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The Politics of Civilian (Im)mobility Movement Management Strategies in Western Syria

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ACMRL Migration Law Series

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Abstract

Contemporary conflict, often intentionally, involves civilians. One of the ways in which actors are instrumentalizing civilians' presence within conflict territory is by controlling their movement, either by forcing civilians to flee or forcing them to stay. Hence, civilians' location and their geographical movements have become contested tools of warfare. This phenomenon is highly problematic as the involvement of civilians in conflict directly affects their livelihood, potentially violating International Humanitarian Law as well as International Human Rights Law, including the right to leave any country, the right to freedom of movement and the prohibition of expulsion. Until recently, the academic literature paid relatively little attention to the underlying motivations preceding the use of movement management strategies by warring parties, particularly in the case of restriction of movement strategies. Moreover, the literature does not account for movement management in the broadest sense, including both policies of displacement and restriction. It is essential to bridge these gaps in the literature to generate a more complete analysis of the issue of civilian movement management in conflict. Through the analysis of the nature of civilian movement management in Syria this thesis aims to answer the following question: Why and how has civilian geographical movement been instrumentalized in Western Syria, in 2018-2022? Applying a qualitative content analysis of reports by international organizations and local non governmental organizations, this thesis finds that various movement management strategies are employed by different active actors in the conflict, including depopulation, relocation and cleansing, as well as sieges and checkpoints. Moreover, its use underlies military, economic and/or political logics, as evidenced by a variety of strategic advantages.

Key words: Syria, civilians' geographical movement, movement management, displacement, restriction of movement.

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List of Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
CoI	Independent International Commission for Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
NGO	Non-governmental organizations
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SJAC	Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	the United Nations Refugee Organization
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

1. Introduction

Armed conflict may be defined as a violent interaction between two or more armed groups (Eck & Hultman, 2007). Nevertheless, civilian populations are significantly affected by conflict for the reason that they are perceived as strategic actors (Weinstein, 2007). Repeatedly throughout history political perceptions have been attached to the role of civilians in war, resulting in their victimization (Gregory, 2020). During WWII civilians were considered the industrial and ideological machine driving the war. Consequently, strategies such as the bombing of cities were used (Leaning, 2011). In the 1950s all the way through the last anti-colonial wars in the 1970s, civilians were understood to support rebel groups, resulting in a strategy of (counter)insurgency (Leaning, 2011). The political processes driving said war-strategies up to this point often resulted in the mass-killing of civilians.

In recent decades, civilians have been significantly impacted by various methods of war, however, not all of which lead to death (Balcells, 2010, Khorram-Manesh et al., 2021; Melander et al., 2009; Von Einsiedel et al. 2017).¹ Contemporary conflicts, often referred to as *new wars*², exhibit distinct underlying perceptions and motivations that set them apart from 20th-century violence (Kaldor, 2013). The political perception surrounding civilians' existence within the territories of a conflict today makes their survival more often of strategic importance. Consequently, civilians' location and movement across space and time is politicized as a powerful tool to be used to advance an actor's strategic goals (Sheer, 2022; Lichtenheld, 2020a). Moreover, evidence suggests that for most victimized populations "conflict is not a single event but rather a prolonged way of living" (Sheer, 2022, p. 1). Victimization occurs consistently and stretched over larger periods of time as conflicts continue to last for years on end (Lichtenheld, 2017).

In contemporary academic discourse, an aspect of strategic civilian targeting that has garnered increased attention is the exploitation of civilians' geographical movements (Armed Conflict

¹ Previous authors have made the claim that fewer civilians are killed in modern warfare than in traditional warfare (see for example: Kalyvas, 2006). However, it should be noted that there are significant challenges in estimating the number of civilian deaths in moder wars, due to traditional methods of tallying casualties becoming insufficient (Khorram-Manesh et al., 2021).

² New wars is a term first coined by Mary Kaldor (1999). It is used to differentiate between old systems of war and contemporary systems of war. Kaldor emphasizes that new wars "should not be understood as an empirical category but rather as a way of elucidating the logic of contemporary war." (2013, p. 1).

Survey, 2019). This refers to the phenomenon commonly termed as the *weaponization* or *instrumentalization* of civilians in conflict settings through movement management strategies. Such organizational policies are used in conflict against civilians and in connection with violence (Schon, 2015). Contemporary research links displacement to movement management strategies in conflict, with armed groups forcing civilians to flee using a variety of strategies for various strategically motivated reasons (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002; Shon, 2015; Greenhill, 2010; Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b). Such displacement may occur within the territories of a conflict, allowing the perpetrator group continued access to the displaced people (Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, displacement may also take the form of expulsion across state borders (Greenhill, 2008, 2010).

Notwithstanding the above, in addition to compelling civilians to flee their homes, actors in conflict may also adopt strategies aimed at constraining civilian mobility. Such movement restriction strategies seek to coerce civilians into staying in conflict zones, effectively limiting their freedom of movement. Civilians living within the territories of a conflict may be exposed to targeted deprivations of freedom, through physical barriers such as mines, checkpoints and walls as well as non-physical barriers, for example including policies of citizenship deprivation (Sheer, 2022; Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023). A more directly violent way through which civilians' location and movement is instrumentalized is by sieges, an often employed strategy of urban warfare today (ICRC, 2019). Moreover, siege-like strategies as well as other means to restrict movement more frequently include deliberately depriving access to humanitarian aid, further exacerbating already dire circumstances (ICRC, 2019). As such, the implementation of movement restriction strategies has emerged as a prominent and escalating phenomenon (ICRC, 2019). Consequently, both strategies of displacement and strategies of restriction of movement significantly impact conflict dynamics, civilian populations, and the overall trajectory of conflicts in the civil war context.

The strategies by which civilians' mobility is controlled or manipulated are acknowledged as potentially violating multiple instruments of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) as well as International Human Rights Law (IHRL). Such violations include the right to leave any country, including one's own (Article 2(2) Protocol 4 European Court of Human Right (ECHR); Article 12(2) African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR); Article 12(2) International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)), the right to freedom of movement (Article 2(1) Protocol 4 ECHR; Article 12(1) ACHPR; Article 12(1) ICCPR) and the prohibition of collective expulsion (Article 4 Protocol 4 ECHR; Article 12(5) ACHPR). Undoubtedly, the exploitation of civilians' movement has manifested in various forms and dimensions – as also evidenced by these legal violations – bolstering the argument that human suffering in conflict has escalated significantly beyond civilian casualties (Kalyvas, 2006).

1.1. Research questions

In this thesis, my primary objective is to examine the various types of movement management and the strategic reasoning that underpins armed groups' decision-making processes. I intend to shed light on how and why these groups employ movement management strategies and vie for control over civilians' mobility, thereby politicizing their locations and geographical movements, leading to the victimization of civilians. Furthermore, I will explore discerning patterns in the utilization of these policies, focusing on the potential coexistence and connection of restriction of movement strategies and displacement strategies. In doing so, I aim to uncover the underlying motivations driving such policies and determine whether restriction of movement strategies serve similar purposes as displacement strategies. Focusing on the Syrian conflict as a case study, I seek to answer the following research question:

Why and how has civilian geographical movement been instrumentalized in Western Syria, in 2018-2022?

This thesis will be organized to answer two sub-questions, namely:

1. What types and patterns of movement management are present in Western Syria?; and
2. What are the underlying logics and motivations³ for different types of movement management strategies?

³ The terms (strategic) 'logic' and (strategic) 'motivation' will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Please note that when referring to one or the other the same is meant, namely the underlying strategic reasoning which precedes the use of one or more movement management strategies.

This study aims to broaden the scholarly focus on movement management, encompassing various strategies next to strategic displacement, and contributing to the existing literature by examining the strategic logics behind both displacement and restriction of movement strategies. Organizational policies of displacement on the one hand, and restriction of movement on the other hand, have scarcely been studied as two branches of the war strategy of movement management.⁴ Contemporary scholarly research has primarily addressed widespread phenomenon of (strategic) displacement, likely due to the significant impact of displacement across borders on the global stage in the last few years (Alaverdov et al., 2019). Yet, in comparison there has been a relative lack of academic focus on logics behind the increasing use of restriction of movement, despite their crucial role in the broader context of movement management strategies in contemporary civil war. Through a qualitative content analysis, this thesis seeks to bridge these gaps and offer a comprehensive examination of the existence of different movement management practices as well as the differences, similarities, and patterns of strategic logics aimed at forcing people to stay and forcing people to flee. It is the hope that in contributing to the existing literature more attention is drawn to the complexities of movement management, their ethical implications and potential violations of international law, also highlighting the urgent need for policymakers and international organizations to address the devastating effects of these strategies on civilian populations and consider ways to better protect civilians from movement management strategies.

1.2. Scope and structure of the thesis

For the purpose of maintaining a specific focus for this thesis, *strategic displacement* or *strategies of displacement* is defined as the deliberate, systematic and coercive movement of non-combatants by armed groups. This definition is taken from the criminal qualification of displacement as stipulated in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.⁵ Strategic displacement is ordered, indicating that it is authorized by leadership of an armed group as part of a wider (wartime) policy (Lichtenheld, 2020b). Similarly, for this thesis, *strategies of restriction of movement* are defined as those strategies aimed at the restriction of movement,

⁴ During the period of the writing of this thesis a first article was published on this topic, considering how movement management is utilized by different actors. This study focused on strategies of forced exit, selective return and strategic laissez-faire (see: Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023).

⁵ ICC Rome Statute 7.1, 7.2(d), 8.2.

which are systematically implemented by leadership as part of a broader organizational (wartime) policy. Both strategies of displacement and strategies of restriction of movement are occasionally referred to as *organizational policies*, with the former aimed at forcing people to flee and the latter aimed at forcing people to stay. Note both terms convey the same meaning in for the purpose of this thesis.

This thesis will be structured as follows: first, I will discuss the existent literature on the different movement management strategies, separating between strategies which force people out and strategies which force people to stay. I will conclude this chapter with a theoretical framework which will serve as the theoretical and analytical foundation of this thesis. In the next chapter, I will discuss the research design and methodology, mainly by discussing the case selection, data selection and extraction, as well as the method of analysis. In the following two chapters I apply a qualitative content analysis to a sampled number of reports to, firstly, capture the extent to which movement management strategies have been employed in Syria during the time of research, and secondly, what strategic logics have driven the use of different movement management strategies. Lastly, I will move to the conclusion, also discussing limitations and recommendations for future research and policy.

2. Literature review

As touched upon in the introduction, the weaponization of population movements is an organizational policy that is frequently resorted to in armed conflict, in conjunction with the use of violence. This chapter will dedicate attention to the academic literature on the topic, synthesising the academic output on the types of strategic displacement and the driving forces of the use of such strategies in conflict. Consequently, this literature review will provide the extant theories which will be used in the development a theoretical framework, on the basis of which the materials of the case study are approached in the analysis.

2.1. Organizational policies forcing people to flee

Organizational policies which are put in place to deliberately and intentionally expel a population or group are legally and socially categorized under the umbrella of forced displacement or forced migration. There has been considerable amount of scholarly attention on forced displacement (Shon, 2015). However, there has been less attention for the engineering or creating of displacement by actors as part of a strategy in conflict (Lichtenheld, 2017). Past research into displacement primarily viewed the phenomenon as a collateral, consequential result of conflict, rather than as part of the organizational policy of an armed group (Leaning, 2011). Besides collateral displacement, some academic attention has been directed towards the prevalence of opportunistic displacement, referring to displacement as deliberately used by individual combatants but not ordered by their superiors as part of a larger strategy (see: Ibáñez & Vélez, 2008; Schon, 2015).

Nevertheless, there has been a shift in scholarly attention signifying a recognition of additional dimensions, factors and impacts of displacement, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Research categorizing displacement as a collateral of conflict or strictly opportunistic has been replaced by contemporary scholarship approaching displacement as part of a wider strategic policy of armed groups, elucidating to its rational, intended character. Moreover, in this regard, scholars have dedicated attention to underlying motivations for such instrumentalization of displacement – with some analysing its use within a controlled territory (Lichtenheld, 2017, 2020a, 2020b), hence often limited to state borders,

and others approaching the phenomenon as a primarily cross-border occurrence (Greenhill, 2008, 2010).

2.1.1. Strategic displacement: a categorization

Strategic displacement, or the engineering of displacement, may be defined as migration flows which are induced by actors to achieve a certain military, political or economic end (Greenhill, 2008; Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b). The deliberate changing of the composition of a territory's population is used as a military strategy or policy instrument by both state- and non-state actors (Greenhill, 2008; Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, scholars agree that the strategic engineering of displacement may be performed using a range of instruments: an actor may use coercive methods as well as actual (military) violence. Additionally, less aggressive approaches may be used, including incentives such as financial compensation (Greenhill, 2008). Moreover, displacement may be engineered by simply opening borders which under normal circumstances are closed (Greenhill, 2008).

Displacement can be categorized based on various different factors. As this thesis aims to identify different types of movement management, it is most relevant to approach displacement based on the various ways it may be strategically utilized by actors. One of the most prominent scholars on the topic of strategic displacement is Adam Lichtenheld (2017, 2020a, 2020b). Lichtenheld – based on a detailed account of all of the existing literature on the topic of displacement – has identified three types of strategic displacement in the civil-war context, separating between cleansing, forced relocation and depopulation. This categorization will be used for this thesis.

Cleansing is defined as the deliberate expulsion of members of a political, ethnic, religious, racial or social group (Lichtenheld, 2020a). The concept of cleansing in conflict studies is conceptualized to include the categories as listed above – making this definition broader than the legal definition, which exclusively accounts for *ethnic* cleansing (Lichtenheld, 2020a). Cleansing, according to Lichtenheld (2020a, 2020b), is defined by a number of criteria. Firstly, it involves the collective expulsion of individuals based on a common group characteristic rather than individual circumstances. Secondly, the goal is to achieve permanent displacement, preventing the victims from returning. The final criterion as outlined by Lichtenheld pertains to the *outward push orientation* of the displacement, with the perpetrators aiming to drive the expelled group away from a controlled area (Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b). This could involve

transferring a group across state borders due to conflict or relocating them within the conflict territory (Greenhill, 2008).

The second strategy, known as depopulation, represents a distinct displacement strategy characterized by its indiscriminate nature. Using this strategy of displacement, all individuals within a controlled area are evacuated without any attempt to discern their affiliations. This distinguishes depopulation from cleansing, which involves a collective targeting approach rooted in specific discriminatory criteria (Lichtenheld, 2020a). Another significant disparity between depopulation and cleansing is the temporary nature of depopulation. Those orchestrating a depopulation strategy implement them solely throughout the conflict's duration (Lichtenheld, 2017). When opposing factions cease hostilities, displaced individuals often receive permission to return to their original location (Lichtenheld, 2017). Similar to cleansing, depopulation displays an *outward push orientation*, pushing the displaced populace away from the area (Lichtenheld, 2020a).

Lichtenheld introduces relocation as the a last form of strategic displacement. Relocation involves the concentration of a population into a specific area within the conflict zone (Lichtenheld, 2020a). In this context, the perpetrators forcibly displace individuals, compelling them to settle in a designated region. Unlike depopulation and cleansing, there appears to be an *inward pull orientation* associated with relocation, as the civilian displacement involves drawing the population into a controlled area rather than pushing them away (Lichtenheld, 2020a). Furthermore, the practice of relocation can encompass either collective or indiscriminate targeting. These three strategic displacement methods can be executed using a range of instruments, including intimidation, land seizures, evacuation orders, physical assaults on civilians, and the destruction of cities, villages, or agricultural lands (Lichtenheld, 2017, 2020a, 2020b).

2.1.2. The strategic logics of displacement

Scholars focusing on strategic displacement are in agreement that displacement is a general strategy that is seen across various conflicts, driven by distinct motives and involving a diverse array of actors (Greenhill, 2008, 2020; Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b; South, 2006). Consequently, several scholars have formulated theories aimed at elucidating the rationale behind utilizing

displacement to strategically to manage population movement. Lichtenheld, in his examination of how government forces employ strategic displacement, introduces a typology that distinguishes between three key logics – punishment, denial, and sorting – drawn from existing literature on the subject. This framework not only categorizes displacement strategies but also extends to encompass a third logic, namely the sorting logic, which is particularly instrumental in explaining the strategy of relocation.

