

# Drivers of Displacement

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The Syrian civil war was a conspiracy against refugees and the internally displaced.

All the major warring parties, including Western interventionist powers, effectively converged to generate forced migrants. For some, this was an acceptable, foreseeable consequence and for others, an objective of their military and political strategy. If this appears odd or cynical, it is likely because we are accustomed to a self-serving, propagandistic, sectarian, nationalistic, and state-centered perspective of wars like the Syrian one. A deluge of lofty pronouncements about sovereignty, order, freedom, revolution, democracy, and human rights have tainted our understanding of the behavior and motivation of murderous actors on the ground, as well as in the sky. The seemingly endless catalog of combatant sides – who cannot seem to decide whom among themselves they despise most – overwhelm observers, who then seek simplification in binaries of authoritarianism vs. democracy, terrorists vs. the civilized, jihadi vs. secularists, Alawis vs. Sunnis, Kurdish vs. Arab, and East vs. West. As regards refugees, however, this superficial discord is fundamentally misleading and conceals a deeper, underlying, and hegemonic consensus: the more displacement, the better.<sup>1</sup> Mortal enemies of the Syrian bloodbath, who cannot agree on anything, effectively agreed on that.

### Refugee Creators

Subsequent chapters focus on refugee destinies after they had left Syria. But it is impossible to appreciate the significance of the fieldwork testimonies and findings without first contextualizing them. This includes recognizing not just why they fled, but why those from whom they fled proactively and knowingly displaced them. Providing an overview of the principal agents of displacement in Syria, this chapter argues that refugee production in the Syrian civil war was no accident. Far from “collateral damage” or unintended consequences, forced migrants were a deliberate instrument of war for major belligerents, with minor combatants secondarily aggravating and exploiting

the scale of displacement. Refugees were, at best, a minor consideration and expense; at worst, they were sacrificial lambs towards military victory.

This is true not only because of various cross-belligerent pacts to enact ethno-sectarian cleansing via forced population transfers (such as the “Four Towns Agreement” described later). It is true, more profoundly, because displaced civilian populations were widely perceived as an opportunity, an asset, and a goal.<sup>2</sup> Some, like the Asad regime and its Iranian and Russian allies, deliberately induced mass refugee flight out of the country and even greater exodus internally because this drained the base of support for opposition armies and militias, leaving only sympathizers behind. Others, like the al-Nusra Front, Daesh, and other Salafi elements, solidified control over territory by expelling undesirable populations (Daesh notoriously expelled some 200,000 Yazidi refugees from Sinjar, effectively sending them on death marches; Turkey, with a “green light” from the Trump administration, displaced tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds). Still others, like the guerrilla movement of the Kurdish minority, expelled non-Kurds to fortify positions while benefiting from mass forced migration as the internally displaced swelled their enrollment and ranks. Finally, not to be forgotten, exogenous interventionist powers such as the United States and France repeatedly instrumentalized refugees as an ideological, economic, and military resource to justify and conduct air strikes and other interventions which, naturally, themselves displaced masses of civilians.

Needless to say, the distribution of liability among the parties is highly skewed. It also varied temporally and across combat theaters. For geographic reasons, Turkey and its proxy forces were overwhelmingly most liable for displacement from the north while Daesh, in its heyday of Iraqi territorial contiguity, was the main threat to civilians fleeing central and northeastern Syria. At certain intervals in the middle of the war, US-led military strikes were the leading cause of refugees and displacement from Syria.<sup>3</sup> In the latter half of the conflict, the Russian-Iranian-Asad coalition was by far the greatest refugee creator – *sui generis*.

In the main, three generalizations persevere the various fluctuations and evolutions of the war: (1) ground forces with supportive air strikes from foreign air forces displaced far more people than combatants without air cover from external patron states; (2) warring parties with stronger positions and weapons at a given time tended to generate the most forced migrants, with reversals in relative power positions resulting in corresponding reversals of which party is displacing the most people; and (3) the increase in the presence of foreign fighters – peaking at some 30,000 – was correlated with increased forced migration.<sup>4</sup> This implies that nominally “good” and “bad” belligerents enacted mass displacement according to their capacity, not their ideological purity or nobility of intentions.<sup>5</sup> It also means, furthermore, that the decade-long chorus of advocates for airstrikes on various sides of the civil war was, ipso facto, advocating for mass displacement of millions of people. Finally, it

suggests that internationalization of the conflict – widely advertised as a cure – was a major contributor to the refugee crisis.

## Major Battles

Forced migrants' source areas were highly concentrated in a handful of Syrian regions and provinces. Between 2011 and 2014, the governorates contributing the greatest shares of Syrian refugees were, in descending order: Dar'aa (21.2%), Homs (19.7%), Aleppo (15.7%), Damascus (including rural areas, 13.5%), Idlib (9%), Hama (6.4%), and Ar-Raqqa (4.1%) – with negligible proportions (<2%) from Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez Zor, As-Seida, Lattakia, and Tartous (Verme et al. 2015, p.41). Regarding IDPs, three areas were critical: 1.2 million internally displaced were in Aleppo, 1.3 million in the greater Damascus area, and 705,000 in Idlib (Ferris & Kirişci 2016, p.75). The major fighting driving this mass displacement was in the country's west and north, with Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib as notable sites where sieges, rebel insurgencies, and dramatic counteroffensives fundamentally shaped who is fleeing Syria, and when. The battles of Aleppo (2012–2016) and Homs (2012), and secondarily two Battles of Idlib (2015, 2019), were where protracted, high-intensity military destruction created the bulk of forced migration in the aggregate. These battles were also widely perceived as turning points in the war, motivating many stationary civilians, who had hoped to wait it out, to flee.

The siege of Homs, a city of 1.5 million souls, began in 2011 and lasted, with a brief respite of a fragile UN-brokered ceasefire, for nearly three years. In January 2012, the first signals of carnage in Homs began to circulate around the world as 96 deaths, including 55 civilians, were reported. In February, the regime combined air strikes, artillery, and tanks to strangle the strategic city, inflicting massive destruction and death, and inducing a Free Syrian Army (FSA) withdrawal. The regime's Syrian Arab Army (SAA) essentially captured the city by reducing it to rubble with artillery shelling, but vicious fighting continued until a negotiated rebel withdrawal in December 2015 (Holland 2020, p.26–7). It was a fleeting victory, however, as “the regime's success [in Homs] had the further effect of [...] playing into the hands of the Islamist militias” who would return with a vengeance (Rabinovich & Valensi 2021, p.51).

As many as a million people fled Syria's second largest city, Aleppo, whose population decreased from 2.5 million to 1.5 million. In 2012, rebel forces captured the city and sparked three years' worth of guerrilla insurgency and government counteroffensive, including numerous episodes of inconclusive outcomes followed by reversals. It was not until Russian air strikes aided government forces into a decisive victory in late 2016 that resolution was on the horizon. “The outcome of the Syrian civil war,” Rabinovich and Valensi (2021) argue, “was essentially decided in December 2016 with the conquest of Aleppo” (p.195). A massive evacuation was coordinated by

the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) only after Russian bombardment, through attrition, ground rebel strongholds in eastern Aleppo to a halt. Given the timing of my team's fieldwork, incidentally, a large proportion of our sampled respondents reported coming from Aleppo or its vicinity.

