

The Logic of Urbicidal Terrorism and Its Implications on the Protection of Civilians: Lessons to be Learned from Syria

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Abstract

Never before has the subject of urbicide been more present in the media and social networking sites; however, this kind of violence against the Syrian cities is never unprecedented. This three-fold article aims to help understand and learn what motivates the systematic visible urbicide in Syria, what threats against civilians are ensuing, and what actions could be taken for the protection of civilians (POC). To this end, a threat-based analysis coupled with a historical analogy is conducted, drawn upon Etaywe's taxonomy of forms of terrorism and cycle of terrorism-drivers, and Graham's view of asymmetric urbicide. Results show that urbicide in Syria is a multifaceted destructive form of conventional state-sponsored and non-state actor-executed terrorism. It is a strategic option adopted principally for political reasons to intimidate and humiliate targeted homogeneous groups of population, and to deprive their affiliated opposition from any satisfactory geopolitical and demographic settlement. Urbicidal threats are multi-dimensional and expected to end in changing the character of Syrian cities. The nature of perpetrators' drivers and resulting threats entails the need to have a 'comprehensive POC in urbicide' strategy developed and adopted. This study provides implications for peace and security studies, social and political studies.

Keywords: urbicide, terrorism, civilian, perpetrator, protection, threat

1. Introduction

Oxford defines urbicide as “the destruction of a city or its character”. Similar to homicide that means the death of a person, urbicide is a compound word made up of *urb* meaning city and *cide* meaning killing/death. However urbicide is generally used to mean the violence against cities. Urbicide is a term initially introduced in 1960s by Michael Moorcock, and it has been revived with the advent of urbanization age and the destruction in Sarajevo in 1990s that initiated the symbolic event which has represented urbicide in modern world (Coward, 2007). This does not mean that violence against cities is something new. It has its roots in history, and incidents continue to arise every now and then. Examples include, among a long list, the Roman Empire destruction of Jerusalem where Caesar gave orders to demolish the entire city, the destruction of Tenochtitlan, Moscow, Dresden and Tokyo, and the US military use of the nuclear weapon against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. In 2011 Syria has witnessed the breakout of mass protests demanding freedom and justice. Protests have been the spark for the Syrian regime's unprecedented violence which has led to an open armed conflict that has now its thorny regional and international connections. Since then, the civilians continue to be the main targets of hostilities and violations, and constitute the majority of victims. Civilians bear the blunt of ongoing terror and violence that amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

UN mission of maintenance of the international peace and security includes, among others, countering terrorism and monitoring and reacting to what may challenge efforts of bolstering peace and security, for which promoting intergovernmental cooperation has been reached. One kind of such challenges was the mass of intra-state wars in the 1990s, when civilians became deliberate targets. These wars propelled the Protection of Civilians (POC) issue to the forefront of international concern. The press and public opinion held the Security Council responsible for genocide in areas like Rwanda in 1994 and Bosnia in 1995 for not having taken better action. In 1999, the Security Council passed its first resolution on POC. Since then it has become normal to see peace missions, as in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), mandated to use whatever means required to ensure the POC as a strategic priority. Nevertheless, POC efforts still generate a degree of unsatisfactory to different protection actors.

This calls for rethinking and repositioning of preventive, in-conflict responsive and post-conflict remedial measures to incidents of violence against the civilians. What stresses this call today is the mounting dissatisfaction related to a wide range of violence that threatens civilians, i.e. the urbicide terrorism in Syria. Urbicide in Syria has not received effective international reaction despite Article 54 of Protocol I of the 1977 Geneva Convention. Article 54 prohibits attacking, destroying, removing or rendering objects that are indispensable to the survival of the population [...] whatever the motive.

This study is believed to be pioneering as being a voice from the neighbourhood of the Syrian conflict. It is the first to combine exploration of the nature of urbicide as a form of terrorism, its perpetrators drivers, and related violence-fallouts on civilians particularly in Syria. This is likely to provide new insights into countering terrorism, supporting humanitarian relief operations management, and helping understand civil war with new perspective. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that although Syria is victim of multiple internal and external actors, focus of this study might not be inclusive of all actors. It is meant to include, but not to limit, some examples of actors and aspects of skirmish that can, however, satisfy the sake of exemplifying analysis-elements and reflect the logic behind violence against the Syrian cities instead of providing an account of actors. Although this could be considered a limitation of the study, role of more actors and aspects of violence could be a focus of later papers or more lengthy work. Differently put, this study endeavors to provide answers to three focus questions:

1. What is the nature of drivers behind urbicide perpetrators in Syria?
2. What kind of urbicide threats are imposed on civilians?
3. What actions could be taken for the POC under urbicide?

2. Literature Review

This study investigates violence against the Syrian cities as a form of terrorism that is directly targeting civilians for multiple reasons. Regardless of actors, in this study it is hypothesized that urbicide in the Syrian context (time, place perpetrators and civilians as victims) has a fundamental impact on the perception of POC and humanitarian interventions. Once urbicide is practiced deliberately, perpetrators should be held accountable and addressed as terrorists, be it states, organizations or individuals. Therefore, identifying drivers behind urbicide and the nature of ensuing threats is believed to help hold involved parties accountable. This study is based on Etaywe's (2017) taxonomy of forms of terrorism and cycle of terrorism-drivers, and Graham's (2002) view of asymmetric urbicide. Originated from the 18th century-French Revolution, terrorism is defined in Oxford Dictionary as "the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims". Etaywe has viewed terrorism as a paradigm of war that has two functions. First, it is the *strategic function* that insinuates either proactive terrorism or reactive terrorism to achieve vital political gains, maintain sphere of influence, or fight for freedom (national struggle). Second, it is the *opportunistic function* that provides traders, crime groups, businesses and states with an opportunity for economic gains amidst the state of chaos and destabilization. Any junction between the two functions may invite more actors and pave the road for a long term-collaborative/transactional terrorism that may even call for privatized terrorism.