Lichtenheld asserts that the logics of punishment, denial and sorting underly an information or intelligence deficit (Lichtenheld, 2020a). This lack of information stems from what Kaylvas (2006) terms the identification problem. This problem pertains to the challenge of differentiating between enemy combatants and civilians, as well as distinguishing disloyal civilians from those who are not involved. This difficulty is suggested to be a driving factor behind the utilization of displacement tactics against civilians (Lichtenheld, 2020b). The significance of civilians in conflict is underscored by the identification problem (Magruder, 2017), where the lack of essential information becomes a key catalyst for resorting to displacement strategies (Lichtenheld, 2020b).

Following the logic of denial, governments may resort to strategies including the forcibly uprooting and expelling entire populations in order to prevent any potential civilian support for enemy forces (Downes & Greenhill, 2015; Zhukov, 2015). This strategy, often referred to as *draining of the sea*, serves as an alternative approach to address the challenge of identifying sympathizers among a population (Lichtenheld, 2020a). Instead of resolving this identification issue, this strategy allows combatants to manoeuvre around it without compromising their strategic position. Collective punishment has been argued as a second trigger for displacement engineering (see also: Ceren & Semuhi, 2022; Posen, 1993; Steele, 2017). Lichtenheld asserts that the identification problem leads to the targeting and expulsion of civilians believed to be sympathetic to enemy forces based on shared group characteristics (Lichtenheld, 2020a). Employing a logic of punishment, government forces employ displacement as a means to directly retaliate against individuals who, based on group-level assumptions, are considered disloyal. In the absence of adequate information, combatants often rely on markers such as

ethnicity as a substitute for gauging loyalty (Lichtenheld, 2020a).⁶ Similar to the logic of denial, the logic of punishment involves using strategic displacement to navigate the challenges posed by a lack of information, rather than attempting to resolve them (Lichtenheld, 2020a).

The multifaceted sorting logic involves the displacement of civilians which allows armed factions to separate, capture *and* utilize them, whether as laborers or potential recruits (Lichtenheld, 2020a). By adopting a sorting logic, Lichtenheld suggests that government forces might shift their focus from traits that define groups to the geographical locations of individuals, using these locations as a substitute for gauging loyalty and allegiances (Lichtenheld, 2020b). This strategy assumes a correlation between enemy territorial dominance and civilian allegiance, using location as an indicator of collaboration or passive support for the enemy. As a result, civilians are categorized as *good* or *bad* based on their desirability in the eyes of the forces involved (see also: Schon, 2015; Steele, 2017, 2018; Pearce, 2012). Consequently, strategic displacement is leveraged as a method of sorting, enabling deductions about people's perceived culpability through their movements. In this way, the identification problem is solved. Furthermore, those considered desirable enough to reside within controlled regions become bases of valuable resources indispensable to the survival of the armed group (Lichtenheld, 2017; Lichtenheld, 2020b; Kaplan, 2022).

Kelly Greenhill (2008, 2010), taking a geopolitical perspective in her theory of strategic engineered migration, argues that the threat of engineering displacement or deliberate instrumentalizing of already displaced people may serve multiple strategic purposes (Miholjic, 2022), which she has identifies as (1) asymmetric leverage, (2) the paradox of liberalism, (3) the exploitation of liberalism (4) operational advantages, and (5) straight-forward economic benefits. These strategic purposes range to discuss economic, political and military advantages or goals which rationalize the employment of strategies of displacement. In doing so, Greenhill

⁶ Especially in plural or co-ethnic societies conflict plays out along group divides (Hägerdal, 2021). Because of this, conflict which are not strictly ethnic in nature may still spiral into ethnic cleansing (Bulutgil, 2016; Hägerdal, 2021 Steele, 2017). However, according to Hägerdal and Lichtenheld (2019; 2020a) the use of ethnic cleansing, more often than not, cannot be traced back to an ethno-nationalist ideology (as is argues as a primary motivator by others, such as Straus, 2015). Rather, ethnic cleansing is based on other military and political considerations, rather than the need for a homogeneous territory.

defines the strategic logics of displacement by separating its various strategic advantages to actors.

Asymmetric leverage refers to the engineering of displacement as a means to gain the necessary precursor to negotiation with a more powerful opponent, namely by creating a “crisis generation” (Greenhill, 2008, p. 14). Greenhill argues that a crisis generation of displaced people is one of the few areas in which a weaker actor has a relatively strong position in negotiations with a objectively stronger actor. In crisis diplomacy, a significant strategy such as the creation of an entire crisis generation aids to the potency of the threats made by an actor (Greenhill, 2008). The powerful target, which in normal circumstances does not budge to make concessions or underestimates the credibility of threats, now takes the weaker actor seriously (Greenhill, 2008). In this manner, a weaker or illegitimate actor, despite their subordinate position at the negotiation table, is able to create bargaining space and have their demands heard. Focusing on rebel groups⁷ specifically, Weinstein (2007) states that “rebel groups send signals of their resolve by waging war against civilians” (p. 208). Besides the use of direct violence, this includes the creating of migration flows so as to change the dynamics of the negotiation process (Weinstein, 2007). The strategic purpose of asymmetric leverage may be described as having a clear political gain, surpassing a legitimacy deficit.

A second strategic purpose as identified by Greenhill is the paradox of liberalism. The strategic displacement of civilians in this case is largely instrumentalized against liberal states by non-democratic governments. As liberal governments consider themselves vastly different from non-liberal governments, they are suspicious of the foreign policies of non-liberal governments, viewing those governments as enemies by default (Greenhill, 2008). This leads non-liberal governments to believe that they have little to lose by disregarding moral norms related to the engineering of displacement, and the instrumentalization of civilians more generally. Already labelled as a rogue state, these governments have less reason to fear the condemnation of the international community and as a result view engineering displacement as a viable strategy to achieve a political, economic or military end (Greenhill, 2008).

⁷ Also referred to in this thesis as insurgents and non-state actors.

Another strategic purpose is the exploitation of liberalism. This purpose is present in the dynamic between a rebel group aiming to overthrow their government and a liberal state, or more generally the entire international community. In this case, displacement is engineered by rebel groups in order to frame their government as oppressive towards its civilians. Exploiting the liberal virtues of the international community, rebel groups will try to create a narrative of an oppressive government by provoking attacks upon themselves, which lead to large migration flows of civilians fleeing violence (Greenhill, 2008). Acting as “agent provocateurs”⁸, these rebel groups deliberately act in ways to incite the government to generate displacement flows (Greenhill, 2010). The manipulation of such a narrative would then also lead to more sympathy for the rebel group and eventual international action against the governments which these rebel groups aim to overthrow (Greenhill, 2008). The purpose of exploitation of liberalism is an attractive purpose for actors which, though strategic displacement aim to achieve more legitimacy (Greenhill, 2008).

A fourth strategic purpose is identified by Greenhill as that of operational advantages. Here, the engineering of migration opted for exclusively because their relatively cost-effective military gains, compared to traditional military operations. Strategically displacing persons is rationalized as it required less (trained) manpower or even military violence. Moreover, it is also easier compared to the engineering of a political campaign, aimed at gaining the support of a local population. Following this logic, often the simple and cost-effective method of generating a fear of (home) violence – in this way forcing people out – is an attractive motive for the strategic use of this method in conflict (Greenhill, 2008, 2010). Consequently, this strategic objective can be linked to the act of utilizing civilians as a resource base to fulfil military and economic requirements, as previously explored in the context of the sorting logic.

The last strategic purpose of the engineering displacement as described by Greenhill is the gaining of straight-forward economic benefits (Greenhill, 2008). An actor which drives people out of a territory is often left with the assets of the displaced. Indeed, displacement often times is paired with (minority) land confiscations and food confiscations (Ekeh, 2007). Hence, a perpetrator actor may directly benefit from the possessions displaced people were forced to leave behind or through so-called departure taxes (Greenhill, 2008). Moreover, actors may also

financially benefit indirectly from displaced persons through their family members still residing in the area. By threatening those left behind with a similar faith of expulsion actors can acquisition bribes, profiting from the exploitation of victims and likely soon-to-be victims of displacement (Greenhill, 2008).

Underlying the instrumentalization of each of the types of displacement – earlier separated into cleansing, depopulation and relocation – are strategic logics which are motivated by strategic purposes or advantages. Lichtenheld's research demonstrates a distinction in the utilization of cleansing, depopulation, and relocation tactics based on the nature of conflicts. Typically, cleansing is prevalent in conventional warfare scenarios, whereas depopulation and relocation find greater application in irregular, new wars, which are characterized by heightened challenges in identification (Lichtenheld, 2020a). Furthermore, the study reveals a discernible pattern in the underlying motives for these strategies. Cleansing tends to align with a punitive logic, whereas relocation often aligns with a sorting approach, evaluating culpability based on geographic positioning (Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b). Greenhill's strategic purposes similarly considers strategic advantages in order to explain why actors would employ strategies of displacement.

2.2. Organizational policies forcing people to stay

As discussed in the introduction, managing civilian movement extends beyond displacement strategies which aim to forcibly remove local populations. It also encompasses strategies that are designed to restrict movement. Just like displacement strategies, the literature identifies various types of movement restriction strategies. These can be broadly categorized into physical barriers and non-physical barriers, with the latter involving bureaucratic policies aimed at population control, including deprivation of citizenship and hindering access to legal documents (Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023). However, this thesis specifically focuses on organizational policies which aim to threaten with or use of *physical* force to manage civilian movement, thus retaining its emphasis on physical barriers strategically employed to restrict civilian mobility.

2.2.1. Restriction of movement: a categorization

The literature is clear about the existence of restriction of movement as a general strategy in contemporary conflict. Restriction of movement strategies may restrict civilians' mobility entirely, most notably through sieges (Todman, 2016), or limit but not totally incapacitate civilian movement, such as walls, checkpoints, antipersonnel landmines and policies such as the accompanying of women by a male relative (Schon, 2016, 2019). Following the categorization by Sheer (2022) for this thesis, physical barriers aimed at restriction of freedom of movement include checkpoints (otherwise known as road blocks), sieges and anti-personnel landmines.

Checkpoints may be defined as “any staffed physical impediment to travel within a territory” (Longo et al. 2014, p. 1009). Used in various different conflicts, checkpoints are described as the primary means to prevent civilian movement in conflict (Schon, 2019). Serving as physical barriers manned by military or security personnel (Schon, 2016), they are often strategically positioned at key locations such as roads, bridges and entry or exit points of cities, villages and neighbourhoods (Schon, 2016). The primary objective of checkpoints is regulation and monitoring of movement of goods and people (Schon, 2016).

Sieges are defined as “any attempt by an adversary to control access into and out of a town, neighbourhood, or other terrain of strategic significance to achieve a military or political objective” (Beehner et al., 2017, p. 78). They are a deliberate strategy aimed at isolating a (strategic) area, effectively cutting off communication as well as movement of goods and people. Similar to the strategic use of checkpoints, sieges serve the primary purpose of restriction of movement (Todman, 2017). Despite being a strategy as old as war itself, sieges in the new war context are typically connected to authoritarian regimes, and secondarily non-state actors (Beehner et al., 2017; Hägerdal, 2021; Todman, 2016). Both checkpoints and sieges are said to disproportionately affect civilians, making them often criticized methods of warfare.

Lastly, anti-personnel landmines are explosive devices designed to be detonated by the presence, proximity, or contact of a person (Giannou, 1997). These weapons are typically buried underground or hidden to conceal their presence, making them difficult to detect and avoid (Giannou, 1997). As a strategy of movement restriction in conflict, anti-personnel

landmines may be employed to control and limit the mobility of both military adversaries and civilian populations (Sheer, 2022). While the use of checkpoints and sieges is controversial and argued to be violating IHL and IHRL in some cases, the use, production and stocking of landmines is explicitly prohibited in the 1997 Ottawa Treaty (Rutherford, 2000). Nevertheless, there are state actors and non-state actors which continue to use anti-personnel landmines, including as a strategy of movement management (UNDP, 2023).

Those scholars which have focused on the logic of movement restriction strategies have done so by primarily focusing on checkpoints and sieges, albeit separate from each other. On its face two rather different strategies – for one, checkpoints may be moved or removed within a couple hours, while sieges can last for years on end – have scarcely been researched as parts of the broader category of restrictive movement management in conflict.⁹ Moreover, the literature seems to clearly divide the use of restriction strategies as employed by government forces and rebel groups, with checkpoints researched as a tactic that is largely used by rebels (Schon, 2016, 2019) and (contemporary) siege warfare a method that is used by authoritarian regimes as part of a counterinsurgency strategy (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022; Downes, 2008; Hägerdal, 2021).

2.2.2. The logic of legitimacy

The need to exert control has been identified in the earliest literature as the reason for the “monopolization of legitimate means of movement” (Torpey, 1998, p. 239). In such situations, armed groups claim the exclusive right to authorize or restrict civilian mobility, effectively becoming the sole arbiters of movement in a conflict zone. Like the monopoly of force, this exercise of control is used as a strategic tool to achieve objectives, including the setting up of a governance system, as well as the defending of a territory (Torpey, 1998). Consequently, Schon (2016) asserts that displacement deterrence is considered vital by armed groups as both a territory and a population to govern over are measures of lasting victory in a conflict.

Most frequently, movement restriction and the control of movement more generally is connected in the literature to the need to present a perpetrator actor as legitimate (Betts & Loescher, 2011; Fazal, 2017; Lichtenheld & Schon, 2017; Schon, 2016). As argued by Barter

⁹ Notwithstanding in the Palestinian context of military occupation (see among others: Alijla, 2019; Ghazaleh, 2008; Giacaman et al., 2007). Nevertheless, most of these studies are grounded in health science studies.

(2012), civilian flight is a symbolic and political act that implies a loss of legitimacy on both the domestic and international level, signalling that a population feels the need to find sanctuary with the enemy. Consequently, both state forces and rebel groups experience a loss of legitimacy in the case of mass displacement outside of their territory (Lichtenheld & Schon, 2021). Schon (2016) argued that through checkpoints displacement is deterred in order to maintain control over these so-called symbolic resources (Schon, 2016). By intentionally creating fear around checkpoints and travel more generally, armed groups predict that the anticipated violence will deter civilian movement during conflict (Schon, 2016). Siege-like strategies have been similarly connected to the motivation to attain or retain (political) legitimacy (Todman, 2016), as well the motivation to deny the enemy the possibility to do the same (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022).¹⁰

Similarly to the strategic logics identified for displacement strategies, mobility restriction is considered crucial because the presence of civilians within a controlled area is essential for resource extraction (Weinstein, 2007), as well as to keep resources and intelligence civilians provide from the enemy (Kalyvas, 2006). Hence, both state actors and non-state actors feel the need to extend their influence beyond the battlefield and concentrate on population control, as exemplified by the implementation of movement restriction strategies (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022).

2.2.3. The logic of military denial, political denial and punishment

Similar to the literature of strategies of displacement, Toft and Zhukov (2012) found that the general strategy of counter-insurgency is centred around the strategic goals of collective punishment and denial of military advancement. Berti & Sosnowski (2022) have tested this theory by examining the use of siege warfare by government forces to achieve these strategic goals. They found that a logic of punishment is often intertwined with one or more logics of denial. Next to collectively punishing a population, siege warfare may serve the purpose of cutting off connections between enemy forces and a local population (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022). Through this military denial, military advancement of the enemy is prevented, freezing the battle lines and “shrinking the sea to kill the fish” (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022, p. 955). This includes depriving the enemy through the prevention of goods and services entering the

¹⁰ The next section elaborates on the denial of political legitimacy or ‘political denial’.

besieged territory (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022), essentially starving civilians (their resource, intelligence and legitimacy base) to death and forcing insurgents into capitulation (Beehrer et al., 2017; Todman, 2017). Moreover, military denial may also include relocation following a strategy of siege warfare, with civilians being displaced into regime-held areas (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022; Lichtenheld, 2020a). Furthermore, strategies aimed at military denial do not have to involve direct violent confrontation, making it an attractive strategy for actors who lack manpower or sufficiently trained forces (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022).