Finally, two devastating Battles of Idlib (in 2015 and 2019) were whirlpools of refugee production. Thousands of residents fled for their lives when the city fell to rebel forces in 2015, not least because the withdrawing SAA destroyed any basis for meaningful life in their wake: "the regime's reaction to defeat was to pummel [Idlib's infrastructure] with barrel bombs and airstrikes" to drain the city of any human capital by maximizing displacement. Any "genuine civil governance" was thus deliberately sabotaged, Lister (2016b) explained: "it wouldn't work if all capable people had chosen to become internally displaced instead" (p.341).<sup>6</sup> This chronic crippling of Idlib's capacities, therefore, indirectly continued to propel thousands of refugees well after the fighting subsided. Then, in late 2019, Russia and the SAA conducted another punishing assault on Idlib, expelling 230,000 people and unleashing the single largest flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey since the war commenced (Rabinovich and Valensi 2021, p.225). By February 2020, a fateful military excursion – the second major siege of the province since the First Battle of Idlib in 2015 – ushered the beginning of the end of the civil war. In the three-month period precipitating what may be the "final push" of the Asad government, between 900,000 and 1 million people fled Idlib. This is more than in any 90-day period since the beginning of the war in 2011.

In its conclusion, in other words, the war was generating more refugees than ever. Yet, unlike in 2015, the Turkish border was strictly sealed, and media, scholarly, and policymakers' attention had long been exhausted. The world had become so oversaturated by tales of human tragedy from Syria that the latest families sleeping in streets and olive groves, burning garbage to avoid freezing to death in the winter, hardly raised any alarm.

Since the prewar Syrian population was predominantly Sunni and given their demographic majority in these major battles as well the combat zones in general, it is unsurprising that a majority of refugees and (an even greater) majority of IDPs are Sunni Arabs. This is a testimony not to the relative brutality of anti-Sunni forces but, rather, to the ethno-national and religious composition of Syria's population, given the trivial fact that major strategic hubs and urban centers are precisely where the bulk of the vulnerable population at risk of displacement was concentrated. This is also not to deny that Alawis, Kurds, Christians, Druze, Palestinians, Turkmen, and others were also colossally displaced, dispossessed, and victimized. Indeed, given their smaller relative size, it was easier to expel a proportionally greater segment of these minority populations. In subsequent chapters, we will explore some reasons why these minority categories were overrepresented (including in our sample) in certain phases of the refugee wave, especially its European component.

## The Belligerents

There were seven major belligerents displacing forced migrants in the Syrian civil war: (1) the Asad regime's Syrian Arab Army (SAA); (2) its indispensable allies Russia and Iran; (3) the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and affiliated anti-regime rebels; (4) the United States and France, the major NATO backers of so-called "moderate" opposition forces; (5) Daesh (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, two partially rivaling Salafist jihadi insurgencies; (6) Turkey and Saudi Arabia, who significantly engaged in a proxy war on behalf of Sunni rebels; and (7) the Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) and related militants. As a rough approximation, the combatants can be divided into pro-regime (1 and 2) and opposition forces (3–7), but the latter exhibited significant cleavages and organizational rearrangements which resulted, among other things, in the tremendous displacement of civilians from intra-opposition combat. For an overview of main opposition groups, leaders, and territorial gains by mid-2014, see van Veen and Abdo (2014, pp.39-40). For maps of combat theaters/frontlines and evolving territorial control by various belligerents in the course of the war, see Jenkins (2014, p.5), Kahl and Heras (2017, p.2), Blanchard and Nikitin (2017, pp.4-5, p.13).<sup>7</sup>

As noted earlier, the belligerents were nowhere-near-equal in their culpability in generating refugees and displacing civilians. Asad regime ground forces with Russian airstrikes often displaced more people in a week than Kurdish forces did during the entire decade of the conflict. Nevertheless, as regards often-deliberate policies of displacement, there were no innocents in the Syrian war – and the guilt in creating refugees is obviously not excusable in reference to the greater guilt of other parties. (This includes the United States which, as detailed below, has developed a curious innocence complex regarding its role in the Syrian tragedy.) Finally, the following disclaimer may unfortunately be necessary for some readers: policies that forcibly displace masses of civilians as a predictable or deliberate consequence can under no circumstances be justified – whether in the name of a Caliphate, sovereignty, Sunni or Shia sectarianism, Arab Spring revolutionism, humanitarian interventionism, or democracy and human rights. Indeed, as we will observe below, these supposedly conflicting ideological currents coalesced to perpetuate one of humanity's worst refugee waves since World War II.

### **The Syrian Arab Army**

Representing primarily Alawis, a minority Shi'ia religious group in the Sunni-majority country, Syria's Ba'athist Government was the first to exert massive violence in the civil war by arresting, torturing, and beating thousands of protestors. When clashes between police officers and Arab Spring demonstrators began to escalate in the spring of 2011, whatever restraint Bashar al-Asad's forces had had dissipated. Since then, the SAA has fought

primarily for regime preservation and secondarily to maintain or regain control of as much territory as possible. To these ends, everything from the mass exodus of civilians to the appropriation of refugee-related humanitarian aid (Leenders and Mansour 2018) was geared towards regime perseverance, legitimation, and territorial expansion.

The SAA boasted thousands of battle tanks, 4,000 armored personnel carriers, 300 fighter and ground-attack aircraft, and 165 helicopters (Jenkins 2014, p.6), but its survival ultimately depended on reinforcements and foreign fighters from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRG) and Hezbollah, and even more on Russian air power. Formally part of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, the SAA is supplemented by the National Defense Force (NDF), a 50,000-strong group of militias that receives salary and gear from the Ba'athist Government. Asad also recruited gangster squads called *shabiha* ("ghost") drawn from the Alawi criminal community. SAA-affiliated militias acted as "the regime's shock troops, rooting out rebel fighters, terrorizing suspected rebel supporters, carrying out ethnic cleansing" (Jenkins 2014, p.7).

At the beginning of the conflict, there were an estimated 220,000 active soldiers in the SAA. By mid-2013, there were only 110,000 left after mass defections and desertions; by 2017, there were around 20,000–25,000 deployable soldiers. Simultaneously, however, there were 200,000 troops in NDF and related militias, which significantly sustained the counterinsurgency (Lister and Nelson 2017). More than half of combat deaths on the Asad side belong to militias, indicating the tremendous military dependence on them (for the chronology of near-collapse and reincarnation of the SAA, see Waters 2019). These militias were also disproportionately responsible for the numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity documented by human rights organizations (Khen and Siman 2020).

The Asad regime's most stigmatized behavior was the notorious use of chemical and biological weapons.<sup>8</sup> This was, however, arguably the least of the SAA's sins. The use of barrel bombs, incendiary weapons, cluster munitions, starvation of civilians as a war instrument, and mass executions of suspected traitors and defectors took far more lives and created an order of magnitude of more refugees than chemical warfare. The mass arrests and detentions of prisoners into de facto death chambers alone killed 300 people on average every single month (Khen & Siman 2020, p.119); this systematic torture program "arrested and tortured several hundred thousand people," including 11,000 who were tortured to death (Baczko et al. 2018, p.89). Estimates of the casualty toll from indiscriminate artillery shelling and air bombing of neighborhoods have ranged from tens to hundreds of thousands.<sup>9</sup> Simply put, the SAA was engaged in mass reprisals, "siege warfare," and deliberately diffuse targeting of densely populated civilian localities both as a tactic and as a strategy (Ferris & Kirişci 2016, p.93–4). As such, it easily earned the title of the war's leading refugee generator and the single warring party with the most liability for Syrian forced migration.

There is no doubt that this refugee creation was, to a significant extent, a deliberate policy. First, inducing forced migration was a mechanism of building loyalty among militias and other pro-government elements: “[t]heir role in atrocities against Sunni civilians ensures their loyalty to the regime – they could not expect to survive under any other government and will continue to fight even if Asad falls” (Jenkins 2014, p.7). Second, within the broader counterinsurgency and repression campaign, displaced populations were considered – at best – nuisances to be removed from frontlines, but – at worst – enemy combatants to be liquidated as easy targets (Lister 2015, p.131). In strangling civilian Sunni neighborhoods, the SAA was deliberately “signaling to the populace that the regime considered them collectively as the enemy” (Baczko et al. 2018, p.92), their urban warfare effectively recommending emigration. The modus operandi of the SAA, a “pattern” already noticeable by 2012 and replicated in Tremseh, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, and Damascus, was as follows:

Prior to an attack, the government would besiege the city or town, cutting the flow of goods, water, fuel, and medicine. With supplies running low and medical care compromised, encircling government forces would shell and fire rockets and surface-to-surface missiles into the localities. Over time, they would also increasingly rely on aerial assaults, using jets and helicopter gunships that would fire or drop a variety of weapons including missiles, cluster munitions, thermobaric bombs, incendiary weapons, and barrel bombs. Snipers from the Syrian Armed Forces and the shabiha (and later the NDF) would fire at anyone attempting to flee.