Etaywe's taxonomy of terrorism-forms points to two broad forms of terrorism. The first includes the *conventional forms* which namely comprise the suicide forms (e.g. manned car bombs), the destructive forms (that is achieved through blowing up buildings and barrel bomb-based urbicide, and CBRN weapons) and the demonstrative forms (e.g. child abduction). The second is the *non-conventional forms* which namely include cyber terrorism, environmental terrorism and the intellectual terrorism. In his study on terrorism forms, drivers and counter-strategy, Etaywe has introduced a cycle of drivers that act as factors for insecurity, instability and terrorism. His cycle included the following drivers: ideology, political interests or keeping sphere of influence, political extremism, racism, sectarianism, injustice, national conditions of vulnerability to radicalization, nihilism, previous terror, and media. In Etaywe's taxonomy, urbicide-related terror comes under the conventional destructive forms of terrorism. Hence, he has introduced the term of 'urbicide terrorism'. However, what drivers stand behind this kind of terrorism, yet, needs further investigation, which the present study attempts to achieve. Urbicide has been studied by pioneering researchers (e.g. Campbell, Graham & Monk, 2007; Coward, 2007; Giddens, 1985; Graham, 2002; Shaw, 2003).

For example, Graham's (2002) study on the city of Jenin, entitled 'Bulldozers and bombs: the latest Palestinian-Israeli conflict as asymmetric urbicide', has introduced urbicide as a strategy followed to slow modernization of the cities, and to prevent any geopolitical settlement. Graham asserts that urbicide was a strategy of war that aimed to "deny the Palestinian[s'] collective, individual and cultural rights to the city-based modernity long enjoyed by Israelis" (p, 643). On the validity of creating security through urbidal actions, Graham states that urbicide by Israel in Jenin, for example, was a "deliberate strategy [...] that to date has failed to improve the security of Israelis in their own cities", and that with the absence of "just, two-state, geopolitical settlement", bulldozers and bombs will remain present in the "economic hearts of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa" (p, 647). Based on this, the present study will argue whether or not urbicide in Syria will help the demolishing force achieve security and perpetrators' objectives, especially when taking into account targeting children, women, the elderly and civilians in general. Riley's (2011) study on urbicide exercised in Iraq after the US led invasion is another example of contemporary urbicide. Riley has investigated to what extent the battle of 'Sadr City' was a case of urbicide. With relation to ways and means used in contemporary urbicide, Bullough (2016) highlighted the use of air strikes as a major weapon in urbicide cases.

He also indicated to illegal weapons and munitions as well as the Russian "bunker-buster" bombs used in cities like Grozny and Aleppo. He referred to the same Russian Putin as a main player in both Grozny and Aleppo urbicide that have had a lot in common. Related studies and literature serve as a pedestal upon which this study will be based. Unlike previous studies that addressed cases of urbicide exercised mainly by one force against one major city of influence on the direction of operations or negotiation, the present study addresses a far more complicated case that has drawn into it forces from many countries to exercise violence in multiple cities. In addition to the government forces, troops and supplies from other states have been pooled in. Besides, in view of "government forces shortages of combat manpower and Iraqi militia return[e] to fight in Iraq which curtailed [the Syrian government forces'] ability to simultaneously deploy troops on multiple fronts" (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2014:4), support for the Syrian government forces from other countries was requested. This included Russia and Iran and its affiliated militias from different parts of the world like Hezbollah. Other forces on ground included as well anti-government armed groups, the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham/Syria (ISIS), al-Nusra Front, Kurdish armed groups, etc.

Confrontations, be it between the government and anti-government armed groups, between the government armed groups and ISIS, or between the anti-government armed groups and ISIS, have caused "urban areas demolition" due to "direct confrontations" as occurred in "Ar Raqqa, Aleppo and Dayr az Zawr governorates" (UNHRC, 2014:4). In a polarization scene, the Syrian government army "continues to rely on technical, training and logistical assistance provided by external allies" (UNHRC, 2014:4). The situation has also polarized Turkey in light of the Kurdish People's Protection Units' continuing to "consolidate their control over the de facto self-regulated Kurdish regions in the north, namely Afrin, Ayn al-Arab and Al-Jazeera. They [fought against] ISIS [...] on territory under their control along the borders with Iraq and Turkey" (UNHRC, 2014:21). Above all, Iran was ready to mobilize its proxies in response to any direct US support for the opposition armed groups, and to announce it as a form of backing for takfiris (Smyth, 2015:9). This has given the situation of urbidal acts the flavor of religious fight (such as Sunni-Shiite), sectarian/nationalism/constellations fight (e.g. Turk-Kurd, Arab-Persian, Arab-Israeli, Saudi front and Iranian front), west-east polarization, and so forth. A threat analysis has been, therefore, essential to the study.

3. Methodology

An account of observations of incidents collected and interviews conducted over the period from 2014 to 2016 was used as data set for this study. The account was originally introduced as part of separate reports prepared by activists, the Human Rights Council's independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, Handicap, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The choice of the mentioned international agencies and non-governmental organizations' (NGO) was made based on my (the researcher's) belief in validity of data gathered by such independent committees and reputable organizations that have access to conflict areas, power to intervene in emergencies and crises, and sometimes "duty to witness" (Conoir: 2008). Moreover, these organizations have ability to obtain data from interviews, observations and analysis of medical records, recordings, photographs and satellite imagery.

This has made it a reasonable ground to use again this first-hand account of data for the purpose of the present study in a 'second-hand data set', whereby the data in hand was used as a new input (data set) for a new focus of study. Data was then sifted following the fully naturalistic approach to identify not only reported forms of threats and vulnerabilities, but also actors involved in the violence. A threat-based approach has been used to analyze the different types of threats against civilians associated with urbicide in Syria. It is a two-side approach that helps, first, capture the nature of the perpetrators and their drivers, and second bring together the operational factors related to the urbicide: time, space, and civilians' coping strategies which would lead to defining threats against civilians. This analysis is believed to consequently assist in shaping some POC measures and some creative means for more effective humanitarian interventions. To describe incidents, historical analogy was adopted, chiefly with respect to the case of Sarajevo of former Yugoslavia.

