

STRATEGIC POLITICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS IN CIVIL WARS: THE CASE OF SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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Abstract: This study examines the strategic use of violence against civilians in civil wars by using the Syrian civil war as a case study. The research uses strategic violence theories as an analysis framework to explain how and why authoritarian governments use violence against civilians as a strategic political tool by focusing on the Syrian civil war. This research is a qualitative case study that utilizes document analysis method. The findings of the study show that different methods of violence against civilians in the Syrian civil war was used mainly by the Bashar al-Assad government and its allies as a strategic tool to maintain control over political threats during the war and also to shape the post-war political order. This research contributes to the fields of conflict studies and political violence studies.

Keywords: violence against civilians; civilian victimization; Syrian civil war; the Assad government

1. INTRODUCTION

Why are civilians/non-combatants deliberately targeted in civil wars? As civil wars have become the most common type of conflict in the 21st century, this question turned out to be crucial to address in conflict studies, because civilian victimization in such conflicts has become frequent feature rather than exception. Civil wars around the world from Bosnia and Rwanda to Yemen and the Democratic Republic of Congo have shown that civilians are often strategically targeted and consciously victimized. This study examines the Syrian civil war as a case study to understand this fundamental issue. The Syrian civil war has become one of the world's most violent conflicts of the 21st century (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). Since 2011, the Assad government started a brutal campaign that has caused mass atrocities against civilians since the first

day of the Arab Spring protests in Syria. These atrocities included indiscriminate aerial bombardments, chemical weapons attacks, mass detentions, torture, siege warfare, and many other types of violence. These actions led to the deaths or injury of hundreds of thousands and to the displacement of millions of civilians. In 2024, President Bashar al-Assad's government was overthrown by a coalition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), ending nearly 14 years of armed conflict (Amnesty International, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Different perspectives explain the rationale of the violence against civilians in the Syrian civil war. Some perspectives frame it as a symbol of power and dominance (e.g., Wedeen, 2022); some scholars identify it as acts of identity-based violence – ethnic, religious or sectarian (Akkan, Aksu, 2023; Balanche, 2018; Goldsmith, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2020; Phillips, 2015); or some see it as emotion-based violence (revenge or punishment) (Stahn, 2013). However, such perspectives may ignore the consistency, selectivity, and repetitiveness of the Assad government's strategies of violence against civilians in the Syrian conflict.

The literature about the violence against civilians in civil wars provides various perspectives and theories. Andrew Halterman (2018) divides these theories into three main categories: Null theory, emotion-based theories, and strategic theories. This study applies the strategic theories to explain the violence against civilians in the Syrian case.

This study has two main objectives in examining violence against civilians in the Syrian civil war. First, it gives the broader literature on civilian victimization in civil wars to identify how existing literature explains the use of violence against civilians by state actors. Second, it situates the Syrian case in this broader literature by analyzing the methods of state violence during the civil war and their implications on civilian population.

Methodologically, this research is a qualitative case study that uses document analysis method and statistical data analysis method. These methods were used through a rich set of empirical sources which include non-governmental organizations reports (such as, Syrian Network for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International), newspaper reports (such as, BBC News, Al Jazeera, Middle East Monitor), and academic secondary sources. The analysis of these data focuses on patterns of violence against civilians in Syria by adapting the analysis of strategic violence theories.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS IN CIVIL WARS

Civilian victimization is one of the most widespread and tragic features of modern civil wars. This phenomenon raises critical questions, such as: Why are non-combatants so deliberately targeted during armed civil conflicts? What strategic, political, or ideological logic drives the authorities of the states to use violence against civilians? What are the main methods of violence used to maintain the political order? These questions are critical, especially at a time when civil

conflicts continue to dominate global security concerns. Although international norms have long condemned the deliberate targeting of non-combatants in civil wars, numerous studies have shown that violence against civilians by both state and non-state actors is a central issue to be dealt with (e.g., Berti, 2018; Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2010).