(Ashraph 2020, p.89)

Indeed, creating refugees was an objective of Syria’s official counterinsurgency strategy, which included “deliberately targeting crops, bakeries (a critical source of food for many), and hospitals” and the admission that the “objective is to force people to move out of the rebel zones, thereby depriving the rebels of popular support” (Jenkins 2014, p.12). In a sadistic cherry on top, those fleeing populations were then vilified and demonized as traitors and terrorist rebels whose flight proves their guilt.

Finally, having displaced millions, the SAA obstructed any meaningful avenue for returning safely. As of the beginning of 2022, the (now victorious) Asad regime has offered no coherent proposal for the return and repatriation of 5 million refugees outside Syria. Indeed, the logic of sectarian social engineering from the battlefield continues in proactively blocking refugee return. Various “members of the regime’s inner circle”

would rather have the refugees remain outside Syria. In their eyes those refugees are a disloyal, potentially rebellious element that choose [sic] not to support the regime. Asad loyalists have suggested that a smaller Syrian

population with a higher percentage of Alawis would be preferable to an attempted reinstatement of the diaspora.

(Rabinovich and Valensi 2021, p.207)

The regime's head of Air Force Intelligence considers returnees "vandals," while Asad himself remarked that while "[w]e have lost the best of our young people [...] we have gained a healthier and more harmonious society" without refugees (Ibid, pp.207-8).<sup>10</sup>

### ***Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah***

This peculiar vision for "health" and "harmony" could not have been achieved without international assistance. Though Asad's unforeseen revival has earned him the title of the provisional victor of the Syrian civil war, the "real victory," as a comprehensive volume concludes, "belongs to those who facilitated it, mainly Russia and Iran and, to a lesser extent, Turkey: all of these states now share de facto control of the Syrian state" (Khen et al. 2020, p.297). In particular, beginning in September 2015, and culminating in the December 2016 conquest of Aleppo, Russian and Iranian intervention decisively turned the tide of the war in the SAA's favor.

As early as February 2012, Russian weapons sales to Asad raised eyebrows across the world. But it was not until al-Nusra and other Salafist rebels implemented a series of victories in Idlib in 2015 that Russia leaped – shortly after annexing Crimea from Ukraine – into a fairly cohesive Syrian-Iranian-Russian coalition to counter Turkish-Saudi-al-Nusra advances. Russian anti-ship missiles, fighter jets, helicopter gunships, and tanks poured into Latakia in the northwest. Under Vladimir Putin's command, air strikes commenced in late 2015, accompanied by the deployment of Russian ground troops. In the first three months of fighting alone, Russia conducted 39,000 air strikes on Syrian territory. By October, the Russian military boasted of destroying 1,600 "terrorist facilities" (Chen et al. 2020, p.76). In addition to causing some 5,300 casualties, these bombardments displaced hundreds of thousands of people (Zisser 2020, p.75).<sup>11</sup> Some of them who fled towards the Turkish border were bombed in their IDP camps by Russian jets in November 2015. Conforming to the SAA's on-the-ground strategy, Russia did not restrict its bombs to the armed resistance

but also [to] fight their supporters within the civilian population. Doing so would cause the civilian supporters to seek refuge outside the country, thus cleansing Syria of all those elements within the society from which the rebels came and which gave the protest movement and the rebellion their support. In other words, if there are no inhabitants, there will be no rebels.

(Zisser 2020, p.58)

This indicates, ipso facto, a deliberate strategy of forced displacement and migration as an instrument of ethnic and sectarian cleansing.<sup>12</sup>

The devastation culminated in 2020's Idlib campaign, characterized by punishing, indiscriminate Russian bombing resulting in the flight of nearly one million forced migrants (Rabinovich and Valensi 2021, p.234). Among other war crimes, the airstrikes once again targeted camps for the internally displaced. It is especially worth emphasizing this episode of Russian/SAA culpability because issue-fatigue and a fundamental (but popular) misunderstanding of Syrian refugee wave dynamics (see Chapter 3) led to complete disregard of these migrants.

In addition to Russia's indispensable role, the Syrian regime's effort was also sustained by Iran: primarily, through the IRG and Hezbollah (International Crisis Group 2017) and secondarily, through formations such as the Abu Al Fadl al-Abbas brigade operating in Damascus along with SAA militias. Iran purports to be leading an "axis of resistance" with Syria and Hezbollah, centered on opposing Saudi, Western, and Israeli influence.<sup>13</sup> It assisted the regime as early as March 2011, with a solidified partnership in February 2012 when 15,000 IRG soldiers were deployed followed by some 2,000–10,000 Hezbollah fighters. By 2013, Hezbollah's ground troops began independently seizing territory in addition to supporting SAA operations (ICG 2017). These Iran-backed fighters significantly contributed to the mass displacement of Syrians, especially in localities like Qusair (Jenkins 2014, p.7). One of the most salient episodes of forced migration was negotiated by Iran, on behalf of the Syrian regime, with al-Nusra between 2015 and 2017: the "Four Town Agreement." The pact involved what van Dam (2017) called a "sectarian reshuffle" (p.73) – a euphemism for a forced population transfer of trapped civilians. Namely, the residents of the Shia-majority localities of al-Fu'ah and Kafarya in Idlib province (considered heretics by al-Nusra) would be evacuated. In exchange, residents of the Sunni-majority localities of Madaya and Zabadani northwest of Damascus (considered undesirable elements by the SAA) would be expelled towards rebel forces. It was a stunning example of coordinated mass displacement by warring parties.

### ***The Free Syrian Army***

In mid-2011, initially, small pockets of armed resistance emerged, mostly to supplement the mainstream nonviolent mobilization (ICG 2012). But, as the SAA escalated repression using obviously disproportionate firepower, militant mobilization swept the Syrian oppositional spectrum and the population at large (ICG 2012). Beginning in July 2011, defecting Sunni commanders of the SAA began to coalesce around the newly formed Free Syrian Army (FSA), followed by tens of thousands of defectors over subsequent months (Holland 2020, p.25). Curiously, "its leadership was based outside Syria, in refugee camps in southern Turkey" and "with the full cooperation of Turkish

intelligence” from the very beginning (Lister 2015, p.2, p.78). By March 2012, 60,000 soldiers had defected from Asad regime ranks and the FSA expanded to become the most serious contender for leading the entire Syrian revolutionary movement.

They soon attracted foreign support and solidarity, including from the West. As early as mid-2012, the CIA began covertly vetting FSA armed groups, in order to lend military support (until that juncture, the army had mostly relied on scavenged equipment) (Lister 2016a). In December 2012, the FSA was rebranded as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (also called the Syrian National Coalition). The organizational maneuver was primarily a diplomatic initiative to accrue support from abroad (ICG 2013). This Coalition was under the command of a Supreme Military Council (SMC) led by General Salim Idris. Under this SMC, foreign states could provide support to what came to be celebrated internationally as a “moderate opposition.”