4. Results of Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The nature of the urbicide perpetrators and their drivers

To highlight the nature of perpetrators' drivers and thus the nature of urbicide drivers, it is worth recalling here the Columbia Encyclopedia's definition of war: an inter-state armed conflict (international war) or an intra-state armed conflict (civil war) wherein force is used to compel the defeated party to accomplish the will of the victorious party. Generally speaking, at the end of a war, what is expected is that a victorious party reaps its gains, irrespective of the means, including the urbicide for realizing that end. Unprecedented in complexity of its perpetrators, urbicide in Syria has been distinctively practiced by different actors, including the Syrian (state) armed forces, the Russian (state) military, ISIS, Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Iran-affiliated militias, anti-government armed groups supported by their allies, and individual volunteers. In other words, perpetrators have included state actors, non-state actors of organized armed groups, transnational sectarian volunteer-combatants, sectarian communities and self-defense individuals. They could execute structured and systematic destruction, mob violence and acts of revenge that could be seen in any example of urbicide. Realizing this net of perpetrators invites us to seek for understanding the potential drivers of urbicidal practices. From a *political interest-perspective*, it seems that it is the Syrian regime, the Russians and the Iranians' divergence of political interests that marks a unity against the same target, the internationally recognized-opposition held areas that protested against Assad as of 2011. This politically driven coalition might be justified when considered in light of the nature of war. A war is usually waged by two opposing sides; yet, it may occur between more, as in the 1920s nationalists, communists and Japanese war on China, where the nationalists and communists united against Japan. This also occurred when the Soviet communism and the American capitalism united against the same enemy, Germany, in WWII; however, soon after defeating the Germans, the communists and the capitalists began opposing each other. In Syria, nature of war implies that the Russian-Syrian-Iranian front against their target cities is believed to crack down once interests of the Russian (e.g. ensuring a sphere of influence), for example, are achieved and whenever reasons for union no longer exist.

Under the inquisition-like pretext of defending religion and religious places, the Iranians are believed to have for long been making use of sectarianism by looking like fighting for the Shiite against the Sunni with whom they used to live together in harmony for ages. This has been stressed by observers and researchers like Smyth (2015: 7-9) who stated that: [T]he defense of the shrines has evolved into an appeal to pan-Shiism as a rationale for involvement. Hezbollah has been particularly active in promoting this theme, which initially appeared as a subtext in the Sayyeda Zainab reasoning. Following Assad's lead, Iran and its proxies have since fall 2012 engaged in an extensive media campaign casting the Syrian rebels, whatever their actual beliefs, as takfiris, or Muslims who accuse other Muslims of apostasy [...] Iran and its proxies have also used the takfiri threat to persuade Levant minority groups to support their actions [...] [b]uild an Army for Zainab [and] call to Jihad. In this sense, Iran seems like presenting itself as a fighter for the Shiite all over the world, probably to ensure mobilization of more fighters to its side. Meanwhile it uses 'the infallible figure/leader' concept to imply for its followers that any decision taken by the leadership is utterly right as a heavenly order. This looks like ISIS tendency to disguisedly use slogans such as 'caliphate' for mobilization purposes. Similarly, ISIS justifies its executions to civilians in Syria by religious law. The very similar techniques of front-joining and mobilizing supporters and sleeper cells seem to have been used by the "nihilist ISIS" (using Atran's, 2015 description of ISIS) to target as well Sunni and others' cities.

The scene seems it is about making fronts and making political gains, but media “distraction strategy” (Chomsky, 2016) of control on minds may derail analogy-based understanding of the nature of terrorism seen in urbicide situation. The wanted political gain could be achieved in a later political negotiation through which a militia man would be introduced as a Syrian national in power.

Amidst the social fabric disorder, voices of observers and researchers like Smyth (2015) may emphasize this very political, disguised in religion, sought after gain. In an analogy to the Syrian situation, Smyth (2015: 55-56) pointed out to how Iran operates in Iraq, particularly the Sunni cities: Many Shiite militias are quickly adopting a role as the Iraqi rump state’s main fighting force against ISIS and other Sunni elements. The rise to interior minister of the Badr Organization’s Mohammed al- Ghabban shows just how doggedly Iran is working, through both armed and democratic methods, to thwart [even] U.S. efforts within Iraq. [...] Iranian proxy organizations [...] should be recognized as sub-networks of a broader [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] IRGC–Qods Force network and part and parcel of a larger regional strategy. Shedding light on (*political*) *extremism*, it could be viewed that it is extremism of the Syrian regime that has led to the civilian catastrophe in Syria. If just reflecting the definition of extremism a rationale for violence could be identified. Extremism is “fight[ing] pluralism and opposition, and deal[ing] with the opposing party as being illegitimate” (Casciani, 2014). A historical match could be seen in the act of the Zimbabwean Mugabe who launched “Murambatsvina” (‘remove the filth’ operation) against towns of those who did not vote for him in 2005. The case in Syria amounts to adopting Lenin strategy of use of terror for social cleansing that would end up with having façade of cities, especially after the proto-typical demolishing of the infrastructure and entities in such cities as Darayya and Aleppo and thus killing and forcibly kicking their population out. Urbicide in so-looking could be described as “a form of genocide” (Shaw, 3003:153), which threatens not only the physical status of a city but also its social and cultural condition. To have opposition is healthy, but to have terrorists and extremists is not. It is rather an indication of accumulated failure in addressing issues per se. This is implied in the lines of Bashar al Assad: “If we speak of one truth that is we are having tens of thousands of Syrian terrorists, it means there exists a social incubator for those terrorists that amount to hundreds of thousands or probably million(s) [...]. This means we are facing a moral failure, a social failure, and thus a national failure” (Zu’bi, 2015). This stresses that although it was the responsibility of the state to fight vulnerability conditions to extremism and terrorism, the state as well as non-state actors come again to exercise another form of terrorism, urbicide. Such declarations by al Assad, for example, could be conceived as a magnetic invitation for alleged fighters of terrorism.