Secondly, a logic of punishment may be intertwined with a logic of political denial designed to frustrate the rise of “an alternative political order” (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022, p. 961). This may be achieved through the undermining of enemy governance efforts, leaving an armed group without a population to govern over, or exacerbate their inability to govern and create an alternative system granting them political legitimacy (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022). This includes depriving an armed group from a supportive population through “demographic manipulation” based on (perceived) political affiliation, religion and ethnicity (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022, p. 955). Sieges may be used to first punish, and – once capitulated – “triage” civilians through forcibly imposing the choice to relocate to government-controlled areas, displacement camps or rebel-held areas. By forcing this choice upon a local population, civilians are separated into those considered desirable and those considered undesirable on the basis of these group-level heuristics (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022). The triaging of civilians in the aftermath of a siege alludes to the sorting logic as introduced by Lichtenheld (2020a, 2020b) in his theory of strategic displacement. Additionally, however, another purpose is served besides sorting between “good” and “bad” citizens and the subsequent mobilization for labour, conscription or intelligence gathering purposes. Through relocating civilians, one actor is deprived of the chance to govern over a population, while another one gains this opportunity at political legitimacy.

2.3. Civilian agency

In discussing the logics behind organizational policies of displacement or restriction of movement, focus remains on the rational decision making process of armed groups. Nevertheless, recent literature has argued the importance of accounting for civilian agency – in

this case referring to the agency of those people victimized by movement management strategies (Jackson et al., 2022). The question as to what drives actors to control a population's movement does not minimize the fact that civilians choose, within the constraints of the situation, whether or not they move, and, if so, where to, and when. As elucidated to earlier in the chapter, different scholars have noted that civilian movement is symbolically, politically, economically as well as militarily significant to warring parties.

Civilians consider conflict dynamics to assess whether they will be selectively targeted (Barter, 2012). They make reasoned assessments about the decision to stay loyal, collaborate, flee to safer areas within the conflict territory or migrate across state borders (Greenhill, 2008). The most often cited motivator for the decision to stay or move in conflict is the anticipation of violence (Schon, 2019). Schon (2019) describes this as the balancing act between the fear of home violence versus the fear of road violence. In case that home violence is anticipated, civilians are motivated to move – when there is a perceived increase in road violence civilians are more likely to decide to stay. Fear as a driver or deterrence for migration can be manipulated by armed forces, particularly through coercive instruments (Greenhill, 2008; Lichtenheld, 2020a, 2020b; Schon, 2016).

Notwithstanding, violence fits with a much broader range of considerations, revealing both the rationality that is involved in actors' decision to instrumentalize civilian movement, as well as civilians' response hereto. Indeed, another imperative element which informs a decision to move, where to and when is the opportunity to do so (Schon, 2019). Once there is significant motivation to flee there still may be reason to stay, namely because the opportunity to move (safely) is limited. The opportunity to migrate is contingent on numerous factors. Schon (2015, 2019) and Lichtenheld (2017, 2020a, 2020b) describe connections to armed groups, family members, friends and acquaintances who have fled before as well as resources such as money. Civilians with a socially advantageous position can use their position to migrate safely, protecting themselves against selective targeting on the road (Jackson, et al, 2022; Schon, 2019). Civilians without such an advantaged position have less opportunity to move safely. Hence, they might consider their chances of surviving home violence higher than the chances of survival on the move (Schon, 2019). Micro dynamics related to social advantage may

significantly influence a conflict at the local level (Jackson et al. 2022), even if displacement or the deterrence thereof is engineered by armed groups at an organizational level.

2.4. Theoretical framework

The literature review has highlighted various logics as identified by scholars who researched one or more individual movement management strategies. When comparing the academic research on strategic displacement and restriction of movement, several logics have been identified for both branches, including punishment, denial, and legitimacy. This suggests that strategic motivations may be transferable between these branches of movement management strategies. Additionally, similarly to the Greenhill's (2008) definition of strategic engineered migration, restriction of movement strategies can also be categorized as serving military, economic, and/or political ends. The literature review further revealed that multiple strategic logics may be intertwined, indicating a complex decision-making process involving various considerations.

Drawing from the literature review, a theoretical framework was developed and visualized in Table 1. This Table presents the classification of movement management strategies into displacement and restriction of movement, along with their sub-strategies, which armed groups may employ. The strategic logics underlying all movement management strategies are grounded in military, economic, and/or political advantages. Using this framework, the existence and patterns of movement management strategies are identified in the case study. Furthermore, the strategic advantages observed in the case study are interpreted as evidence of the underlying strategic logic, which is military, economic, and/or political in nature.

Recognizing the unabated existence of civilian agency, this theoretical framework placed the rational decision-making process of actors to employ movement strategies *within* the framework of the civilian's individual considerations about their movement. It is recognized how civilians can influence the choice between displacement or restriction of movement strategies, the selection of specific instruments, and redirect a strategy to achieve effects contrary to the intentions of warring parties.

Table 1: Theoretical framework

Strategy of movement management*	
Strategy of displacement	Cleansing (political or ethnic)
	Depopulation
	Relocation
Strategy of restriction of freedom of movement	Checkpoints (road blocks)
	Sieges
	Anti-personnel landmines
Strategic logic**	
Military advantages	Intelligence gathering, sort/triage civilians, recruitment/conscription, labour, basic needs, , military denial, strategic locations***, human shields***
Economic advantages	Appropriating assets, taxes, rents, protection rackets, domination of economy and/or services****
Political advantages	(Collective) punishment, creating bargaining space (negotiations), political denial, construction of legitimacy through control

Civilian agency

* includes the threat with one of the strategies.

** multiple strategic logics can underly the use of one movement management strategy.

*** these variables were added during the content analysis.

**** this variable was added after the pilot study.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the academic output on the different movement management strategies, including their underlying strategic logics. Drawing from strategic displacement literature, migration studies as well as the academic scholarship on restriction of movement in conflict, a theoretical framework was developed. Multiple strategic advantages are theorized to be connected to a strategic logic that is military, economic or political in nature, nevertheless recognizing that strategic displacement or restriction of movement strategies may be motivated by multiple strategic logics at once.

3. Research design and methodology

In this thesis, I aim to analyse the strategies of movement management and their underlying strategic logics in the contemporary civil war context. The analysis will use a deductive research approach in explaining how and why civilians' geographical movement is managed by different actors. Using a qualitative content analysis, the Syrian conflict – as the chosen case study for this study – will be analysed for practices and patterns of displacement and restriction of movement, as well as the strategic logics for its use. In the following order, this chapter will discuss the case selection, the operationalization of the different concepts, the methodology and data selection and collection. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the results of the pilot study which was performed, as well as the structure of the analysis.

3.1. Case selection

As discussed, this thesis will conduct an analysis of movement management strategies within the context of the Syrian conflict, specifically focusing on Western Syria¹¹ from 2018 to 2022. Given the contested nature of control in this region over the years, movement management strategies are likely to have been more frequently employed compared to areas with more static front lines. By using a time span of several years, this research allows for a comprehensive examination of the strategic use of movement management throughout the conflict.

This 5-year period, coupled with a focus on Western Syria, facilitates a detailed analysis, enabling the exploration of connections between movement management strategies and their potential strategic logics. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to identify patterns of strategies over time, demonstrating how, during a prolonged conflict, movement management strategies may evolve or be used in conjunction with one another (see on displacement: South, 2006). By adopting this approach, the thesis aims to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics and implications of movement management in the Syrian conflict.

¹¹ Including North-West, Central West and South-West Syria; Chapter 4 will provide further context of the conflict.

The choice of focusing on Syria for this thesis is logical for several compelling reasons. Firstly, Syria is a suitable example to study movement management strategies in the contemporary civil war context due to the prolonged nature of the conflict and the involvement of both state and non-state actors. Additionally, the conflict in Syria has a population-centric focus, which aligns with the characteristics commonly observed in new wars (Kaldor, 1999, 2013). While Syria's conflict possesses unique elements, it serves as a representative and pertinent case of a contemporary civil war state (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022). Secondly, the widespread reporting of displacement and movement restriction during the Syrian conflict establishes a strong connection between both state and non-state actors and the instrumentalization of movement management (Akhmedov, 2022). This suggests that ample data is likely available for conducting an explorative analysis of the topic. The abundance of reported incidents related to displacement and restriction of movement further reinforces the suitability of Syria as a case study for studying movement management strategies. Furthermore, by focusing on Western Syria, this thesis aims to gain valuable insights into the dynamics and implications of movement management strategies in contemporary civil wars, shedding light on the ways state and non-state actors exploit civilian mobility for strategic objectives. In a broader context, the Syrian conflict has garnered significant attention from international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the press (Akhmedov, 2022), suggesting there is a considerable amount of information available to be drawn from.

Thirdly, the Syrian conflict is a leading example of a contemporary civil war with an internationalized character (Hale, 2019), allowing for the analysis of use of movement management strategies by international actors involved the conflict. Moreover, Syria's population is largely displaced, both across external and internal borders (Price et al., 2015) – allowing for an in-depth research of the use of all strategies of movement management, particularly as it relates to the category of displacement. The ample displacement of civilians allows for the examination of strategies aiming for complete elimination beyond state borders as well as those seeking to expel people from specific areas while keeping them within the conflict territory. This diversity in displacement strategies within the Syrian context offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of movement management in civil wars.

As this thesis focuses on the Syrian conflict, it applies a single case study design. As defined by Yin (2009), a case study is “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (...)” (p. 14). A case study allows for a detailed, ‘thick description’ which is bounded, both in space and time. This thesis has an explorative character – it seeks to find strategic logics for movement management strategies besides displacement – and as such aims to apply a holistic case design. The detailed character of a case study is a particularly attractive approach as this study aims to dissect and interpret specific decision-making processes underlying movement management strategies, requiring a detailed eye. The single case study approach allows for a nuanced and holistic account of a phenomenon, based in theory building (Yin, 2009), making it an appropriate design for this thesis which, although deductive in nature, creates a new theoretical framework – relating and comparing displacement strategies and restriction of movement strategies.

3.2. Operationalization of concepts

The literature review revealed various strategies of movement management used by both state actors and non-state actors in the contemporary civil war context. These strategies were categorized into policies that force people to flee, termed as strategies of displacement, and policies that force people to stay, labelled strategies of restriction of movement (see: Table 1).

In order to examine the types and practices of movement management strategies, addressing the first sub-question, the strategies are operationalized in alignment with the focus of this thesis, considering how they can be physically implemented or put into action. Informed by the theoretical framework, strategies of displacement are separated into cleansing, depopulation and relocation – serving as the variables for this first category of movement management. As movement management strategies do not have to be executed for their strategic purpose to be achieved, threats with displacement were included in the analysis. Moreover, instruments to achieve displacement range from the use of violence, the use of incentives to the threatening with (home) violence. Particularly the latter results in the motivation to flee for many civilians. Hence, those displacement flows which are the result of a fear of violence were included in the analysis. Table 2 includes the indicators for each of the displacement strategies.

Table 2: Indicators displacement strategies¹²

Variables	Indicators
Cleansing	Any displacement characterized by a deliberate, discriminate and permanent removal based on group characteristics, having in an outward push orientation e.g. targeting of Christians, destroying their houses after or during displacement and driving them away from the territory.
Depopulation	Any displacement characterized by a temporary, indiscriminate removal with an outward push orientation, e.g. forcibly removal of an entire area, using collective targeting and destroying property.
Relocation	Any displacement characterized by the removal with an inward orientation, e.g. resettlement into model villages. Relocation may involve both discriminate or indiscriminate targeting.

Analysing the restriction of freedom of movement, deliberate focus remains on those mobility restrictions which are characterized by physical barriers. Based on the literature, physical restriction of movement strategies for this thesis includes checkpoints (road blocks), sieges and anti-personnel landmines, also serving as indicators for the analysis. The decision to exclude non-physical barriers allowed for a more in-dept focus of the thesis. Moreover, immobility due to invisible barriers have been connected to logic of state-making (see for example: Fröhlich & Müller-Funk, 2023). Like for the category of displacement strategies, threats with the use of restriction of movement strategies, or threats of (road) violence – at checkpoints or due to landmines – resulting in people staying rather than moving, were included.

To address the second sub-question, the strategies and patterns of strategic movement management observed in the Syrian conflict were linked to different strategic advantages. The analysis aims to elucidate the rational decision-making processes driving the use of these strategies in the civil war context in this manner. Notwithstanding, it is essential to recognize that the use of one movement management strategy may precede a complexity of

¹² Initially, the strategies of displacement served as indicators for the analysis. However, after conducting the pilot study, it was found that most documents referred to ‘displacement’ without differentiating the strategies as cleansing, depopulation and relocation. Hence, it became necessary to develop these workable indicators based on the literature review. This problem was not present for the restriction of movement strategies. Hence the individual strategies (i.e.: checkpoints, sieges, and landmines) continued to serve as indicators for the content analysis.

considerations, as evidenced in more than one strategic advantages. Following this line of reasoning, the military, economic, or political advantages resulting from displacement or restriction of movement strategies can be explained as evidence of the underlying logic guiding a particular strategy (see Table 3). It should be noted that while making the analytical distinction between the strategic logics, it is recognized that these motivating agents empirically interact and overlap (see also: Greenhill, 2008).

Table 3: Groups of variables strategic logics for movement management

Strategic logic*	Groups of variables
Military advantages	Intelligence gathering, sort/triage, recruitment, labour, cost-effectiveness, military denial, strategic locations**, human shields**
Economic advantages	Appropriating assets, taxes, protection rackets, the domination of economy and/or services***
Political advantages	(Collective) punishment, demographic change, creating bargaining space (negotiations), political denial, construction of authority through control

* multiple strategic logics can underly the use of one or more movement management strategies.

** these variables were added during the content analysis.

*** this variable was added after the pilot study.

3.3. Qualitative content analysis

In order to analyse movement management strategies and their corresponding strategic logics, this thesis applies a qualitative content analysis. Content analysis involves the systematic examination of forms of communication, in order to analyse and interpret its content. Krippendorff (2018) states that content analysis is “inferential in intent” (p.2): the data is coded in order to draw inferences about the phenomenon under study. Once the data is coded, identifying relevant aspects of the data and categorizing them accordingly, patterns, themes and meanings within the data can be identified (Krippendorff, 2018).

Using the theoretical framework, the operationalization of the concepts – as explained above – have been created. Serving as predefined codes, these groups of variables have been identified throughout the literature review and inspire this explorative but deductive research. Nevertheless, an open, inductive lens was maintained leaving room for the possible

identification of new variables and indicators. The pilot study resulted in the adding of *the domination of economy and/or services* as an variable for the category of economic advantages. During the content analysis two more variables were added for the category of military advantages, including *strategic locations* and *human shields*. As such, these variables were later included in the theoretical framework (see: Tables 1, 3 and 5).

It is worth noting that this thesis does not aim to provide a detailed description of logics underlying movement management strategies. Rather, through the content analysis, categories of advantages are identified and analysed to see what drives different actors to use a strategy of movement management. Hence, those aspects in the data indicating certain advantages are highlighted as they are relevant in identifying patterns of strategic logics. Based on the literature review and the consequent theoretical framework, groups of variables are identified for each of the advantages which are measured as evidence of the strategic logics of movement management strategies. A pilot study was performed to further transform the groups of variables into indicators.

3.4. Data extraction and selection

Multiple types of data sources were used for the content analysis. The accounts of policy documents, reports and articles by non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and international organizations were used. As such, the analysis exclusively drew from secondary sources. While the use of primary sources – including government and rebel reports, statements and speeches – could have offered valuable insights into the strategic logics behind movement management strategies, these were not included. This decision was based on the uncertainty surrounding their reliability and the potential for biased portrayals of intentions and logic. Considering how this could obscure the analysis and affect the internal validity of this thesis, primary sources were decided upon as an exclusion criteria.

Following a purposive sampling strategy, the initial selection of sources was performed based on the author's knowledge of reputable NGO's and international organizations. Based on the accessibility of information, the volume of output on movement management strategies by these organizations as well as the time constraints of this thesis led to the inclusion of the following

sources: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the Independent International Commission for Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (CoI) – representing the international organizations – and Syrian Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC), Syrian Observatory of Human Rights (SOHR) and Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) – representing the Syrian NGOs. All organizations are impartial and reliable as well as accessible and informative, explaining their inclusion for this study. Moreover, by including reports from multiple organizations a broader perspective is created, enabling a comprehensive overview and well-rounded analysis and minimizing the risk of bias(es).

Using a recent time frame as a general selection criteria, one document was selected for analysis from each organization. Starting with the five initial documents, a snowball strategy was implemented by analysing the references and citations within these documents. As an additional precautionary measure – aimed at avoiding underrepresentation of strategies – the archives of the organizations were specifically searched for reports on movement management strategies such as checkpoints and landmines. This iterative process of expanding the report selection continued until saturation was achieved, resulting in a sample of 29 documents for analysis.