This “moderate opposition” quickly descended into extreme factionalism and even more extreme politics. In September 2012, the FSA first splintered along sectarian fault lines: the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front was formed as an alternate organization inside the FSA, while the Qatari-, Saudi- and Turkish-backed Syrian Islamic Front, itself composed of seven amorphous formations, was formed outside of the FSA (Holland 2020, p.42-3). Many high-ranking leaders and commanders hardened their anti-Shia, anti-Kurdish, and pro-Salafi jingoist rhetoric. For example, a prominent defecting officer who helped found the FSA, Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad, expressed sympathies for al-Nusra, defense of suicide bombing as a revolutionary instrument, and contempt for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Slogans such as “Christians to Beirut, Allawites to the grave” foreshadowed the ethno-sectarian cleansing (Ferris & Kirişçi 2016, p.21). The SMC splintered into various factions – including the Syria Revolutionaries’ Front (SRF) and the Hazm Movement – partly by territorial localization and partly over stated objectives. Many guerrilla rebel groups ceased taking commands from the SMC entirely, as it metamorphosed from a command center into an arms routing service (Lister 2013). By the end of 2013, the SMC was largely irrelevant; the organizational structure of the FSA, in flux.

What was supposed to be a unifying umbrella soon decomposed into a kaleidoscope of sectarian warlords, recalcitrant extremists, and opportunistic turncoats – sometimes with greater animosity among themselves than towards the regime, nominally the mutual enemy. Armed splinter groups – various brigades (*alwiya*), battalions (*kata’ib*), and sections (*saraya*) – would operate independently of centralized military command, including by switching allegiances, pursuing secondary targets, and reorienting from strategically significant objectives to terrorizing civilians into flight. The central split – between Salafist jihadis and more secular groupings – would ultimately tear the unified opposition and empower al-Nusra and other Islamic fundamentalist factions

to ascend to the mainstream of the anti-government rebellion (see below, “Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh”).

Though on a much more modest scale than the SAA, the FSA also engaged in indiscriminate targeting of civilian populations, including via improvised rockets and mortars into government-controlled towns and villages. It conducted raids on the Yarmouk refugee camp, where the Asad regime initially sought to recruit Palestinian refugees. As the territory was captured south of Damascus, local minority Druze communities were purposefully displaced by rebel forces.<sup>14</sup> Like its government enemy, the FSA also conducted torture and executions of “suspected shabiha and collaborators” (Ashraph 2020, p.83), inspiring thousands to escape in fear from frontline towns and villages. Finally, due to the factionalism and decentralization of the FSA, weapons from the United States – including antitank and anti-aircraft missiles – often ended up in unintended hands (notably, Daesh’s).

### ***The United States and France***

With the EU largely assuming a bystanders’ posture by restricting itself to an arms embargo, diplomatic isolation of Damascus authorities, and humanitarian aid, France emerged as the most assertive European actor attempting to overthrow the Syrian regime militarily. (The UK, also vocal and aggressive, was the second most active European interventionist.)<sup>15</sup> The engagement only lasted, however, until overwhelmingly greater Russian and Iranian intervention effectively deterred them from further involvement and induced retreat.

France was among the earliest Western interventionists, bombing Syria as early as September 2014. Withdrawing its ambassador from Syria in February 2012, it was the first nation to propose military measures in November 2011 – thus opening the floodgate of foreign interventionist planning and effectively legitimizing interference from Western and non-Western actors alike. France was also the first to recognize the oppositional Syrian National Coalition, to lead the lobbying effort among EU and other allies to arm anti-Asad forces and create a sanctions regime (on counterproductivity of the latter, see van Dam 2017, p.78). With François Hollande’s succession of Nicolas Sarkozy, Syria’s historic colonial center became the most aggressive interventionist Western state: “It could be seen that France’s attitude toward the Asad regime was tougher and its policy stance more aggressive and even more high-profile than that of the United States” (Chen et al. 2020, p.34).<sup>16</sup>

Beginning in 2015, partly in reaction to the refugee wave into Europe, France gradually diminished its foreign policy ambitions towards Syria from regime change to anti-Daesh airstrikes. The peak of the French bombing of Syria followed terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, with other notable airstrikes in July and August 2016. Though this incident was entirely orchestrated and executed by Belgian and French nationals, anti-refugee hysteria rode on the fact that one of the operatives, Ammar Ramadan Mansour

Mohamad al-Sabaawi, possessed a forged document misrepresenting him as a Syrian refugee (he was in fact Iraqi). Wildly distorted and publicized as proof of “refugee terrorism,” this factoid served as an occasion to deny Syrians and others asylum, securitize the migration question, and escalate French airstrikes while solidifying anti-refugee restrictionism domestically (Chen et al. 2020, pp.38-39).<sup>17</sup> Though its military contribution was minor and secondary compared to the United States, France’s trailblazer role in protracting and militarizing the conflict was profound, with most EU states following France’s lead and conforming to pressure from Paris.

The primary agent of Western interventionism, however, was undoubtedly the United States. Over 80% of Western airstrikes on Syria were American (Holland 2020, p.45). Indeed, regime change policy in Syria had precedents among US planners well before the Arab Spring revolt.<sup>18</sup> When the uprising commenced, US Senator John McCain and the UK’s head of the International Institute for Strategic Studies were early spokesmen for an Anglo-American war on Asad. McCain even traveled into Syria to meet then-SMC leader Brigadier General Salim Idris, who proved ephemeral. But it was the United States liberal spectrum that was especially aggressive in advocating for military interventionism, including figures such as then-UN Ambassador Susan Rice and foreign policy Special Advisor (later UN Ambassador) Samantha Power. They were augmented by journalists such as Nicholas Kristof and Bartle Breese Bull, prominent “think tankers” such as Max Boot from the Council of Foreign Relations and Michael Doran from the Brookings Institution, and various academics (Slaughter 2012; Feldman 2020, p.88; Briggs et al. 2017, p.76-88). Disregarding legalisms, they pleaded for “humanitarian intervention,” as the “right to protect” (R2P) became a rallying cry of the liberal intelligentsia – including, if need be, via “covert, deniable drone and missile strikes.”<sup>19</sup>

In retrospect, a certain depiction of the US Syria war planners has been concocted: a well-meaning but indecisive, starry-eyed foreign policy establishment that was paralyzed by its own proceduralism and naïve adherence to diplomacy. Nothing could be further from the truth. A dissenting voice within the State Department, in an anonymous interview at the time, described the militarist dogmatism pervasive among her colleagues:

She said [the] State [Department] was populated with “humanitarian interventionists,” people who favor one or another form of military intervention by claiming it will, in the end, protect civilians. “But we never discuss the legality of such attacks, let alone the morality,” she told [the interviewer]. Controversial policies are sent to the legal department for review. “They’ll always find a way to justify whatever policy is decided.” (Erlich 2014, p.214-5)

Indeed, as scholars of US militarism have noted (Bacevich 2013), it is often the case that the purely military sectors – the Pentagon and Defense Department

– are cautious, skeptical, or opposed to escalating wars but are pressured into them by the civilian government bureaucracy which is, among other features, detached from combat realities. The Syrian episode was no different. The Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey, was skeptical of proposed US action, while the “Pentagon flatly opposed establishing a no-fly zone or any other ongoing military presence in Syria” (Erlich 2014, p.221). Instead, Hilary Clinton’s State Department and David Petraeus’s CIA led the militarist charge.

