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FROM DREAM TO NIGHTMARE: REGIME-DRIVEN DEMOGRAPHIC
ENGINEERING IN HOMS

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Introduction

On March 15th, 2011, protests began in Damascus, Syria, calling for democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners.¹ In the seven years since the ignition of these protests, the conflict in Syria has grown into a protracted civil war and one of the worst humanitarian disasters in a century. The conflict has displaced 12 million people—over half the country's population—and resulted in the deaths of more than 450,000 Syrians.² While the war has impacted all of Syria, one area that has been significantly changed by the conflict is the city of Homs. Nicknamed “the capital of the revolution,” Homs was an early participant in the political protests that swept the country and received a particularly brutal response from the regime.³ This brutality, however, was not just in response to the opposition forces in Homs. Instead, it was a strategy of demographic engineering by the Assad regime as a continuation of sectarian politics designed to force out the non-loyal Sunni population and strengthen the regime power base in the city.

While the conflict in Homs was one of the most sectarian of the war, this is not the result of long-standing sectarian tensions within the city. Before the start of the conflict in the city, relations between the different sects were not antagonistic, and the Sunni majority and the Alawi and Christian minorities interacted in peace despite living in de facto segregation.⁴ When protests in Homs began, they were not viewed by residents or protesters as a Sunni uprising against the Alawi government, but rather as peaceful protests against government oppression and corruption. It was the state, not the public, that injected sectarianism into the conflict. In response to the

¹“Syria’s civil war explained from the beginning”, *Al Jazeera*, 18 March 2018

²Ibid.

³ No return to Homs: a case study on demographic engineering in Syria”, *The Syria Institute, PAX* . 21 February 2017, pg.20

⁴ Ibid, pg. 18

protests, state security forces organized groups of Alawi men and sent them into Sunni neighborhoods to counter-protest.⁵ They also encouraged the development of a sectarian narrative of Sunni versus Alawi among these groups, who would then spread this narrative among the Alawi population. Soon, organized Alawite militias, known as *Shabiha*, formed throughout the city but primarily in the Zahraa neighborhood.⁶ While the violence was not wholly sectarian at first, an escalating “eye for an eye” situation exacerbated tensions and pushed more significant numbers of Alawis into supporting the regime.

The violence in Homs heightened in 2012 with the regime’s military campaign into the Baba Amr, or Amrou, neighborhood. This neighborhood was the center of opposition power in Homs, and on February 4th, 2012 the regime launched an attack that reportedly killed over 200 people from initial shelling alone.⁷ Following the bombardment, the regime laid siege to the neighborhood, cutting off all access. The siege lasted for a month, during which time the regime forces attacked Amrou with mortars, tanks, and snipers.⁸ Reports of the siege describe the killing of civilians with impunity and regime forces’ refusal to allow civilians safe passage out of the neighborhood. By the time opposition forces surrendered on March 1, shelling had destroyed the vast majority of buildings in the area.⁹

After the destruction of Amrou, the regime shifted their focus to other parts of Homs, and imposed sieges on opposition areas in the north and center of the city. Access in and out of these neighborhoods became restricted, and sectarian attacks by the *Shabiha* became common, forcing families to take high risks to escape the deprivation and violence. By July 2013, the

⁵ No Return to Homs, pg. 20

⁶ Ibid, pg. 20

⁷ Ibid, 21

⁸ Ibid, 21

⁹ Ibid, 21

neighborhoods under siege were utterly isolated, with no access to medical care, clean water, food, or electricity. In May 2014, negotiations were brokered by Iran and Russia, leading to a series of population transfers to remove the remaining civilians from the city, except in the Alawi and Christian minority neighborhoods. By this point, tens of thousands had already been displaced from their homes.

In this article, we argue that this displacement is not the result of the conflict itself, but was a part of the regime's strategy of demographic engineering to consolidate power. We will demonstrate this by mapping the demographics and conflict areas in Homs and placing it within the context of sectarian and authoritarian power strategies of the regime. This thesis will be structured as follows: first, we will examine the relevant literature concerning the history of the Assad regime, the sectarian nature of the conflict, and demographic engineering, followed by an explanation of our research methodology. Second, we will explore the context surrounding this population displacement and demonstrate why it should be viewed as demographic engineering. We will also explore why the regime would want to alter the demographics of Homs, and how the city is strategically important to the regime. Third, we will examine trends in the mapping data that show that the regime was purposeful in its violence towards the Sunni populations of Homs and that there was an attempt to alter the demography based on sectarian lines.

Literature Review

History of Syria

The conflict in Syria today is neither new nor unexpected, rooted as it is in Syria's history, and informs a great deal of the motivations, ideology, and resiliency of the Assad government. For our purposes, the body of literature discussing modern Syria, especially after the military coup and Hafez al-Assad's takeover in 1970, sheds light on why Syria is mired in conflict and what its future might look like. Scholars show that the authoritarian political system was developed under Hafez and inherited by his son Bashar, who strengthened it further through upgrading authoritarian mechanisms, consolidating a loyal social and economic base, and immunizing it to the coups and uprisings that characterize Syrian history and the conflict that would arise through the Arab Spring.

The military coup that brought Hafez al-Assad to power was the last in a line of many coups and one that led to the longevity of the authoritarian Assad regime. In his book *Inside Syria*, Reese Erlich provides a history of the Assads, showing how the coup that established Hafez as president brought stability after years of instability. Under Hafez, dissent and opposition were suppressed, as witnessed by the 1980s uprisings led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Most notably, dissent was crushed in 1982 in Hama and the Brotherhood was driven underground or out of Syria. Bashar carried on his father's legacy when he assumed the presidency in 2000 and improved upon his authoritarian model. Bashar has turned his attention to stifling dissent throughout his presidency, cracking down on protesters in a similar fashion.¹⁰ In their compilation, Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl expand on Erlich's history, arguing that Bashar not only inherited but built upon his father's legacy, creating an "authoritarian

¹⁰ Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2014

upgrade” by developing a regime that could more effectively and powerfully consolidate power.¹¹ This sense of regime adaptation is also echoed in Steven Heydemann’s article, “Tracking the ‘Arab Spring:’ Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism,” which argues that the regime has been able to adapt to conflict and opposition to further hold onto power.¹²

The regime has also remained in power through the Assads’ consolidation of social and economic bases, creating a ring of loyalty around the regime that ensures its survival. According to Erlich, Bashar has employed a divide and rule tactic, rallying minorities by instilling fear of a Sunni majority while also creating internal fissures within and between groups. This tactic is highlighted by the 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta. One theory about the attack that Erlich highlights is that the government might have perpetrated it to alienate Sunni citizens against the rebels, who it accused of executing the attack, which would further weaken the opposition.¹³ Ultimately, loyalty is primary. Nikolaos Van Dam also discusses the importance of regime loyalty as superseding any single affiliation. While sectarianism is important, favoritism was also socially and politically motivated, as Alawites, Ba’th party members, and tribes all vied for prominence under the Assad regime.¹⁴ Samer Abboud also highlights the importance of economic strategy as creating a crony capitalist elite dependent on the regime.¹⁵

Finally, history also accounts for regime resiliency. Najib Ghadbian discusses previous opposition movements under Bashar, from the Damascus Spring of 2000-01, the period of opposition activity between 2003-2007, and 2008-2011, all of which resulted in regime

¹¹ Raymond Hinnebusch and Tina Zintl (Eds.) *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Vol. 1: Political Economy and International Relations*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015.

¹² Steven Heydemann, Tracking the “Arab Spring:” Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy*, 24, 4, 2013, 59-73.

¹³ Erlich, Inside Syria

¹⁴ Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

¹⁵ Hinnebusch and Zintl, *Syria from Reform to Revolt*, Chpt. 3

crackdown on dissent and arrests. This accounts for the strength of the opposition in 2011, as it had learned and grown from previous contestations with the state, as well as the pattern of state crackdown and concession when the movement continued to spread.¹⁶ However in the contest between the state and its citizens, as Heydemann notes, the state was far more capable of adapting, strengthening, and surviving. Although the opposition too adapted, the regime could leverage external relationships such as with Russia and China, and internally within the military, making it far more successful in the conflict.¹⁷ Jonathan Littell saw the regime's resiliency as well as the rebels' efforts on the ground in Homs, witnessing what regime oppression looked like and how these grievances informed the opposition.¹⁸ As Heydemann concludes, given the historical trajectory Syria is on, a democratic outcome to this conflict is unlikely, and could result in a more divided country with a stronger and more brutal regime.¹⁹

Demographic Engineering

Emerging from the nexus of migration and conflict studies, demographic engineering has remained an understudied topic. The term first entered academia in 1997 in Milica Bookman's *The Demographic Struggle for Power*, in which she examines how demographic engineering is a tool used by groups in ethnic conflict in their struggle to gain power and superiority.²⁰ Bookman critiques the field for its lack of theoretical understanding of demographic engineering, claiming that scholars focus on specific examples or historical cases without extracting useful, generally applicable principles from which future scholars can study this phenomenon. Bookman explores different methods of demographic engineering, including economic pressures and inducements

¹⁶ Hinnebusch and Zintl, Syria from Reform to Revolt, Chp 5.

¹⁷ Heydemann, Tracking the "Arab Spring" 59-73.

¹⁸ Jonathan, Littell, Translated by Charlotte Mandell. (2015). *Syrian Notebooks: Inside the Homs Uprising*. London: Verso.

¹⁹ Heydemann, Tracking the "Arab Spring"

²⁰ Milica Bookman, Demographic struggle for power, London: Frank Class, 1997

for demographic change, as well as population transfers and pronatalist policies. One critique of Bookman's work is that she does not explore the forceful removal of a people as a method of demographic change. She describes ethnic cleansing as a subcategory of population transfers but does not explore how conflict leads to this type of demographic engineering or why. Another critique is that Bookman does not define demographic engineering, making it difficult to discern the theoretical boundaries of her work.

Another work lacking a clearly stated definition of demographic engineering is John McGarry's "Demographic engineering': the state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of ethnic conflict regulation." In this article, McGarry describes demographic engineering as a method of managing conflict employed by the state to impose and consolidate control. According to McGarry, demographic engineering is implemented through either 'push' or 'pull' techniques.²¹ Pull techniques involve encouraging the inflow of migrants through measures such as land grants. Push techniques include coercive measures to move ethnic populations from one area to another. While this article is useful in establishing a 'why' for demographic engineering—to consolidate control—its focus on conflict management is not a universally useful framework.

Building on previous works, Myron Weiner and Michael Teitelbaum's study *Political Demography, Demographic Engineering* defines the latter as entailing "the full range of government policies intended to affect the size, composition, distribution, and growth rate of a population."²² Weiner and Teitelbaum argue that the desire for state security is intrinsic in driving demographic engineering, and as such, they focus primarily on methods that involve

²¹ John McGarry, "Demographic engineering: the state-directed movement of ethnic groups as a technique of conflict regulation", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21:4, 1998

²² Myron Weiner, Michael Teitelbaum, *Political Demography, Demographic Engineering*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2001, pg. 55

removing or moving populations because those are most influential on state security.²³ They claim that there are five forms of state intervention resulting in demographic engineering—addition, subtraction, substitution, out-migration, and restriction of entry. Of these five, subtraction is the most applicable to the situation in Homs and is defined by Weiner and Teitelbaum as “policies designed to remove certain (often minority) populations out of the country or from one portion of the country to another in order to solidify national identities of enhancing national security.”²⁴ While the spirit of this definition is applicable to the situation in Homs, there are issues with practical application. For one, the population being removed is the majority ethnic population, however, the minority population has the majority of power. Furthermore, the purpose of the removal is to enhance regime security, not national security. Weiner and Teitelbaum contribute to the literature by specifying the necessity of state intent for this type of demographic change to be considered demographic engineering.

Paul Moreland, in his work *Demographic Engineering: Population Strategies in Ethnic Conflict*, provides a comprehensive definition and typology for demographic engineering. He writes: “Demographic engineering is the intentional pursuit by ethnic groups in conflict of strategies aimed at increasing their demographic strength either as an end to itself or as a means to military or political power, which itself may be considered as a means to the ultimate group ends of presence, persistence, and proliferation.”²⁵ In this definition, Moreland includes the aspect of intent that Wiener and Teitelbaum require for demographic engineering. He also incorporates the purpose of power consolidation that is described by McGarry, arguing that the fundamental purpose behind demographic engineering is to increase or retain power. Moreland

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Paul Moreland, *Demographic Engineering: Population Strategies in Ethnic Conflict*, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014, pg. 37

then delves into typology, arguing that there is ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ demographic engineering. Soft demographic engineering involves boundary changes and challenges in definitions of national or ethnic groups, and are non-forceful techniques in achieving demographic change. Hard demographic engineering is defined by Moreland as “demographic change, relating to the physical creation, destruction, or movement of people on an ethnically or nationally selective basis with the objective of altering the demographic balance and power of ethnic groups.”²⁶

When examining the different definitions and frameworks proposed in the limited scholarship on demographic engineering, Paul Moreland’s inclusive definition and typology of hard demographic engineering is the most applicable to the situation in Homs and will be the working definition of demographic engineering used in this article.

Methodology

This study compiles data on violence in Homs and utilizes GIS mapping software to assess the impact of the regime’s strategy of demographic engineering and understand the relationship between different neighborhoods, hot spots of conflict or displacement, and changes over time during the war.