Statistical evidence on civilian casualties in civil wars shows the severity of the problem. Civil wars have become the most common and violent conflict form since the end of the Cold War (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 3). Comparisons across conflicts reveal the systematic and catastrophic nature of the civilian victimization. For example, in Rwanda, an estimated 800,000 to 1 million civilians were killed during the 1994 genocide, and the violence was carried out with deliberate and coordinated intent (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Another example, the Bosnian war and genocide, resulted in the killing of an estimated 100,000 civilians, the forced displacement of more than 2 million people, and the systematic rape of between 20,000 and 50,000 women. Most of them are ethnically motivated mass killings and sieges, including the Srebrenica massacre (Remembering Srebrenica, 2025). The ongoing conflict in Yemen has had a catastrophic impact on civilians, and the UN has described it as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. According to UN data, an estimated 377,000 people have died between 2015 and early 2022, with approx. 60% of these deaths attributed to indirect causes of the war. Currently, more than 4.5 million people have been displaced, and approx. 21.6 million people (two-thirds of Yemen's population), including 11 million children, are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance (Global Conflict Tracker, 2025b). Another example, the Second Congo War (1998–2007), described as the deadliest conflict since World War II, has claimed the lives of 5.4 million people. The vast majority of these people were civilians who had died from preventable causes such as starvation and disease, which are indirect consequences of systematic displacement and war (International Rescue Committee, 2008).

These statistics demonstrate that violence against civilians in civil wars is one of the most important issues in the modern world. To understand why violence against civilians occurs so frequently, scholars have offered a variety of explanations. While earlier thinkers such as Edward Said (1988) and Carl Schmitt (2008) viewed violent conflict through the perspective of political divisions and ideological struggle, much of the recent empirical research challenges these classical views. For example, scholars like Benjamin Valentino et al. (2004), Stathis Kalyvas (2006), and Alexander Downes (2011) argue that violence against civilians is often strategic rather than based on ethnic or ideological hatred. Similarly, Eli Berman et al. (2011) and Jeremy Weinstein (2006) highlight the influence of organizational structure and survival strategies on patterns of civilian victimization. This study reviews the major theories developed to explain civilian victimization in civil wars. Halterman (2018) divides these theories into three main categories: null theory, theories about ideas and emotions, and strategic theories.

According to null theory, violence against civilians is not targeted nor politically motivated, instead it occurs as collateral damage during conflicts. This theory assumes that civilian casualties occur in cross fires, indiscriminate bombings, or primarily because of carelessness and neglect in conflict. According to this theory, civilian harm is viewed as an unintended consequence of conventional warfare rather than a strategic action (Walzer, 1977).

The second set of theories/approaches includes ideas (group identities and individual desires) and emotions (such as revenge and punishment) as the central role for the victimization of civilians (Halterman, 2018). The first explanation in this category is the principal-agent problem. This problem explains civilian victimization as a result of different preferences between principals (commanders, rulers, decision-makers) and their agents (fighters/combatants). While principals may prefer to avoid harming civilians for strategic reasons, agents may have personal desires, such as revenge, looting, or pleasure, that drive them to commit violence. Factors contributing to this reason of violence include poor training, inadequate monitoring, and resources that attract fighters (Shapiro, 2013; Weinstein, 2006). The second explanation under this category is based on emotions. Roger Petersen (2002) provides a structural framework explaining how emotions can be the reason for violence against civilians. According to this approach, individual and collective emotional responses, such as fear, resentment, hatred, and revenge, are significant drivers of violence during civil war.

The third explanation is that ethnic identity contributes to violence in civil wars. According to Barry Posen (1993), when ethnic groups begin to view themselves as threatened, this can lead to a security dilemma, which escalates the violence and causes mass violence against civilians. The third set of theories/approaches, strategic theories, is the largest research area focusing on civilian victimization in civil war (Halterman, 2018). In this category, there are five different theories/approaches or models. *Hearts and minds approaches* developed by Kalyvas (2006) argue that violence against civilians is irrational in civil wars. The theory is based on the idea that armed groups rely on the cooperation of civilians to win the war. Especially in partially controlled zones, selective violence against those who collaborate with rival factions may consolidate authority. However, indiscriminate violence risks pushing civilians toward rival factions for protection and reducing intelligence flow. Thus, winning hearts and minds of the civilian population is a key to gaining territorial advantage.

