-war population.

SYRIA WIDE (only Western Syria show)



HOMS/DAMASCUS INSET



IN-DEPTH RESULTS: METHOD B

Populations in 2004 are derived from census totals. Populations in 2011 are estimated by taking provincial totals from the 2011 Population Study; comparing with provincial totals from the 2004 Census; and assuming that all areas of a province grew at the same rate from 2004-2011. Data on current populations comes either from Siege Watch (for besieged areas) or from a 25% returnee estimate (in Hezbollah areas). Number displaced equals 2011 population minus current population.

AREA/REGION	Population 2004	Pop. 2011 (estimate)	Current pop.	Displaced	Notes
HOMS				<u>327,851</u>	
Homs City	652,609	422,851 non-Alawis. 563,802 total population.	95,000	<u>327,851</u>	- Current population lives in Wa'er, last rebel area in city. - Alawis assumed to be 25% of residents, in line with estimate by scholar Fabrice Balanche. ^{bxv}
E. GHOUTA				<u>390,190</u>	Subdivided by regions.
North region					
Douma	110,893	172,798	140,000	<u>32,798</u>	
Harasta	68,708	107,064	20,000	<u>87,064</u>	
Masraba	5,942	9,259	40,000	<u>-30,741</u>	Some towns have grown after receiving populations displaced by regime advances.
Madeira	4,308	6,713	8,000	<u>-1,287</u>	
Rayhan	4,099	6,837	?	(Omitted)	Population estimates were missing in Siege Watch data.
Shafuniya	2,953	4,601	?	(Omitted)	
Housh Nasri	2,459	3,832	?	(Omitted)	
East region					
Nishabiya	11,053	17,223	3,000	<u>14,223</u>	
Obada	6,385	9,949	-	<u>9,949</u>	Conquered by regime.
Der Salman	6,277	9,703	-	<u>9,703</u>	"
Otaya	3,720	5,797	-	<u>5,797</u>	"
Qasimiya	3,518	5,482	-	<u>5,482</u>	"
Ghassoula	3,272	5,099	-	<u>5,099</u>	"
Bilaliya	2,914	4,541	-	<u>4,541</u>	"
Harasta al-Qantara	2,513	3,916	-	<u>3,916</u>	"
Jarba	2,172	3,384	-	<u>3,384</u>	"
Bazina	2,099	3,271	-	<u>3,271</u>	"
South region					
Mleiha	23,034	35,893	-	<u>35,893</u>	"
Shabaa	13,446	20,952	-	<u>20,952</u>	"
Zabdeen	7,003	10,912	-	<u>10,912</u>	"
Deir Asafir	6,209	9,675	-	<u>9,675</u>	"

AREA/REGION	Pop. 2004	Est. 2011	Current	Displaced	Notes
West region					
Arbin	44,934	70,018	55,000	<u>15,018</u>	
Zamalka	44,661	69,593	13,000	<u>56,593</u>	
Ain Tarma	35,722	55,664	9,500	<u>46,164</u>	
Saqba	25,696	40,041	19,000	<u>21,041</u>	
Kafr Batna	22,535	35,115	24,000	<u>11,115</u>	
Hamoura	13,760	21,441	24,000	<u>-2,559</u>	
Jisreen	9,442	14,713	11,000	<u>3,713</u>	
Hezze	9,293	14,481	15,000	<u>-519</u>	
Beit Sawa	6,249	9,737	11,250	<u>1,513</u>	
JOBAR	-	300,000	225	<u>299,775</u>	Jobar was not listed on 2004 Census; used 2008 official statistics quoted in Al-Jazeera. ^{lxvi}
MOADAMIYA	52,738	82,179	45,000	<u>37,179</u>	
DARAYA	78,763	122,732	0	<u>122,732</u>	Forcibly evacuated 8/2016.
YARMOUK - BABILA				<u>356,825</u>	
Yarmouk	137,248	137,640	8,000	<u>129,640</u>	
Sbeina	62,509	97,404	-	<u>97,404</u>	Area conquered by regime.
Babila	50,880	79,283	11,000	<u>68,283</u>	
Yalda	28,384	44,229	16,500	<u>27,729</u>	
Beit Sahm	15,667	24,413	15,000	<u>9,413</u>	
Bweida	8,832	13,762	-	<u>13,762</u>	Area conquered by regime.
Aqarba	6,799	10,594	-	<u>10,594</u>	Area conquered by regime.
S. HOMS				<u>153,496</u>	Hezbollah area; population assumed at 25% pre-war levels.
Tel Kalakh District	129,429	92,845	23,211	<u>69,634</u>	
Qusair District	107,470	111,816	27,954	<u>83,862</u>	
QALAMOUN				<u>149,875</u>	- Hezbollah area; population assumed at 25% pre-war levels. - Area divided by sub-districts.
Yabroud					
Yabroud	25,891	40,344	10,086	30,258	
Ras al-Maara	8,520	13,276	3,319	9,957	
Ras al-Ain	2,754	4,291	1,073	3,219	
Sarkha	1,405	2,189	547	1,642	
Rima	1,034	1,611	403	1,208	