To start, we compiled data from across English and Arabic sources, including news articles, reports, and eyewitness statements explicitly documenting government-led action in Homs. We limited our scope to regime-led offensives and actions to better identify regime strategy and tactics intended to reshape Homs and engineer its demography. Due to the nature of the conflict and the difficulty compiling reliable or timely information regarding regime-led offensives in the city, we used the best available information and verified reports with additional reports corroborating the incident. We disregarded attacks attributed to unknown sources or ones

²⁶ Ibid

we could not verify. This allowed us to minimize bias in the reporting of attacks in the city and keep as accurate a record as possible as Syria remains an active war zone. We then gathered these sources into a database which spans the 2011-2014 time frame until the government mostly reclaimed the city in 2014.

The database was broken down into several categories. First, we categorized violence at the neighborhood level. This level is significant because each neighborhood has a strong sense of identity and residents feel territorial loyalty to these areas.²⁷ Each neighborhood was classified by its Sunni, Alawite, or Christian majority - or if the area had no clear majority. Using this metric allowed us to examine patterns of violence given sectarian residential patterns. We further broke down our data into the following categories:

Protester Violence: identifies incidents of protests that turned violent; government using forces against protestors or documented cases of protester death

Civilian-Directed Violence: identifies civilian injury or death during government offensives into a neighborhood; documented instances of militia harassment and abuse

Siege: indicates instances in which government forces cordon off neighborhoods and/or refuse exit and entry into an area

Military Campaign: identifies the beginning, duration, or end of a military campaign, often shelling, bombardment, or use of tanks in civilian areas

Building Damage: documented instances of building damage such as hospitals, schools, and mosques

Government Reclaims: identifies the point at which the government re-takes a neighborhood and reclaims control

Depopulation: documented instances of the removal of the population in an area following a successful government military campaign

Resettlement Issue: any instances in which original population has difficulties or is refused entry back to their neighborhood following a government campaign or depopulation of an area

²⁷ Fabrice Balanche, Meeting with the authors, Hoover Institute, February 2018.

To these incidents we added data from the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), which had a pre-existing data set for Homs' building damages captured from 2010 to 2014. UNITAR captured over 13,000 instances of building damages in the city, also broken down by neighborhood, which we incorporated to analyze trends in violence. After building the database, we then transferred the data into QGIS software. Overlaying demographics and the population density in Homs over the neighborhoods allowed us to see what correlation, if any, demography had with socioeconomic status. We also used our database, broken down by year, to highlight trends and patterns over time at the neighborhood level.

We encountered some difficulties with mapping the data, primarily due to transliteration and overlapping neighborhood borders. Using GIS shapefiles provided by Fabrice Balanche as our foundation, we remained consistent with the Arabic to English transliteration used in his work to adapt other sources and to translate from Arabic. We also reconciled several inconsistencies with neighborhood names and borders, adapting the UNITAR data to fit within the neighborhood borders of Dr. Balanche's data set.

Context

This section will discuss the regime's history of using sectarianism as a method of power consolidation and control. We explore why the regime would want to change the demography of the city to demonstrate that these types of strategies have a precedent in Syria. This section also discusses the financial and industrial importance of Homs to the regime and the Homs Dream development project.

Sectarian Precedent in Syria

Modern sectarianism in Syria has its roots in the French Mandate years (1920-1945), when the French authorities gave the Alawite community autonomy over their land and encouraged their enlistment in the military to support the French.²⁸ These efforts engendered positive relations between the French and the Alawite community while also cultivating a rift in identity between Alawites and the Sunni majority, which opposed French rule, that has persisted into the present.²⁹ When Hafez al-Assad ousted Salah Jadid and assumed the presidency in 1970, he “single-mindedly constructed centres of power around Alawi sectarian groupings,” in particular in the intelligence and security sectors.³⁰ Hafez al-Assad brought the ‘coercive framework’ of the security apparatus under near-total Alawi control, placing family members and other loyal Alawi elites in key positions of authority.³¹

The government also placed Sunni officials in high positions, but with certain caveats. Sunnis in the military lacked individual authority and answered solely to the Alawi dominated security apparatus or the president.³² Sunni officials were also placed within the political sphere—the prime minister and other ministerial positions have traditionally been held by Sunnis, but Assad effectively neutered these positions by transitioning power away from the ministerial realm and into the security and intelligence apparatus.³³ However, having Sunni elites in positions of authority, even if in name only, prevented an explicit appearance of sectarian

²⁸ Jomana Qaddour, “Unlocking the Alawite Conundrum in Syria”, *The Washington Quarterly*, CSIS, 36:4, 2013, pg. 68

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Aslam Farouk-Alli, “Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 34:3, 2014

³¹ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, New York: Routledge, 2001, pg. 65

³² Farouk-Alli, *Sectarianism in Alawi Syria*, pg. 218

³³ Hinnebusch, *Syria*, pg. 65

favoritism and ingratiated the Sunni elite with the regime, thus ensuring they would assist with the management of the Sunni masses.

Alawi control of the security sphere was critical to regime survival. The Alawi population in Syria hovers around 10 percent of the total, yet they dominate the political and economic power in the country.³⁴ Since the regime could not maintain its authoritarian hold on power through physical means, lacking the numbers to ensure Alawi dominance in that way, it was crucial that it project the image of absolute power, and the security apparatus was the vehicle through which it could do this. After the Islamist uprisings in the late 70's and early 80's, the Assad regime decreed that the security apparatus was above the law, and it increasingly became involved in all aspects of everyday life.³⁵ The pervasiveness of the intelligence service was such that a prevalent rumor was that 1 in 4 Syrians was an informant, and there was a general belief that the average citizen was either being spied upon by or spying for, the regime at all times.³⁶ As the Alawi community dominated the intelligence services, this pervasiveness created a sense of absolute power and authority for the Alawi and the regime.³⁷

Assad then moved to further consolidate regime power, and therefore Alawi power, by encouraging the movement of Alawis from the coastal region into the cities, where they gained control over the financial and industrial sectors with the assistance of the regime. In Homs, the Alawi population went from zero to 25 percent in the last 40 years.³⁸ This rapid influx of Alawis drastically impacted the demographic makeup and pre-existing power structure within the city.

³⁴ Heiko Wimmen, "Syria's Path from Civic Uprising to Civil War", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2016

³⁵ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, Burying heads in Geneva sands: without dismantling the sectarian crux of Assad's rule, Syria peace talks are unlikely to usher in stability. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit (Ed.)* Berlin, 2015

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Wimmen, Syria's Path

³⁸ Ibid.

Historically, Homs has been the seat of some of Syria's most influential military institutions, and for many in Homs, joining the military can be a method of obtaining job security and a regular income.³⁹ However, despite the fact that the vast majority of the military is made up of Sunnis, positions of authority were, and are today, overwhelmingly awarded to Alawis.⁴⁰ As the Alawi population in the city grew, demand for housing increased. Housing was seized and given to many of the military elite, resulting in the development of high numbers of illegal and informal housing, primarily occupied by poor Sunnis.⁴¹

The Assad regime used sectarianism very carefully, as a tool for consolidating and maintaining power. The history of sectarianism in Syria is not so much about the existence of “ancient hatreds and rivalries” as it was about economics.⁴² Sectarianism was a strategy by which the minority population could gain and hold on to power—both political and economic—over a majority population. By building up the Alawi community, and select members of the Sunni elite, the regime achieved this, to the detriment of the lower class Sunni population.⁴³ In addition to being provided positions of power, the Alawi population was also shielded from periods of economic distress by a system of political patronage that ensured they did not suffer from the same cuts to subsidies that drastically impacted the Sunni lower classes.⁴⁴ This system reaffirms Alawi dependence on the regime and contributes to their loyalty.

Conversely, the Sunni community, except for the few specially chosen elites, were largely excluded from the economic sphere under Hafez al-Assad and from the economic

³⁹ Aziz Nakkash, “The Alawite Dilemma in Homs: Survival, Solidarity, and the Making of a Community”, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, March 2013

⁴⁰ Kheder Khaddour, Kevin Mazur. “The Struggle for Syria's Regions”, *Middle East Report*, No. 269, STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA (Winter 2013)

⁴¹ Oweis, *Burying Heads*

⁴² Christopher Phillips, “Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria”, *Third World Quarterly*, 36:2, 2015 pg 357

⁴³ Benedetta Berti, Jonathan Paris, “Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War. *Strategic Assessment*, 16:4, January 2014

⁴⁴ Fabrice Balance, “The Alawi Community and the Syria Crisis”, *The Middle East Institute*, 14 May 2015

reforms that occurred under Bashar al-Assad, adding to their deteriorating economic status.⁴⁵

Thus, the Assad regime has employed sectarianism as a method of ensuring that wealth and power stay within the regime and among those loyal to it, to the exclusion of all others. In Homs, this historical application of sectarianism by the regime has led to the development of a population of poor Sunnis, many of whom live in informal housing in areas of the city that could have other economic benefits for the regime. Given this, the regime contrived a plan to remove this population to further their economic and political aims, thus engaging in demographic engineering.

The Homs Dream Project and the Right of Return

Economic reforms in the early 2000's in Syria opened the door for "the rapid expansion of a modern business sector" including finance, services, and real estate.⁴⁶ There was a desire in Syria to develop a luxury goods and services market to compete with the one found in Beirut, a city well-known for its European-style luxury. In Homs, this desire for development and business expansion took the form of an ambitious real estate development project known as the Homs Dream.⁴⁷ In 2007, former Governor Iyad Gazal, announced the impending implementation of a plan that would raze several neighborhoods in the city center to make way for the construction of modern skyscrapers and high-end shopping malls.⁴⁸ This project, in partnership with the Qatari company Addiyar, was sanctioned by the regime with the intent of transforming Homs into a destination like Dubai, bringing in Gulf tourist money and investments.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶Shamel Azmeh, "The Uprising of the Marginalized: a socioeconomic perspective of the Syrian uprising", *LSE Middle East Center*, no.6, 2014

⁴⁷ No Return to Homs

⁴⁸ Sarah Najm Aldeen, "In Homs, Assad accused of using military for urban planning scheme", *News Deeply, Syria Deeply*. 2 January 2018

⁴⁹Azmeh, Uprising of the marginalized

The neighborhoods targeted by this plan were primarily poor residential neighborhoods filled with informal housing and, by extension, mostly Sunni. Alawite neighborhoods were left untouched by the Homs Dream plan, leading to accusations that the goal of the project was to forcibly remove the blight of the poor Sunni populations of the city and force them out to make way for luxury development. The residents and business owners living in these neighborhoods were given few options regarding compensation for their losses, and businesses were often presented with offers far below market value.⁵⁰ Land seizures for the project began in 2009, but the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 prevented the full materialization of the Homs Dream. The Homs Dream project was at the heart of the demonstrations that took place in the early days of the conflict in Homs, as demonstrators accused the regime of trying to change the demographics of the city to force out the poor, Sunni population while sparing Alawite neighborhoods.

Initially, it seemed that the regime would comply with their demands to halt the project, as Assad ordered the removal of Iyad Gazal in 2011.⁵¹ Soon, however, the demonstrations turned violent and the regime initiated a full-scale military campaign against the opposition forces in the city. Security forces cordoned off neighborhoods, and the regime began heavily bombarding certain neighborhoods in the city. Ultimately, many of the same neighborhoods targeted for destruction by the Homs Dream project were those targeted by the regime during the conflict. In August 2015, the regime announced through the state-run media network that the destroyed neighborhoods in Homs would be rebuilt according to the Homs Dream plan, which would prevent the return of their former residents, the majority of whom had fled.⁵² It was able to do this through the application of Decree 66, which entered into law in 2012 and gave the

⁵⁰Aldeen, News Deeply, Syria Deeply

⁵¹Joseph Daher, "Decree 66 and the Impact of its National Expansion", *The Atlantic Council*, 7 March 2018

⁵²No Return to Homs

government the right to “redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas and replace them with modern housing.”⁵³ This housing, built at the cost of four billion dollars, is not intended for the return of the previous neighborhood residents as they would no longer be able to afford to live there. In short, the implementation of Decree 66 is simply an extension of the Homs Dream plan.

In addition to this, other measures were passed to prevent the return of the Sunni populations to these neighborhoods, as well as throughout the city. In October of 2017, Law 33 was passed which dealt with the legal hurdles a returning refugee would have to face to reclaim their property.⁵⁴ The law stipulates that if a person has their original deed or the deed has been digitized, they will be issued a new deed to their property. However, digitization of property records was only in the beginning stages in Syria as the conflict broke out, and many land registries were destroyed in the conflict, resulting in the loss of an untold number of deeds. If a person is not in possession of their original deed, which many are not, they must appear before a judge to present a claim to the property. They can then provide other paperwork, such as utility bills, or witness testimony stipulating that they were, in fact, a resident of that property. However, there is only a 15-day window in which to present your claim to the judge after it has been announced that hearing will be held for that particular neighborhood in the city. If that 15-day period expires, a claim can be made within the next five years, and after that for 15 years but only for compensation, not ownership.

While on the surface this law seems to create a complex, but doable, channel to regaining property, it is essentially nullified by the issuance of a communique from the Syrian security agency stipulating that Syrians cannot hire an attorney, or sign over power of attorney, for the purpose of handling a property claim. Furthermore, all Syrians outside of the county, and any

⁵³ Daher, Atlantic Council

⁵⁴ Mohammad Al Abdallah, Executive Director, Syria Justice and Accountability Center, interview with the authors.

suspected of having been part of the opposition, are prohibited from hiring an attorney for any reason. In combination with the complex legal process to assert one's property rights, it has become almost impossible for those in Syria to reclaim their property after fleeing the war. The Homs Dream plan was a project of demographic engineering to remove an undesirable population from the city while maintaining desirable populations. This population, due to decades of systematic oppression and the selective advancement of the Alawite minority, was almost entirely poor Sunnis. The regime took advantage of the instability of the civil war to destroy the neighborhoods it had already slated for destruction, and force out those residents through violence and fear. After having accomplished this, the regime has put measures in place to ensure that Sunni residents will be unable to return to their homes, preparing instead for the construction and development initially laid out by the Homs Dream.