There is also a widespread misimpression that US air strikes – which totaled 19,904 – did nothing but good.<sup>20</sup> They are typically portrayed as rescue missions, life-saving operations, liberations of cities like Tikrit and Kobanî, preemptions of “genocide” against the Yazidis, and implementations of humanitarian corridors (Holland 2020, p.38).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, President Obama was routinely excoriated in *New York Times* op-eds by columnists Maureen Dowd and Bill Keller for his lackluster “performance in mustering support for military action” and his supposed “isolationism” (Briggs et al. 2017, p.143). At best, American airstrikes displacing civilians – or, as in the case of Atmeh, killing an IDP family along with a dozen other civilians – are mentioned in passing as a “blow to America’s reputation” (Lister 2015, p.382) instead of as chronic causes of displacement. The reality is that US forces are (conservatively) estimated to have killed at least two thousand civilians (Zisser 2020, p.75); more realistic estimates put the figure between 8,159 and 13,210.<sup>22</sup> The American public was recently exposed to investigative disclosures regarding a systematic cover-up of the Baghuz attack (Phillips & Schmitt 2021), when US air strikes bombed 70 women and children in Syria. But it is highly probable that this cover-up is exceptional only in having been exposed; such war crimes were surely far more frequent and – unlike Baghuz or Atmeh – successfully buried. Regarding forced migrants, the only methodical estimate of US-generated displacement in Syria is by the Cost of War Project of Boston and Brown Universities. It puts the number at 7.1 million (2.1 million refugees and 5 million IDPs), over a third of the country’s population (Vine et al. 2020, p.17-18). The study’s authors characterize this as a conservative estimate (p.7) restricted to five provinces (Aleppo, Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ezZor, and Homs) from 2014 onward. Notable US-generated forced migrants include 470,000 from the siege of Raqqa, 237,900 Kurds from northeastern Syria abandoned by US troops, and those fleeing airstrikes.

But the greatest contribution of the United States to proliferating forced migration was indirect: the secondary arming and funding of extremist factions under the umbrella of a nominally “moderate” rebellion with humane combat tactics. This decision fatefully altered the trajectory of the war, amplifying its sectarianism, violence, and capacity to displace masses of the population. If unintended, this result was predictable. In an early empirical glimpse of rebel ranks, a 2013 report by the Janes Information Group discovered that anywhere between 33% and 80% of US-backed anti-Asad forces

were antidemocratic, hyper-sectarian, Salafist, and anti-Western in orientation – a conclusion that observers from the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria agreed with (Foreign Military Review 2013). When a \$500 million CIA training program successfully processed only 5 out of an intended 5,000 fighters, a military scholar dubbed them “the most expensive warriors in history” (Sorenson 2016, p.100).<sup>23</sup> A plethora of fanatical factions – including the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, the Syrian Islamic Front, Suqor al-Sham, and Syrian Islamic Liberation Front – graduated from ragtag splinter groups to formidable mini armies with CIA supplies intended for “moderate” elements. American hopes “that such groups could in the future be co-opted more closely under SMC command, should certain carrots be waved their way” (Lister 2013, p.np) immediately proved to be unrealistic, as loose-cannon commanders operated sometimes completely outside of any coordination with the SMC – including with mass indiscriminate violence displacing thousands. Worse still, Daesh and al-Nusra themselves seized considerable quantities of weapons and ammunition – not to mention humanitarian aid – provided by the United States. In sum, \$12 billion of US military and civilian aid was pumped into the war between 2014 and 2017.<sup>24</sup>

In a noteworthy example of exploiting refugee suffering, this abandonment of diplomatic solutions in favor of a policy of rampant militarism that astronomically escalated the refugee crisis was advertised to US public opinion as a mission to *save* the displaced. The exile of the Yazidis and other non-Muslim minorities by Daesh in Sinjar was arguably the most egregious episode of such propaganda, as the theme of “genocide” of refugees who “risked dying of thirst” or “being slaughtered” became a cornerstone of President Obama’s mobilization for US air strikes (Holland 2020, p.173-4). Even otherwise-superb analyses of the Syrian war reproduce the demonstrable falsehood that “Western countries focused their actions almost exclusively on refugees” (Baczko et al. 2018, p.150). In reality, refugees were barely an afterthought of planners. Defeating Daesh and removing the Asad regime were always priorities, including at the cost of massive displacement of civilians. Air strikes and no-fly zones without the large-scale commitment of ground troops (which was excluded from the beginning) were known to (1) risk creating unmanageable power vacuums with “only marginal benefits for protecting Syrian civilians” (Mueller et al. 2013, p.1) and (2) probably “speed up violence on the ground” and thus “put them in increased danger” (Ferris & Kirişçi 2016, p.104).<sup>25</sup> The absence of a clear command structure, the undisciplined behavior of splinter formations, and the sectarian orientation of US-backed armed groups were known at the time (Baczko et al. 2013, p.9-11). Furthermore, historical precedents abounded in the Middle East, including Israeli-Palestinian, Iran-Iraqi, Israeli-Lebanese, and (perhaps most famously) Afghan-Soviet wars, which clearly demonstrated similar dynamics. Namely, unmonitored external funding and arms invariably found their way to extremist, fanatical fringe sectors of rebel insurgencies. It is therefore quite misleading to characterize the US

de facto empowerment of some of the most refugee-creating elements of the entire Syrian bloodbath as “incoherence” (Gani 2019): “Western passivity” (Briggs et al. 2017, p.81), “confused and confusing” (Ibid, p.148), a product of “an overdose of wishful thinking” (van Dam 2017, p.119), or “impossible to model” because of the “strong part played by contingency in decisions made out of complex considerations” (Baczko et al. 2018, p.270). In reality, the United States knowingly, willingly, and coherently enacted interventions that displaced millions of people.

By fueling an already-explosive violent theater in a critical early phase of the war, American policy partly inspired Russia and others to follow suit. As noted, this consequence was entirely predictable, as such proxy wars in the Middle East were well-known to escalate spirals of violence, “exacerbate factionalism within the rebel movement, encouraging clashes between rival commanders,” and embolden the externally “back[ed] factions t[o] commit the types of atrocities that are inherent in civil wars” (Hughes 2014, p.528). Likewise in Syria, military analysts almost unanimously pointed out that “U.S. military intervention in Syria is likely to prolong the conflict,” and that “U.S. military involvement would reintroduce unpredictability into the situation,” thus disincentivizing negotiated settlements (Miller 2014, p.14). “If the opposition forces had not been supported in the way they were,” the world’s leading expert on the conflict concluded, “the revolution might possibly have been suppressed earlier with fewer victims” (van Dam 2017, p.65, p.74). Instead, “various Western [...] politicians indirectly helped the war to continue with all its victims, refugees and destruction,” van Dam recalls, adding that “these actors ensured that the bloodshed and multi-dimensional destruction were bound to continue” (p.124). In the words of Syria’s leading democratic activist, the “United States chose to concentrate on stopping the spread of ISIS and, by doing so, provided indirect support to the regime” (Allabwani 2020, p.290). “There would have been fewer casualties and far fewer refugees,” Harvard’s Noah Feldman (2020) observed, if “U.S. policy was to stand back and do nothing” (p.94).<sup>26</sup>

### ***Jabhat al-Nusra and Daesh***

Arising partly alongside and partly within the FSA were Salafist jihadi groups advocating the strict application of Sharia law and greater sectarian targeting of violence. The two main ones were the Jabhat al-Nusra (or al-Nusra Front), an al-Qaeda branch in Syria that occasionally converged with FSA and other Syrian opposition groups in their struggle, and Daesh (or ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), with an integral organizational and ideological connection to its Iraqi branch.<sup>27</sup>

The al-Nusra Front was founded in 2011. It “owes [it’s] independence to foreign funding and war-hardened fighters” boasted the highest level of indoctrination and discipline among its rank-and-file and supported dramatic

suicide missions (Baczko et al. 2013, p.13-5).<sup>28</sup> Its 5,000–6,000 fighters “bec[a]me what many regard as one of the most effective rebel forces” (Jenkins 2014, p.9). They desperately lacked TOW antitank weapons which could answer the SAA’s armored vehicles, while their oppositional competitors in the FSA were receiving them from the United States. On one daring occasion, they raided a rival, CIA-backed rebel faction to confiscate their antitank missiles, kidnapping a Defense Department deputy in the process. Notable joint operations between the SAA and al-Nusra included the seizure of Yarmouk, home to 200,000 Palestinians, in late 2012 – a striking episode of a major battle centered in a refugee camp (Lister 2015, p.95).