3.5. Pilot study

Prior to the initial data selection, a pilot study was conducted to further specify the variables and create workable indicators. The pilot study also aimed to narrow down the time period and region for the main analysis. The insights gained from the pilot study played a significant role in guiding the data selection for the main study.

Using purposive sampling, 10 documents were selected from three organizations: CoI, SNHR and SJAC. The pilot study sample encompassed thematic reports, annual reports, policy papers, and articles to represent various types of sources. Tables 4, 5, and 6 visually present coding examples from the pilot study, which served as indicators guiding the content analysis of the remaining documents.

Table 4: Coding examples military advantages

Variables	Indicators	Coding example
Intelligence gathering	Any actions aimed at extracting information from individuals by using a movement strategy, e.g. at checkpoints, during movement.	“civilians were made to reveal the names of anyone who had elected to be evacuated from the area, as well as the contact details of human rights activists”
Military denial	Any actions committed by armed forces aimed at restricting civilians’ access to infrastructure and/or basic needs (medicine, food, water)	“offering to evacuate suffering civilian residents from these locals only after armed groups surrendered”, “ blocking entry of food, fuel and medical supplies”, “ cut-off water and electricity”, “ denied humanitarian access ”
Sort/triage	Any actions aimed at separating civilians into “good” and “bad”, “guilty” and “non-guilty”, “reconcilable” and “not reconcilable” by using a movement management strategy, e.g. at a checkpoint or during a siege.	“escaping individuals were held (...) pending completion of screening procedures . Men and boys, perceived to be ISIL militants, were separated from women and children and transferred (...)”

Table 5: Coding examples economic advantages

Variables	Indicators	Coding examples
Appropriating assets	Any actions aimed at the confiscation of property, land or other possessions by using a movement management strategy, e.g. during displacement or at checkpoints.	“ redistributing looted assets among the regime’s security services and local militias (...) as a from of reward in lieu of cash payments ”, “ confiscation of property”, “ strip the displaced of their property rights ”, “ allocation of properties of absentee owners to its fighters or rented them out to displaced families”
Taxes	Any actions aimed at the imposition of levies by using a movement management strategy, e.g. prior or after the engineering of displacement	“ pay for their (evacuees) transportation ”, “ taxes in order to cultivate their (farmers) lands”, “cede a percentage of their (olive farmers) harvest as taxes to armed groups”, “ imposition of levies ”
Domination of economy	Any actions aimed at controlling a market or other (social) services, using a movement management strategy, e.g. during a siege.	“ monopolize the fuel market and the provision of other services”

Table 6: Coding examples political advantages

Variables		Indicators
Creating bargaining space	Any actions aimed at creating a bargaining advantage using a movement management strategy, e.g. during truce negotiations in the context of a siege.	“(…) offered to evacuate suffering civilian residents from these locales only after armed groups surrendered.”
Political denial	Any actions aimed at obstructing governance efforts of the enemy by using a movement management strategy, e.g. through forcibly removal of a population	“(…) all in an effort to compel the surrender of those “governing” or in control of the areas in which they live”
(Collective) punishment	Any actions aimed at retaliation against civilians or a armed group, using a movement management strategy, e.g. targeting civilians during movement	“acts of retribution ”, “form of punishment which also extends to their family members”

3.6. Structure of analysis

In this chapter I outlined the choices and considerations for the research design and methodology. The structure of the next few chapters will precede as follows: using the operationalization of strategies of displacement and strategies of restriction of movement, Chapter 4 will discuss the context of the conflict and the results of the content analysis, explaining what types and patterns of movement management can be identified within the period under investigation in the Syrian conflict. This chapter largely serves as a preliminary phase necessary in order to answer the second sub-question. Next, in Chapter 5 I will move to discuss the results of the content analysis, focusing on the strategic logics which drive the use of these movement management strategies, situating these finding within the broader question of why strategies of displacement and strategies of restriction of movement are employed by different actors in the civil war context.

4. The types and patterns of movement management in Western Syria

Through the literature review and subsequent pilot study, this thesis so far identified numerous ways in which the mobility of civilians may be politicized as a contested tool of warfare. Controlling civilian's geographical movement, either through forcing them out, forcing them in or forcing them to stay is powerful and may be used in various ways by different armed groups. In this chapter, I discuss part of the results of the content analysis, exploring what types and patterns of movement management strategies may be identified in Western Syria during the period of 2018 until 2022. As such, the groundwork is laid for understanding the strategic logics of movement management in the case study.

4.1. Context of the conflict, region and active actors

Before delving into the analysis of the types and patterns of movement management strategies in Western Syria, it is in order to first provide a description the conflict, time period, geographical area as well as the active actors in the region.¹³ The Syrian conflict started in March of 2011 between government forces and opposition groups (Price et al., 2015). The conflict is rooted in President al-Assad government's suppression of protests in 2011, which have since evolved into a country-wide war with no shortage of atrocity crimes and human rights violations, committed against civilians (Price et al., 2015). In the period from 2018 until 2022, Western Syria – encompassing cities from Aleppo in the North-West to Dara'a in the South-West – has witnessed the involvement of various armed groups, both locally and international, each vying for control and influence in the region (Hinnebush & Saouli, 2019). Figure 1 includes a map of Syria, indicating the some of the major cities in the Western half of the country which are included for the analysis.

¹³ The intent for this section is not to provide an exhaustive summary of the events but to provide a sufficient knowledge of the conflict, region and actors to built upon in creating an understanding of the movement management strategies and their underlying strategic logics. Much has been written about the Syrian conflict already. For a more in-dept literature on the conflict see for example: Akhmedov, (2022), Hinnebusch & Saouli, (2019) and Price, Gohdes & Ball (2015).

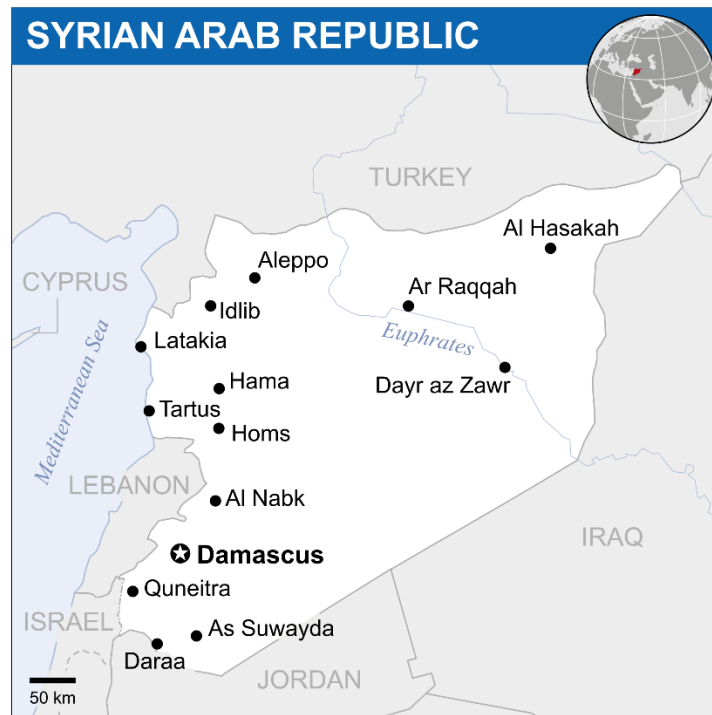


Figure 1: Map Of Syria.¹⁴

One of the most significant actors in Western Syria active in 2018-2022 are the armed forces of the Syrian regime, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Over the years government forces have managed to regain control over large parts of the country including several major cities in Western Syria (Hinnebush & Saouli, 2019). At the time of the writing of this thesis this includes nearly the entirety of Western Syria, notwithstanding some contested areas in the North-West (Tsurkov, 2023). Supported by Russia and Iran, the Syrian government has relied on its armed forces to reassert its control in the region (Bagdonas, 2012). Although most of Syria currently consists of government-controlled areas, numerous opposition groups – including UN designated terrorist organizations – remain active, fighting to overthrow the Assad regime as well as fighting each other (Hinnebush & Saouli, 2019). During the investigation period these opposition groups have maintained significant presence in various areas in Western Syria, particularly in the countryside and suburbs surrounding major cities (UNOCHA, 2022). A notable armed group active in Western Syria includes Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra (Adraoui, 2019). An extremist group with links to Al-Qaeda, HTS managed to establish its presence in parts of Idlib province, located in the North-West

¹⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).

(Adraoui, 2019). Despite facing pressure from both the Syrian government and rival opposition factions, HTS has maintained its control what is currently the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition in Idlib, where their governance effort – the ‘Salvation Government’ – continues to be prominent (Tsurkov, 2023).

In addition to the Syrian regime and rebel groups, Western Syria also witnesses involvement of foreign actors who have provided military assistance to the Syrian regime. Such foreign actors will be further defined as ‘pro-government forces’ or ‘allied forces’. The involvement of Russian pro-government forces, starting in 2015, has significantly contributed to bolstering the regime’s position in regaining control of various strategic areas (Kozhanov, 2016). Other foreign pro-government forces include Iranian militias, Lebanese Hezbollah and Turkish forces (Price et al., 2015). The involvement of these foreign actors have added another layer to the complexity of the conflict, each pursuing their own agenda and providing clashes with other armed groups active within the Syrian territory (Price et al., 2015) The presence of these diverse armed actors in Western Syria has led to a protracted and devastating conflict, resulting in the loss of countless lives and the displacement of millions of Syrians. Despite intermittent ceasefires and diplomatic efforts, a comprehensive and lasting resolution to the conflict remains elusive with all parties invested in their own political gain, evidently at the expense of the Syrian people.

4.2. Strategies of displacement

The findings of the content analysis confirmed that displacement has been a prevalent phenomenon since the outset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Using the indicators for the movement management strategies as predefined codes, it is found that Western Syria has also been plagued by widespread displacement affecting millions of Syrians. In their needs assessment reports UNOCHA identified multiple significant displacement flows during the period of analysis, primarily originating in and to North-West Syria. In 2019 alone, a total of 284,000 people were displaced from frontline areas in Northern Hama and Southern Idleb, primarily fleeing to cities such as Ariha and Idleb city (UNOCHA, 2020). A significant number of these people were already displaced earlier in the year, revealing the revictimization of already displaced people (UNOCHA, 2020). With hostilities continuing in the North-West,

civilians in the Idlib governorate and Aleppo governorate continue to be displaced well into 2020, amounting to a total of 2.7 million displaced people in North-West Syria (UNOCHA, 2021a). By the end of 2021, this number has increased to 2.8 million people, with 1.7 million Syrian living in 1,407 displacement sites in the area (UNOCHA, 2021b; UNOCHA, 2022). UNOCHA recorded a total of 300.000 new displacements North-West Syria in 2021 (UNOCHA, 2022). By 2022, the frontlines remained relatively static with around 2.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in need of direct humanitarian assistance (UNOCHA, 2023).

4.2.1. Cleansing

The needs assessments reports do not differentiate between the types of displacement in the region. However, through the content analysis of the other reports, it is found that cleansing, depopulation as well as relocation have been consistently employed in Western Syria, although not in equal measure and by all of the actors involved in the conflict. Focusing on the strategy of cleansing, it is found that different actors active in hostilities have employed cleansing against a number of groups. In 2020 residents in the Afrin region were forced to flee after Syrian National Army (SNA) brigades coerced its residents of Kurdish origin to leave, by means of violence as well as property confiscation.¹⁵ Throughout the entire Afrin region the expulsion of Kurdish population by the SNA is reported to have been coordinated in a systematic and permanent manner, indicating cleansing.¹⁶ Pro-Turkey factions during operation Olive Branch¹⁷ continued to commit violations against Kurdish residents, including imposing evacuation orders (SOHR, 2019). Expulsion policies were also directed at Christian civilians, although less systematically. HTS has used property confiscation as a means to displace Christian residents from villages which they controlled.¹⁸ Furthermore, cleansing has also been identified as a strategy used against political dissidents, displacing those perceived disloyal through property confiscation or threats with detention or violence (SNHR, 2021; SOHR, 2022c). Particularly the seizure of lands of political opponents is striking as this indicates expulsion in combination with the deliberate elimination the possibility of return.

¹⁵ A/HRC/45/31: Report to the 45th regular session of the Human Rights Council.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Operations Olive Branch was a military campaign conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces in Syria. It was launched in January 2018, targeting the Kurdish-held Afrin canton in North-West Syria (SOHR, 2019).

¹⁸ A/HRC/51/45: Report to the 51st regular session of the Human Rights Council.

4.2.2. Depopulation

During the hostilities over territories in Idlib governorate and Western Aleppo, frontline locations were targeted using heavy artillery, leaving entire areas “in ruins and completely depopulated”.¹⁹ Furthermore, attacks employed by the government forces, supported by aerial offensives by Russian pro-government forces, targeted areas which were marked as strategic locations.²⁰ Civilians in strategic areas were collectively, deliberately and strategically displaced, forcing them out by making the area uninhabitable.²¹ These characteristics indicate a strategy of depopulation as employed by (pro)-government forces including the persistent shelling of civilian infrastructure, forcing civilians to flee *en masse*.²² The CoI reports that it has reasonable grounds to believe that the pro-government forces intended to depopulate these areas.²³ The strategy of depopulation was not as explicitly present for rebel groups, notwithstanding the instances in which mutual shelling between (pro)government forces and rebel forces resulted in depopulated rebel strongholds.²⁴

4.2.3. Relocation

Lastly, relocation is a widely employed strategy of displacement. A particularly coordinated manner in which the relocation strategy was employed was via so-called reconciliation agreements between (pro)government forces and local rebel leaders. First initiated in 2016, reconciliation agreements are usually discussed in the aftermath of a siege which left rebel forces with no choice but to capitulate and government forces regaining control of the previously besieged area (SJAC, 2019). Following capitulation, these negotiations leave residents of the area with a choice; they are forced to decide whether they want to be relocated to opposition-held area, displacement camp or stay and participate in a government-led reconciliation process (SJAC, 2019). In reality, reconciliation agreements often resulted in government forces deciding on which civilians remain and which await a different faith, inducing displacement in this manner.²⁵

¹⁹ A/HRC/44/61: Report to the 44th regular session of the Human Rights Council, p. 4.

²⁰ A/HRC/48/70: Report to the 48th regular session of the Human Rights Council.

²¹ Ibid; A/HRC/43/57: Report to the 43th regular session of the Human Rights Council.

²² A/HRC/43/57.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ A/HRC/51/45.

²⁵ A/HRC/43/57.

During the period of investigation, compulsory reconciliation has resulted in the forcible relocation of civilians away from their homes. Most notably might be the reconciliation process in the Dar'a governorate in South-West Syria.²⁶ The first negotiations started in July of 2018, between opposition factions and the Syrian regime, mediated by Russia (SJAC, 2019). The original agreement forced those unwilling to 'reconcile' to leave for opposition-held Idlib, which was controlled by HTS.²⁷ Since then, multiple reconciliation processes have followed, include one in late 2021, which covered 55 cities town and villages, forcing 6,200 residents into signing reconciliation agreements and unaccounted number of civilians displaced to opposition-held area's (SOHR, 2021). By 2020, the Idlib governorate housed at least 700,000 civilians which were displaced through reconciliation agreements in that year, indicating that the use of relocation to rebel-controlled areas has been a consistent strategy, at least prior to 2021.²⁸ Understanding relocation as identified by Lichtenheld (2020a, 2020b), the standard use of procedures in the aftermath of reconciliation negotiations is particularly unique. Rather than an inward push orientation – driving a population to an area under control – this type of relocation seems to have an outward orientation – driving a population away from a newly controlled area, *toward* the enemy. Civilians who are displaced after capitulation in most cases are not resettled in government-controlled areas, but sent away to areas which are outside of the control of the regime forces and their allies.

Notwithstanding, relocation with an inward push orientation is also employed by actors, albeit most frequently outside of the context of reconciliation. In the North-West, multiple settlements and model villages are built, often sponsored by international actors active in the conflict (SOHR, 2021, 2022c). Forcibly displaced populations or other civilians are housed in these new villages, often at the expense of the indigenous residents of these areas who are forced to flee or coerced into giving up their property rights.²⁹ Turkish forces started with the establishment of model villages are located in the North-West, aimed at housing displaced people from other areas in Syria, eventually engineering a change in the demographic of the area (SOHR, 2021), elucidating to the international influence in the practice of relocation. The area on which the

²⁶ A/HRC/42/51.