Financial and Industrial Importance of Homs

Homs is the third largest city in Syria and a major center for industry, oil, agriculture, and transportation. The city holds significant interest for the regime for these reasons, as it contributes greatly to the economy of the country overall. One example is the city's contribution to the petro-economy of Syria. Although Syria is a relatively small oil producer, accounting for just 0.5 percent of global oil production prior to the start of the conflict in 2011, oil revenues make up a large part of the Syrian economy.⁵⁵ According to the International Monetary Fund, oil profits accounted for 25.1 percent of the state's revenue and were anticipated to generate 3.2 billion dollars for the state before the outbreak of the civil war.⁵⁶ The country's largest oil refinery, owned by the state, is located just outside Homs and was capable of producing 120,000

⁵⁵ "Factbox: Syria's energy sector", *Reuters*, 14 August 2011

⁵⁶ Syrian Arab Republic: Staff Report for the 2009 Article IV Consultation, *International Monetary Fund*, IMF Country Report 10:86, March 2010

barrels per day before it sustained damage during the conflict.⁵⁷ This refinery is crucial to the regime, as the state relies on oil and natural gas revenues to pay down government debt.⁵⁸

In addition to oil refining, Homs is the location of several important industrial sites. Industrial production made up 27.3 percent of Syrian GDP in 2010 and relied heavily on phosphate processing and fertilizer production.⁵⁹ Syria is the fifth largest producer of phosphate rock in the world, much of which was processed into fertilizer in several plants in Homs.⁶⁰ Sulfur, a byproduct of oil refining, is a part of this production process and is processed through a sulfur plant just outside the city. Through this process, the oil refinery and fertilizer plants in the city are linked and require the continued production of the other. The General Fertilizer Company is the state-owned enterprise that controls the superphosphate fertilizer production in Homs, which produces hundreds of tons of fertilizer per day and supplied the fertilizer needs for the surrounding agriculture.⁶¹ Additionally, the state owns and operates a sugar refinery located in the north of the city.⁶² This sugar mill is one of only four in the country, another of which is owned by the family of First Lady Asma al-Assad.⁶³

Prior to the conflict, agriculture provided around 21 percent of Syria's GDP and was critical to the state's economic development goals. The regime wanted to increase agricultural self-sufficiency and halt out-migration through increased agricultural development, in which Homs played an important role.⁶⁴ Homs is located along the Orontes River and the surrounding

⁵⁷ "Homs Oil Refinery", *Industry About: World Industrial Information*, 1 June 2014

⁵⁸ "Syrian officials say terrorists damaged refinery in Homs", *United Press International*, 25 November 2013

⁵⁹ "Syria", *The World Factbook*, *Central Intelligence Agency*

⁶⁰ Thomas Collelo, ed. *Syria: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, pg. 198

⁶¹ Manar al-Freih, Hazem Sabbagh. "Superphosphate fertilizer plant in Homs resumes production with daily capacity of 350 tons", *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 1 December 2017

⁶² Homs Sugar Refining Mills, *Industry About: World Industrial Information*, 28 June 2014

⁶³ "Syrian sugar refinery operating at 25 pct capacity", *Reuters*, 5 February 2013

⁶⁴ Collelo, *Syria: A Country Study*

land is rich and fertile, making it highly suitable for agriculture. Farmland just outside the city produces wheat, lentils, barley, cotton, and sugar beets, which are processed in the sugar refinery. Homs' fertilizer production provided for 60 percent of Syrian agricultural needs, much of which is in the area surrounding the city.⁶⁵ It is reasonable to assume that interruptions to the fertilizer production would also impact the surrounding agriculture, and therefore impact the regime's plans for agricultural expansion and economic development.

The geographic location of Homs has made it an important transportation hub for the country. Homs is located halfway between Damascus and Aleppo and provides the only natural gateway from the coast to the interior of the country. This is important not just for private transportation, but for the transport of goods from the interior of the country to its ports for export shipping. Two of Syria's major highways, the M1 and M5, run through Homs, the most important of which being the M5 as it connects the "backbone" of the country from Damascus to Aleppo.⁶⁶ The M1 is significant in that it connects Homs to Latakia, the location of Syria's main seaport. This motorway provides an important shipping route, with Homs acting as a base for the distribution of imported goods which are transported to Homs and then shipped through the large railway station located there. The railway in Homs connects to the major cities in the north and south of the country and extends into the interior.

After the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, the regime's financial and industrial interests in Syria were threatened and it was critical that the state maintain their control over the city. One way in which the regime could do this was through altering the demographics of the city. Removing the Sunni population of the city, which was disloyal to the regime, was an effort to strengthen the regime's political and economic power. The Sunni population was threatening the

⁶⁵ CIA World Factbook

⁶⁶ Ibid

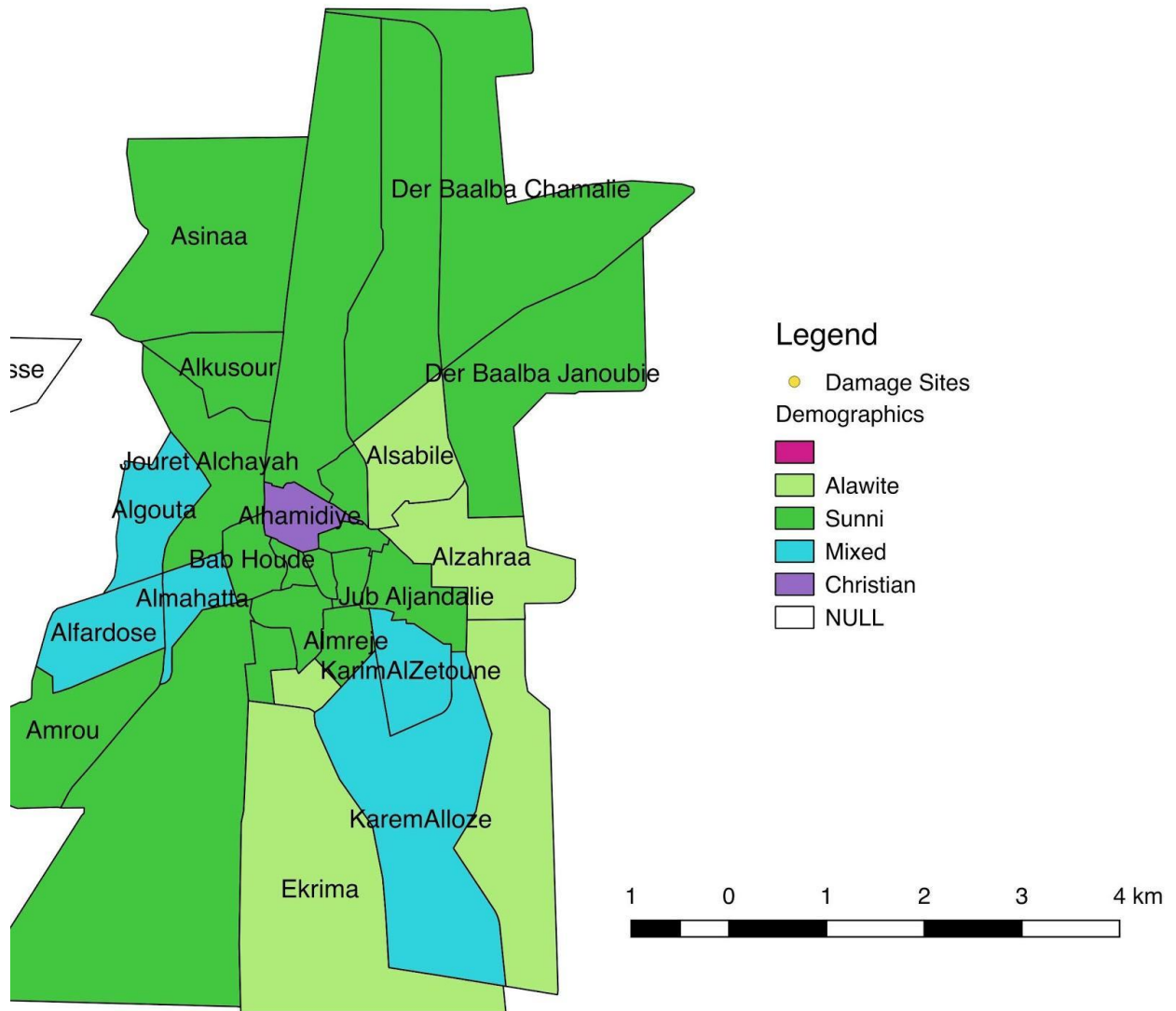
industry of Homs and therefore the economy of Syria, so the regime tried to remove the threat. By engaging in demographic engineering in Homs, the regime would be left with a population that was significantly more manageable in terms of loyalty and size. The regime already has plans to capitalize on the newly altered demographics of the city, with a recently signed agreement with Iran to build a new oil refinery in the city. The newly empty sections of the city will provide ample space for construction, and the inability of displaced citizens to return means that the regime will strengthen its industrial base with the support of regime loyalists and non-dissenters.

Findings and Analysis

Mapping the Data

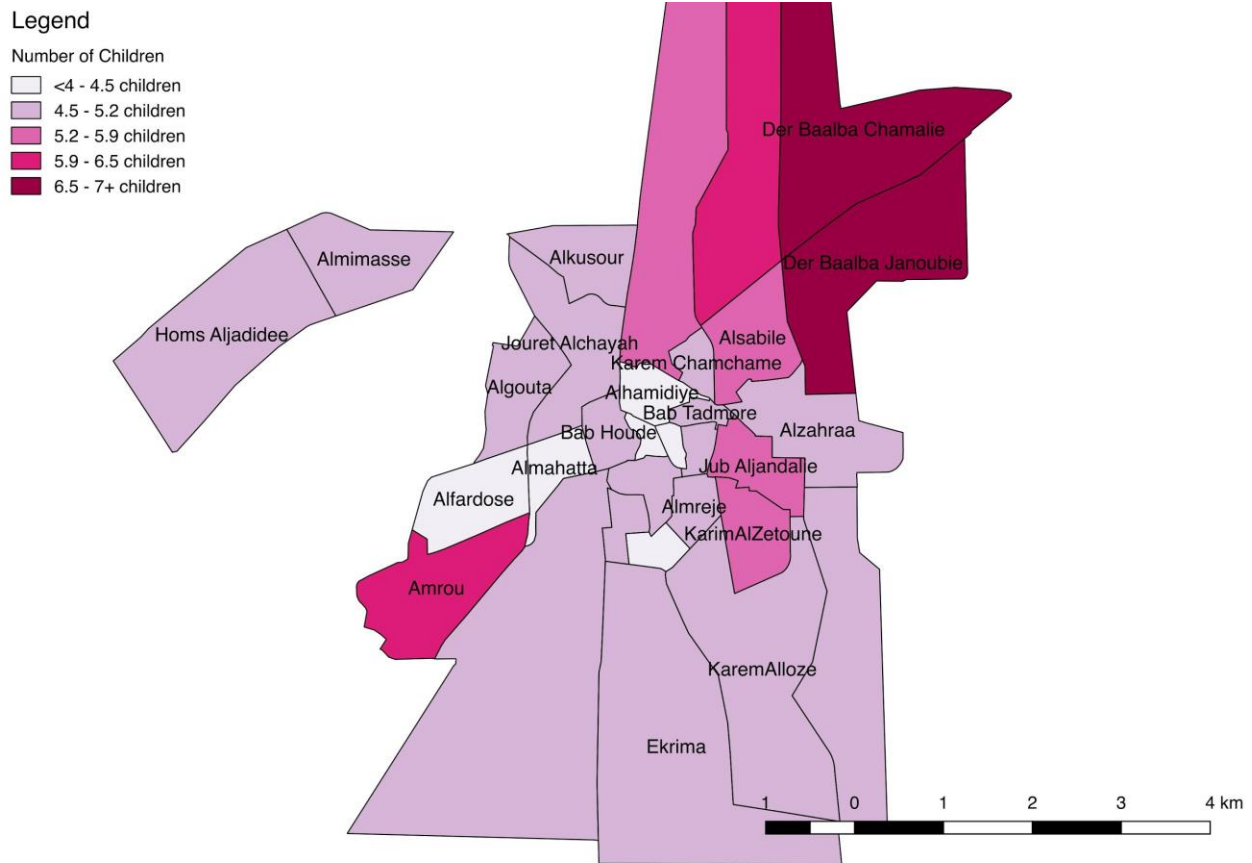
In mapping the data collected from neighborhoods across Homs during the conflict, three trends become apparent. First, the regime created a pattern of violence reflective of the violence indicators in our dataset; namely, that protests that turned violent often led to a full-scale military campaign and the depopulation of the neighborhood. This pattern and its replication across different neighborhoods indicates the regime's intention to quickly and effectively re-capture the city and displace its inhabitants. Most Sunni areas in Homs were also the worst off socioeconomically. Figure 1 on the following page shows the demographic composition of Homs. Figure 2 shows each neighborhood's socioeconomic status, as seen by a larger family size and more children per family, indicating a poorer area.