The second explanation within this set of theories is the *denial and punishment strategies*. Robert Pape (1996) argues that under the denial strategy, civilians are targeted to prevent them from providing material support to rival factions, such as food, shelter, and intelligence. The goal is to cut off resources and weaken the rival faction's ability to fight. However, the punishment strategy aims to conduct direct violence on civilian populations for providing support to rival factions.

Another strategic violence type is *collective violence strategy*. Christopher Sullivan (2012) proposed a middle ground between indiscriminate and selective

violence by arguing that armed actors target entire areas that are believed to support the opposition. In collective violence strategy, instead of using resources to identify particular targets, mainly the state armed groups target the whole area indiscriminately to punish or deter opposition.

The fourth theoretical explanation as a strategic means for civilian victimization is the *desperation theory* (Downes, 2011; Hultman, 2007). This theory argues that governments are more likely to target civilians deliberately in desperation when they are losing ground militarily or when a conflict becomes protracted. Under this logic, violence against civilians is not the first strategy, but a last resort.

The fifth strategic theory, the theory of *indirect violence* by Laia Balcells, is one of the strategic violence theories to make an explanation for violence against civilians. This theory gives a comprehensive analysis of non-combatant victimization in civil wars by applying the pre-war and post-war processes. Balcells (2010) departs from dominant paradigms that treat civil war violence as collateral damage, identity-based hatred, or an emotionally driven phenomenon. Instead, she argues that civil war violence is rational, selective, and often geographically organized, driven by both pre-war political rivalries, wartime power struggles, and post-war political order. What makes Balcells's theory unique is her argument that indirect violence is not merely a function of war tactics but is deeply rooted in political calculations, which are the desires to eliminate future threats stemming from pre-war political mobilization (Balcells, 2010; 2017).

These theories provide a rich set of explanations for the literature on violence against civilians in civil wars. In terms of the Syrian civil war, while some of these explanations provide valuable perspectives, they fall short in explaining the scale, timing, and coordination of civilian victimization seen in the Syrian case (such as theories about ideas and emotions, denial and punishment strategies, collective violence, and desperation theory). Some of these theoretical explanations contradict the violence type in Syria, where civilian victimization is mostly connected to the Assad government forces using heavy weapons and other violence methods for strategic gains (such as null theory, principal-agent problem, hearts and minds approaches). Thus, this study will apply the strategic theories as a more suitable framework for analyzing the violence against civilians in the Syrian civil war.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study method to analyse the violence against civilians in the Syrian civil war. The case study is suitable for examining the complex violence process against civilians in the Syrian civil war by situating the Syrian case in a broader literature. The research combines four methods as complementary: document analysis, statistical data analysis, secondary data analysis, and case study analysis.

The most widely used method in this research paper is the *document analysis*. Document analysis is a type of qualitative research that uses a systematic method

to examine documentary evidence and answer specific research questions (Gross, 2018). This method was used to examine the reports and articles by international organizations and non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR). These documents were analyzed to identify the methods of violence against civilians (aerial bombardment, siege warfare, chemical weapon attacks, mass detentions, and torture) in the Syrian civil war and their implications on the civilians.

Second, the study uses statistical data analysis method to scale the violence against civilians during the civil war in Syria. By the data from different reports and articles by international organizations and non-governmental organizations were examined to figure out civilian casualty numbers, the change throughout the years, and displacement data to provide an empirical overview on the scale of the civilian victimization. The purpose of this method is not to create new statistical data, but to analyse the existing literature and draw patterns about civilian victimization.

Third, the study uses the secondary data analysis method to examine the existing academic sources and understand different perspectives on how and why civilians have been the target of violence in civil wars. This method enables the research to situate the Syrian case within the broader theoretical debates.

Fourth, the case study analysis method was used to examine violence against civilians in civil wars with a main focus on the Syrian case. The case study method allows for an in-depth analysis focusing on different methods of violence and their implication on civilians in Syrian civil war. The Syrian case was selected because of the scale, duration, and intensity of civilian victimization. Rather than aiming comparison between two or multiple cases, the case study analysis enables detailed assessment of single study (Gustafsson, 2017).

4. VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Syrian civil war, which erupted in 2011 following widespread anti-government protests, quickly became one of the most complex and destructive conflicts of the 21st century. The uprising began on 15 March 2011 in Daraa, when security forces arrested and tortured school children for their anti-government graffiti. These protests constituted the first demands for political reform and human rights, then for the overthrow of president Bashar al-Assad, later escalated into a full-scale civil war (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025). The government's deadly responses – such as firing on protesters, mass arrests, and torture under detention – led the protests to spread to other cities, including Damascus suburbs, Aleppo, Hama, Idlib and Latakia. These urban areas were the opposition strongholds and had mobilization structures that increased the protesters mobilization ability (Al Jazeera, 2011; BBC News, 2011; Marei, 2020; Sinjab, 2011).

The conflict, then, escalated into a complex civil war involving many domestic and international actors. The war evolved into three main fronts; the Assad government, backed by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah; the Syrian opposition, backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and US-led coalition; and SDG, backed by the USA and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Global Conflict Tracker, 2025a). The government's eventual collapse in 2024 left a catastrophic humanitarian legacy characterized by mass atrocities, mass displacement, and the erosion of Syria's social structure. This section examines how the Assad government responded to the opposition with systematic violence against civilians to eliminate opposition forces and maintain their power.

4.1. Instruments of Violence Against Civilians in the Syrian Civil War

In 2011, when the civil war intensified, the Assad government forces began to use violence against opposition. Over time, especially in 2012 and 2013, different methods of violence were used for civilian victimization. In this study, main violence methods are presented to provide empirical evidence for demonstrating the Assad administrations use of strategic violence against civilians. The most common methods were aerial bombardments, siege warfare, chemical weapons attacks, massacres, and tortures. These different methods of violence allowed the Assad government forces to cause massive harm to politically mobilized civilian populations in the Syrian civil war. The main instruments of violence against civilians during the Syrian civil war can be summarized in terms of their methods and documented humanitarian impacts. Table 1 provides an overview of the main instruments of violence attributed primarily to the Syrian government and its allies during the conflict.

Table 1. Main instruments of violence against civilians in the Syrian civil war*

Method	Description	Estimated impact
Aerial bombardment	airstrikes, artillery shelling, and barrel bombs	52,909 civilians killed
Detention and torture	arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and systematic torture	over 130,000 cases of detention or disappearance and 78,383 deaths in detention facilities
Siege warfare	starvation (denial of food, water), humanitarian aid blockade	33 communities besieged
Chemical weapons	sarin nerve agent, chlorine gas, and sulfur mustard	222 documented attacks causing 1,514 deaths and 11,080 injuries

*The instruments of violence used by the Assad government against civilians during the Syrian civil war are examined according to their scale and impact on the civilian population, as documented in existing reports. Instruments resulting in the greatest civilian casualties and the widest geographical coverage, such as aerial bombardment and artillery shelling, are considered first, followed by other instruments, mass detention and torture, siege warfare, and chemical weapons attacks. This order reflects both the frequency of use and the scale of the humanitarian consequences, allowing for a more systematic examination of the violence perpetrated by the Assad government against civilians during the conflict.

Source: Author's own study based on SNHR, UN, and human rights organizations reports.

4.1.1. Aerial Bombardment

In the civil war, the widespread use of aerial bombardment and artillery shelling by the Assad administration and its allies, mainly Russian forces, in opposition areas was one of the main destructive violence method. Almost all the cities that were under the control of opposition – such as Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus Suburbs, and other – were the target of air bombardment from the early years of the war (Hall, 2018; SNHR, 2017). According to the SNHR data, the primary cause for civilian victimization in the civil war was the systematic and deliberate bombardment on the civilian areas.

The aerial bombardment against civilian areas in Syrian civil war was one of the most fatal violence method. According to the SNHR (2025), the aerial bombardments by the Assad forces and their allies killed 52,909 civilians. Especially, Russian forces' aerial bombardment caused massive destruction in civilian areas. According to conflict monitoring organization Airwars (2021), Russia's military actions in Syrian civil war led to deaths of at least 23,936 civilians, which makes Russia one of the deadliest foreign actors involved in the civil war. These numbers were derived from local sources and verified, but they are considered to be well below the estimated numbers due to the access restrictions on the ground.