²⁷ A/HRC/42/51.

²⁸ A/HRC/43/57.

²⁹ A/HRC/45/31.

model village was built belonged to Yazidi residents, who were displaced some years back (SOHR, 2021). The SOHR booklet 2021 reports of multiple other model villages which were opened in the Afrin countryside. Settlement efforts have since continued, with the second stage of ‘Basma Village’, a model village sponsored by Kuwaiti association White Hands (SOHR, 2022c). To illustrate to the grandness of these settlements: this second stage included the 125 flats, across 8 residential blocks which are established on seized land of approximately 10,000 square meters (SOHR, 2022c).

4.3. Strategies of restriction of movement

Like the use of displacement strategies, restriction of the freedom of movement has also been a widely imposed general strategy by armed groups involved in the ongoing conflict. During the period of investigation, actors in Western Syria have used multiple restriction of movement strategies. Siege tactics have been frequently employed, involving the encircling and isolating of areas under control of enemy forces, effectively cutting off the import of essential supplies. Not uncommon is the use of this siege strategy in combination with aerial attacks, essentially trapping civilians to either die from a lack of basic necessities or from direct violence (SOHR, 2021, 2022c). Siege warfare has been employed by various parties involved in the conflict, including government forces and rebel groups, although the Syrian regime and their supporting forces seems to particularly favour this strategy. Moreover, the use of sieges or ‘siege-like tactics’ have been somewhat different from its use in the earlier days of the conflict, specifically when considering their relatively short time frame compared to the years long sieges the Syrian people have endured before. Besides the strategy of sieges the use of checkpoints will also be discussed in this analysis. Notably, the analysed reports made no mention of the use of (anti-personnel) landmines in the context of restriction of movement. Hence, this strategy will be not be further addressed in discussing the results of the analysis.

4.3.1. Sieges

During the period under investigation, regime forces imposed sieges on displacement camps. Al-Rukban faced siege practices by regime forces as well as Russian forces, preventing basic needs from entering the camp and displaced people from leaving these catastrophic circumstances (SOHR, 2021). More frequently, however, sieges were imposed on opposition-

controlled areas. In 2021, civilians residing in a neighbourhood in Dara'a city – Dara'a al Balad – endured a 10 week siege, the longest siege during the time period under investigation (CoI, 2022).³⁰ The Syrian regime, supported by pro-government forces, encircled the opposition-held neighbourhood, preventing humanitarian access as well as access to aid, water, food, medicine (SNHR, 2021). Moreover, electricity was shut off while civilians endured aerial attacks by Russian forces (SNHR, 2021).³¹ Government forces demanded that certain opposition figures left the area or surrendered in return for the end of the siege. Before final negotiation agreements were reached, residents surrendered and were forcibly removed by regime forces to the Northern Aleppo Province.³² In the aftermath of this siege movement management by the regime forces transformed from a strategy of restriction of movement to a strategy of discriminate displacement by means of relocation with an outward push orientation.

Government forces also imposed sieges in Kurdish areas of Aleppo, preventing thousands of civilians from leaving, and depriving them from access to fuel and aid (SOHR, 2023b). The siege affected 50 villages in the Al-Ashrafiyah and Al-Shaikh Maksoud neighbourhoods and Al-Shuhabaa areas in the northern Aleppo countryside, prohibiting the entry of fuel into the besieged area (SOHR, 2023b). which were under control of the Kurdish Civilian Council, an organization which has affiliation with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Although less reported, non-state armed groups also employed siege strategies in the period of investigation. HTS as well as Da'esh also resorted to the use of siege warfare (CoI, 2021). However, the sieges as employed by these groups is directed to the people within their own control, preventing them from leaving.

The control the blockade of goods and people during sieges, in many cases, occur through checkpoints. As such, the erection of checkpoints occurred in the context of sieges. Prior to the siege on the Al-Sheikh Maqsoud and Al-Ashrafiyah neighbourhoods north of Aleppo a division of the regime forces “deployed nearly 13 new security points to dish the siege on the area” (SOHR, 2022b, n.p.). Moreover, multiple reports state that after the end of a siege – resulting in the reasserting of control by government forces – restriction of movement continued by means of checkpoints, in some cases in contravention with the negotiated reconciliation

³⁰ A/HRC/49/77: Report to the 49th regular session of the Human Rights Council.

³¹ Also: A/HRC/49/77.

³² Ibid.

agreements.³³ Consequently, while the end of a siege meant that residents regained access to certain goods and services, their movement continued to be severely restricted through military control points.

4.3.2. Checkpoints

Separate from sieges, armed groups in Western Syria have established numerous checkpoints and crossings throughout the region. Often justified as a security measure, checkpoints have become a source of violence resulting in death or forced disappearances – control and intimidation for civilians. Similar to sieges, the checkpoints significantly hinder the movement of people and goods, impeding on the daily lives of civilians by blocking access to basic necessities as well as the delivery of humanitarian assistance to a population (SJAC, 2022). Illustrative of the frequency of which checkpoints are used in Western Syria is the presence of government checkpoints in Duma, “located approximately every 200 meters (...)”, restricting and controlling the movement of civilians that wish the exit and enter the area.³⁴ In formerly besieged areas such as in Qaboun, Jawbar, Yarmouk camp and parts of Darayya, checkpoints continue to control the movement of civilians.³⁵ Similarly, HTS used checkpoints as a means to control movement as well as identify and detain perceived dissidents.³⁶ Checkpoints are also employed by international actors, such as the Iranian-back militias in the North-West, imposing militia checkpoints, preventing the entry of certain goods and the controlling of passage of civilians (SOHR, 2021).

Besides the use of checkpoints as strategy of mobility control, checkpoints are also referenced in the context of displacement. Checkpoints may be an entry way to safety for those fleeing civilians who have the motivation and opportunity to flee home violence, rationalizing that the chance of experiencing road violence is a risk worth taking. While checkpoints most frequently are used by armed groups to prevent such displacement, they may also be used as a means to facilitate movement, serving as a crossing point. In January 2020 in Abu al-Duhur in Idlib, al-Hader and Habit checkpoints were used as humanitarian corridors, enabling the return of IDPs

³³ A/HRC/43/57; A/HRC/45/31 A/HRC/49/77.

³⁴ A/HRC/42/51, p. 13.

³⁵ A/HRC/45/31.

³⁶ A/HRC/43/57.

back to government-controlled areas.³⁷ Nevertheless, this statement was immediately followed with the reporting that most civilians refrained from travel via these checkpoints, still fearing forced conscription or arbitrary detention at the checkpoints.³⁸ Hence, movement restriction nevertheless continued in this case, largely due to fear surrounding checkpoints. This is in line with the argumentation of Schon (2019), who states that incitement of fear of road violence by armed groups serves as the main method of movement restriction. The strategy of checkpoints in Western Syria reportedly has this effect, deterring displacement by posing physical barriers as well as through the manipulation of civilians' decision to stay or move through the engineering of fear of checkpoint violence.

4.4. Conclusion

The above sections elaborated on what types and patterns of movement management strategies are present in the western half of Syria in 2018-2022. The content analysis highlights a number of observations. Firstly, all displacement strategies – cleansing, depopulation and relocation – seem to be present in Western Syria and employed by various actors. However, not all restriction of movement strategies are present; checkpoints and sieges have been consistently used strategies while landmines remain unreported, at least outside the context of direct hostilities. Secondly – focusing on the restriction of movement strategies – checkpoints are used in addition to siege warfare, as both strategies seemingly complement each other. Likewise, displacement and restriction of movement strategies cannot in all cases be separated for they are used in conjunction, i.e. a siege which is followed up by a relocation strategy. Lastly, it is found that although all active actors do resort to movement management in some capacity, this is not in equal measure. On the one hand, government forces – often supported by allied forces – have used relocation, cleansing and siege warfare most frequently. On the other hand, rebel groups most frequently use displacement strategies, including cleansing and relocation, rather than restriction of movement strategies. In the next chapter, I will discuss the results from the thematic analysis, which focuses on the strategic logics underlying each of the movement management strategies.

³⁷ A/HRC/44/61.

³⁸ Ibid.

5. The strategic logics of movement management in Western Syria

So far, I have identified the types and patterns of movement management strategies as employed by different actors in the Syrian conflict during the period of 2018-2022. In this chapter I will move to analyse the strategic logics underlying the use of movement management strategies in the Syrian conflict, providing identified advantages as evidence of the strategic logics. Moreover, this chapter will reveal the extent to which parallels can be drawn between strategies forcing people out, including the different displacement strategies, and strategies forcing people to stay, which encompasses siege warfare as well as the use of checkpoints.

5.1. Military advantages of movement management strategies

The most obvious way in which armed forces may benefit from a strategy of movement management is for military advantages, revealing a logic that is military in nature. The analysis revealed that all movement management strategies may underly various military advantages, including military denial, intelligence gathering, sorting, conscription and more.

5.1.1. Military denial³⁹

Military denial was frequently connected to the use of movement management strategies, including strategies of displacement and restriction of movement. Civilian areas were rendered uninhabitable as the result of hostilities, compelling people to leave.⁴⁰ The attacks of civilians and civilian objects – including civilian infrastructure such as residential areas, hospitals, educational facilities and markets – are connected to displacement waves (SOHR, 2021, 2022a). Civilians were targeted through starvation and denial of goods and services, in addition to direct violence. Indiscriminate and direct attacks on civilian infrastructure by government forces included those objects which are indispensable to civilian survival. Particularly striking in this

³⁹ As described in the literature review, military denial refers to deliberate efforts by an armed group to prevent or hinder the ability of the enemy to achieve its objectives. Related to the purpose of this thesis, and in accordance to the definition by Berti & Sosnowski (2022), this is limited to actions by armed forces aimed at restricting civilians' access to infrastructure and/or basic needs as a way of depriving the enemy of resources as provided by a local population.

⁴⁰ A/HRC/43/57.

context is the frequent attacking of water services as this highlights the particularly direct impact on human survival, attacking the source of the most basic need in order to engineer displacement.

(Pro)government forces have deliberately damaged water services through bombardments (SNHR, 2020), and ground attacks against water distribution points⁴¹ and water plants⁴² in rebel-controlled areas. These attacks often coincided with attacks against agricultural lands, open markets, hospitals, schools and mosques have caused death as well as displacement *en masse*.⁴³ Additionally, mutual shelling between progovernment forces and rebel groups have resulted in water stations in rebel-controlled areas being destroyed, in one case resulting in the cutting of water supplies for at least 225,000 civilians for around 20 days.⁴⁴ The results of these attacks on civilian infrastructure point towards a strategy of engineering displacement, resulting in “ghost town[s]”, without services, water or electricity.⁴⁵ There seems to be a clear pattern of (pro-)government forces of draining regions’ resources and exert pressure on indigenous residents as well as resettled displaced persons to (re)turn to government controlled areas.

The indiscriminate and targeted attacking of civilian infrastructure as a military denial strategy is not only employed by government-forces and their allies.⁴⁶ Targeting government-held areas, non-state armed groups have similarly engaged in the shelling of civilian areas and infrastructure with “the purpose of spreading terror among civilians” (CoI, 2021, p. 5). HTS and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units participated in shelling in densely populated areas, targeting residential areas and local hospitals (CoI, 2021). Moreover, food resources and civilian infrastructure are targeted aimed at “deliberately inflict[ing] terror on the civilian populations.” (CoI, 2021, p. 6). The fear or anticipation of attacks – by both (pro)-government forces and rebel groups – have resulted in the displacement of civilians, before towns and villages were actually hit. In western Aleppo in mid-February of 2020, when the advance of

⁴¹ A/HRC/51/45.

⁴² A/HRC/44/61.

⁴³ A/HRC/44/61; A/HRC/51/45.

⁴⁴ A/HRC/51/45.

⁴⁵ A/HRC/44/61, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Rebel groups also use attacks of water supplies as a means force displacement and subsequent military denial: in their annual report, SJAC reported that in 2020, the SDF as well as regime forces have used cutting off water supplies in Al-Hasakah as a means to military denial against Kurdish forces (2021). Notwithstanding, this is not in the region covered for this thesis.

government forces seemed imminent, almost all residents of the Atarib neighbourhood had already decided to flee.⁴⁷ Similarly, in December 2019, residents around Ma'arrat al Nu'man, who fled in December 2019, "in anticipation of attacks".⁴⁸

Military denial can also be linked to strategies of restriction of movement by armed groups. In the case of siege warfare, it is the general strategy of the Syrian regime and Russian allied forces to start with the targeting of vital facilities. Besieged areas are subjected to bombing, with this strategy "depending on forcing people to despair and to flee into displacement" (SNHR, 2020, p. 5). The targeting of schools and open markets serves as a clear message that people have no option but to leave (SNHR, 2020). Other manners in which this message is conveyed is through the prevention of access of basic services – leaving civilians to starvation among other faiths. Moreover, during siege warfare humanitarian access was frequently prevented.⁴⁹ Civilians endured limited access to water, food and other basic needs such as electricity (SNHR, 2021). Indeed, civilians were driven to flee out of despair through the disrupted access to basic services (SNHR, 2021).

5.1.2. Civilians as an intelligence base

Military advantages, linking the use of civilian movement management to a logic that is military in nature, also includes the use of civilians as an intelligence base. The analysis found that any mention of information gathering from civilians was made in the context of reconciliation processes. As elaborated on before, reconciliation – occurring in the aftermath of a siege – refers to the negotiations between the two parties, which results in civilians being forced to choose between reconciliation or relocation to opposition-held areas. Those who decided to reconcile were made to sign oaths of loyalty.⁵⁰ Moreover, in some cases reconciled individuals were made to reveal the names of the people who refused reconciliation, as well as the contact details of human rights activists and others who were deemed to have betrayed the Assad regime (SJAC, 2019).⁵¹ These so-called wanted lists were "compiled largely on the basis of intelligence gathered by government forces" in this manner.⁵² Particularly referenced in this regard in the

⁴⁷ A/HRC/44/61.

⁴⁸ A/HRC/43/57, p. 7.

⁴⁹ A/HRC/49/77.

⁵⁰ A/HRC/42/51.

⁵¹ Also: A/HRC/42/51.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 13.

reconciliation process that ensued in the Dar'a governorate in the aftermath of the siege in 2018.⁵³ Nevertheless, it is standard procedure for reconciliation agreements to include the mandatory providing of “information on relatives, friends and neighbours”, alluding to the systematic use of reconciled civilians as a source for intelligence gathering (SJAC, 2019, n.p.).

5.1.3. Sort and triage

In accordance with the literature (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022; Lichtenheld, 2017, 2020a, 2020b), the analysis found that strategies of displacement were used to sort between civilians. Additionally, this was also the case for movement restriction strategies. Moreover, numerous reasons for sorting have been found, not only based on guilty/innocent perceptions.

Evacuees who aimed to travel to government controlled areas were processed through security screenings.⁵⁴ Background checks, as well as fingerprint statements of loyalty were a requirement for entry into these areas (CoI, 2018). Indeed, displaced people were forced to undergo similar reconciliation agreements as those civilians living in formerly besieged areas, now under the control of government forces. Compulsory reconciliation has been a manner which Syrian regime forces have systematically used to separate between those they considered loyal and those considered terrorists. As such, screening procedures as well as inspection campaigns have been used, aimed at the sorting or triaging of civilians who may stay, and those who are to be forcibly transferred to other areas. Through reconciliation agreements already displaced individuals who settled in government-controlled areas, as well as indigenous residents were displaced.⁵⁵ Large numbers of residents and displaced people transferred out of areas under control of the government, including those individuals who are perceived sympathetic to opposition groups as well as activists and journalists. Moreover, regime forces have used checkpoints as a way to carry out intensive inspection, aimed at sorting. In June 2021 – in the aftermath of a reconciliation agreement being reached between regime forces and armed opposition factions – government forces imposed heavy restrictions at checkpoint surrounding the Daraa al Balad area, the Tareeq al Sadd neighbourhood, and the camps in Daraa city for this purpose (SNHR, 2021).

⁵³ Ibid; A/HRC/49/77.

⁵⁴ A/HRC/42/51.

⁵⁵ A/HRC/48/70.