Figure 1- Demographic map of Homs⁶⁷



⁶⁷ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018.

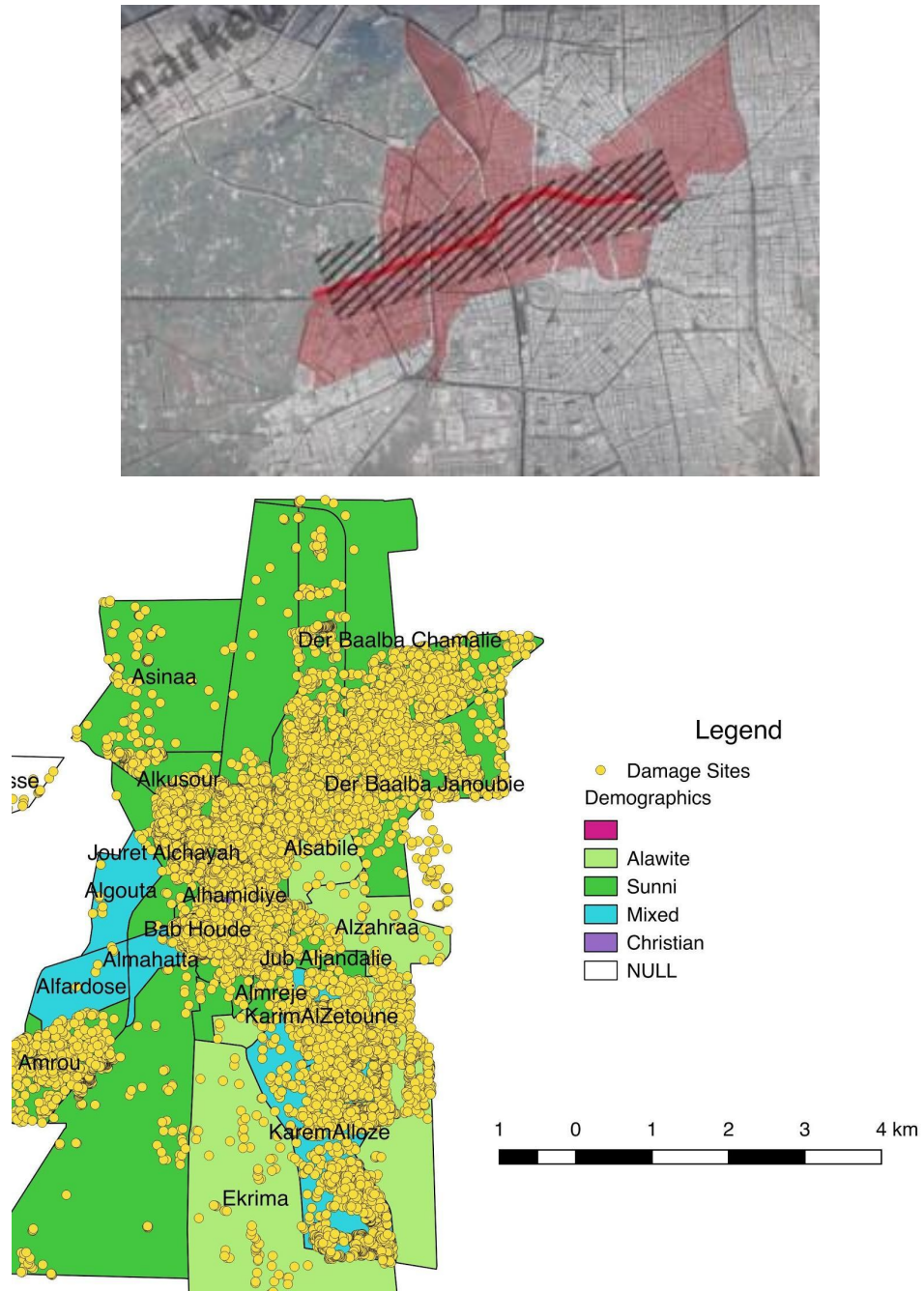
Figure 2- Map of Sunni and low socioeconomic neighborhoods by number of children⁶⁸



The second trend shows the overlap between neighborhoods targeted by the Homs Dream construction project prior to the conflict and the neighborhoods destroyed by violence. This trend not only reinforces the idea that the regime intentionally targeted Sunni neighborhoods, but also that its intention to displace Sunni residents existed prior to the war and was furthered by the conflict. One of the few maps of the intended Homs Dream project is shown in Figure 3.

⁶⁸ “Al-Nataij al-Ajmaliyeh li3dad al-Sukan wa al-Masakeen li3am 2004,” *Al Jamhuriyeh Al Arabiyeh Al Souriyeh*, 2004.

Figure 3- Map of Homs Dream neighborhoods and damage patterns during the conflict⁶⁹



⁶⁹Aldeen, News Deeply, Syria Deeply; Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, "Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria," 6 November 2018

The third trend points to a larger objective on behalf of the regime- to safeguard Homs' Alawite inhabitants. While not immune to violence, Alawite neighborhoods had considerably less damage and displacement, and little to no regime-led violence, compared to their Sunni counterparts. Furthermore, neighborhoods bordering Alawite areas were significantly impacted, suggesting an effort on the part of regime forces to protect Alawite populations and push away the Sunni threat.

To examine these trends, we will examine different neighborhoods within Homs that exemplify these patterns, analyzing map data and highlighting areas in which these trends are clearly observable. The patterns discussed here, however, are significant because they show a sustained pattern of regime-led violence against Sunni populations in Homs, not only during the conflict but also before and possibly after the violence has ended, suggesting that the Sunni population, rather than the opposition, was the intended target.

Trend #1: The Regime's Strategy of Violence

Beginning with violent protests in 2011, the government quickly adapted a pattern of violence towards opposition and largely Sunni neighborhoods. Moving from a starting point of violent protests, the government then cordoned off restive neighborhoods and carried out a military campaign of shelling and bombardment until regime forces could recapture and depopulate the neighborhood. This pattern was replicated across Homs in majority Sunni neighborhoods starting in 2011. Areas such as Bab Al Sibaa, Al Kusour, Amrou, and Al Khaldiye showed distinct and parallel trends and most had documented instances of each category of government-led violence discussed in our methodology section above. The destruction of these neighborhoods points to a longer-term strategy on the part of the regime past

the conflict years in which original residents of these neighborhoods face challenges returning to their homes after initially leaving. Thus, government recapture and depopulation of neighborhoods cannot be considered the endpoint of the conflict in Homs because government forces in several areas remain resistant to resettlement of displaced citizens.

Bab Al Sibaa

Bab Al Sibaa is a majority Sunni neighborhood in the heart of Homs city. In 2011, Bab Al Sibaa saw its first protests against the Assad regime and by mid-2012, the government had retaken control of the neighborhood and depopulated the area of residents. The first turn to violence in the neighborhood started with protester deaths- 17 killed by security forces in the March-September 2011 time frame.⁷⁰ As protests continued, in July of that year security forces began cordoning off the neighborhood, which entailed checkpoints monitoring entry and departure from the area and strict limits on resident movement.⁷¹ Figure 4 shows the incidents of violence in Bab Al Sibaa in 2011.

⁷⁰ “We Live as in War”

⁷¹ Ibid.

Figure 4- Bab Al Sibaa 2011⁷²

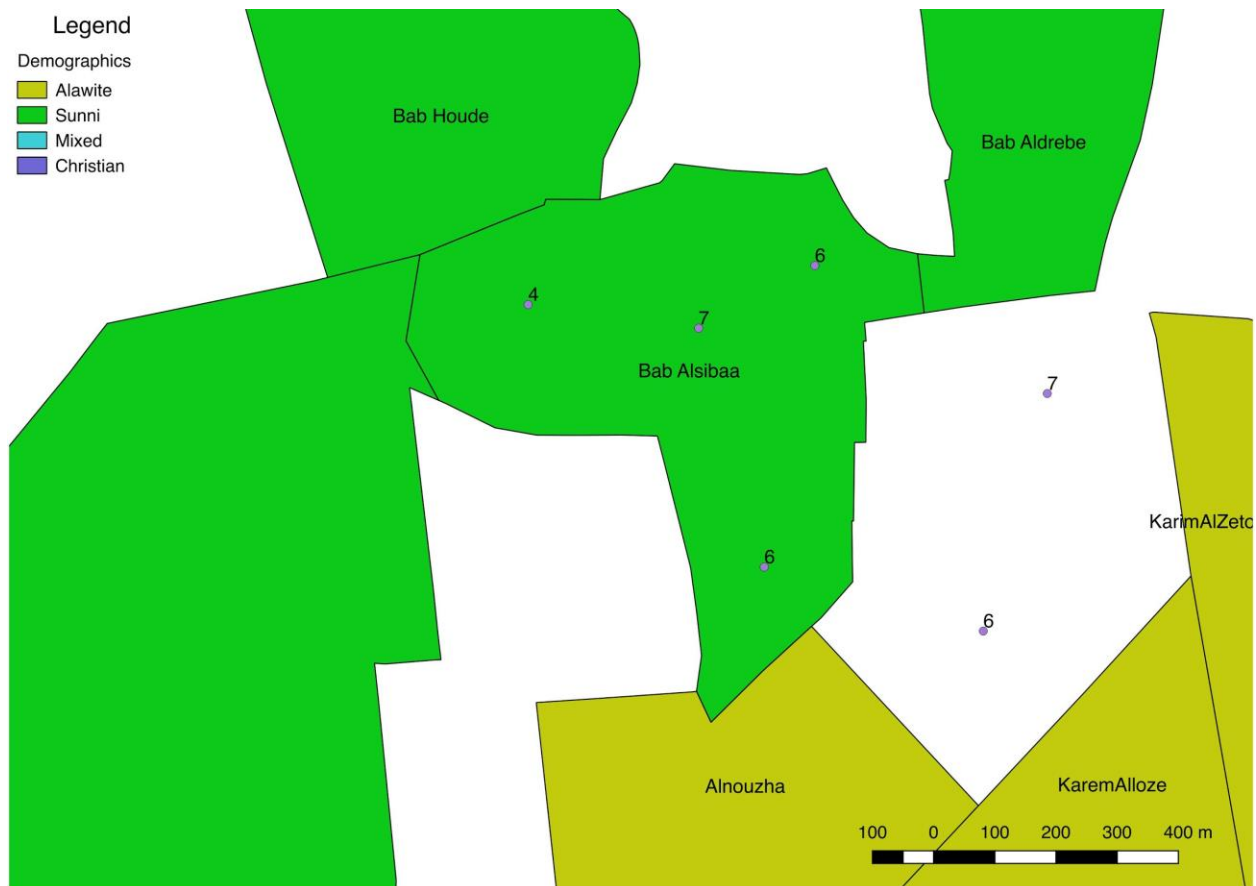


1	Protesters Killed
2	Civilian-Directed Violence
3	Siege
4	Military Campaign
5	Building Damage
6	Government Reclaims
7	Depopulation

⁷² Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; Sarah Timreck, "Syria Population Displacement Database"

In 2012, the government began its military campaign in the neighborhood, bombarding the area as early as February⁷³ and continuing to strike until the neighborhood had fallen under government control and was depopulated in June and July.⁷⁴ Figure 5 shows the incidents of violence in Bab Al Sibaa in 2012.

Figure 5- Bab Al Sibaa 2012⁷⁵



⁷³Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Angus McSwan, “Bombings, bombardments kill across Syria,” *Reuters*, 10 February 2012

⁷⁴ “No return to Homs”

⁷⁵ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*; Sarah Timreck, “Syria Population Displacement Database.”

1	Protesters Killed
2	Civilian-Directed Violence
3	Siege
4	Military Campaign
5	Building Damage
6	Government Reclaims
7	Depopulation

The government’s strategy, however, was not limited to retaking opposition areas during the conflict to quell the uprising. In November 2015, over three years since the government had won the battle for Bab Al Sibaa, residents reported being turned away by security forces and unable to enter their neighborhood.⁷⁶ While largely anecdotal, this nevertheless points to a regime strategy of not only retaking control but also keeping Sunni majority neighborhoods as a spoil of war.

Al Kusour

Another neighborhood showing a similar pattern is Al Kusour, located northwest of the city center. Al Kusour is also majority Sunni and surrounded by Sunni areas. Like Bab Al Sibaa, Al Kusour was hit by mortar and artillery shelling in June 2012⁷⁷ followed by a government-imposed siege beginning in July.⁷⁸ The siege lasted until May of 2013, when the neighborhood fell to government control.⁷⁹ Figure 6 shows Al Kusour in 2012 and 2013.