In a tense partnership-turned-rivalry, al-Nusra was accompanied by Syria’s Daesh faction, which apparently began violent actions in August 2011. In September 2013, Daesh successfully defeated FSA forces in Azaz on the Turkish border, a notable blow to the fragmented secular opposition. They proceeded to capture Raqqa, the first major Syrian site to be conquered after triumphant advances in neighboring Iraq (“the bride of the revolution,” as their propaganda christened it). Forcibly emptied of much of its population, it would serve as their center of operations and capitol of the proclaimed Caliphate. By the summer of 2014, Daesh controlled as much as a third of Syria, including 60% of Syria’s oil capacity (and, not to be forgotten, much of Syria’s precious water resources; Mazlum 2018, p.109-125). Seizures included the Shaer gas field and Syria’s largest oil field, al-Omar. As many as 180,000 barrels of oil were pumped daily by Daesh, much of it smuggled into Iraq, Turkey, and elsewhere (Sorenson 2016, p.62). Religious minority refugees were specially targeted and persecuted in this period, with a particular avalanche of forced migration in 2015: an assault on Hassakeh province in February 2015 expelled a thousand Christian families in February (Ferris & Kirişçi 2016, p.21); Daesh then captured Yarmouk refugee camp expelling Palestinians and others in April (Lister 2015, p.345-6); and 60,000 villagers around Deir-ezZor were expelled in a major offensive between May and June (Ibid, p.222). Daesh’s power continued to grow until Russian intervention gradually induced a reversal.

“ISIS are experts in fear,” as Cockburn (2015, p.xiv) put it, displaying gruesome acts of violence against perceived infidels to media outlets as a deliberate tool of public relations, deterrence, and recruitment. In addition to the better-known recorded beheadings and mass executions, the displacement of civilians, especially non-Sunni, was also a notable instrument. “God knows,” Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi said in his explanation of the Syrian exodus, “that thugs and thieves fled from every street area we entered” (Lister 2015, p.195). In October 2014, tens of thousands of refugees fled Daesh’s march into Kobanî and surrounding Kurdish villages. In Sinjar, Daesh expelled hundreds of thousands of Yazidis and others into the mountains (Holland 2020, p.36-7), with every conceivable subcategory of forced migration imaginable inflicted on the displaced: forced population

transfers, forced conversions, forced marriages, forced taxation, forced labor (including sexual slavery), and forced mobilization into militias. The group is also distinctive in destroying cities and localities as they withdraw from them in order “to make the area uninhabitable” and impossible for the displaced to repatriate. Such was the fate of Kobanî, in which Daesh set 4,000 acres on fire and littered it with explosives while retreating, simply to disable repatriation (Sorenson 2016, p.62). However, excluding their induced mass exoduses in neighboring Iraq (in June 2014, notably, half-a-million fled Daesh’s conquest of Mosul), Daesh was – despite its macabre practices – not even nearly one of the top refugee generators among belligerents in Syria itself.<sup>29</sup>

Given how closely Daesh resembles a death cult, it is understandable that their levels of international recognition and aid were modest. Indeed, Daesh had the least transnational support of all on-the-ground formations, relying primarily on wealthy donors from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf dictatorships. To be sure, sectors of the Turkish state apparatus probably permitted Daesh smuggling of oil from Iraq across the Turkish border, but official sponsorships from nation-states were completely lacking.<sup>30</sup> When their massive territorial gains in 2013–2014 attracted bombs from the US-led coalition – whose mission transitioned from regime change to “degrading and destroying ISIS” – Daesh-controlled territories became the most targeted areas of all Syrian territory. Countries including the United States, Canada, France, Saudi Arabia, and the UK all conducted airstrikes on Daesh positions, frequently accelerating Daesh’s murder or displacement of thousands of its captives.

### ***Turkey and Saudi Arabia***

By mid-February 2014, FSA factionalism had temporarily congealed around four alliances: the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Jaish al-Muhajideen, Harakat Hazm, and the Southern Front. These groups would receive aid not just from the United States but also from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, with diverging trajectories and often-conflicting goals. Along with Qatar, the UAE, and various quasi-state foreign donors, these two patron states would push in different directions through their military proxies, with an overall suspension of restrained use of force and a rejection of Western-style secular democratic agendas. As Patrick Cockburn observed,

A fatal paradox of the Arab Spring in Syria was that the main financial backers of a movement that had begun by demanding freedom and democracy should then become dependent on Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which were resolutely antidemocratic and sectarian, and the last absolute monarchies on earth.

(Cockburn 2019)

Given its proximity to Syria, its refugee volume, and its separatist history with Kurdish nationalism, Turkey was the most influential backer of jihadi rebels – and arguably the one with the most to lose. Beginning as an opponent of the Asad regime in 2011–2012 (especially when its plane was downed by Syrian anti-aircraft on their shared border), Turkey pivoted reluctantly to a more accommodating posture only with the rise of Daesh, Asad’s major competitor, in 2015. Through its Joint Operations Centre (Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi) in southern Turkey near the Syrian border, Ankara began to groom a proxy ground force, the Syrian National Army (SNA), deploying it in joint military operations such as Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring. Through these incursions into north Syria, Ankara was committed to containing Kurdish militants at all cost, including by directing the SNA against both the YPG and the Asad regime (Yüksel 2019). By 2019, Turkey was “determined to prevent a fresh wave of immigrants” even “to the point of risking its good relationship with Russia and colliding for the first time since 2011 directly with the Syrian army” (Rabinovich and Valensi 2021, p.234).

The toll on refugees and other forced migrants was tremendous. Abandoned by Trump’s withdrawal of US troops, the YPG and Kurdish population were left as cannon fodder in a buffer zone between ISIS, Damascus, and a Turkish incursion into Syrian territory. In the course of Operation Olive Branch in January 2018, Turkey expelled thousands of Kurds and others in a massive offensive on Afrin, an enclave in northwestern Syria. It effectively depopulated the northwestern Syrian enclave of all its Kurds, turning the entire town’s population into IDPs and refugees in order to “dispel the Kurdish dream of creating a contiguous entity in Syria’s north” with enclaves Kobanî and Jazira (Kajjo 2020 pp.284). Hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds who fled to Iraq were primarily fleeing these Turkish military operations (Ferris & Kirişçi 2016, p.86). But Turkey’s most egregious refugee episode was a genuine ethnic cleansing campaign in 2019. Displacing tens of thousands of Kurds of northeast Syria via artillery and airstrikes, Ankara openly declared its intention to settle 2 million Syrian Arab refugees from other parts of Syria to replace the Kurdish population – against their will if necessary (Çavlin 2021, p.186). On the whole, Turkey was unquestionably more committed to containing Kurds than defeating Daesh.<sup>31</sup>

Saudi Arabia, for its part, continuously sent funding and arms to extremist Sunni rebels in Syria. At first, it focused on nonlethal material provisions, including the payment of salaries to FSA fighters (Darwich 2019, p.131), then, a torrent of armaments. Antitank weapons and lighter arms were favored over anti-aircraft weaponry, given the US’s concern that the latter “might be used against non-Syrian military targets” (Sorenson 2016, p.105). In the early incarnations of the FSA’s military council, Saudi intelligence played a dominating role. The Saudi Deputy Defense Minister reportedly offered unconditional “arms, ammo, and money” to anyone intending to attack SAA positions – no questions asked (van Dam 2017, p.99). Legendary journalist Robert Fisk,

arguably the greatest anglophone student of the region, described the Saudi role in Syria as follows:

Deny and deny and deny is the Saudi policy, when asked what assistance it gave to the anti-Asad Islamist rebels in Syria. Even when I found Bosnian weapons documents in a Nusrah base in Aleppo, signed off by an arms manufacturer near Sarajevo called Ifet Krnjic – and even when I tracked down Krnjic himself, who explained how the weapons had been sent to Saudi Arabia (he even described the Saudi officials whom he spoke to in his factory) – the Saudis denied the facts.