Similarly, opposition groups have used screening procedures in response to influxes of displaced persons, namely through so-called *managed sites* where displaced persons were held, “pending completion of screening procedures”.⁵⁶ Those perceived enemy militants – often men and boys as young as 12 years old – were separated from the women and children and eventually transferred to detention centres.⁵⁷ Moreover, alike from the wanted lists government forces obtained during intelligence gathering among the reconciled, HTS maintained lists of names and pictures of individuals perceived disloyal.⁵⁸ These included activists and those who perceived dissent or disagreement. The lists were used at checkpoints, sorting between those allowed to enter the area, and those were not. Individuals on the lists were reportedly detained at checkpoints.⁵⁹

Men seem to be particularly affected by the practice of sorting and triage, by both government forces and rebel groups. Besides the sorting between guilty and not guilty and reconcilable and not reconcilable, armed groups used sorting through movement management as a means to unlawful conscription of men and boys into their ranks.⁶⁰ In the context of reconciliation agreements, those of military age are ordered to report for conscription (SNHR, 2020).⁶¹ Consequently, movement restriction of the civilian population also particularly affected men, who feared detainment at checkpoints for conscription (SNHR, 2020). Fear of conscription was also noted as one of the reasons why civilians decided to stay – facing direct violence and gross humanitarian conditions – rather than flee for government-controlled areas.⁶²

5.1.4. Other military needs: housing, strategic locations, civilians as human shields

Besides the use of civilians for basic needs, intelligence and conscription-related purposes, there are other needs which are fulfilled in the context of civilians’ movement management. These include basic resources for the survival of armed forces, namely their housing (CoI, 2018). As the next section on economic advantages will show, confiscation of property and lands by means of (threatening with) displacement, is a frequently applied strategy which has

⁵⁶ A/HRC/42/51, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ A/HRC/43/57.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ A/HRC/44/61.

⁶¹ Also: A/HRC/44/61.

⁶² A/HRC/43/57.

transformed to be more sophisticated as the conflict continued. More often than not, the confiscation of property may be directly related to military activities, indicating a military purpose next to an economic purpose. Indeed, seizure of property may result in the housing military personnel or their families (CoI, 2018).⁶³ Displaced persons returned to their homes to find their houses being occupied by fighters and their families (SOHR, 2022c). Moreover, confiscation of property belonging to displaced people may be repurposed for strictly military ends, such as a military headquarters (SOHR, 2021, 2022c). The provisional seizure of property is found to particularly affect those civilians which were perceived disloyal, elucidating to an underlying punishment logic as well – this logic of (collective) punishment will be further addressed in the section on political advantages (5.3).

The analysed reports also highlight the military objective of capturing a location or area deemed of strategic importance.⁶⁴ Movement management strategies were used for strictly military advantages such as control over key transportation routes or tactical vantage points. By gaining control over such areas, armed groups were able to enhance their operational capabilities and fortify their position, enabling military advancement.⁶⁵ Such strategic locations included cities which were located at important highways (SNHR, 2020), or serving as a passage to a strategically significant road (SNHR, 2019). The targeting of these locations meant increased and systematic brutality against its civilian neighbourhoods, resulting in displacement. Hence, in an effort to accelerate capture of strategic motorways, civilians as well as civilian objects were systematically attacked, forcing civilians living in strategic locations near active front lines to flee.⁶⁶ During such offences, characterized by ground attacks by government forces and aerial attacks by pro-government forces, these areas were left almost entirely depopulated⁶⁷, indicating its purpose of long term removing civilians in order to continue using the location for their strategic benefit, at least so long the conflict continues.

In other cases, rather than engineering displacement to gain strategic locations – the existence of civilians *inside* an area under control serves a strategic military purpose. HTS in the case of

⁶³ Also: A/HRC/43/57.

⁶⁴ A/HRC/44/61.

⁶⁵ A/HRC/48/70.

⁶⁶ A/HRC/48/70.

⁶⁷ A/HRC/43/57.

sieges reportedly restricted the freedom of movement of civilians, preventing them from leaving the areas under control, “for the purpose of rendering objective immune from attack” (CoI, 2021, p. 6). In this manner, restriction of movement of civilians is aimed at transforming an otherwise military objective into protected object under IHL. The use of these residents and their mobility in this manner amounts to the use of civilians as human shields. This specific strategy elucidates the ways in which civilians’ mobility can also be used to serve a military advantage to those armed forces which are besieged, as described by Berti and Sosnowski (2022). The use of civilians as human shields has been used by government forces as well, albeit by means of forcible transfer. In one case, between 24 and 26 August, some 80 persons were relocated from Dara’al Balad to the northern Aleppo province, “at the front lines between government forces and the Syrian National Army”.⁶⁸

5.2. Economic advantages of movement management strategies

The content analysis of the included reports revealed that the economic advantages make up a large portion of advantages gained by armed groups for employing movement management strategies. This included the use of various movement management strategies, with armed groups fulfilling the role of generators of displacement or movement restriction as well as opportunists profiting off of the movement management employed by other actors or earlier in the conflict.

5.2.1. Taxes, rents and protection rackets

Displacement strategies have been employed in Western Syria, resulting in the economic gains of armed groups. Taxes have been used frequently by said actors, coercing civilians to pay taxes as a precondition for staying. In case civilians were unable to pay they are forced into leaving, causing displacement in this way. This practice of threatening with displacement materialized in forcing civilians to pay taxes to cultivate their lands, as well ceding a percentage of harvests as taxes. Such taxes for civilians were imposed as a precondition for remaining in their homes. Families have been extorted for money for up to LS 25,000, equalling around 10,000 USD.⁶⁹ Moreover, armed groups have ceded the harvest olive trees, grape leaves and other agricultural

⁶⁸ A/HRC/49/77.

⁶⁹ A/HRC/45/31, p. 11.

crops (SOHR, 2019).⁷⁰ The extortion of civilians in this manner was targeted rather than indiscriminate. As part of the continued violations against Kurdish residents in the Afrin region, militants of Al-Amshat – a Turkish backed faction – imposed fees over tractors of Kurdish residents, imposing USD 300 on each citizen in possession of a tractor (SOHR, 2019). Additionally, another Turkish backed faction - al-Jabha al-Shamiyyah – imposed royalties on farmed with agricultural machinery in Maabatli. Again, Kuridsh residents were disproportionately affected by this practice (SOHR, 2019).

Besides the exploitation of civilians through threats of displacement, armed groups also profited from already displaced people who wished to return to their homes and property. This exploitation of returnees included the requiring of a valid expatriate card for displaced persons to be able to enter and remain in the area, notwithstanding the fact that some of these displaced people were returnees with habitable homes in the area (SOHR, 2022d). In other cases, returnees were required to pay large sums of money in order to have their vehicles, goods and property returned after they had been stolen by armed forces.⁷¹ Other residents were required to pay for utility costs in the case that they wanted to reinhabit their homes, including for the period they were displaced, placing an added financial burden on civilians whilst profiting of their vulnerable position as displaced people.⁷² Another practice of financial exploitation included the imposition of exorbitantly high rents to displaced persons in need for housing (SOHR, 2022d). In one case, HTS in west Idlib countryside sent notifications to displaced persons inhabiting houses in the area that they are required “pay rental dues of six months in advance or to evacuate these houses.” (SOHR, 2022c, p. 23) The houses belonged to Christians who were previously displaced, indicating to how displacement is a particularly long term profitable strategy.

Returnees who had their property stolen by armed forces paid bribes to regain access to their properties, as they considered this the only way to safely return to their homes, avoiding arbitrary arrests.⁷³ Moreover, returnees were threatened with for claiming their property back,

⁷⁰ Also: A/HRC/45/31; A/HRC/48/70; A/HRC/49/77; A/HRC/51/45.

⁷¹ A/HRC/42/51.

⁷² A/HRC/43/57.

⁷³ A/HRC/52/69: Report to the 52nd regular session of the Human Rights Council.

also forced to pay fees in order to return.⁷⁴ Some returnees in the Afrin region tried to file complaints with the Joint Committee for the Restoration of Rights, while others engaged directly with armed groups in order to retrieve their property through the payment of bribes.⁷⁵ Those who argued that their reluctance to participate in formal proceedings, citing fear of reprisals. In one case, it was reported that government forces, while forcibly transferring civilians from Rukban camp to government-controlled areas, forced evacuees to pay departure taxes, having them pay for their transportation, including for their livestock and other belongings (SOHR, 2021).

Armed groups also used restriction of movement strategies in order to gain economic advantages. Particularly checkpoints frequently facilitated corrupt practices of armed groups, extorting civilians. Moreover, multiple reports connect that the erection of checkpoints, which restricted the entry and exit of people and goods, to the increased cost of living in the area. Through checkpoints government forces confiscated items, requiring civilians to pay bribes.⁷⁶ Similarly, checkpoints run by regime forces were also used to control crop production and the extortion of civilians through bribes.⁷⁷ Government forces have arrested civilians at checkpoints, after which they confiscate their money. Checkpoints of the 4th Division of the Syrian Army in the Al-Sheikh Maqsoud and Al-Ashrafieh neighbourhoods were guarded by female officers, allowing for the searching of women passing through. This has resulted in the confiscation of duty-free phones as well as “money in excess of 150,000 Syrian pounds” (SOHR, 2022b, n.p.). HTS also used checkpoints as a means to gain economic advantages, including the confiscation of goods or the charging of fees at checkpoints.⁷⁸ Restriction of movement – particularly the ascertaining of control of civilian movement through checkpoints – also resulted in the civilians having to pay protection rackets. HTS forced shop owners to pay \$1,500 per month “to ensure their “protection”.”⁷⁹

Likewise, in the case of complete encirclement of a city, neighbourhood or IDP camp, armed forces may use a single checkpoint for the heavily restricted access to the outside world, also

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ A/HRC/49/77.

⁷⁶ A/HRC/45/31.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ A/HRC/44/61.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 16.

requiring residents to pay bribes to cross (SOHR, 2021). Even pregnant women were subjected to these practices, being forced to bribe regime forces to leave strategically deprived IDP camps in order to give birth safely in a government-controlled area with medical facilities (SOHR, 2021). Upon their return after birth some have been denied entry, while others have to pay large bribes to re-enter the area (SOHR, 2021). Multiple families who could not pay have been separated due to this practice (SOHR, 2021). Unfortunately this example is not a stand alone affair, with government forces and rebel groups using checkpoints to bribe residents in order to allow them to gain access to medical facilities and health services.⁸⁰

The above has shown how taxes, rents and rackets are used by armed groups in employing movement management strategies. While such strategies are usually part of an organizational policy, this has not always been the case for confiscation of money and bribes, particularly at checkpoints. Nevertheless, with the deteriorating of the economic situation in the country practices aimed at extorting money from civilians flourished.⁸¹ Moreover, this practice alludes to the ways in which movement management can be extremely lucrative and in some cases can be used as a means to substitute official salaries, leading hereto that the Syrian regime turns a blind eye to this practice by its armed forces (SNHR, 2021a).

5.2.2. Looting and confiscation of land and property

Movement management strategies have also resulted in the looting and the confiscation of property and land by armed forces, in this way facilitating financial gain from movement management. Similar to the use of taxes and rents, the affected civilians of looting and confiscation of property and land include both civilians at the time living in areas controlled by the perpetrators, as well as displaced people who may or may not wish to return. Focusing on the latter, both government forces and rebel groups use confiscation as a means to bar displaced persons from returning, making it impossible for them to access their property. Particularly in formerly besieged areas, thousands of returnees were denied access to their homes by government forces. Civilians were prevented by government forces to return to their habitable houses with checkpoints being used to control the entry and exit of civilians, including returnees.⁸² Reconstruction projects have also been announced without a start date in sight,

⁸⁰ A/HRC/43/57.

⁸¹ A/HRC/52/69.

⁸² A/HRC/45/31.

continuing to prevent displaced people from returning to their homes.⁸³ International actors, such as the Turkish forces in the North-West also participated in the confiscation of houses, lands and shops of displaced owners (SOHR, 2019, 2022a).

Housing, land and property-related violations were particularly frequent during the olive harvest season, indicating the use of displacement for primary economic benefits.⁸⁴ It is important to highlight that property seizure predominantly impacted individuals who were already displaced, suggesting that the implementation of these tactics is driven by opportunism, with armed forces benefiting from pre-existing displacement rather than intentionally causing displacement for financial gain. Notwithstanding, the analysis found instances in which displacement was generated through confiscation of property, directly linking economic advantages to the strategy of displacement. In Qusayr, Dar'a and Darayya "certain segments of the civilian population" were coerced by pro-government forces into selling their property at reduced prices.⁸⁵ Moreover, evacuation notices were put on houses of already displaced people, giving residents one month to file a claim at the cadastral office.⁸⁶ However, upon returning to the area displaced owners were barred from entry resulting in the time period being exceeded and their houses being occupied by fighters and their family members.⁸⁷

In the aftermath of property confiscations houses were looted with items transported and resold by rebel forces.⁸⁸ Items such as widows, doors, electric cables, sanitary fittings, tiles and generators were systematically removed from houses.⁸⁹ In some cases, SNA members even resold items to the household they previously stole the items from.⁹⁰ This practice of looting was also common under regime forces, however more premeditated and systematic. Regime militias used private companies to transport the items to government-controlled areas for reselling.⁹¹ The yield of this business model was "sometimes considered as a reward for

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ A/HRC/49/77.

⁸⁵ A/HRC/43/57, p. 15.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ A/HRC/45/31.

⁸⁹ Ibid; A/HRC/44/61.

⁹⁰ A/HRC/45/31.

⁹¹ A/HRC/44/61.

members of the armed forces who recaptured the area”.⁹² As such, looting also served a military purpose as it a means to pay fighters for their service.

Like the looting of houses, the appropriation of lands and property by the Syrian regime is particularly premediated and strategic, serving multiple purposes beyond mere economic gain. The Assad regime, since the eruption of the civil war, as introduced multiple laws which aim at legalizing the legal practice of property and land appropriation, as well as looting, violating the most basic human rights. For example, Law 63 of 2012 aims at legalization of confiscation of the property of ‘terrorists’ (SNHR, 2020). Defined by the regime as a terrorist is anyone who demands or support a change of government. Consequently, this law is used to target politically dissidents, as well as any civilian perceived as supporting the revolution, resulting in the transfer of ownership of their lands and properties to the government (SNHR, 2020). Many of these seized properties are consequently occupied by loyalists to the Syrian regime (CoI, 2018). Introduced into law during the period of investigation, Laws 10 of 2018 and 42 of 2018 aims to establish so-called ‘regulatory areas’ in Syria, in which the regime can restructure, including residential and commercial property of civilians residing in these areas as well those of displaced owners (CoI, 2018). The ongoing implementation of laws targeting property confiscation indicates both the enduring utilization of this strategy and its evolution in sophistication over time.

These laws not only indicate the utilization of property and land confiscations for economic gains but also as a form of collective punishment, targeting individuals perceived as disloyal and their families, while also manipulating ethnic demographics.⁹³ Additionally, as discussed in the previous section, the confiscation of property also accommodates to military needs such as housing for family members of fighters (CoI, 2018). Moreover, women who lived alone were particularly targeted through practices of property and harvest confiscation, claiming women do need homes just for themselves or can have property in their names.⁹⁴ This demonstrates how cultural stigmas were intertwined with confiscation for economic purposes.

⁹² Ibid, p. 18.

⁹³ The targeting of particular groups, for example through by ethnicity or perceived political affiliation will be discussed in the section on political advantages (more specifically in section 5.3.1 and 5.3.2. on political denial and collective punishment respectively).

⁹⁴ A/HRC/52/69.

5.2.3. *Public auctions*

Related to the confiscation of property by armed forces is the usurpation of land and property rights through public auctions by government forces. Public auctions have become a formal and systematized manner of appropriation of land and property.⁹⁵ Administrative orders were established by the Security and Military Committee, who published announcements about auctions.⁹⁶ More recently public auctions have emerged as a coordinated and deliberate governmental strategy. Indeed, the analysis found that while confiscation of private property is used by all parties in the conflict for personal gain, the confiscation of property through public actions is a recent phenomenon that is only present in areas in government-held areas, particularly in the North-West (SNHR, 2021a).⁹⁷ Used as a way to guarantee permanent removal, inhibiting the return of displaced people, public auctions also have an economic character with government forces deliberately separating between which lands are burned and destroyed and which ones were tilled to generate profit. The targeted land for auction includes arable land, which usually grown high-value crops, including pistachio and olive trees, as well as land that is used for the cultivation of cotton, vegetables and wheat.⁹⁸ The CoI reports that one farmer in Hama had parts of his lands taken to be put up for auction, while in other parts of his land trees were cut down to be sold as firewood.⁹⁹ This further elucidates to the deliberate and careful nature by which land is confiscated and repurposed.