Being an end-state for urbicidal force, façade of city-status may stress the need to consolidate viewing cities as harmonized urban containers that require rethinking of self-defense from national and transnational violence. Having said that, even a plan for self-defense may threaten any initiatives for future social mix or coexistence. However, validity of the contention on the need to think about a better defense for civilians may lie in addressing the blacklisted terrorist groups such as the Lebanese Militia, Hezbollah, and other Militias invited to fight as violent non-state actors (VNSAs) for the sake of Persian nationalism. This sheds light on another aspect of skirmish-driver represented in cross-border nationalism which might be considered against the right to diversity, the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, and sovereignty of states. Proving ability in their destabilizing role in Lebanon and Iraq, for example, these VNSAs are used over and over in Syria, which would justify any innovative actions taken for a cityself-protection. *To achieve humiliation of population and crushing symbols and will of survival*, history informs us about the fall of Madrid which marked the defeat for Spain’s Republic in the Civil War. On the contrary, defending Stalingrad was a symbol of Soviet defiance and Hitler’s failure. Urbicide in Syria intensifies the centrality of cities in future warfare, especially in the Middle East. It can be said that despite economic and population expansion of a city like Aleppo (which is almost demolished), a city military significance and fortification (including walls, underground shelters and trenches, rations packed) should be taken into account by urban planners from now on. Aleppo, for example, was conceived a symbol of industrialized significance, economic strength and population survival, and thus targeting it violently by the opposing alliance seemed an end state. In view of this, nowadays, the warplane takes the lead as an instrument of “urban mass terror” (Shaw, 2003), making some Syrian cities in the 21st century just like Guernica in 1937. Unlike Giddens’ (1985) description of a country as being “bordered power containers”, it is cities not states that should be demarked and protected, particularly in light of the cross-border allegiances that announce a complete destructed cities as conquered communities, just as al Assad did after Aleppo.

From now on, defense experts and militarists may need to reconsider the future warfare intended to target cities and rethink ways to better protect civilians therein because any future war's objective might be (as has been) the destruction of the will of civilians and national front that represents the public opinion. This call for rethinking has been stressed as well by Campell et al. (2007). Being targeted intentionally, cities under of systematic urbicide might be thought of as desired by perpetrators *to eliminate agreeable demographic and geopolitical settlement* that opposing parties may have liked to propose.

In line with Graham's (2002) view of asymmetric urbicide in Jenin, urbicide against certain Syria cities is believed to have been exercised on the purpose of:

1. Denying rights, and
2. Eliminating the modernization of specific components (mainly the Sunni and opposition population) and any fair geopolitical settlement.

This gets achieved by means of undermining the targeted component's-geographical coherence and forcing population to gather in one designated area like Edlib. When it is time for negotiation, this may help, in turn, give way to a connected controlled land corridor (by Iran for example), stretching from Iran through Iraq to the Syrian-Turkish borders, and thus prepare the ground for new status quo that is beneficial to Iran, the Kurds, or whoever interested in a new reality. The newly assigned place for a component like the Sunnis would make it easier for the regime and its allies to maintain the targeted group's poverty, taking into account control over electricity generators, potable water, crops, food and the access of humanitarian assistance. This will also ensure inferiority in modernity and economy of the target areas. Nevertheless, considering that Etyawe has raised injustice and a previous terror as drivers for another terrorism, choices made against the opposition areas may not provide a safe haven for the regime or its allies. The oppressed components' fight-back may continue in the form of a long term reactive terrorism and fighting for freedom and dignity. Urbicide in Syria is, therefore, expected to leave a fragmented and destabilized country that has become connected to regional fallouts and international concerns such as migration influx and stranded internally displaced persons. Demolished and torn out-Syrian cities seem resulting from the want of politicians, sectarians and ethno-nationalists to achieve their aim even by seeking to reintroduce a homogeneous state (and getting rid of diverse or opposition cities) by such means as military force, collateral damage, and attack against certain components and component cultural heritage of heterogeneous cities. Succinctly stressed, drivers of urbicide in Syria are likely to draw the rationale behind urbicide. The following have been discussed as identified drivers exemplified by respective perpetrators:

1. Political interests.
2. Political extremism.
3. Humiliating groups of population and crushing their symbols and will of survival.
4. Eliminating any likely agreeable demographic and geopolitical settlement.

Matching the Oxford definitions of terrorism and urbicide as well as the Columbia Encyclopedia's definition of war with Etyawe's (2017) cycle of terrorism-drivers, urbicide in Syria can be considered a deliberate physical destruction and will-demolishing violence against a city and its civilians, driven by any or a mix of the following drivers: ideology, achieving political interests or keeping sphere of influence, political extremism, racism and sectarianism, injustice practiced by a regime of legitimacy-demise, nihilism, and hunting for economic gains. With a complex rationale, urbicide in Syria has, therefore, involved and invited multiple perpetrators. What emphasizes the notion of predetermination on violence against civilians, by such means as using aerial and bombardment, is the UNHRC (2014:5) highlight: "as part of its strategy for controlling the population, [the Syrian regime] has combined long-lasting sieges with heavy aerial and artillery bombardment, leading to dozens of forced truces in Homs and Damascus and the surrounding countryside." Hence, urbicide is a strategy for confrontation. This kind of confrontation, humiliation and violence will only breed more violence and terrorism.

4.2 Ensuing threats against civilians under urbicide: Time, space and civilians' coping strategies

Interrogating the past, it was the Bosnian war that introduced urbicide in Sarajevo as a contemporary prototypical example of urbicide. That war lasted for three years (from 1992 to 1995) and witnessed the Serb forces' besiege of Sarajevo. Sarajevo had been ethnically heterogeneous, and a home for both Serbs and Muslim Slavs. What was especially horrible in this historic event is the ethnic cleansing that resulted from civil and political disagreements between the conflicting parties. Before the eruption of events of Bosnian war, Yugoslavia received global reputation owing to confrontations with Stalin and the role played in the non-aligned movement.