(Fisk 2019, p.np)

### ***Yekîneyen Parastina Gel (YPG)***

Though only 9% of the Syrian population, the Kurdish national minority played a prominent role in the civil war and its refugee dynamics. Their northern territory was Syria's poorest, even prior to the tremendous destruction of localities through warfare. It is not homogeneously Kurdish, furthermore, but is mixed with Arab tribesmen whose allegiances were with Kurdish commanders only in acutely deadly situations. Oscillating between mere self-defense and proactive state-building and separatism in the Syrian northeast, Kurdish forces mounted impressive victories over Daesh. In 2017, they held 25% of Syrian territory – second only to the government's territorial reach (Kajjo 2020, p.269). Indeed, their victory in Raqqa marked the first time in history that Syrian Kurds expanded control to non-Kurdish areas within Syria.

At the war's onset, Asad attempted in 2011 to co-opt the Kurds with citizenship rights that had been stripped by an exclusionary census and denied to them for decades. Between 150,000 and 220,000 stateless Kurds inside Syria were thus given citizenship, though just as many remained disenfranchised. In addition to this unprecedented gesture, the regime expressed interest in meeting with the Kurdish leadership in hopes of securing their neutrality in the budding conflict. (Indeed, the FSA treated the Kurds as collaborationists with the Alawis in this early stage.) The Kurdish authorities were unmoved, sensing the perilous encirclement that may loom with civil war. The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) began preparing its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG would grow to an enviable 30,000 fighters, gradually taking over Kurdish-populated land as the Syrian government withdrew (ICG 2014).<sup>32</sup> Though nominally independent, the PYD and YPG were both subordinate to the PKK and the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey: "the PKK unequivocally controls this façade coalition," a 2013 analysis concluded, "[i]t imposes its political line, funds the operations, and closely controls the recruitment of members [who are] trained by former party cadres from Syria or who have returned from abroad" (Baczko et al. 2013, p.16).

By January 2015, the city of Kobanî was liberated from Daesh primarily by the YPG, which earned them international praise and continued American allegiance. Beginning in 2015, US airstrikes “were increasingly coordinated with YPG efforts on the ground, in a relatively effective alliance, with Arab fighters slowly being ‘glued on’ to Kurdish forces” (Holland 2020, p.44). By December, after a series of victories, the YPG expanded into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) under US tutelage. This rebranding of the army to include Arab and Syrian fighters in their ranks was primarily aimed “at mitigating Turkish objections to arming the YPG,” given Ankara’s strong opposition to the budding US-Kurdish alliance as yet another foothold of Kurdish terrorism (Kajjo 2020 pp.283).<sup>33</sup> In March 2016, Kurdish authorities announced the formation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in Rojava. This was a historic leap for the nationalist vision of Kurdistan – not only in Syria but regionally (Federici 2015).

The Kurdish separatists’ policy on forced migrants was ambivalent. On the one hand, they have created genuine sanctuaries in the territories they controlled, including not just for PKK fighters from the region but for internally displaced Kurds and other Syrian forced migrants as well. On its territory, the YPG guaranteed safety for thousands of people, created “humanitarian corridors” for refugees moving into Turkey, and acted as a security guarantor for dozens of IDP camps. Impressive civil institutions and social services were built – including through female empowerment – serving displaced constituencies in often-impossible conditions of encirclement and economic isolation. In a dim environment, the Kurds’ modest steps towards democratic autonomy and grassroots empowerment were a rare, hopeful oasis (Kizilkaya et al. 2021).

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the YPG knowingly displaced significant numbers of people in its military operations. Non-Kurds were deliberately driven out of liberated Daesh strongholds (Ferris & Kirişçi 2016, p.85-6). Amnesty International, among others, raised alarms that US arms donations to the YPG were used to “raze villages” and commit war crimes (Angelovski & Marzouk 2017). In the June 2015 battles over Tel Abyad and Suluk, some 13,000 people were displaced in a joint assault with the FSA.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the YPG enforced conscription for all capable males and some females. By issuing a new family register, they mandated each family to contribute one member; although “the law does not exempt Arabs and Christians living in the areas under the [YPG’s] control, recruitment has been contained to only the Kurdish Muslim population” (Oktav 2018, p.14). Since half of the Syrian Kurdish population lived outside of the YPG zones – in Aleppo and Damascus – all the forced migrants from those areas constituted potential recruits and sources of revenue (Baczko et al. 2013, p.16-17). In 2014, a solid majority of the estimated 4.6 million people residing in YPG territory were IDPs (Ünver 2017, p.44). Recruitment into the YPG, in other words, was directly dependent on the mobilization of the displaced. Many of the 200,000 Kurds who fled into the Domiz refugee camp in Iraq were also targeted for recruitment. In a perverse

incentive typical of such conflicts (“the worse, the better”), displacement was not merely a liability, therefore, but was also an asset insofar as it filled YPG ranks.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, I have argued that refugee production in the Syrian civil war was a natural outcome of the belligerents’ behavior and that the culpability for mass displacement was shared, if asymmetrical. We can draw little consolation from Western countries’ conduct which, as I stressed, was itself a key driver of migration. To say that “the vast majority of Syria’s warring parties are utterly unrestrained by international humanitarian law” (Ashraph 2020, p.105) is a cruel understatement. Not only were they supremely unconcerned with refugees. Most of them were actively committed to forced displacement as a tactic or strategy, while the rest were content to use forced migrants as sacrificial lambs towards loftier objectives.

We now turn to those few who fled Syria, to meet them and to learn about their journey.

## Notes

- 1 Such a dynamic is characteristic of comparable civil wars, such as in Yugoslavia (1991–1995), the DRC (1998–2003), Sri Lanka (1983–2009), and Yemen (2014–present), to name only a few – and Syria is no different. For sampling of incentives that warring parties have in refugee production see, *inter alia*, Lischer (2015) and Stedman and Tanner (2003). For the concept of “refugee warrior communities,” see Zolberg et al. (1989). For implications of refugees as tools of modern warfare, see Mandic (2021b).
- 2 As one hard-nosed military analyst rightly put it, more refugees means “fewer mouths to feed, patients to treat, children to educate” (Sorenson 2016, p.144).
- 3 In January 2017, for example, American forces killed and displaced more Syrians than Russian forces (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2017). For a comparison of casualties of the two leading air powers in the conflict – United States and Russian – see Airwars Project dataset available at <https://airwars.org/conflict-data/?belligerent=russian-military&country=syria>.
- 4 By comparison, only between 3,000 and 4,000 foreign fighters in total were estimated for the entirety of the Afghanistan conflict – an annual volume for the Syrian war (Sorenson 2016, p.111).
- 5 For an excellent critique of moralistic posturing by Western countries from the former Dutch Special Envoy for Syria, see van Dam (2017, pp.119–138; 168–184).
- 6 Because of their withdrawal of human capital, refugees and IDPs necessitate highly localized institutional innovation in their absence. Baczko et al. (2018) observed what happens to emergent civil institutions when “millions of civilians lived in areas controlled by insurgents that had no public services or administrators (judges, engineers, ranked police officers, mid-level managers) since most had fled the fighting” (p.118).
- 7 An excellent visualization of pre-2016 Syrian displacement data is available at <https://www.syria-visualized.com/>.
- 8 In addition to reports of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx>), see John et al. (2018), Pita and Domingo (2014), and Cozma and Kozma (2015). For scrutiny of exaggerated propaganda claims regarding chemical weapons, see Hersh (2013) and Erlich (2014, pp.101–123).