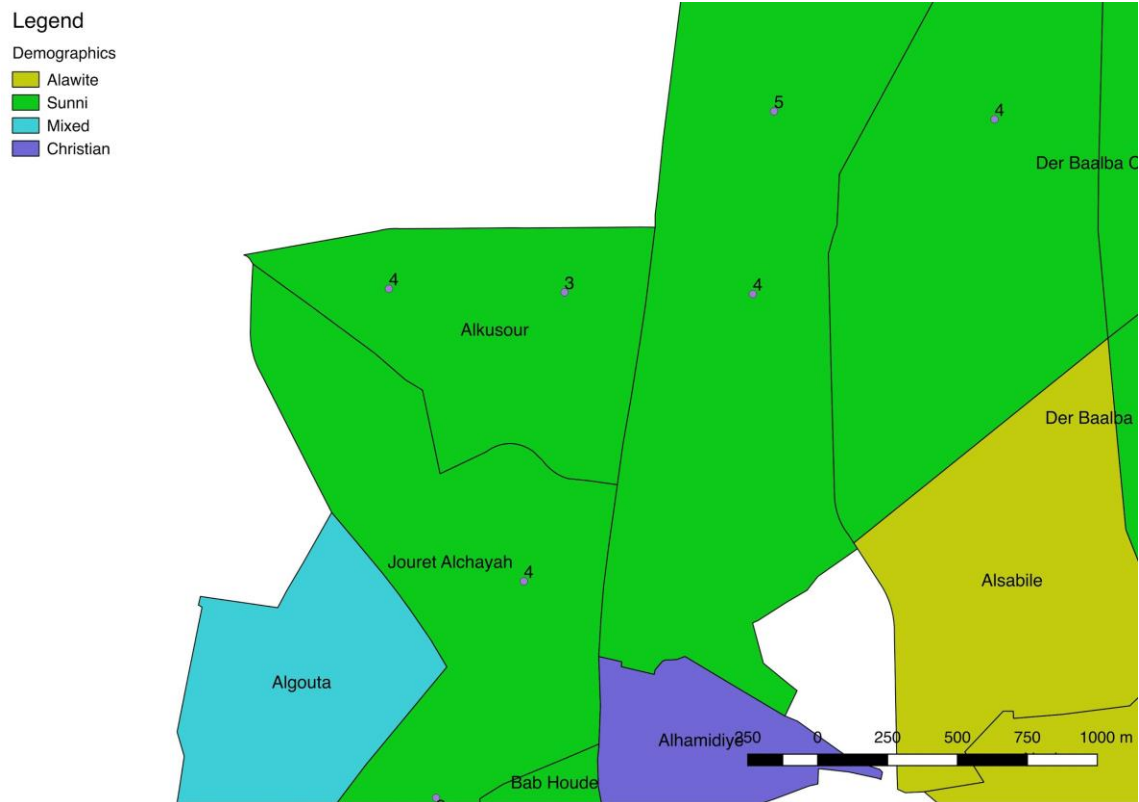
⁷⁶ Osama Abu Zeid and Samuel Kieke, “Returning residents of Homs reportedly turned away,” *Syria Direct*, 11 November 2015

⁷⁷ Dominic Evans, “UN suspends Syria monitoring as violence rages,” *Reuters*, 16 June 2012

⁷⁸ “No return to Homs”

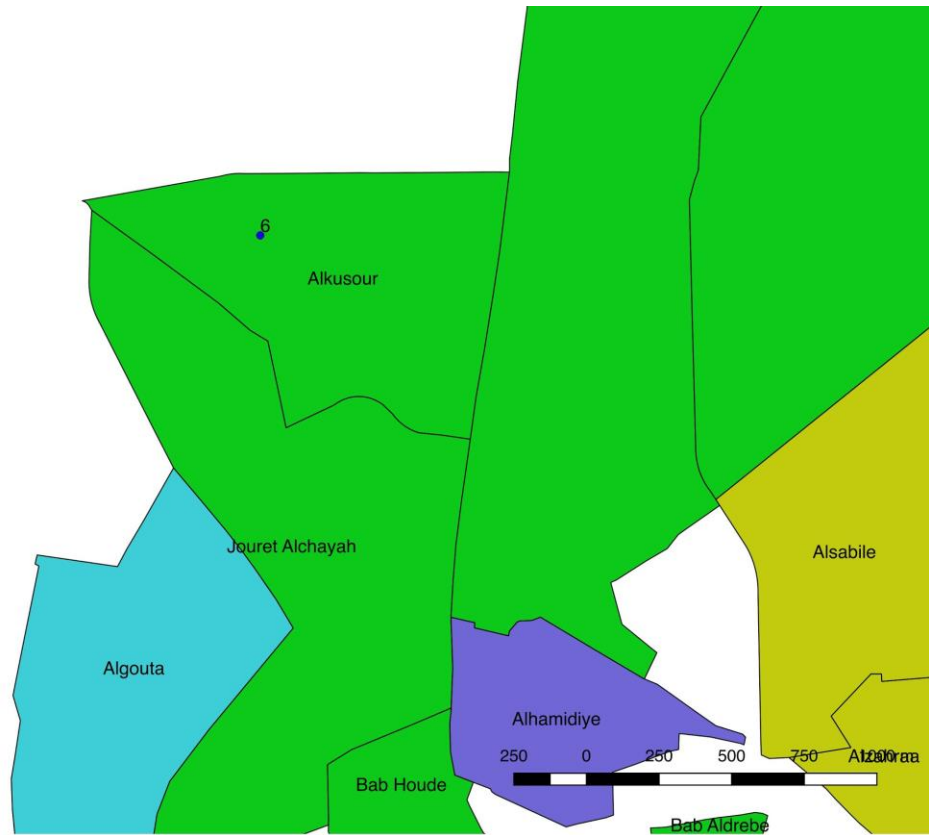
⁷⁹ Mohamed Rabie, ““The Siege is a slow death for the rebels and the civilians,”” *Syria Direct*, 21 November 2013

Figure 6- Al Kusour 2012 and 2013⁸⁰



⁸⁰ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; Sarah Timreck, "Syria Population Displacement Database"

Legend
 Demographics
 Alawite
 Sunni
 Mixed
 Christian



1	Protesters Killed
2	Civilian-Directed Violence
3	Siege
4	Military Campaign
5	Building Damage
6	Government Reclaims
7	Depopulation

Both Al Kusour and Bab Al Sibaa show a similar pattern not only in the trend of violence leading to government recapture but also the speed with which the government worked to reclaim the area. From the start of protests until the government took control, the conflict in Bab Al Sibaa lasted 15 months, only five of which included the military campaign. Likewise in Al Kusour, bombardment and siege of the neighborhood lasted 11 months until it finally

capitulated. The short, intense bouts of violence witnessed in both neighborhoods suggest the Assad regime's blitzkrieg-like strategy to overwhelm the population with force and take territory as rapidly as possible.

As in the case of Bab Al Sibaa, the fighting and contestation of neighborhoods in Homs continued after government recapture. In 2015, Shia militiamen stormed the Al Kusour area, harassing Sunni citizens and taking their money and identity papers.⁸¹ While these militia were not necessarily associated with regime forces, their use of intimidation and, more significantly, theft of Sunni identity forms points to a virulent sectarianism that could deter Sunnis from staying in the neighborhood or deny them of the evidence they need to prove their residency. This again indicates a pattern that not only delineated the types of violence employed by the Assad regime during the conflict in Homs but also served to keep original Sunni residents from returning in the future.

Amrou

A hotbed of oppositional activity during the early months of protest, Amrou followed along the same continuum of violence leading to regime control, albeit considerably faster; Figure 7 shows its progression in a similar fashion to Bab Al Sibaa and Al Kusour.

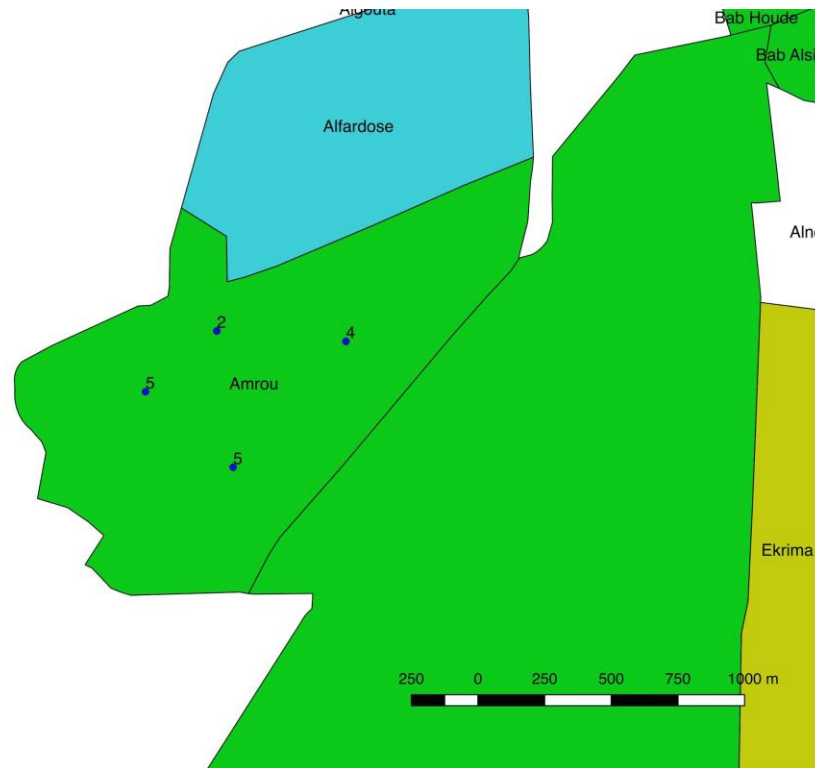
⁸¹ "Syria militiamen steal identity papers and money from merchants in Soq al-Hal in the city of Homs," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 6 September 2015

Figure 7- Amrou 2011-2013⁸²



⁸² Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; Sarah Timreck, "Syria Population Displacement Database."

Legend
 Demographics
 Alawite
 Sunni
 Mixed
 Christian



1	Protesters Killed
2	Civilian-Directed Violence
3	Siege
4	Military Campaign
5	Building Damage
6	Government Reclaims
7	Depopulation

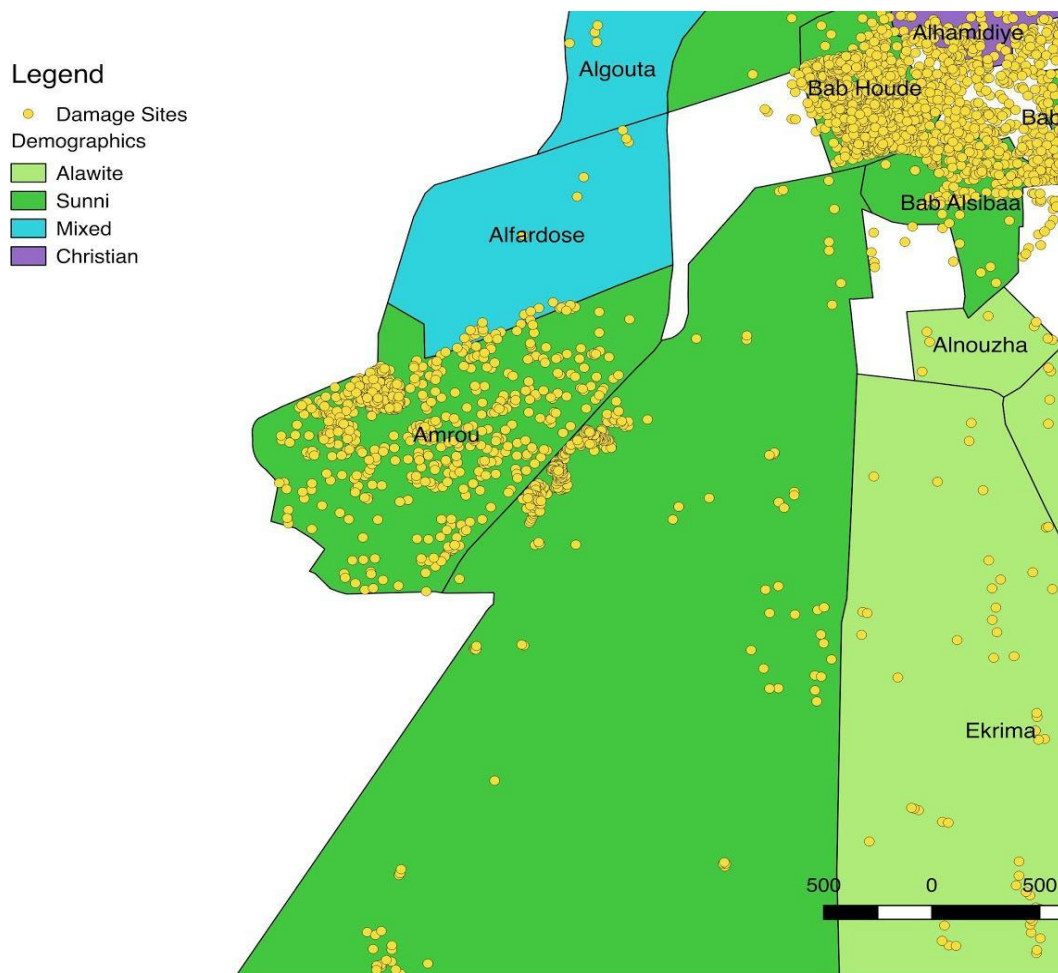
A Sunni majority neighborhood held by the opposition during the conflict, Amrou witnessed deadly protests in 2011⁸³ which led to the first government military campaign in the country in February 2012.⁸⁴ Fighting in the neighborhood led to over 200 deaths and the displacement of 50-60,000 people before government regained control of the neighborhood the

⁸³ “We Live as in War”

⁸⁴ “No Return to Homs”

following month.⁸⁵ While highlighting the government’s strategy of military campaign and depopulation, Amrou also suffered significant building damage as a result of the conflict. In one month alone, 600 buildings were damaged during the battle, 126 of them were considered severe, including a school building, and 213 of them counted as totally destroyed.⁸⁶ Figure 8 shows the destruction in Amrou during the conflict.