That reputation was accompanied by growing ethnic tensions, particularly when realizing that northwest of the country was the most developed part, while the southeast was the least developed part. Events showed that it was the politicians (particularly, Milosevic, Tudman and Izetbegovic) who used media to turn confrontations into ethnic conflicts. Otherwise, people used to live together for long till politically and ethnically driven violence against the city came to the fore.

That violence destroyed the National Museum of Sarajevo, the National Library and Archives of Sarajevo, Stari Most Mostar (an old Ottoman bridge), mosques, cemeteries, schools, markets, post offices, cafés and public areas, etc. Infiltrating into these historic events of urbicide in Sarajevo, threats associated with urbicide in Syria could have been expected in the first place. What is more important and correlated to expecting the threats is how to manage these expectations related to *threats' time, space, empowering the civilians to avail potential coping strategies, and mobilizing resources and upgrading readiness to assist the civilians*. The following sub-sections are devoted in the hope of providing some implications for setting precursors of violence against civilians in urbicide and thus informing on how to intervene and which actors to be invited to intervene on a humanitarian basis. Analysis of urbicide-operational factors (time, space, and how civilians in targeted cities handled risks) could be so informative.

4.2.1 Urbicide time

The aforementioned drivers for the Syrian regime front inform us about the when. Urbicide threats have been *imminent* since the regime has had the intent (and capacity) to inflict physical violence against specific groups of civilian areas that shouted out against it. Like Sarajevo, despite living in heterogeneous cities for ages, the Syrians have come under an *ethnic cleansing* threat that resulted from civil and political disagreements between the conflicting parties. It has been, since *the breakout of the large scale demonstrations*, most imminent because the demolishing force seems only dependent on attacking urban areas to achieve its objectives, backed by its allies. *Seasonal* changes as in moving towards cold winter have witnessed surge in violence against cities like Aleppo, which informs us that perpetrators seek to maximize pain and humiliation against the civilians by creating a no-shelter situation. Even in summer, as in other seasons, control on potable water has been practiced as a weapon. Nevertheless, indicating to another precursor of potential time of growing threats against civilians, *at times of possible/enforced humanitarian truces* it has become a norm to use civilians for negotiation and lifting the siege of other groups of population. When pressure was practiced to lift the siege of Madaya, for example, consent of the regime and relevant militias to 'coordinate assistance' was a must. The picture becomes worse and more gloomy when the required is not only the regime's but also a veto master's consent, Russia, as in the case of Aleppo, or a consent from Iran or Hezbollah that do not hesitate to use the very demands for lifting siege imposed on pro-government towns. The same kind of pressure was practiced by anti-government armed groups to negotiate lifting siege on pro-opposition towns. Imposing siege in an urbicide situation should be remembered as a precursor for a potential threat and crime against humanity. This in turn requires an appropriate and timely response by the respective international community actors prior to the aggravation of the situation against civilians.

4.2.2 Urbicide space

As regards *space*, Sunni as well as opposition-most dominated cities have constituted the areas where more civilians are more likely to be attacked than those in other places. This identification of potential urbicide hot spots is key for the international community, if determined, to help allocate resources needed for protecting areas that are more exposed than others. Moreover, escalation and spread-out of urbicide acts to multiple urban areas have been increasing for it has been found to achieve the cause of perpetrators, i.e. crushing the opposition barbarically. Targeting groups on sectarian and ethnic locality-basis makes it indicative of a potential deliberate attack on specific geographical locations rather than other areas. Driven by political and ethno-sectarian reasons, the reality on ground entails that the stronger the connection and affiliation between target groups and main opposition players, *the more likely it is to target areas of these groups*. In a situation like this, POC strategies should prioritize response to such areas where firepower is used to crush both armed and unarmed opposition by a government repression approach to urbicide. This approach has involved regular armed forces and non-state actors, and seems to have led some Syrians to join whoever is ready to retaliate against the demolishing force. After ISIS had drawn "an increasing number of Syrians to its ranks, particularly after forming alliances with local tribes in Ar Raqqa, Al Hasakah and Dayr az Zawr governorates", such areas, accordingly, happened to be considered by the regime front a legitimate target, under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

The civilians have thus been exposed to bombardment and shelling of the regime and allies as well as the ISIS “brutality [for establishing] order” (UNHRC, 2014:5). Similar urbicide occurred in areas where anti-government armed group including “Ahrar Al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra abducted over 200 civilians during an operation on villages in eastern Latakia” (UNHRC, 2014:8). This informs us that even non-opposition areas underwent urbicide by anti-government armed groups.

These groups used “fire mortars, artillery guns and tanks towards government positions within residential areas, utilizing their limited firepower in an indiscriminate manner, causing civilian casualties” (UNHRC, 2014:17). This indiscriminate manner of use of fire power has led sometimes to unlawful attacks targeting persons and objects over wide geographical areas wherein civilians reside. Areas where ISIS stretched, e.g. Ar Raqqa and some localities in Aleppo governorate, have also witnessed “the unlawful killings” whose perpetration entails that ISIS has “committed the crime against humanity of murder” (UNHRC, 2014:8). Insofar as the POC should be observed, all armed groups and forces seem involved in expanding the urbicide space in Syria, regardless of the pretext.