- 9 It can be said – tragically – that refugees fleeing this violence were fortunate to have escaped, insofar as “army snipers and shabiha posted at strategic positions target[ed] civilians trying to flee” (Ashraph 2020, p.84; see also Lister 2015, p.161 for Human Rights Watch’s identical conclusion). A miniscule number of Syrians who are internally displaced (3%) reside in shelters or camps provided by the regime (Miller 2017, p.12).
- 10 It is striking that Russia, the SAA’s savior and patron state, is more inclined and sympathetic to mass repatriation of refugees than the Asad regime (Rabinovich and Valensi 2021, p.208).
- 11 For best-available methodology estimating civilian harm of Russian air strikes, see <https://airwars.org/conflict/russian-military-in-syria/>
- 12 For analysis of Russian intervention in Syria as “Chechen model,” see Zisser (2020, pp.69-71). The comparison is unfair, as the Russian-induced displacement in Syria was considerably worse.
- 13 The stakes for Hezbollah were existential: “without the Asad link to Syria,” analysts concluded, “Hezbollah would not survive” (Sorenson 2016, p.110). On four reasons for Iran’s unwavering alliance with the Asad regime, see Goodarzi (2019, pp.153-4).
- 14 In the summer of 2015, Israel was actively preparing to welcome Druze refugees from Syria into the Golan Heights (Ferris & Kirişci 2016, p.22).
- 15 Following France, the UK also lobbied for an interventionist European policy, pledging some 15 million pounds of (primarily nonlethal) assistance to Syrian rebels. The British *Globe and Mail* was an outlier as the only publication among the Western press advocating for “a Libya-type, R2P military intervention” in the early phase (Briggs et al. 2017, p.70). David Cameron’s initiative for military intervention was blocked by a parliamentary vote on August 29, 2013, an historic antiwar victory – and an unambiguously popular decision on the tailwind of majority public opinion opposing British airstrikes in Syria at the time (Chen et al. 2020, p.65). The policy reversed in the end of 2015, when parliament failed to repeat its veto of airstrikes and approved anti-ISIS actions in Syria as well as Iraq. The British Royal Air Force (RAF) attacked its first targets in Syria, six oil fields under Daesh control on December 1st.
- 16 There was even a documented “grudge against the United States [...] for not giving support to its [France’s] military operations against Syria in August 2014” (Chen et al. 2020, p.36).
- 17 On similar confusion of refugee and terrorism issues in the UK, including the reasons that 57% of British public opinion “did not want to receive more refugees from Libya, Syria and other war-torn countries” at the peak of the refugee wave, see Chen et al. (2020, pp.69-71).
- 18 After the 9/11 attacks, US Secretary of Defense memos listed Syria as one of seven countries slated for regime change: Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran (Ahmed 2013). In 2006, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s emails published by WikiLeaks revealed continuity of the policy (available at <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/18328>). On the “fairly muscular plan on Syria” advocated by Clinton and CIA director Leon Panetta in 2012, see Sorenson (2016, p.96-7).
- 19 This blatantly illegal proposal was advocated in a *New York Times* op-ed by a prominent liberal (Briggs et al. 2017, p.84). Under international law, states are committed to neutrality in cases of civil war and are expressly prohibited under Article 2, Paragraph 4 of the UN Charter to use “any” force except at the express invitation of the formal government. This fact remains true despite Russian propaganda’s incessant, cynical appeal to it. On (il)legality of US-led coalition’s military strikes on Syrian government, see O’Connor (2016), IADL (2012), Westbrook (2019), Cohen (2020, pp.13-17).
- 20 See Airwars Project database available at <https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria/>. For summary of US and French military airstrikes and deployments in Syria, see Chen et al. (2020, p.80). For Congressional Research Service overview of (non-covert) US involvement in Syria, see (Blanchard & Nikitin 2017). In September 2015, the United States bombed Daesh in Syria with French, British, Canadian, and Australian forces. Under

- President Donald Trump between April 2017 and February 2020, the United States conducted 12 major attacks on SAA or its allies. It also deployed several thousand troops onto Syrian territory.
- 21 After praising American air strikes on Syria, Holland (2020) qualifies his homage to bombs with an inaccurate footnote: “[The U.S. air strikes] would also contribute to numerous and uncounted civilian deaths (estimated at around 500 within twelve months),” a significant underestimate drawn from a 2014 *Guardian* article (p.38n98).
  - 22 See Airwars Project for carefully aggregated casualty dataset <https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria>. As soon as US airstrikes began, “U.S.-backed FSA groups,” including “at least ten insurgent factions openly backed by the USA had issued official denunciations,” rejecting the strikes as “an attack against our national sovereignty,” and as “only benefit[ing] the regime,” while more jihadi rebel formations perceived them as “a war against Muslims” (Lister 2015, p.292).
  - 23 On how the US “train and equip” program “turned into a disaster,” see Lister (2015, p.380).
  - 24 This figure, presented in testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in February 2018, is likely an underestimate because it excludes “black funds” and other informal military aid.
  - 25 A RAND Corporation analysis concluded that, at best, US airstrikes oriented towards creating territorial safe havens are not only likely to fail but to themselves motivate greater displacement: “sans” a coherent ground component, “safe zones set up as enclaves on Syria’s northern or southern border could only protect a small proportion of Syria’s population and would presumably increase the number of IDPs as Syrians fled to them” (Mueller et al. 2013, p.11). On well-known flaws of “safe zones,” including that they “act as a pull factor for refugees,” see Ferris & Kirişçi (2016, p.101-4). In the words of a senior official in the humanitarian sector: “We’ve been there. We’ve seen it doesn’t work” (p.104).
  - 26 It is indicative that, despite this conclusion, Feldman (2020) characterizes this hypothetical policy as “deeply cynical but perhaps lifesaving over the long run,” yet is content to describe a regime change policy with massive military incursion comparable to Iraq and Libya as “morally appealing” and “morally attractive” (p.93-94). This curious threshold for “cynicism” in US foreign policies is characteristic of the militarist interventionist mindset: actively creating millions of refugees by prolonging wars and exacerbating bloodshed is deemed “moral”; but restraint and non-interference in civil wars to ensure less death and misery is “cynical.”
  - 27 On terminology and history of “Daesh,” “Islamic State,” “ISIL,” or “ISIS,” see Siniver and Lucas (2016) and Gerges (2016).
  - 28 Al-Nusra also congregated related extremist organizations such as the Liwa Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa Harakat al-Fajer al-Islami, Liwa Saqour al-Sham, and Liwa al-Islam. On FSA’s condemnation of US sanctioning of al-Nusra, see Sorenson (2016, p.49).
  - 29 In Daesh-controlled Iraq, however, the opposite is true. Their conquest of Ramadi in Anbar province alone expelled as many as 250,000 people.
  - 30 In addition to oil and weapons smuggling, humanitarian aid was also often diverted to extremists. An oppositional figure monitoring cross-border humanitarian aid estimated that “30-40 percent was lost to scams by warlords and others,” many of them Daesh-related (Ferris & Kirişçi 2016, p.98).
  - 31 To take just one indicator: in August 2015, Turkey had conducted 400 airstrikes on the PKK but 4 on Daesh (Sorenson 2016, p.93).
  - 32 On factionalism and leadership among Syrian Kurds, see (Kajjo 2020 pp.276-279).
  - 33 In 2016, the SDF was estimated to have 10,000 Sunni Arabs in addition to 20,000 YPG troops (Pusane 2019, p.76).
  - 34 Many claims about YPG-induced forced migration are exaggerated and should be scrutinized, as many of them emanate from Turkish propaganda which exaggerated Kurdish influence and misattributed Daesh-caused displacement to the YPG (Lister 2015, p.358).
  - 35 Among other violations, Human Rights Watch recorded instances of forced recruitment of refugee child soldiers in Kurdish areas (Oktav 2018, p.14).