Figure 8- Map of Amrou neighborhood destruction⁸⁷



⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ UNITAR, “Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria”

⁸⁷ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*; UNITAR, “Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria,” 6 November 2018

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the lack of destruction surrounding the Amrou neighborhood. Alfarose, directly adjacent to Amrou, was a mixed Sunni and Alawite neighborhood while both Algouta and Almahatta host military outposts. While the Assad regime would be sure to avoid its own military installations, it is perhaps due to Amrou's Sunni majority that made it a target during the conflict.

Along with these three neighborhoods, other neighborhoods within Homs show a similar correlation and pattern of regime-led violence from protest to bombardment and siege to recapture and depopulation.

Trend #2: Homs Dream Neighborhoods are Destroyed

The second trend shows that many neighborhoods that were destroyed during the conflict, beyond being opposition-held or Sunni majority, were also targeted for demolition and renovation through the Homs Dream project prior to the conflict years. As seen in Figure 9, the highlighted neighborhoods are those that were areas intended for destruction through the Homs Dream, including neighborhoods in the city center and areas west of the center.⁸⁸ These neighborhoods correlate with several neighborhoods also badly damaged during the conflict, suggesting the continuation of a policy specifically designed to displace specific segments of the population in Homs- namely, poor Sunnis.

⁸⁸Aldeen, News Deeply, Syria Deeply

Figure 9- Neighborhoods targeted by the proposed Homs Dream project⁸⁹



Al Khaldiye

Al Khaldiye, a Sunni majority neighborhood targeted by the Homs Dream, was also a victim of massive damage and violence during the conflict.⁹⁰ After protests turned violent with 36 protesters killed by security forces during the March- September 2011 time frame, security forces cordoned off the neighborhood in a July in a similar fashion to Bab Al Sibaa.⁹¹ Following the siege, the military campaign in the neighborhood lasted from February 2012⁹² until the government reclaimed the neighborhood in July 2013.⁹³ Violence in Al Khaldiye also resulted in destruction of the Khaled bin al-Waleed mosque, a significant religious structure for Sunnis and an important historical monument in Homs.⁹⁴

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰ "Syria: a tale of three cities"

⁹¹"We Live as in War"

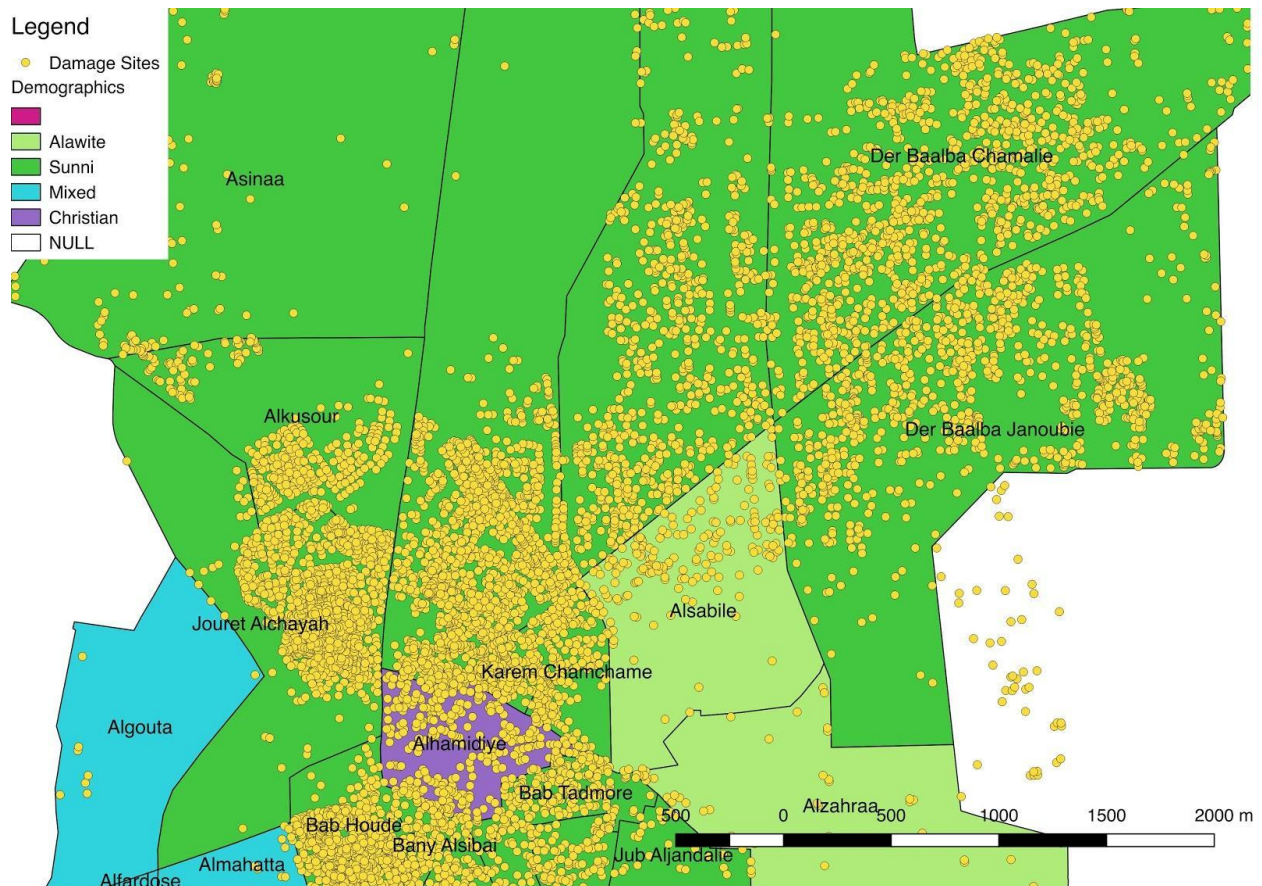
⁹²Alistar Lyon, "Syria referendum goes ahead amid military onslaught," *Reuters*, 25 February 2012,

⁹³Anchal Vohra, "Back Home in Homs: Challenges Facing Returnees to Syria," *News Deeply*, 9 November 2017

⁹⁴ "13th-century mosque hit in Homs 5-14-13," *Syria Direct*, 14 May 2013

The building damage was also considerable. Figure 10 shows the damage in Al Khaldiye. The UN documented 1,256 instances of building damage in the neighborhood. While two mosques, including the historical Khaled bin al-Waleed mosque; six schools; and a hospital were among buildings damaged, 327 buildings overall were severely damaged and 127 were destroyed.⁹⁵ This suggests that targets were both civilian and sectarian in nature and that the widespread destruction could make way for future demolition in the spirit of the Homs Dream.

Figure 10- Map of Al Khaldiye neighborhood destruction⁹⁶



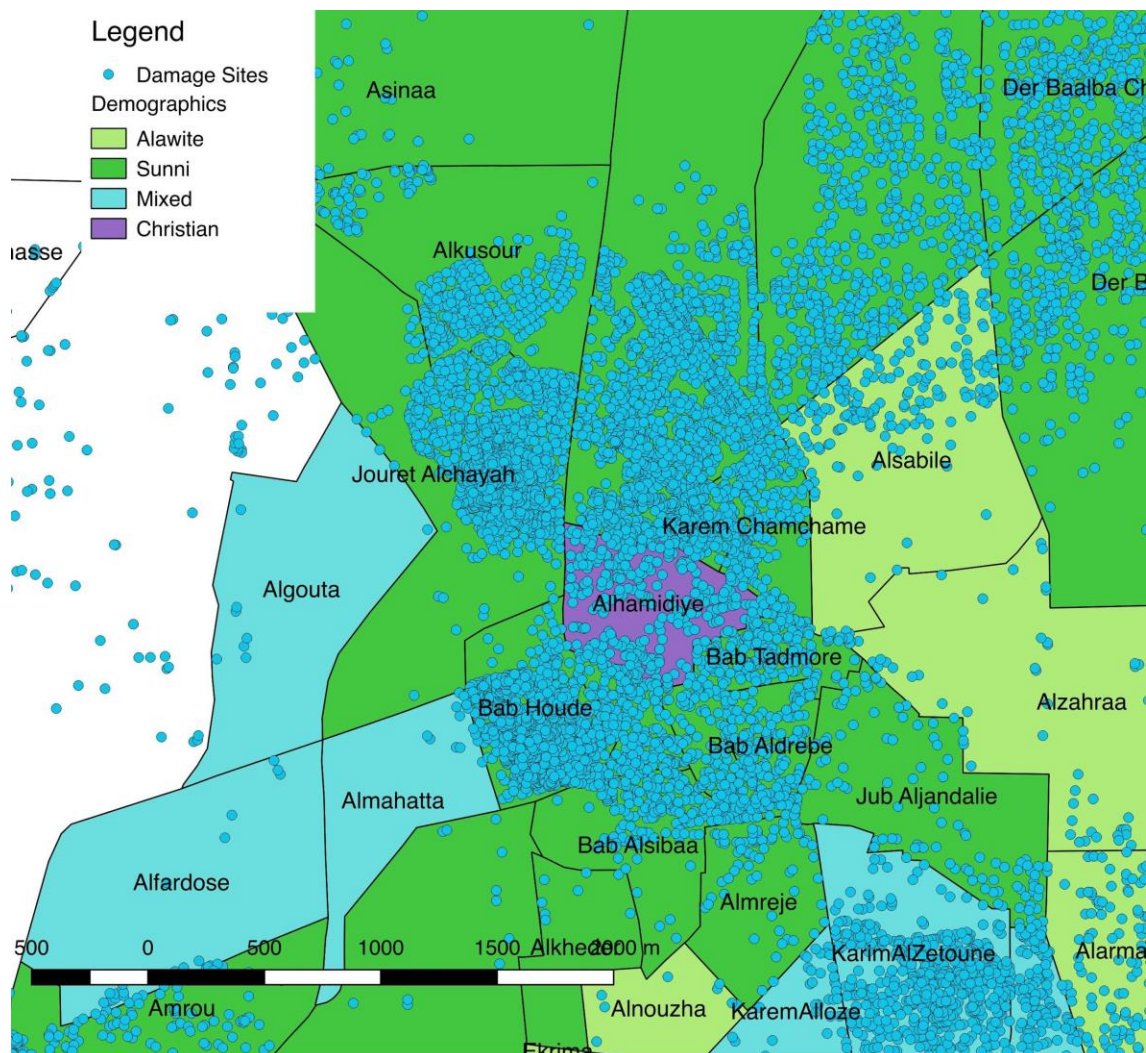
⁹⁵ UNITAR, “Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria”

⁹⁶ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*; UNITAR, “Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria”

City Center

The city center was also targeted for destruction during the Homs Dream, as the amalgamation of neighborhoods in the central area was the commercial hub intended for renovation. Three neighborhoods in particular—Bab Al Drebe, Bab Houde, and Bab Tadmore, were especially hard hit by the violence. Figure 11 shows the three neighborhoods and damage sites.

Figure 11- Map of City Center destruction⁹⁷



⁹⁷ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, "Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria"

Bab Tadmor and Bab Al Drebe had 171 and 209 incidents of building damage respectively. Both also had mosques severely damaged during the conflict.⁹⁸ The greater damages, however, were in Bab Houde. With a total of 829 of damage sites, 193 sites were destroyed and 353 were severely damaged, including 15 markets, a mosque, and a school.⁹⁹ What is interesting about Bab Houde is the number of market sites hit, as markets are often areas of civilian congregation and could cause severe impact on human lives, further disincentivizing people from gathering in public spaces or even staying in the neighborhood. The destruction of the city center, an area designated for commercial activity, was a logical target for regime forces during the conflict as its destruction could pave the way for renovation as planned by the Homs Dream after the conflict ends.

These neighborhoods, all targeted by the Homs Dream prior to the outbreak of conflict, show a concerted effort on the part of regime forces to execute its pre-war plan under the guise of conflict and rooting out the opposition. The areas under the microscope of government demolition before the war continued to serve as regime targets, suggesting a continuation of regime-led and purposeful displacement of specific neighborhoods and specifically Sunni residents.