4.2.3 Civilians’ coping strategies

How civilians dealt with urbicide threats seems to have affected the nature of threats and vulnerabilities. Civilians fled, resisted perpetrators, accepted to co-exist in areas dominated by the regime as in west Aleppo or were forced to live under the ruling of terrorist groups such as ISIS in Ar Raqqa. Nevertheless, fleeing, as an option, has endangered many lives by making IDPs/refugees vulnerable to any types of harm that might be practiced by hunters. This entails non-observance of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by conflicting parties. The binding IHL principle is basic and stresses on that “[i]ndividuals displaced by fighting and those not directly involved in hostilities have the right to the respect of their lives and physical well-being. These individuals will be, in all circumstances, protected and treated humanely, without prejudice.” In spite of the fact that fleeing may look like a favourable option, it has been the desired perpetrators’ intent as stressed in letters dropped by military aircraft asking the civilians to leave home prior to air or artillery bombardment of cities. Even such warnings do not exempt perpetrators from responsibility stipulated by the aforementioned Article 54, Protocol 1 of the 1977 Geneva Convention. This entails that urbicide was intended to force civilians to abandon cities, and thus create ‘for-regime-cities’ status that would comprise the majority of population who may be hoped to legitimize the presence of al-Assad and vote for him after all calamities to civilians, paying no heed to attacks on other groups of population and residential areas. In times when displacement or refuge to neighbouring countries was favourable, civilians in besieged towns were deprived this option. This implies that sometime coping strategy was imposed in a way or another. Fleeing, however, may lead to multiply population in a city like Edlib under the civilians’ expectation of receiving national or international protection once centered in one geographic area. This guided/intended overcrowd might turn into an introduction to a future genocide provided that a decision is made to use urbicide as a means of social cleansing in Edlib. When resorting to coping via remaining in own towns despite the existing risks, people were treated inhumanely. “Government forces [for example] sought to take control of restive areas in Rif Damascus” by detaining female relatives of wanted men to force the men’s surrender (UNHRC, 2014:8). Although governments are pledged to protect all their respective nationals, in situations where Syrian families were threatened, they were “often too afraid to approach the authorities to inquire about the whereabouts of their relatives” (UNHRC, 2014:8). Going for the option of staying in own towns with the expectation of having some effective rescue teams and aid workers. This very option indicated sometimes that helping certain components survive could be discriminatory as well. For example, the “Kurdish armed groups [...] distributed humanitarian aid in Qamishli (Al-Hasakah) exclusively to their supporters (UNHRC, 2014:21). This stresses the need for a holistic international pledge to prioritize relief and support irrespective of the affiliation or background, otherwise supporters and allies of Kurdish armed groups, for example, will be more and more shrouded in haze.

4.2.4 Focus on ensuing threats and emerging vulnerabilities

In view of the discussed above, it should be reiterated that UNDPKO presents POC risks as a result of threats practiced by the perpetrators plus vulnerabilities related to civilians. In light of this understanding, incidents, tempo and atrocity of targeting certain urban areas in Syria can be informative of nature of perpetrators and their acts, and the civilians’ status. Systematic urbicide entails existence of horizontal and top-down coordination that has included the command and control, communication, and leadership of multiple actors and parties.

Similar to Sarajevo, uricide in Syria is deliberate and adopted as a strategic option to maximize civilians' vulnerability and suffering. Modus operandi of perpetrators reveals how vulnerable civilians are. Perpetrators used the means of targeted assassination, indiscriminate attacks using artillery, air raids, barrel bombs, Skud missiles and scorched earth tactics, years of siege, use of weapons of mass destruction such as chemical attacks in al Ghouta-2013 attack, entrapment, torture, detaining women illegally as a weapon against men, denial of medical treatment, food and drinking water, cutting electricity, blocking humanitarian assistance, pillage, hostage taking, demolishing hospitals and factories,

denial of economic, social and cultural rights and basic freedoms, massacre, murder, violations of children's rights (e.g. child soldiery and military use of children), death squads, enforced disappearance even at checkpoints, kidnapping, unjust imprisonment for men and women, rape, torture, and systematic political and racial oppression (Handicap, 2015; UNHRC, 2014; WILPF, 2016). Some violations against civilians arise to war crimes, and others to crimes against humanity because they are deliberately committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against civilians and identified segments of population. To exemplify these threats and violations and how institutionalized and coordinated the violence was, here are some. Violations were exercised in the form of, for example, having detainees "died from injuries sustained during torture, [as in] deaths in custody at the Mezzeh airport detention facility, Military Security Branches 215 and 235 and Sednaya Prison. [Urbicide attacks included as well] widespread shelling and bombardment of civilian-inhabited localities and the targeting of civilians for arrest, detention and disappearance on the basis of their association or perceived opposition to the Government. The coordination and active participation of Government institutions indicated that the attacks were conducted as a matter of institutional policy [including] other forms of ill-treatment at intelligence agencies and in prisons and military hospitals" (UNHRC, 2014:6). It was not only the government front that committed atrocities but also the anti-government armed groups. The Islamic Front "killed several men suspected of collaborating with the Government"; the Kurdish armed groups, namely the People Protection Units used the "recruitment of children under the age of 18"; and ISIS beheaded and shot people in the head even in front of Children as in Minbij, Al Bab and Jarabulus (UNHRC, 2014:6-8).

In another form of threat to life, civilians seem to be vulnerable to a long term threat of explosives left behind fighters all over the country. Civilians were left unable to find safe routes to take, farms to live on, or a refuge to take while abandoned and deserted. Handicap (2015:3-7) stated that explosive weapons "have dramatically affected the lives of more than 5.1 million Syrians, many of whom are taking refuge inside the country not able to return to their homes. Between December 2012 and March 2015, 77,645 incidents were recorded following conventional weapons and IEDs use in Syria." What emphasizes the predetermination to use explosives is the use of explosives against civilians crowded in residential areas and thus the scale of injuries. "75% of recorded incidents involving explosive weapons occurred in densely-populated areas" (Handicap, 2015:4). This throws light on another persistent vulnerability: the displaced persons get trapped in conflict zones and in highly affected contested areas. This implies that the fighting parties have had no intention to distinguish between civilians and combatants. Killing indiscriminately is against the international subject matter agreement, Protocol 1 of the Geneva Convention.