Auction winners of arable lands of displaced people usually include high-ranking government officials or pro-government militia's (SNHR, 2021a). Those same individuals often times already inhabited the property or worked the lands, revealing how the public auctions are no more than a "façade to formalize already existing appropriation and exploitation by various pro-government forces of land belong to displaced owners".¹⁰⁰ Moreover, public auctions are also set to be used as a first step in an effort at displacing rightful landowners.¹⁰¹ In Idlib, public auctions were held by government forces of property in use by its indigenous residents, under

⁹⁵ A/HRC/49/77.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Also: A/HRC/49/77.

⁹⁸ Ibid; A/HRC/48/70.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ A/HRC/48/70, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the false premise that land owners were in debt to the Agricultural Bank.¹⁰² Hence, public auctions in this way not only affected already displaced persons, it is also used as a means to engineer displacement.

5.2.4. Economic domination over markets and services

In addition to employing movement management tactics for taxes, bribes, and property, the analysis also discovered that armed groups specifically utilized restriction of movement strategies as a means to exploit the population by monopolizing the economy and services. It was observed that HTS, in particular, employed movement restrictions with the aim of monopolizing and controlling all aspects of the region under their authority.¹⁰³ As a result, governance structures were established to exert control over commercial activities, including the monopolization of internet and fuel provision. In Kafr Takharim, HTS made various attempts to consolidate power, such as raising prices for bread and fuel, as well as imposing taxes on olive oil production.¹⁰⁴

The Syrian government forces have also used similar strategies in order to monopolize the fuel market, through the restriction of entry of fuel during sieges (SOHR, 2022b). This has led to critical facilities experiencing fuel shortages. Further asserting control over the fuel market, government forces started with smuggling fuel for exorbitantly high prices (SOHR, 2022d). Using checkpoints, government forces were charging up to 2,400,000 Syrian pounds for 220 litres of fuel, exploiting already victimized civilians in this way (SOHR, 2022d).

5.3. Political advantages of movement management strategies

Following the theoretical framework, the last category of advantages is identified as those which serve a political purpose, evidencing a strategic logic that is primarily (geo)political in nature. Multiple political advantages have been identified in the analysis, from political denial, collective punishment, the creating of bargaining space, to the attainment of symbolic resources such as influence and legitimacy.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ A/HRC/42/51.

¹⁰⁴ A/HRC/43/57.

5.3.1. Political denial

The reports analysed shed light on the endeavours of rebel forces to establish governance, highlighting the opposition groups' aspiration to exert influence by controlling both territory and the population. One prominent governance effort frequently mentioned in the reports is the HTS's Salvation Government. Established in 2017, the Salvation Government operates as the quasi civil/administrative authority, exerting influence over civilians in HTS controlled areas through local committees and councils, thus providing an alternative governance system.¹⁰⁵ Governance efforts are a danger to already established systems of authority such as that of the Syrian regime (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022). Hence, movement management strategies by government forces would be employed for the purpose of political denial, motivated by their need to maintain their claim as (sole) legitimate authority.

The previously discussed strategies of denial of access to food, water and other basic necessities served a means to achieve political denial, in addition to military denial. The limited availability of these crucial goods, achieved through the targeting of civilian infrastructure or the prevention of their entry, played a significant role in diminishing support from the civilian population and other rebel factions (CoI, 2018; SJAC, 2021). The general regime strategy of siege warfare, particularly through the denial of evacuation, delivery of food and health items and other essential supplies was said to underly “an effort to compel the surrender of those “governing”” (CoI, 2018, p. 3). More specifically, through siege warfare political denial was pursued by regime forces as a distinct objective, with the scarcity of resources inside besieged areas resulting in a reduced capability of rebel groups to produce a governance system alternative to that of the regime (CoI, 2018). Furthermore, government forces have used displacement to impede or complicate chances for economic recovery or stability in opposition-held areas.¹⁰⁶ Hence, attempts at governance were quashed by depriving rebel groups and their population, leaving the enemy with a dissatisfied population, ready to move on to live in government-held areas (CoI, 2018).

Further focusing on displacement, political denial was most present through the cleansing strategies as employed by armed groups. Demographic manipulation included the deliberate

¹⁰⁵ A/HRC/44/61.

¹⁰⁶ A/HRC/49/77.

and permanent removal of Kurdish, Yazidi and Christian residents as well as political opponents of the Assad regime, the Salvation Government and other opposition groups. Notwithstanding, ongoing efforts to change the demography of areas are particularly present with systematic practices by international actors, such as the Turkish forces and their proxy factions (SOHR, 2021). These practices include the earlier mentioned efforts at so-called model villages and settlements which are established at a fast pace and intend to house displaced Syrian Arabs from other Syrian provinces (SOHR, 2021). Sham Al-Khair village in the Afrin region was build on land which belonged to Yazidi civilians, now unable to return. Many other sponsored model villages by Turkish, Kuwaiti and Palestinian organizations follow a similar pattern of using the lands of religious minorities for this “demographic change project” (SOHR, 2021, p. 51).¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Iran and their proxy militias have aimed to systematically change the demography of areas throughout Syria with development projects through the purchase of large plots of lands, houses and commercial establishments (SOHR, 2021). In Ain Tarma city some 500 units which belong to displaced Syrian owners were sold to the Iranians, nevertheless through a representative authorized by the real owners (SOHR, 2021). In other areas, Iranians offered financial incentives to real estate agents and brokers in return for purchasing houses of owners who had previously been displaced by Iranian and regime forces (SOHR, 2021). Hence, the Iranian militia use a mixture of a coercive and voluntary methods to achieve their goal of ideology promotion and demographic manipulation. In the North-West, Kurish-led SDF requires displaced Arabs to obtain an expat card which should be shown at checkpoints, providing difficulty for displaced Arabs to return to their in SDF-controlled areas (SOHR, 2022d). This strategy of restriction of movement is being aimed at “geographic and demographic division of the province and the Syrian regions”, indicating a purpose of demographic change based on ethnicity and religion (SOHR, 2022d, n.p.)

Besides ethnic and religious minorities, political opponents or those perceived to be disloyal civilians, are particularly affected by displacement strategies. The patterns of evacuations as part of local truce/reconciliation agreements by government forces “appear to be intended to engineer changes in the political demographics of previously besieged areas, by redrawing and

¹⁰⁷ See also: SOHR, 2021, 2022a.

consolidating bases of political support” (CoI, 2018, p. 8). The obstacles for returnees range from property confiscation to refusal at checkpoints, reveal to be an additional effort to manipulate ethnic demographics as well as social structures, the latter referring to the elimination of political diversity (SOHR, 2023a). Furthermore, those demanding political change or accused of being sympathizers of the enemy, hence considered terrorists experience additional movement management strategies as part of a logic of collective punishment, as the next section will discuss.

5.3.2. *(Collective) punishment*

(Collective) punishments is a political advantage that seemed to result from much of the movement management strategies by the armed groups in Western Syria during the time of investigation. However, punishment is found to rarely stand alone; a movement management strategy more likely results in an advantage of inflicted punishment, in combination with another economic, military or political advantage. Moreover, (extended) retaliation or humiliation is often targeted against already displaced people, as an additional blow next to the initial forced displacement (CoI, 2018; SNHR, 2019). This is arguably due to a sorting that proceeded after the engineered displacement, with armed forces perceiving those who fled before as ‘guilty’ or ‘sympathizers of the enemy’. In other cases, punishment or retaliation against already displaced people seemed to particularly target minority groups, based on group level heuristics such as ethnicity or religion.

Restriction of movement strategies are used as retaliatory acts by government forces in response to violence at government checkpoints. In these cases, siege-like strategies were employed in response to attacks or tensions between civilians and government forces at checkpoints – the punishment included the more aggressive enforcement of prior restriction of movement measures.¹⁰⁸ Civilians were collectively punished through the preventing of movement and denying entry of food and fuel.¹⁰⁹ Others were forcibly transferred outside of the area, indicating a displacement strategy.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ A/HRC/48/70.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

The analysis found that displacement strategies are more frequently used a form of (collective) punishment – both next to and independent from economic and military purposes. Punishment seems to be a consideration in the earlier mentioned reconciliation process. The evacuation of civilians who are perceived to be sympathetic to the opposition appears to be a strategy to punish those individuals, elucidating to a punitive political advantage next to the already established military advantages of evacuations (i.e. sorting purposes). Particularly targeted as punishment were fighters who were reluctant to reconcile, as well as activists and civilians who were perceived to be opposition sympathizers.¹¹¹ Evacuation agreements between government forces and rebel groups leave many residents with little option but to reconcile or leave their homes for other areas. While those who choose to leave are faced with forcibly transferred, indicating a sorting logic, this is also used as means to inflict additional punishment upon those unwilling to accept the authority of the regime (SJAC, 2019). In other cases, reconciliation agreements leave other residents with little option but to be relocated as displacement is “a pre-determined destination (...) set out in the “agreements”.” (SOHR, 2018, p. 3). Refusing to leave when demanded to do so also resulted in additional punishment, becoming the wrath of the government forces and consequently being deprived from the most basic rights in life (SOHR, 2018). Moreover, even those who reconciled have undergone the punishment by the regime – primarily through forcibly transfer as well as arbitrary arrests – particularly in the case of civilians perceived to be previous sympathizers of rebel forces, as well as former fighters and their families.¹¹²

The general strategy of depopulation by government forces includes the brutal revenge on political dissidents, not only displacing them but having those who seek political change pay the largest price possible by eliminating the possibility of safe return in combination with continued targeted physical attacks (SNHR, 2019). Displacement is similarly used by rebel groups and international actors. Turkish forces punished civilians who refused to comply with evacuation orders, depriving them from basic necessities as well as continued violations (SOHR, 2019). Alike the strategy by government forces, those who refuse to comply with evacuation orders suffered from continued violations to their properties and their lives (SNHR, 2019). The future perspective of displacement, already having a punitive character, was

¹¹¹ A/HRC/49/77.

¹¹² A/HRC/49/77.

extended through humiliating denial of means to survival (SOHR, 2019). Moreover, Turkish forces and supportive factions punished Kurdish farmers through requiring them to acquire a permit to harvest their lands (SOHR, 2019). Neighbouring Arabs who cultivated lands owned by displaced Kurdish owners were exempt from paying these taxes (SOHR, 2019).

Already displaced persons also face retaliation by means of movement management strategies. Displaced Syrians perceived as opposing the government were specifically targeted by government forces through looting and property seizure.¹¹³ Housing, land and property confiscations – besides their economic and military purpose – were used to punish individuals broadly perceived to be associated with the opposition.¹¹⁴ Politically active individuals, activists as well as displaced Syrians perceived as opposition have been affected by this practice, permanently preventing their return home as a means to inflict additional punishment for their disloyalty to the regime (SNHR, 2021a). This punishment was formalized through laws permitting the appropriation of lands and assets of people are targeted at those who have been forced out of their homes by armed forces (SNHR, 2020). As such, the appropriation of assets – next to its straightforward economic purpose – serves as an additional form of collective punishment of those already dispossessed, being discriminatory in nature and bearing a political, vengeful dimension (SNHR, 2021a).¹¹⁵

Not limited to government forces, HTS in their practice of confiscation of property particularly targeted the property and lands of those displaced owners which were perceived to be supporting the Assad government, or “otherwise opposing Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s rule”.¹¹⁶ Moreover, among those specifically targeted were the property of minority groups such as Christians.¹¹⁷ Indeed, in other reports seizing the lands of political opponents is also described as an additional form of punishment which also extends to family members “while at the same time enriching the regime and its accomplices” (SNHR, 2021a, p. 2), elucidating to the manner in which punishment is often accompanied by other logics, such as economic advantages in this case.

¹¹³ A/HRC/43/57

¹¹⁴ *ibid*; A/HRC/51/45.

¹¹⁵ Also: A/HRC/43/57.

¹¹⁶ A/HRC/49/77, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*.

Besides the particular targeting of their property and lands, the targeting of already displaced persons also includes direct hostilities driven by a retaliatory purpose, next to the earlier discussed purpose of sorting, evidencing a logic of punishment. The city of Ma'aret al Numan as one of the earliest cities participating in the uprising and demanding of political change in 2011 has endured much violence at the hands of government forces (SNHR, 2019). This includes its indigenous residents, as well as the thousands of displaced people who fled to the cities from other areas. Perceived by displaced persons as a safe haven away from government violence, government forces have attached a perception of guilt to all residents in this area (SNHR, 2019). Consequently, everyone associated with so-called rebel strongholds are perceived as disloyal and as such has been punished particularly through forced displacement strategies – including those residents which choose to leave (SNHR, 2020a)

Indeed, particularly elucidating to this *guilt by location* is the continued terrorizing of IDPs that left these rebel-controlled areas. (Pro)government forces, through aerial attacks, have followed displaced persons as they fled (SNHR, 2020a). Similarly, civilians attempted to leave besieged areas were denied safe passage, being systematically targeted by government forces while fleeing as they were perceived to politically affiliate with the enemy (SJAC, 2019). Other movement management strategies against already displaced persons included the targeting of (temporary) IDP housing¹¹⁸ and the targeting of exit routes (SNHR, 2019). Related to the latter, the obstruction of routes, a restriction of movement strategy employed after engineering displacement, serves as form of extended retaliation and humiliation. Furthermore, it sends a message to those displaced, saying that they will be subjected to terror even after displacement (SNHR, 2019). Again, government forces and their allies seem to use a *guilt by location* reasoning, perceiving the disloyalty of these IDP because of their previous residence in rebel-controlled areas.

Similarly, those who fled across state borders face a same guilt association, resulting in the use of movement management strategies as a way to inflict (collective) punishment. Returnees, often with already approved clearances, were denied return on “security” or “criminal” grounds

¹¹⁸ A/HRC/44/61.

without further explanation.¹¹⁹ Moreover, refugees were denied return to their homes in government-held areas, indicating a punitive purpose. Additionally, those who were allowed to enter continued to face retaliation for their perceived guilt.¹²⁰ In one case, a returnee's house was destroyed in retaliation for insisting that the property was returned to him after it was confiscated by government forces.¹²¹

5.3.3. *Bargaining space*

Bargaining space was less evident in the analysed reports. The creating of bargaining space motivates the engineering of displacement by actors which operate, not in the context of the hostilities on Syrian territory, but rather in the political arena in neighbouring countries. As such, this movement management driven by this advantage is a tool of political warfare, rather than that of physical conflict. As for the logic of punishment, civilians who are victimized by movement management strategies motivated by this reasoning include already displaced persons, more specifically refugees. Most notably, Türkiye – which hosts the largest amount of Syrian refugees worldwide – has threatened to open its borders, engineering displacement flows back into Syria as well as into neighbouring European Union (EU) countries (SOHR, 2022a). Dissatisfied with their (financial) support, a strategy to inflict punishment is used by which Syrian refugees are weaponized. (SOHR, 2022a). Largely limited to threats, both the Erdogan government and the Turkish opposition have used the Syrian refugees as a bargaining chip to serve foreign politics, gain extra financial support as well as to gain populist support in national politics (SOHR, 2022a).

In other cases, threats have resulted in actual acts of deportation to Syria, elucidating to the ways in which the use of displacement to create bargaining space can have serious consequences for those most vulnerable – also considering the guilt association attached to Syrian refugees by the Syrian regime. By September 2021, some 16,000 Syrian refugees have been forcibly transferred into Syria via the Bab Al-Hawa crossing (SJAC, 2021). Upon their return refugees face arbitrary detentions from armed groups as well as violence through both discriminate and indiscriminate attacks (SJAC, 2021).

¹¹⁹ A/HRC/52/69, p. 11.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Focusing on strategies of restriction of movement, it is found that siege warfare precedes a general logic of creating bargaining space – starving a besieged population from resources in order to *force* the enemy into capitulation. As such, both government forces and rebel forces, active in hostilities inside of the conflict territory, participate in the use of movement management using a logic of bargaining. Nevertheless, this logic does not inform the decision to use a strategy of restriction of movement, but rather it is a means to achieve a different purpose, such as punishment, political/military denial or the sorting of civilians.