AREA/REGION	Pop. 2004	Est. 2011	Current	Displaced	Notes
Asal al-Ward					
Asal al-Ward	5,812	9,056	2,264	6,792	
Jubbah	2,829	4,408	1,102	3,306	
Nabk					
Nabk	32,548	50,717	12,679	38,038	
Mashrafat Flita	6,475	10,089	2,522	7,567	
Al-Suhl	5,677	8,846	2,212	6,635	
Qastal	3,486	5,432	1,358	4,074	
Qaldun al-Murah	2,561	3,990	998	2,993	
Deir Atiya					
Qara	12,508	19,490	4,873	14,618	
Deir Atiya	10,984	17,116	4,279	12,837	
Jarajir	4,022	6,267	1,567	4,700	
Humeira	1,740	2,711	678	2,033	
ZABADANI	26,285	40,958	1,000	<u>39,958</u>	Current population is as documented by Siege Watch.
ALEPPO*	--	1,000,000	500,000	<u>500,000</u>	* Total derived using Method A (informal) because east Aleppo is not listed separately in the 2004 Census. See "Aleppo" note under Method A for rationale behind displacement total.
<p>TOTAL POPULATION DISPLACED: 1,877,881 people ~ 8% of Syria's pre-war population</p> <p>TOTAL INCLUDING 500,000 IN ALEPPO: 2,377,881 people ~ 11% of Syria's pre-war population</p>					

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Iranian-backed militias and the Assad regime are pursuing a sectarian cleansing strategy that has displaced nearly 3 million Syrians. They have implemented forced population transfers, in Aleppo, Homs, Daraya and Zabadani; they have implemented crushing sieges on Yarmouk Camp and nearby Damascus suburbs; they have demolished whole neighborhoods in East Ghouta protest areas, or sold them to Iranian buyers; they have confiscated vast swathes of Qalamoun and the Homs suburbs for Hezbollah bases or housing; and they now have additional areas in their crosshairs.

As a result, if the conflict ends along current battle lines, there will not be a return of refugees to Syria. An end to conflict will more likely trigger a massive refugee exodus first into Syria's near environs, and then into Europe, as displaced Syrians realize that they can never return home. In the long-run, a permanent refugee crisis could destabilize the entire region, creating long-term sectarian divisions and discontents that provide fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. Major U.S. allies such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan -- if not some areas of Europe -- could then see prolonged periods of instability.



The United States should act urgently to avoid such a dire outcome by adopting the following policies:

Raise costs for Iran-backed extremists in Syria, who are the main drivers of long-term sectarian demographic change, through a combination of:

Increased sanctions:

- Pass the Preventing Destabilization of Iraq and Syria Act, the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, and other more assertive measures.
- List Iranian proxies fighting in Syria such as the Iraqi Harakat Nujaba, the Afghani Liwa Fatimiyun, and the Pakistani Liwa Zaynabiyun as terror groups.

Military strikes:

- Begin targeted operations against Iranian or Iran-backed foreign commanders in Syria to obstruct coordination between local proxies and the "mother ship."
- Target key gathering points, supply warehouses, and headquarters of Iranian proxies, especially Hezbollah, to concretely degrade their fighting capacity.

Work with Russia on a long-term, nationwide ceasefire that halts regime attacks on civilians and thus halts the flow of refugees. The ceasefire should include the following basic elements:

Safe zones free from aerial bombardments or sieges. The zones should be established in all opposition areas of western Syria, as most refugees are displaced from those areas.

An end to fighting between Assad regime and rebel forces, with United Nations monitors at the front lines so that both sides can safely redeploy to fight ISIS.

Removal of terror groups such as Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Fatah al-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa from all regime- and opposition-controlled territories.

Economic development in opposition areas so that it becomes more viable for Syrian refugees who fled those areas to return. This can be done by way of:

Development initiatives led by America's regional allies to rebuild schools, medical facilities, roads, and other public infrastructure damaged in the course of the war.

Trade agreements that grant international companies access to Syrian natural resources (petroleum, minerals, agriculture) in exchange for employing Syrian nationals.

Rebuilding contracts that allow displaced Syrians to take the lead in rebuilding their destroyed cities.

The damage wrought in Syria by years of U.S. inaction as Assad forces, Iran-backed militias and their allies prepared for mass population transfers can not be undone in a short time even with concerted efforts. However, the longer these actions are allowed to persist, the harder they will be to reverse, with more devastating consequences to the future of Syria and of the region. The international community therefore should not wait to begin taking steps to curtail the regime's sectarian cleansing strategy.

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The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated on December 11, 2016 that 120,000 people had fled east Aleppo for west Aleppo since the pro-regime forces' final assault began. If we assume that civilians who fled from east to west Aleppo will have the possibility to return, and if we make the unlikely assumption that all Aleppo IDPs mentioned by de Mistura in December fled from east to west Aleppo -- the most conservative estimate for the purposes of this study -- then this yields a total of $370,000 + 120,000 = \sim 500,000$ former east Aleppo civilians who have a chance of return.

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