Shedding light on gender issues, there appeared a wide scale of sexual and gender-based violence exercised by government forces through "rape and sexual assaults of women at detention facilities in [...] Rif Damascus and Dara'a governorates, [...] to force the surrender of their male relatives, [and rape case by] government forces and Shabiha (government affiliated militias). Men and boys over the age of 12 years [also] continue to be targeted on the basis of their gender" (WILPF, 2016:7-15). According to WILPF, violations against women and girls, in particular, ranged between human trafficking, detained and forced disappeared women, targeting women civil activists and human rights defenders, women among others sieged, refugee, displaced, deprived medical treatment due to targeting health infrastructure and health facilities, and deprived education because of the collapse of educational sector. In general, urbicidal threats to civilians come in multiple forms and worsen civilians' vulnerabilities. Threats are therefore multidimensional. Systematic uricide has generated and facilitated genocide, ethnic cleansing and government repression that hit the social mix, inter-faith harmony and infrastructure that is necessary for economic growth and future governance, and attempted to remove identity of opposition, including cultural entities and worship places. What is more concerning is what will remain after urban bombardments: the psycho-social trauma and the profound changes to social relationships which may threaten not only the character of the cities but also the character of the entire country.

This city-to-country relationship emphasizes the danger of urbicide case in Syria. It eliminates mixed communities, kills diversity, creates single sect communities, feeds communal conflicts and fuels more violence in the region. What will remain persistently alarming is the repeated employment of urbicide over a wider geographical area in Syria and in other countries where regimes may find urbicide a viable option to nip any disagreement in the bud. The systematic destruction of Daryya followed by Aleppo and other urban areas could be ascribed to the destruction force's belief that 'as long as urbicide paid off in Daryya and Aleppo by forcing the residents and opposition to leave the city and head into Edlib, it could pay off again elsewhere'.

This seems in line with Etaywe's (2017) argument that the high rate of reoccurrence of conventional forms of terrorism (such as urbicidal terrorism) as well as its continuing to be among the most common forms is due to domestic and international terrorists' realization of forms' validity to pay off. It can be concluded that the wide range of urbicidal threats in Syria is best described as *dignicide*. It is killing dignity, which is allegedly an inherent right to every human being regardless of the background and political affiliation.

4.3 Proposed action: A POC under urbicide-strategy

The frequency, duration, extension and severity of violence in Syria suggest that civilians are likely to suffer physical and psychological damage for years to come. Founded on the analysis provided for the first and second study-questions, this sub-section is dedicated to contribute to proposing some elements of a POC strategy in urbicide situation and thus supporting more effective humanitarian interventions and even 'duty to witness'. Highlighting the modus operandi of perpetrators which could be indicative of urbicide motivations, besides analyzing potential drivers and motivations, ideas enlighten what counter measures may suppress a destruction force on ground and in future urbicide situations. To protect civilians from the catastrophic consequences of urbicidal terrorism, addressing vulnerabilities and perpetrators' motivations should be given a priority.

Likewise, effective humanitarian intervention should be reviewed and re-planned on condition that agreements entail that all parties are expected to comply comprehensively with human rights and IHL. Delivering humanitarian aid inside Syria has proven challenging owing to the ongoing fight and constant attack that obstruct aid and civilians' coping as well. Rescue workers were under the threat of death and injury, which stresses the need to evaluate not only the safety of civilian population but also the aid and safety workers teams'. Vulnerabilities of civilians in urban areas under urbicide need to receive the attention of stabilization and peace builders, and human agencies around the world (it is a multidimensional mission). Once attention is drawn, these players should focus on promoting individual and community environment that enhances the living standard and capabilities of protection from negative forces. Negative forces do not only execute indiscriminate violence but also practice violence against targeted groups per se. Therefore, international support to the civilians should take into account addressing the motivations and crippling the capabilities of perpetrators at least during conflict once weapons are used in a civil war. Deterrence and proactive attitude seems to be a choice to win for human dignity. Insofar as violence is believed to be strategically used against specific communities, then a deterrent posture to be introduced might be effective. Given the commitment of all parties to a conflict to not starve the population even of their adversary and to allow free passage of needed international assistance (IHL, in Conoir, 2008), any absence of reaction to the negative force's denial of access to assistance might be recognized as an international (collaborative) passive consent of this fighting strategy and terror. A deterrent posture is proportionate with what UNDPKO suggests in the tactical level protection of civilians for any strategic threat targeting civilians. Sending peacekeepers or observers may not seem practically useful for UN cannot send a peacekeeper or observer to every corner in every village and behind every building. Their safety might be questionable as well. However, in the Syrian case of cross interests, it might have been just necessary to follow a proactive attitude to defuse initiative of demolishing forces, and then to allow the international community to impose humanitarian solutions with force. Such proactive posture would assist in addressing the individual and community vulnerabilities (the life and physical protection requirements, and establishing a protective environment). It would also support the required effort by agencies to categorize civilians based on vulnerabilities and thus on what should be provided to preserve human dignity. This was likely to have supported efforts of, for example, establishing refugee and IDP camps, field hospitals, food supplies, etc. Diminishing of international support to civilians under constant and imminent threats, and failing to interfere on humanitarian grounds, despite the UN charter's permission (yet, faced with UN PMs' veto), could intensify the loss of legitimacy and credibility of the UN in the eye of the region in particular.

As long as every country has a UN Country Team (CT)-representatives who constantly write reports on violations, threats and vulnerabilities against civilians, and the status of human rights, failing to react preventively could seriously damage the UN impartiality. Given that UN has options like robust peace keeping and peace-enforcement measures that may achieve POC, not applying those entails that the continuation of urbicidal terrorism as of 2011 may lay the ground for a long term reactive terrorism and reprisal actions. Late interference might be received with animosity from local population and hence endanger any prospective tactical protection operations like patrolling, cease fire line-observation, etc. Destruction of international heritage-sites and urban areas in Syria underlines that the traditional paradigms set by the UN agencies and international institutions for safeguarding international heritage and defending human dignity have proved unable to act in response. Therefore, some reform seems badly needed to restore peace in the region before it is a dead-end in a very strategic security complex in the Middle East. Stated in Table 1 below is a suggested three-tier POC shape that could be applied to future urbicidal cases.

