

Assad's Syria: how he planned to transform Syria since 2011

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In March 2011, the Arab Spring was in full bloom. Like their Egyptian, Libyan and Tunisian counterparts, Syrians made known their desire for change, demanding “freedom, justice and dignity,” the emblematic words of the Syrian revolution.

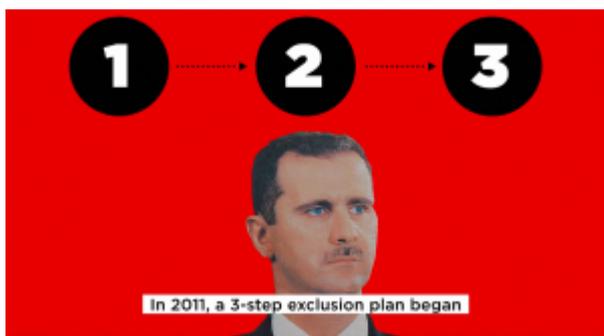
In March 2011, middle schoolers in the southern city of Deraa wrote on the walls a slogan chanted on Arab streets throughout the region: “The people want the regime to fall.” Security forces arrested and tortured them ; in response, demonstrations broke out across the country.

Regimes forces responded systematically by shooting at the crowds. At the same time, hundreds of young activists and other civilians were arrested and disappeared into regime prisons. Repression grew stronger by the day, provoked new protests and demands for reform. By the end of the year, the UN had counted 5000 deaths. A full-blown war had started.

Eight years later, the war is still raging and President Bashar al-Assad's plan to change the demographic dynamics of the country is now apparent.

As of the last quarter of 2018, more than 12 million Syrian citizens had been displaced, whether to other areas of the country or abroad, after suffering myriad international humanitarian law and human rights violations. While the Syrian regime and its allies are acting as if the conflict were nearly over, attempting to deny years of war crimes and other massive humanitarian law and human rights violations, and urging people to come home and calling for reconstruction, Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) tell a radically different story.

Three steps have consistently sustained the regime's scheme to exclude from territory under its control all undesirable populations (anti-regime activists, opponents, human rights defenders, Sunni populations perceived as anti-government, and so on): the first step consists in emptying areas retaken from armed opposition groups of their inhabitants following prolonged sieges and indiscriminate attacks; the second step aims to ensure that these undesirable populations never return; and the third step entails rebuilding and restructuring the retaken areas to host allies.



Step 1: Bombing, besieging, starving: a recurrent modus operandi to force evacuation

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Syrian regime has implemented a systematic policy of destruction and killings to win back civilian areas controlled by insurgent groups. Whether in Homs, Aleppo, Zabadani, Madaya, Darayya, Muadhmiya, or eastern Ghouta, a similar modus operandi has been implemented to force surrender. Opposition-held civilian areas have been systematically besieged and encircled by security checkpoints while landmines prevent residents from leaving and humanitarian aid, food, medicines and other essential items from entering. Residential areas, including houses, hospitals and schools, have been indiscriminately bombed, while civilians have starved to death and many casualties have been caused by the lack of medical care. Regime offensives have lasted months, sometimes years, and have not eased until opposition groups have been forced to surrender and accept unfair evacuation agreements. Combined with the anticipation of deadly attacks, this “surrender or die” strategy has left millions of civilians with no other choice but to escape, leaving their property and land at the mercy of the Syrian regime and its allies.



Step 2: Preventing the return of undesirable displaced people

The next stage of the regime’s plan to establish a new Syria based on a recomposed demography consists in consolidating its constituencies within redefined boundaries. While implying that the conflict is nearing its end and an ostensible return to normalcy in territories reconquered by the regime, the official narrative has multiplied calls for refugees to return Syria and for reconstruction to begin. However, conditions are not in place for either to take place; crimes and international humanitarian law and human rights violations that led around half of the Syrian population to flee their homes continue in utter impunity. The regime’s and its allies’ recent moves show no respect for Syrians’ rights, including those of IDPs and refugees. Returns appear to be selective, while there are no guarantees to protect returnees from forced conscription, arbitrary detention, torture or extrajudicial execution. Far from welcoming back everyone, the regime has taken steps to prevent the return of most displaced populations, including legislation aiming to expropriate, seize and demolish their property.



Step 3: Restructuring Retaken Areas

After retaking opposition-held areas and emptying them of their dwellers, the regime has taken steps to restructure entire neighborhoods and villages, ranging from property destruction, land seizure, expropriation, expulsion, and the promotion of new urban projects to be offered to sympathetic populations.



"We don't own a house there. It was bombed and completely destroyed during military operations. I had a teaching institute, which was also destroyed during military operations. After the Four Cities Agreement was signed and the population displaced to Idlib, the regime requested title deeds from Al-Zabadani residents², including those who stayed in or returned to the city after military operations ceased. However, many families inherited their homes from their ancestors. Not all homes were necessarily registered in the names of current inhabitants. For example, there are homes registered in the names of a grandfather, not a father. It was reported that the state sold and expropriated land belonging to local residents."

a resident of Al-Zabadani

"On 27 January 2017, regime forces entered Al-Fijah Spring. On the Internet, I visited pages of the Syrian regime. They posted pictures, showing themselves looting houses in Ain Al-Fijah. They stole everything : fridges, washing machines, furniture, kitchenware, electrical wire from walls, bedrooms and salons, plumbing systems, ceramics, restaurant equipment, cars, and anything that could be sold and used. It was recently reported that my house, my family's house, our restaurant and my brothers' houses had been blown up. My grandfather's house, where we grew up, was also detonated. This was the case of many other houses. I lost everything. At the age of 30, I am impoverished. All residents of Ain Al-Fijah and Basimah are like me."

a media activist from Wadi Barada area

Until adequate political and security conditions and guarantees to protect all Syrians' rights are met, the international community should neither encourage the return of refugees and internally displaced Syrians, nor fund or engage in reconstruction in Syria. In particular, businesses, states and organisations that may be tempted to take part in the regime's reconstruction plans should be reminded of the risk of being held accountable for international crimes and violations of Syrians' human rights. Indeed, participating in reconstruction would support and legitimize the Syrian regime's demographic recomposition plans, permanently deprive thousands, perhaps millions, of Syrians of their land, condemn non-displaced Syrians to live in a violent totalitarian state, further reinforce impunity and bury any prospects for national reconciliation.

FIDH recommends that countries hosting Syrian refugees respect their rights and dignity by rejecting the regime's calls for premature return and flagging the cases in which these calls violate established non-refoulement principles or international human rights and humanitarian conventions. The organization calls upon the international community to publicly condemn the crime of forced displacement of civilians and ensure that issues including voluntary return in safety and dignity, as well as housing and property restitution rights, in accordance with the requirements of international law, are addressed as part of peace talks and settlement.