5.3.4. *Symbolic resources: influence and legitimacy*

Lastly, the category of political advantages includes that of symbolic resources. Besides the use of movement management as a way of denying governance efforts, movement management also be used as a means to create governance abilities, namely through a construction of legitimacy and influence. As such, the political advantage of symbolic resources would be evidence of a logic of legitimacy. As mentioned, rebel groups have actively aimed to gain these symbolic resources by means of movement management strategies. As displacement strategies are used to deny an enemy group a population to govern over, movement management strategies may also be used in order to *maintain* a population to govern over, creating a narrative of competence, influence and legitimacy through mobility control.

The use of movement management strategies for this purpose is relatively little present in the analysed reports, indicating that restriction of movement and displacement is not frequently pursued using this underlying logic. Nevertheless, in cases of sieges, it is reported that armed groups operating in name of the authority of the Salvation Government have prevented civilians from leaving areas under their control, particularly in “urban combat situation” (CoI, 2021, p. 6). Besides the use of civilians as a *buffer zone* – indicating a military purpose, these active efforts at mobility control may also elude to a political motivation, particularly for the purpose of legitimacy maintenance.

In the context of the Iranian presence in Western Syria, multiple reports refer to their ““symbolic” regime domination” or ““symbolic” regime control” in (Western) Syria (SOHR, 2021, p. 138, 2022a, p. 67). This symbolic control refers to the manipulation and control of symbols, narratives and ideologies by Iran to maintain power and control over a population.

Although different strategies and methods may be used to achieve this symbolic dominance, in the context of movement management this goal is pursued through Iran's efforts to gain territorial control and the spread of their ideology throughout pockets of controlled areas (SOHR, 2021). In the SOHR Booklet 2021 and 2022, this symbolic value is linked to Iran's influence in areas across Syria. Moreover, Russia's involvement in the conflict is also mentioned as "attempting to impose absolute influence on Syria" using symbolic control (SOHR, 2021, p. 170).

Physical control over large cities – including their consequent large population – is also of significant symbolic value to (pro)government forces and opposition groups (CoI, 2021). This includes their portrayal as fighting *for* the civilian population, rather than against them. The Russian forces in Syria have gathered a reputation as the "Godfather of Settlements" – a title they acquired through their mediating role in the establishment of the de-escalation zones in 2017 (SOHR, 2021, p. 173). Moreover, the Russians actively pursue this reputation as bringers of peace, for example through distributing food supplies to residents in controlled areas (SOHR, 2022c). This is characterized as an effort to "woo" residents and portray themselves as "peace makers." (SOHR, 2022c, p. 52) Similar efforts by HTS's Salvation Government are also reported, with HTS forces attempting to tighten their grip and subjugate populations, taking over "activities aimed at regulating access to services (...)".¹²² Moreover, efforts aimed influence and legitimacy also serve simultaneous economic purpose, with HTS profiting from a local population under the guise of taxes in return for their provided services.¹²³ Unsurprisingly, these efforts aimed at symbolic resources do not serve a local population, but rather fulfil the narrow purpose of benefitting the armed actors. For one, HTS's attempts at legitimacy and authority resulted in a decreased access to basic necessities, negatively impacting access to education and health services.¹²⁴

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the results from the content analysis, answering the second sub-question on what the underlying logics and motivation are for different types of movement management

¹²² A/HRC/43/57, p. 8.

¹²³ A/HRC/44/61.

¹²⁴ A/HRC/43/57.

strategies. Focusing on the different actors involved in the conflict, it was found that military and economic advantages – in rather equal measure – drove movement management strategies as employed by (pro)government forces and opposition groups, evidencing a logic that is often military or economic in nature. Political advantages to a lesser extent could be connected to the use of movement management strategies by armed groups. Notwithstanding, political advantages were found in connection to the (threat with the) use of movement management strategies by primarily (pro)government forces and other international actors, indicating a strategic logic that is primarily (geo)political in nature. Lastly, it was found that movement management strategies in relatively few cases were triggered by a single motivator. Rather, multiple advantages were identified for one movement management strategy, indicating that more strategic logics were considered upon the use of a movement management strategy. In the next chapter, the conclusions of the analysis will be discussed in more detail.

6. Conclusion and discussion

6.1. Conclusion

In this thesis I aimed contribute to the understanding of the employment of movement management strategies by armed groups through a qualitative content analysis of a sample of reports on the conflict in Syria. Focusing on Western Syria from 2018 until 2022, I sought to offer an in-depth research of the strategies of movement management and uncover the rational decision-making processes behind their implementation. As such I aimed to answer following research question:

Why and how is civilian geographical movement instrumentalized in Western Syria, in 2018-2022?

The theoretical framework included six categories of movement management strategies for the analysis: (1) cleansing, (2) depopulation and (3) relocation for displacement strategies, and (4) sieges, (5) checkpoints and (6) anti-personnel landmines for restriction of movement strategies. These strategies were further classified into three categories of strategic advantages as resulting from the use of these movement management strategies: a strategy may be used to gain a (1) military advantage, (2) economic advantage, and/or (3) a political advantage. Subsequently, through identifying advantages inferences can be made about the existence of underlying strategic logics. In Chapter 4, the prevalence and patterns of the six strategies of movement management were analysed for the case study. In Chapter 5, actions by armed groups were identified as in line with one or more of the aforementioned strategic advantages, evidencing an underlying strategic logic which was military, economic and/or political in nature. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the results of the content analysis, which will be further explicated in this chapter.

In addressing the first sub-question and examining the "how" in the main research question, it was discovered that all identified displacement strategies from the theoretical framework were present during the investigation period. However, in the category of restriction of movement strategies, while sieges and checkpoints were frequently utilized, there was no reported use of

anti-personnel landmines in relation to movement restriction. Despite this absence in the data, it is important to note that anti-personnel landmines continue to affect large areas in Western Syria (SNHR, 2023), suggesting a potential connection to movement management strategies, such as serving as barriers to deny entry to returnees (see for example: SNHR, 2023).¹²⁵

Regarding the patterns of movement management strategies, it was found that strategies were often used in conjunction, particularly in two distinct scenarios. First, within the category of restriction of movement, sieges and checkpoints were used in combination. After a siege, checkpoints were established to continue restricting movement, albeit with less extensive reach. Conversely, in some cases, pre-existing checkpoints became the only crossing point when a siege was implemented, resulting in more extreme movement restrictions over time. Second, a combination of movement management strategies was observed between restriction of movement and displacement strategies, specifically with sieges and relocation in the context of relocation agreements. Following a siege, the subsequent relocation resulted in further control over mobility, but in the form of forced transfer. This finding supports earlier research by Berti & Sosnowski (2022) in which they refer to this phenomenon in the Syrian context.

In order to answer the second sub-question, and the “why” in the main research question, these prior observations were further investigated, focusing on the potential strategic logics underlying the use of movement management strategies. Firstly, for the **military advantages** – connecting the gains of actors to a strategic logic that is military in nature – the findings revealed that all predefined codes were present in the case study, excluding the use of civilians for labour purposes. The latter suggests the absence of employing civilian movement for the purpose of mobilizing (free) labour. However, in contrast, civilians’ movement has been instrumentalized for various other military purposes. Notably, the sorting and triaging civilians by governments forces as well as rebel forces as part of screening procedures was a frequent result of movement management strategies. These findings support Lichtenheld’s (2020a, 2020b) sorting logic, which underpins the use of displacement strategies for this reason. In the context of reconciliation agreements relocation was used as a sorting mechanism, using displacement to separate the reconcilable (the ‘good’) from the unreconcilable (the ‘bad’). In comparison, the military advantage of sorting and triaging by rebel groups was connected to restriction of

¹²⁵ This perceived inconsistency in the results will be further addressed later in this chapter.

movement strategies, evidenced by a siege-like strategy of holding civilians in ‘managed sites’ for screening. Furthermore, sorting and triaging were also used for conscription-related purposes, specifically to distinguish between individuals eligible for military service (often men) and those who were not (women and children). These insights provide a significant contribution to the existing literature on movement management, particularly in regard to Lichtenheld's conceptualization.

Secondly, for the economic strategic logic – as evidenced by the gained **economic advantages** of actors employing movement management strategies – it was found that all of the predefined codes are present in the case study. Notably, movement management was most frequently employed for economic gains, both by (pro)government forces and rebel groups. However, variations in sophistication and organization were observed among the types of advantages and actors. Strategies such as bribes and protection rackets were used with less systematicity, suggesting that this strategy was not always officially authorized by leadership but rather tolerated. On the other hand, the confiscation of property emerged as an extremely systematic strategy, as both government forces and rebel groups employed public auctions for this purpose. The use of bribes, taxes and (threats with) confiscation of assets was evident to force civilians out as well as to restrict their movement, for example by denying civilians entry into controlled areas. Furthermore, the financial exploitation of civilians through movement management were used discriminately and indiscriminately. Related to the former, already displaced persons (of ethnic and religious minorities as well as perceived political dissidents) were particularly affected. While in some cases this targeting was deliberate, in other cases this was more opportunistic in nature, with already vacant properties of displaced owners being readily available for exploitation.

Thirdly, for the **political advantages**, evidencing a strategically political logic of actors, all predefined codes were present in the case study. However, the prevalence of these political advantages varied among different strategies. In particular, political denial and collective punishment were frequently observed as political advantages resulting from movement management strategies employed by both rebel and pro-government forces. These political advantages often showed interconnections with both military advantages, such as military denial, and economic advantages, specifically the confiscation of property and lands of those

considered dissidents. The latter aligns with the existing literature, which states that a punishment logic is likely connected to other motives (Berti & Sosnowski, 2022).¹²⁶ In contrast, political advantages such as the gaining of bargaining space in negotiations and symbolic resources were relatively rare. However, when present, they were often associated to (threats) with movement management strategies by international actors, including allied forces present within the territories of the conflict and external actors engaging in political warfare from outside (Western) Syria. Unlike the evidence for an economically motivated logic, political advantages more frequently included the discriminate targeting of a population – i.e. forced displacement as revenge for perceived enemy affiliation or denial of entry of returnees for the perceived traitorous act of fleeing in the first place.

These conclusions substantiate several of the foundational ideas presented in the introduction chapter and in the theoretical framework. In line with some of the definitions academics have connected to displacement strategies (Greenhill, 2008, Hägerdal, 2019), it is evident that the strategic gains resulting from all studied movement management strategies can be categorized into economic, military, and/or political advantages. Additionally, the implementation of a single movement management strategy often leads to multiple strategic advantages, suggesting that more than one strategic motivation underlies its use.¹²⁷ This is particularly the case for economic and military advantages as economic factors and military considerations often intertwine in conflict settings (a group cannot keep fighting if there is no money). Hence, while it was important to separate the advantaged analytically, practically they overlap and interact. Consequently, movement management strategies serve various purposes, with the location and mobility of civilians becoming politicized for multiple intertwined strategic motivations. Furthermore, the strategic logics previously identified for individual displacement strategies were found to be transferable to restriction of movement strategies, and vice versa. This highlights a clear connection between the two branches of movement management strategies. The fluidity and interchangeability of strategic logics between displacement and restriction of movement strategies demonstrate their complex and interlinked nature, revealing how armed groups utilize these strategies for similar, multi-dimensional purposes

¹²⁶ Berti & Sosnowski (2022) related this argument to the specific use of siege warfare by combatant forces.

¹²⁷ i.e. the attacking of civilian infrastructure preceding a military and political logic (strategic advantage of military denial and political denial respectively) or the monopolizing of services preceding an economic and political logic (strategic advantage of economic domination and symbolic resources respectively).

6.2. Discussion

6.2.1. Limitations

As with any research effort, there are a number of (methodological) limitations which need addressing in order to best weight the results of this thesis. The primary limitation of this thesis lies in the potential for researcher bias inherent in the qualitative content analysis design. The method of qualitative content analysis leaves significant risk for possible influence of the researcher's preconceived beliefs and perspectives in the interpretation of the textual data. Through a qualitative content analysis, inferences are drawn from the data; observations of advantaged are interpreted to deduce about strategic logics. In this process, unintentional focus may be put on certain aspects of the data while overlooking others, ultimately resulting in biased data. To address this concern, several measures were taken throughout the analysis process. First, transparency is provided through clear documentation of the decisions made during the analytical process, as evidenced in the coding examples in Table 4, 5 and 6. This enabled reflectivity on the part of the researcher, mitigating subjectivity in the content analysis. Additionally, researcher bias was minimized through the use of predefined codes, based on established theories and existing research. This ensured a structured and objective analytical process, enhancing the transparency and reproducibility of the study. However, some flexibility was retained during the analysis to accommodate new codes and patterns, maintaining an (albeit limited) inductive approach. In these cases, discovered codes and patterns were reported and documented, further enhancing transparency and reproducibility.

Furthermore, despite aiming to provide an account of movement management strategies, including displacement and restriction of movement strategies, this research faced challenges in capturing evidence for the use of anti-personnel landmines as a strategy of movement restriction. While not unprecedented in the contemporary civil war context, including the Syrian conflict, the analysis yielded little to no data on the use of landmines vis-a-vis strategy of movement management. This could be attributed to the fact that the primary purpose of anti-personnel landmines is not aimed at mobility control, unlike the other researched strategies. Instead, their intended purpose is to cause injury, maiming, or death to individuals who encounter them (Giannou, 1997). As a result, the data primarily linked landmines to active hostilities, rather than as a restrictive strategy. Consequently, the methodological approach

utilized may not have effectively captured instances of anti-personnel landmine use as a movement management strategy, leading to the absence of evidence in the findings.

6.2.2. Future research and policy recommendations

This thesis represents a novel approach by examining both strategies of displacement and restriction of movement together as part of movement management strategies. Previous scholarly attention has predominantly focused on displacement strategies, making this study a original effort in this domain of research. As such, this thesis should be viewed as a scientific test phase, wherein concepts from various branches of research are integrated to establish a concrete analytical framework, subsequently applied to a case study. Considering this, much is still (intentionally so) left unexplored, leaving room for future research (approaches).

First of all, to gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research could employ a comparative case study design, exploring the variations in movement management strategies across diverse conflict zones. By comparing different contexts, deeper insights into the strategic logics influencing decision-making could be gained. Additionally, future research could benefit from a longitudinal design, shedding light on the advancement of movement management strategies over time. While this thesis aimed to provide an idea of the evolution of movement management strategies, this was not the main focus. Hence, the results on this front were fairly limited. Nevertheless, investigating how these strategies adapt during the course of a conflict would offer valuable knowledge regarding their impact on conflict dynamics and civilian populations at different stages of a conflict. Furthermore, an important avenue for future research (and a specific interest of this researcher) lies in integrating gender analysis into the study of movement management strategies to uncover how these strategies affect men and women differently (see on *new wars* in general: Chinkin & Kaldor, 2013). Chapter 5 briefly touches on gender relations, but an in-depth examination could unveil critical gender-specific implications of different movement management strategies.

The results of this thesis highlight the striking similarities and interconnectedness in the strategic decision-making processes behind various displacement and restriction of movement strategies. This emphasizes the importance of adopting an integrative lens in understanding conflict movement dynamics. While the thesis may not directly provide policy tools for

protecting civilians from movement management strategies, it offers crucial insights into their usage and underlying motivations. By enriching the broader literature on conflict dynamics, this knowledge deepens our understanding of movement management strategies and their complex implications for civilian protection and humanitarian response. As a result, it can contribute significantly to advancing efforts to safeguard civilians in conflict zones.

6.2.3. Researcher's note

Finally, it's important to highlight that this thesis does not aim to disregard or minimize the significant role of ethnic and religious tensions within the context of the Syrian conflict. Instead, its focus lies in underlining the likelihood that movement management strategies have been employed to fulfil objectives *next to* the establishment of exclusive territories driven by exclusionary ideologies. In order to effectively address movement management – including strategies that disproportionately affect minority ethnic groups and religious minorities – it is crucial to question the assumption that displacement or movement constraints are solely used as tools for punishment and elimination.

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Appendix A: Sources for analysis

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[content/pdf/english/The_destruction_of_the_cities_of_Maarat_al_Numan_and_the_observation_and_displacement_of_residents_is_a_clear_example_of_the_Syrian_regime_s_en.pdf](https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/The_destruction_of_the_cities_of_Maarat_al_Numan_and_the_observation_and_displacement_of_residents_is_a_clear_example_of_the_Syrian_regime_s_en.pdf)

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