Table 1. Three-tier POC in urbicide cases

Tier 1: Preventive measures	Tier 2: Responsive measures	Tier 3: Post-urbicide measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Targeting authorities: UN CT keeps local authorities informed on POC situation, and drives authorities to fulfill their responsibilities under the IHL. - Introduce-for-humanitarian intervention-international military quick response force (QRF). - A deterrent intervention is primed: This involves developing directives on use of force to prevent urbicide occurrence. - Building a local reference scale of POC risks priorities: This embraces supporting local POC plans of preserving lives, houses and property, and preventing what can lead to a mass physical torture and denial of access of assistance. - Understanding cultural and political context. - Pass more effective enforcement measure for the protection of civilians, child protection and gender-based violence, to ensure any needed swift humanitarian intervention of the humanitarian community such as NGOs, ICRC, UNHCR, WFP, OHCHR, UNRWA, UNICEF, OCHA, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deploy UN representatives and robust peacekeepers or observers to report any attacks on civilian objects. - Deal with sectarian based militias as potential sub-nets of regional players. - Any violation need be responded to with deterrence posture, including deployment of QRF. A direct military action should be considered as an option for humanitarian purpose that is chartered and exempted from veto constraints. - Employment of in-conflict creative early warning system for threats, including joint protection teams, community online alert networks, community liaison assistants, WhatsApp and Twitter-reporting, etc. - Establish humanitarian corridors. - Establish a no fly zone to disable the demolishing force, neutralize air power and allow the civilians to stay in their environs. - Impose arms embargo and cut weapons lines of communication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Update the policy of preemption for similar countries ruled by similar regimes. - Run infrastructure building-efforts. - Initiate quick impact projects (QIPs) and development activities. - Seek long-term solutions based on the former urbicide experiences of eastern European countries which ended in federal states. - Monitor and evaluate of POC progress. - Wide scale post-conflict reconstruction, and psychological support. - Continue campaign against extremism and terrorism. - Affirm states commitment to not allow appointment of militia-affiliated officials.

As shown in Table 1, three-tier POC in urbicide situation, the tier is three main measures that stress the notion of having *preventive*, *responsive* and *post-urbicide* measures. Measures should be inclusive and consider the roles of all potential actors in humanitarian relief operations and human rights. Actors include international humanitarian organizations, governments and specialized government structures, beneficiary populations, humanitarian and non-governmental organizations, military forces, members of the Red Cross Movement, and more (Conoir, 2008). Preventive measures refer to any innovative steps that pre-empt threatening the civilians by urbicide from developing. This is open to any measure that is likely to help civilians beforehand. Measures, as shown in Table 1, may range from a UN CT-to-local governmental authorities' liaison and communication, through a POC primed deterrent intervention-directives, building a national POC prioritizing scale/framework in times of civil war, a POC-driven study of country cultural and political profile, to having a POC QRF and ready-to-use list of enforcement measures that support humanitarian agencies.

Responsive measures refer to all that should be in place once identifying urbicidal threats which also necessitate innovative practices to compel the demolisher to comply. This is to include the use of peace-builders in uniform, deployment of a QRF and rescue teams, addressing transnational sectarian militias as sub-units of other state forces, applying fast reporting lines and means, and imposing humanitarian corridors, no fly zones and arm-embargo to support any humanitarian agency intervention. Post-urbicide measures aim to establish new conditions and protective environment, and restoring normalcy. Failing to take reliable measures would be indicative of insensitivity towards humanity. Such practical measures need be part of our universal cultural competence that aims to augment urbicidal threat-mitigation as a universal pledge. This should include re-evaluation of preemptive and responsive measures, rebuilding infrastructure, initiating QIPs, applying post-conflict reconstruction and psychological support, and continuing the fight against terrorism and extremism of all forms.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Discussion showed that urbicide in the Syrian context (including its perpetrators and their drivers, urbicide time, place and civilian victims and their coping strategies) can provide us with insight into POC and pertinent humanitarian interventions. This article has sought to advance knowledge in relating urbicidal terrorism in Syria to what should become an international pledge towards POC. It has endeavored to unveil the characteristics of urbicide, as a tool in the hands of politicians, and its fallouts. Urbicidal terrorism could be viewed as ‘a systematic violence against cities used to intimidate and humiliate targeted population, principally for political reasons’. Although the killing in Srebrenica was considered the worst crime since World War II at that time, *urbicide in Syria has introduced the worst-Srebrenica*. Drivers to urbicide are multiple but principally political and ethno-nationalist. Urbicide in Syria is multi-sided/ multifaceted and its threats against civilians are multidimensional in nature, i.e. it takes lives, destroys societies, erodes the infrastructure and development gains, and leaves fear, hostility and potential reactive terrorism. Nevertheless, such atrocities provide an opportunity for learning and performance enhancement, as attempted in the proposed three-tier POC action. Failing to learn would bring about more urbicide cases. Concluded here are some take-away lessons. First, the logic behind the use of urbicide over and over lies in the destruction-based glory builders’ belief in it as a valid strategic option of social cleansing and crushing the will of the opposing targeted groups of population. It is believed to have been paying off every time it has been used. Second, violence against cities as a political tool requires international and humanitarian community prioritize acting against perpetrators on a POC foundation. Action should be pro-active and preemptive, reactive, and remedial. Otherwise, UN legitimacy and credibility could be at stake. Third, since violence incites violence, urbicide in Syria may end with creating a revenge-generation, hence it generates a loop of terrorism if not properly addressed. Fourth, a proper addressing of POC under urbicide demands more analysis of urbicidal situations and their operational elements to enhance the mechanism of international assistance rendered to civilians.

In theory, IHL continues to inform us that parties to conflict are obligated to provide food, medicines, and other essential goods necessary to survival to populations in the territories they control. Practice, however, raises doubts about the right to assistance as recognized in IHL and in its core instruments. Lastly, it is worth noting that the wide use of weapons in urbicide may present an area of study for those interested in ecological system and environmental terrorism. Terrorism as such persists as an informative source and area of study. Similar analysis conducted to the urbicide in Syria could be made to analyze the situation in some cities of Yemen (e.g. Taiz) and Iraq (e.g. Mosul), where different or similar actors, drivers and threats might be identified, and then findings could be compared with the present study’s for the good of POC.

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