One of the most widespread tactics of aerial bombardment was the use of barrel bombs. Barrel bombs are often loaded with shrapnel and dropped from helicopters or planes. According to the SNHR (2021), more than 80,000 barrel bombs were dropped on opposition-held areas between 2011 and 2024. These bombs are reported to kill at least 11,087 civilians, 1,821 of whom were children. These weapons were most commonly used in densely populated urban areas and killed civilians indiscriminately. Damascus and the Damascus Suburbs were the areas where the most barrel bombs were dropped (approx. 29% of total records), followed by Aleppo Governorate (approx. 21%), then Daraa (approx. 14%), and Idlib (approx. 13%). The indiscriminate use of barrel bombs in civilian areas caused massive physical and psychological harm to civilians. The report stated that “Syrian government does not care about the reputation of the army institution, but rather uses it as a tool in maintaining power.”

Many of the aerial bombardments were confirmed to violate international humanitarian law, including the deliberate targeting of civilian locations. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2024) report by The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented numerous attacks by government or Russian warplanes on hospitals, UN-supported shelters, markets, bakeries, and schools. Physicians for Human Rights (2024; 2025) recorded more than 600 attacks on medical facilities between 2011 and 2024, with Syrian and Russian forces responsible for more than 90% of these attacks. These facilities were not located near military targets but were often deliberately marked as civilian and were nevertheless repeatedly bombed.

4.1.2. Mass Detention and Torture

Mass detention and torture were key violence methods for the Assad government forces throughout the Syrian civil war. While the practice of detention and torture has been present in the Syrian administration prior to the start of the civil war, it is important to understand that the conflict led to the growth of both concepts and the change of their role within Syria. First of all, the increase in the number of people being held in prison and subjected to torture during the civil war involved individuals who had either direct or indirect connections with opposition groups, from activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, to ordinary people living in opposition-held territories. In other words, the use of detention and torture has become an integral part of the government's policy of eliminating opposition groups during the civil war. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2025), mandated by the United Nations Human Rights Council, has documented more than 130,000 cases of arbitrary detention, abduction, or enforced disappearance since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. These methods, which included systematic torture and inhumane detention conditions, were carried out as a state policy to take revenge, silence dissent, dismantle the opposition and create widespread fear among population. The report states that the Assad government forces were held responsible for the majority of these violence methods and the government committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Within this violence method, the Syrian prison system played an important role. According to the SNHR report (2025, 18 March), at least 78,383 civilians were tortured to death in the prisons and security centers. This figure demonstrates the systematic state violence by using the institutions as a tool to repress opposition. Most of the missing are believed to be held in secret facilities such as Sednaya Prison, notorious for mass executions, starvation, and extreme torture. In a 2017 report, Amnesty International described Sednaya as a "human slaughterhouse" and estimated that between 2011 and 2015 alone, 5,000 to 13,000 people were executed at the facility. These executions were often carried out in secret, after summary trials or without trial at all (Amnesty International, 2017). Survivors have provided testimonies revealing that abuses such as electric shocks, burning, waterboarding, nail pulling, rape, and beatings with blunt objects were common in these prisons. In addition to physical torture, psychological torture, such as prolonged solitary confinement, mock executions, and the loss of contact with the outside world, was also common. Detention and torture practices extended to political activists, doctors, humanitarian workers, journalists, civilians from areas perceived as anti-government (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2025).

International organizations have concluded that these acts constitute crimes against humanity. The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on Syria (2024, p. 49) stated that "the Syrian Government's systematic use of severe mistreatment and torture during interrogations at detention facilities

has been a deliberate strategy aimed at suppressing and punishing opposition and extracting confessions or information.” The scale and characteristics of mass detentions and torture during the Syrian civil war reveal how the administration’s detention system functioned as a mechanism of repression and control. Table 2 summarizes key indicators and documented evidence regarding detention practices during the conflict.