Trend #3: Government Focus on Sunni Neighborhoods Bordering Alawite Neighborhoods

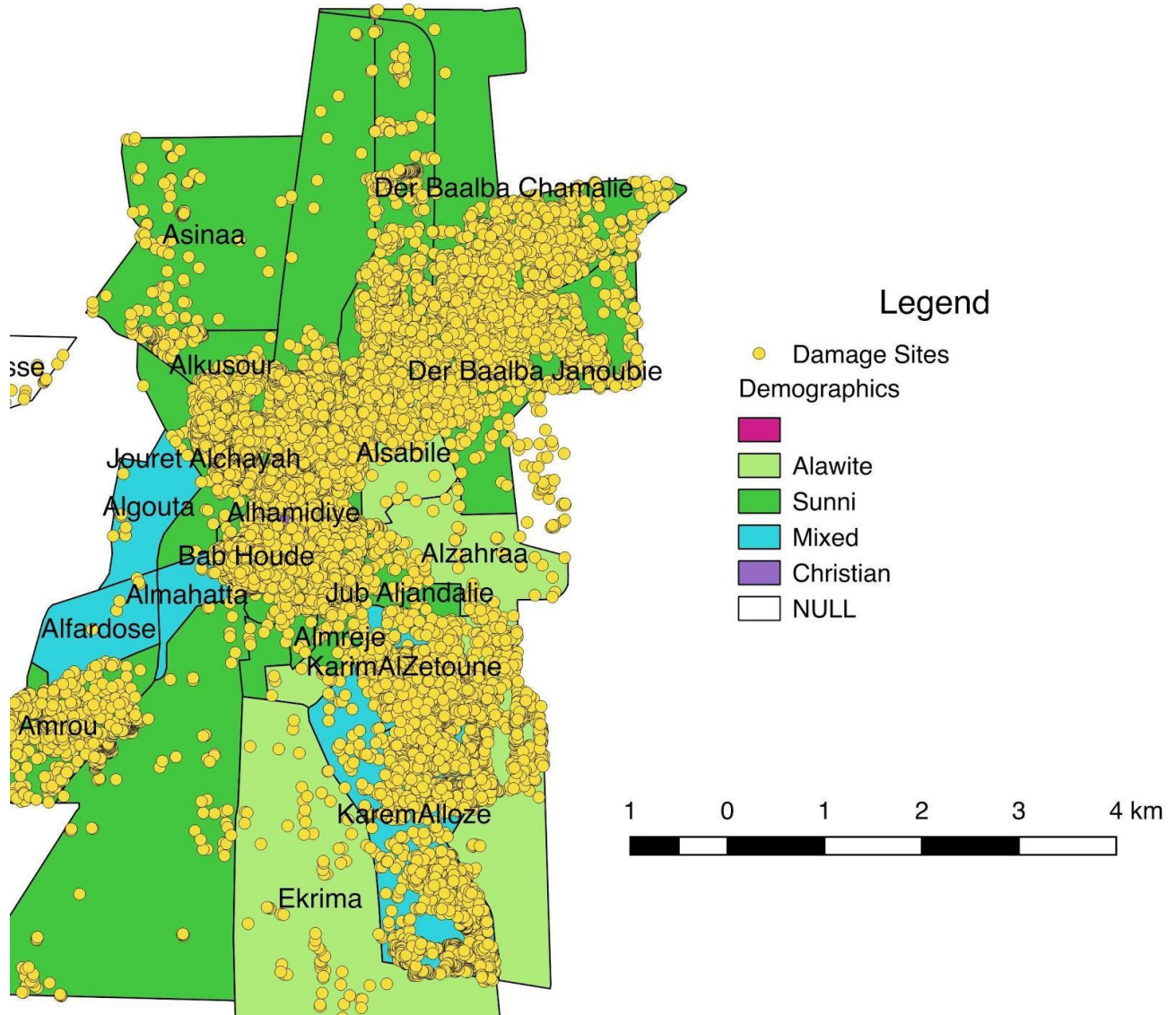
While Sunni neighborhoods in Homs were disproportionately targeted for destruction, those surrounding or adjacent to majority Alawite neighborhoods often felt additional pressure from regime forces. This focus on Sunni neighborhoods bordering Alawites reveals the desire on the part of the regime not only to reclaim opposition-held areas in Homs, but also to protect one

⁹⁸ UNITAR, “Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

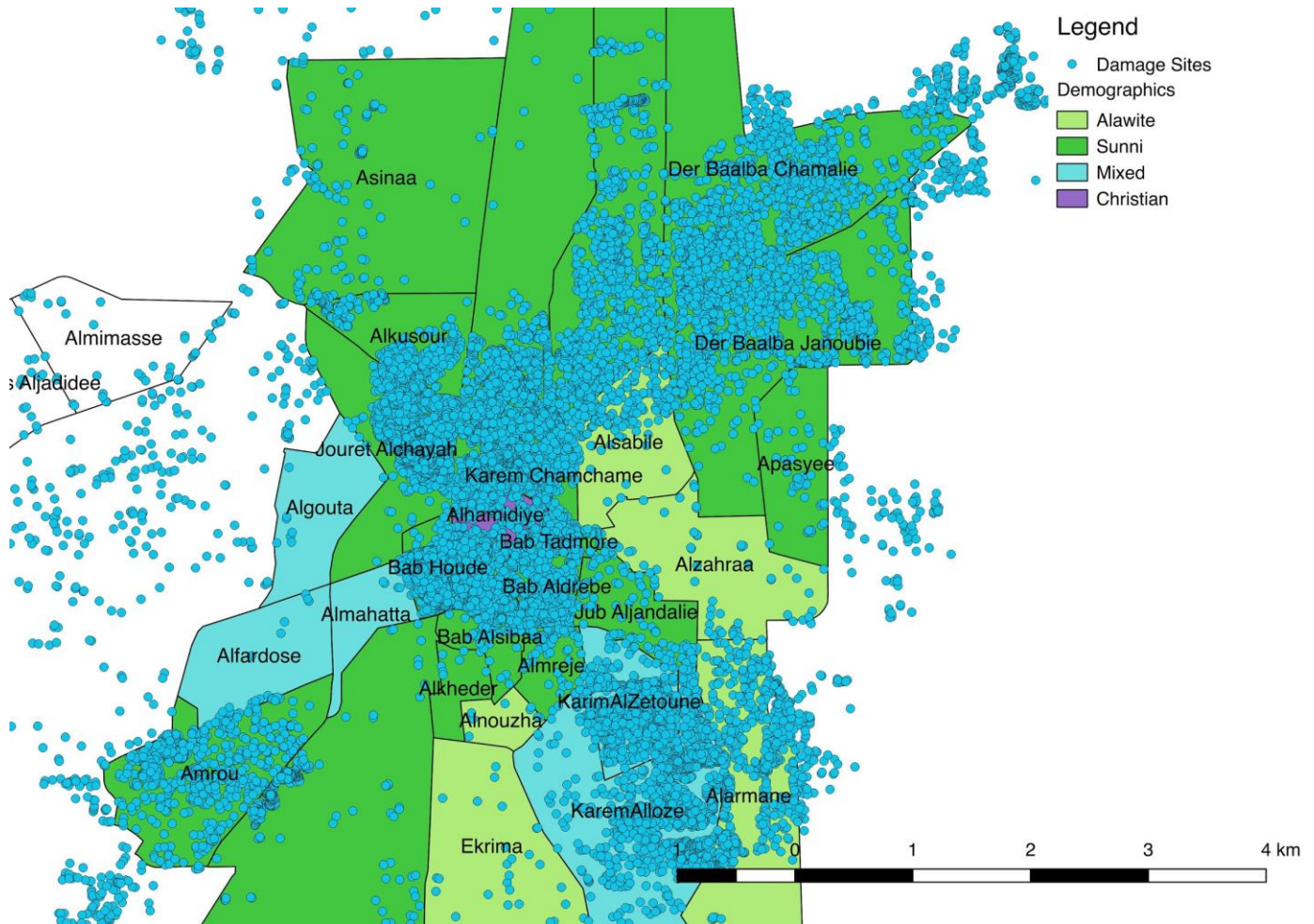
of its most loyal social bases. As Figure 12 shows, neighborhood destruction across Homs took a particular pattern, looping from the northeastern corner of the city around the center and down to the southeast. This created a destruction corridor, as detailed in Figure 13, which runs through the Sunni neighborhoods in the area that border the Alawite majority.

Figure 12- Map of generalized neighborhood destruction¹⁰⁰



¹⁰⁰ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, "Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria"

Figure 13- Map of a “destruction corridor” running through Sunni neighborhoods adjacent to majority Alawite neighborhoods¹⁰¹



Beyond simply targeting Sunni and opposition areas during the conflict, the regime made a concerted effort to protect and shield Alawites from the violence. And while some demographically mixed areas still experienced high levels of violence, regime forces nevertheless hoped to preserve their loyalist base and keep their homes intact.

¹⁰¹ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, “Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria”

The Sunni Neighborhoods

The neighborhoods adjacent to Alawite areas from the northeast of Homs to the southeast were hit disproportionately hard by the conflict. Der Baalba Chamalie, located in the northeast of Homs, saw rapid government take over and control in 2012, when government forces raided the area and killed 200 civilians in April,¹⁰² by June had depopulated the area,¹⁰³ and by December had taken full control of the neighborhood.¹⁰⁴ Der Baalba Chamalie also had one of the highest building damage in the city with 1106 buildings hit, including 2 schools and over 350 severely damaged.

Another severely hit neighborhood, Albayadae, is also in the northeast of the city and suffered bombardment¹⁰⁵ before government depopulation and control in June 2012.¹⁰⁶ It had 824 of its buildings hit, almost half of them destroyed or severely damaged and with four schools, a mosque, and seven industrial facilities also impacted.

Finally, Bab Al Sibaa, directly under the city center area which was similarly hard hit, had protests that turned deadly in 2011¹⁰⁷ and were quickly followed by a siege¹⁰⁸ of the neighborhood and government bombardment into 2012.¹⁰⁹ The government then depopulated and reclaimed the area.¹¹⁰ While hit less than its counterparts, with only 193 buildings damaged, as of 2015 residents were unable to return home, suggesting a desire by the regime to create a safe zone around Alawite areas.¹¹¹ Figure 14 shows the destruction in these neighborhoods.

¹⁰² “The Society’s Holocaust,” *Syrian Network for Human Rights*, 16 June 2015

¹⁰³ “No return to Homs”

¹⁰⁴ “Homs: Syrian revolution fallen ‘capital,’” *BBC*, 9 December 2015

¹⁰⁵ “Shelling intensifies in Syria Homs, 11 dead: opposition,” *Reuters*, 17 June 2012

¹⁰⁶ “No return to Homs”

¹⁰⁷ “We Live as in War”

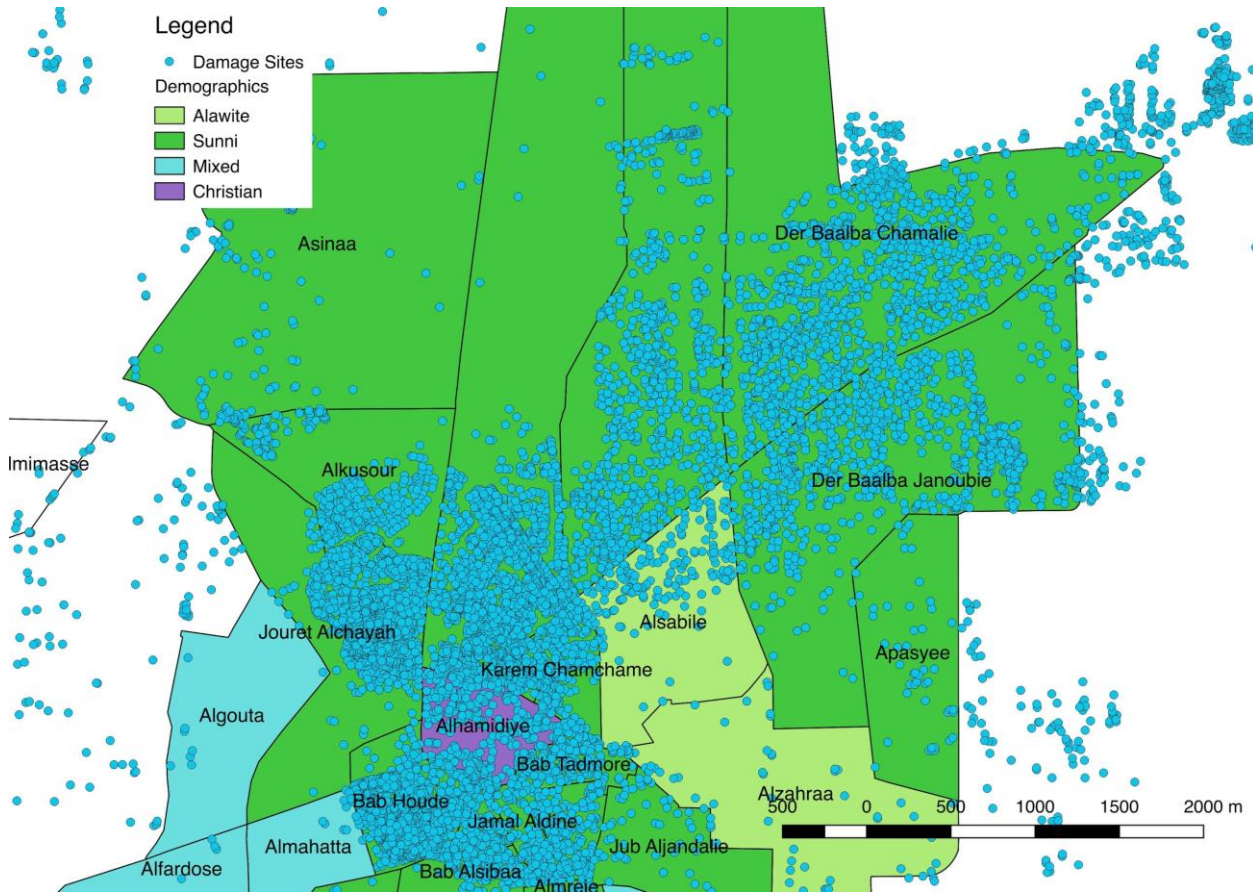
¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Angus McSwan, “Bombings, bombardments kill across Syria,” *Reuters*

¹¹⁰ ““No return to Homs: a case study on demographic engineering in Syria”

¹¹¹ Anchal Vohra, “Back Home in Homs: Challenges Facing Returnees to Syria,” *News Deeply*, 9 November 2017

Figure 14- Map of destruction in the northeast and central parts of the city¹¹²



These neighborhoods, while Sunni, also neighbor the Alawite-heavy areas of the city and therefore were important to quickly recapture and reclaim. Thus, the destruction corridor outlined above neatly threads between Alawite areas, which were saved from the full force of the fighting as a loyal base to the Assad regime.

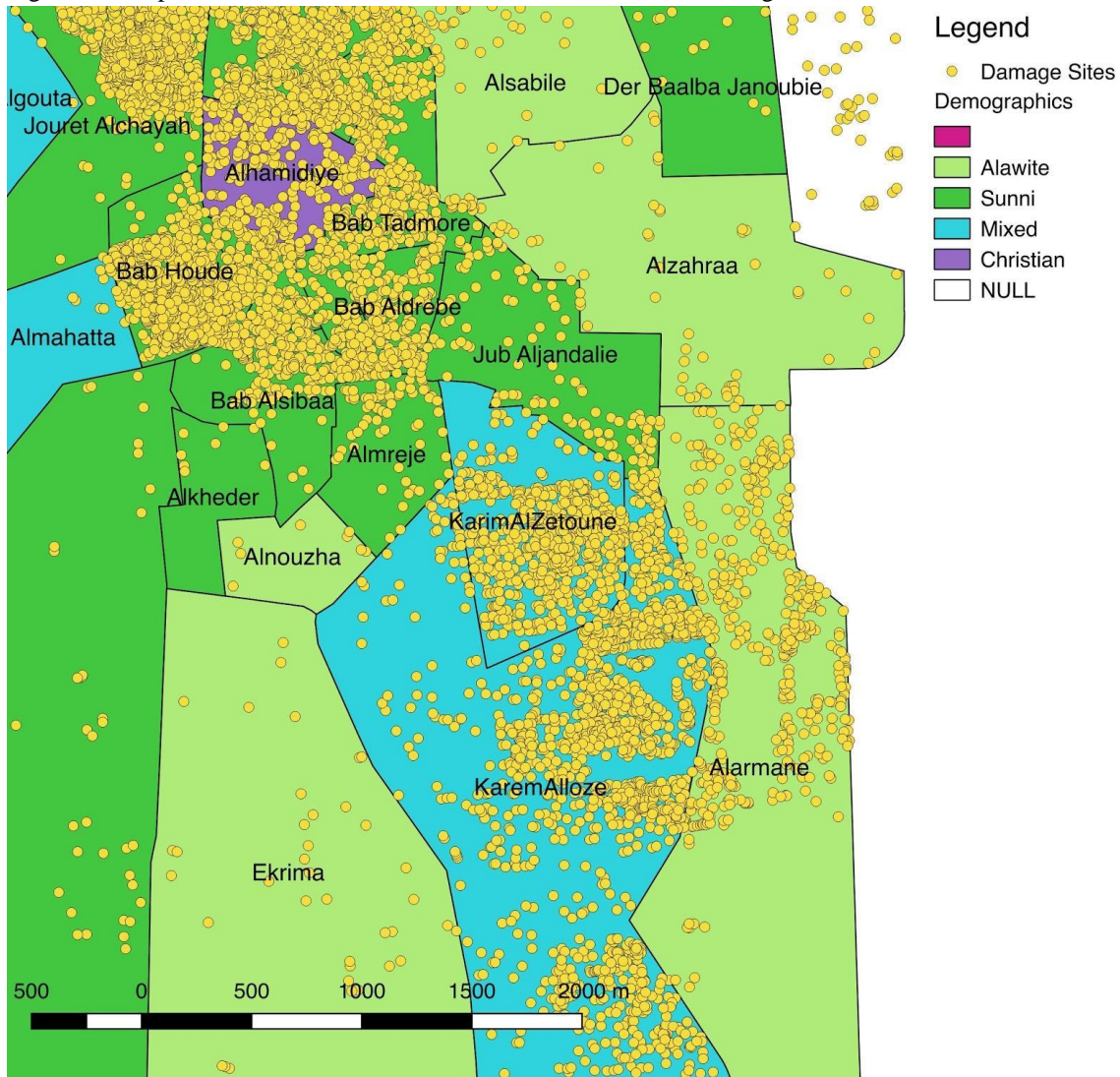
¹¹² Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, "Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria"

The Alawite Neighborhoods

While not completely spared from the fighting, Alawite neighborhoods witnessed considerably less destruction than their Sunni counterparts. Alawite neighborhoods registered some of the least amounts of building damage in Homs, and in the areas surrounding the “destruction corridor” this remained true. Al Zahraa had only 66 buildings damaged; Al Nouzha just 8. Both of these neighborhoods are majority Alawite and neighbor the areas in the center and southeast hardest hit by the conflict.

Ekrima had a higher rate of building damage with 103 total, but what is interesting is that seven of these buildings were “temporary structures” and five industrial facilities, perhaps pointing to alternative reasons for conflict in that specific area. This also reveals a limitation in the data set, as UNITAR records building damage regardless of perpetrator. Thus, it is likely that the attacks on this area were from the opposition and that these temporary structures might have been put in place as a protective measure for the Alawite residents. Alawite neighborhoods for the most part, however, saw far less violence and destruction than their Sunni counterparts as regime forces worked to protect their base and maintain their residency in the city. Figure 15 shows the three Alawite neighborhoods and their relative building damage.

Figure 15- Map of destruction in Ekrima, Al Zahraa, and Al Nouzha neighborhoods¹¹³



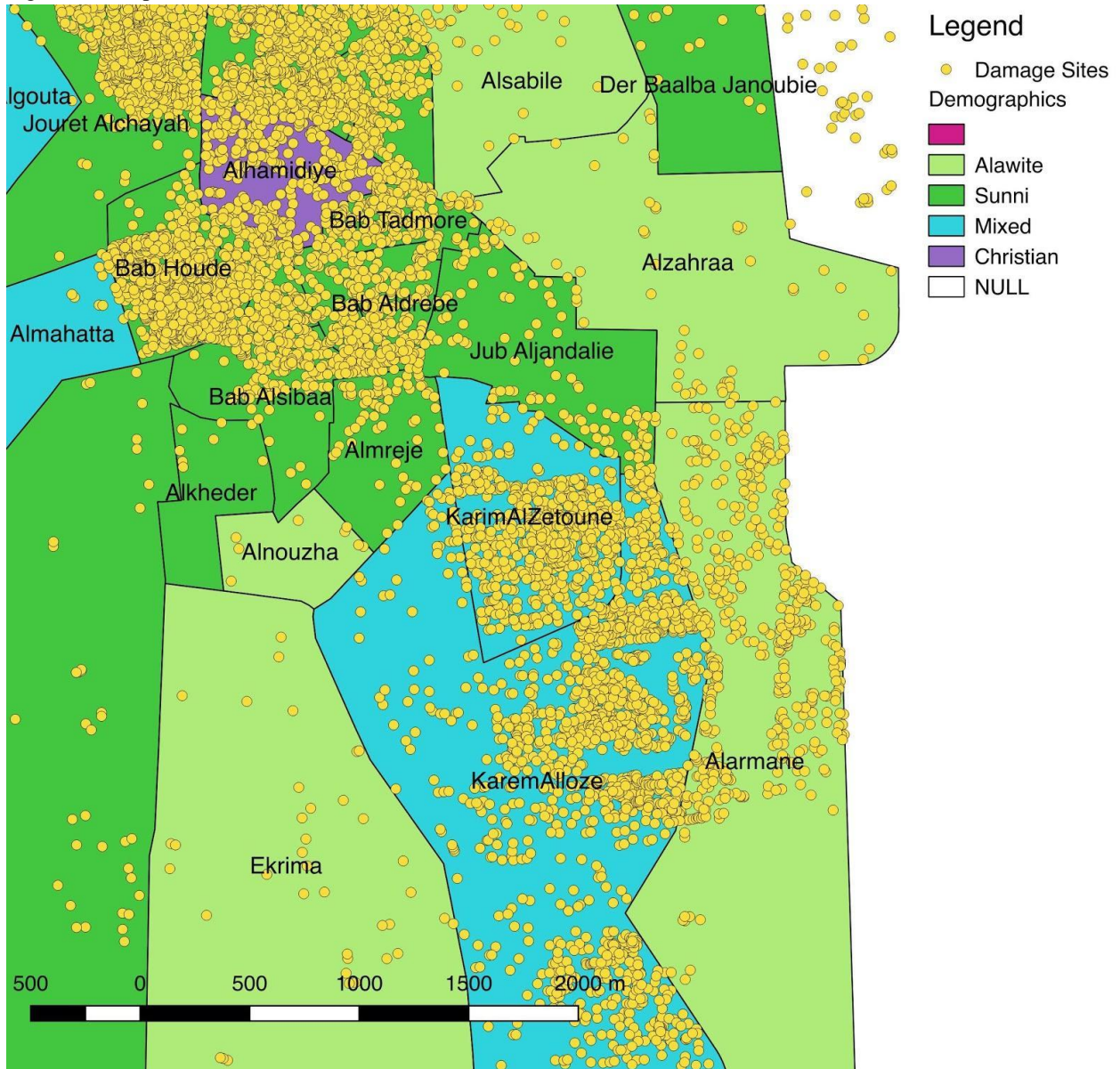
KarimAlZetoune and KarimAlloze- The Outliers

The neighborhoods southeast of the city that create the tail end of the destruction corridor, KarimAlZetoune and KarimAlloze, present a challenge to this trend and act as outliers to the Sunni-as-target, Alawite-as-friend dichotomy. KarimAlZetoune and KarimAlloze are both

¹¹³ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, "Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria"

mixed neighborhoods, containing both Sunnis and Alawites. Figure 16 shows both neighborhoods.

Figure 16- Map of KarimAlZetoune and KarimAlloze¹¹⁴



¹¹⁴ Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*; UNITAR, "Damage Assessment of Homs, Homs Governorate, Syria"

In KarimAlZetoune, local regime-aligned militias and the Shabiha raided, looted, and murdered civilians in January¹¹⁵ and March of 2012,¹¹⁶ preceding depopulation and government control that June.¹¹⁷ 47 civilians were then executed in a massacre that October following the government takeover.¹¹⁸ 566 buildings were also hit in that area. The violence in this area suggests sectarian tension at the sub-neighborhood level, in which contestation for land between residents and neighbors created a site for conflict.

As for KarimAlloze, it had one of the highest building damage rate at 1842 hits, 688 of which were destroyed and 438 severely damaged. Although no evidence points to sub-neighborhood sectarian conflict like in KarimAlZetoune, what is interesting is the high rate of industrial facilities hit, 475 overall, and 3 mosques recorded as being struck. As with Ekrima, this perhaps points to another reason for violence in the neighborhood, as these industrial facilities became key targets in the conflict, making the neighborhood a significant site of violence. Thus, while sectarian identity accounts for many neighborhoods' destruction in Homs, it is not the only factor. Strategic location, sites within the neighborhood, and pre-existing tensions between neighbors can all lead to flare ups of violence and conflict.

Conclusion

Engineered demographic change in Homs, Syria is not a result of the war but rather a long-term strategic interest on the part of the Assad regime. Sectarianism is embedded in the history of modern Syria as the minority Alawite population was favored by the French, came into

¹¹⁵ "The Society's Holocaust"

¹¹⁶ Anne Barnard, "Massacre Is Reported in Homs, Raising Pressure for Intervention in Syria," *The New York Times*, 12 March, 2012

¹¹⁷ "No return to Homs"

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

power under Hafez al-Assad, and remained in power under his son Bashar, much to the detriment of the majority Sunni population. In cities such as Homs, Sunnis resided in the poorest neighborhoods and were subject to forcible displacement starting with the Homs Dream construction project.

Indeed, years before the Syrian conflict began, neighborhoods across Homs that were predominantly Sunni were targeted for destruction to remake the city along the lines of a loyal, largely Alawite base. The Homs Dream targeted Sunni neighborhoods and offered little compensation for residents' removal and loss of business. Implementing luxury development to increase investment, the Homs Dream plan would have reshaped Homs into an Alawite stronghold had it not been for the eruption of Arab Spring in 2011.

The conflict further propelled displacement, however, as regime forces targeted Sunni, and often opposition, areas especially bordering Alawite neighborhoods to retake control and displace Sunni agitators. The conflict also provided fertile ground for the regime to carry out its larger agenda of demographic change. The regime used the conflict as a guise to carry out its original plan, destroying poor, Sunni neighborhoods that did not fit with the Assad regime's goal of controlling central Syria and Homs in particular. Several trends point to this strategy. During the conflict, the Assad regime employed a pattern of violence, bombardment, siege, and population displacement, which worked across the city to retake neighborhoods and displace original residents. Regime forces also targeted neighborhoods directly adjacent to majority Alawite areas as well as areas in the city the Homs Dream had intended to reconstruct. Both of these tactics ensured the safety and sustained residency of its loyal base and opened the door for future post-conflict development in line with the original plan for the city. And displacement will

be protracted as long as the barriers to return remain high and original populations unable to reclaim their property.

Indeed, as the Assad regime consolidates its control across Syria, the question remaining is whether displaced populations will be allowed to return home, and the fate of displaced Sunnis could again suggest a sustained strategy of engineered demographic change. The regime's pattern of displacement from neighborhoods could lead to a scenario in which it is difficult or even impossible for original residents to return and claim their homes, further entrenching Assad's power in Syria. This would in turn create a seismic demographic shift that would outlive the current conflict and dramatically alter the sociopolitical landscape in Syria. While it is likely that Syria will never be the same, it is important to observe the post-conflict landscape and the ways in which communities are able to rebuild after this devastating conflict. The Assad regime's efforts to displace the Sunni population, starting with the Homs Dream, will likely be a nightmare for many Syrians picking their lives up after years of war, and the future shape of Syria will likely be the realization of years of engineered demographic change.

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Appendix: Interviews

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