Table 2. Mass detention and torture in the Syrian civil war

Indicator	Documented evidence
Arbitrary detention, abduction, or enforced disappearance cases	more than 130,000 civilians
Civilian deaths	at least 78,383
Main targets of detention	activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, civilians in opposition-held areas
Known detention facilities	Sednaya Prison, Mezzeh Military Airport, Adra Central Prison and other detention centers
Documented torture methods	electric shocks, burning, waterboarding, nail pulling, rape, severe beatings
Strategic functions of detention system	suppression of dissent, intelligence extraction, intimidation of civilian population

Source: Author’s own study based on UN, Amnesty International, and SNHR reports.

4.1.3. Siege Warfare

One of the most fatal violence methods used in the Syrian civil war – mainly by the Assad government – was siege warfare. This violence method systematically deprived communities of food, water, medicine and humanitarian aid. Many human rights organizations have labelled this method as war crime or crime against humanity (D’Alessandra, Gillett, 2019; Power, 2016). According to a report by the SNHR (2022), between 2011 and 2024, at least 33 communities or neighborhoods were subjected to sieges and starvation by the Assad government forces. These besieged areas were deprived of domestic/foreign aid and subjected to aerial bombardment that caused the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians.

In one of the most notorious examples, the siege of Eastern Ghouta, which was home to more than 800,000 people, lasted more than five years and created a humanitarian disaster (Porter, 2017). The Assad government forces’ blockade of food, water and medical supplies led to the deaths of more than 13,000 civilians in this city (SNHR, 2018). In this process, civilians were forced to survive on grass, boiled leaves, and expired medical supplies (Save the Children, 2016). Many eyewitness and video evidence confirm that the Assad government deliberately used siege warfare and starvation as a method to coerce opposition forces into surrender. The siege and starvation of Eastern Ghouta were defined by the UN as war crimes

and crimes against humanity and were identified as “barbaric and medieval” (United Nations, 2018). UN Commission Chairman Paulo Pinheiro stated that “[i]t is completely abhorrent that besieged civilians were indiscriminately attacked, and systematically denied food and medicine” (OHCHR, 2018).

4.1.4. Chemical Weapons Attacks

Chemical weapons attacks in the Syrian civil war were primarily attributed to the Assad government forces. According to the SNHR report (2023), a total of 222 chemical weapons attacks have been documented in Syria between 2012 and 2023. Approx. 98% of these attacks were carried out by Syrian government forces, while approx. 2% were carried out by ISIS. The report states that 1,514 people were killed in 217 chemical weapons attacks carried out by the Syrian government, including 1,413 civilians, 214 of whom were children and 262 women, 94 armed opposition fighters, and seven Syrian government soldiers held in armed opposition prisons. 11,080 people were also injured in the chemical weapons attacks carried out by the Syrian government, including five government soldiers held in armed opposition prisons.

A comprehensive report by Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend (2019, p. 3) of the Global Public Policy Institute argues that the number of chemical weapons attacks is much higher. According to the report, there were at least 336 confirmed banned chemical weapons attacks against civilians in Syria between 2011 and 2019. “It is clear that the Syrian military has consistently prioritized striking population centers over rebel positions on the frontlines, even in the face of defeat on the ground,” said the report.

The Eastern Ghouta attack in 2013 demonstrates the deliberate use of chemical weapons against civilian populations, including women and children. According to a report by SNHR (2022), as a result of this attack, 1,144 people died of asphyxiation that day, including 1,119 civilians, including 99 children and 194 women and 25 armed opposition fighters. A further 5,935 people suffered respiratory and suffocation symptoms and were injured. According to the report, the attacks, which used large amounts of sarin gas, were carried out after midnight in the early hours of the morning, while people were asleep, thus, minimizing their chances of survival. It demonstrates that the missile launchers knew that the highly toxic gases would sink to the ground and remain close to the ground, rather than be dispersed or blown away by any wind.

Despite Syria’s accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013, attacks continued. The 2023 SNHR report also distinguishes the chemical weapons attacks based on UN Security Council resolutions addressing the use of chemical weapons. The Syrian government carried out 33 attacks before and 184 after Security Council Resolution 2118,¹ while 115 chemical weapons

¹ Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013) is about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It condemned the use of chemical weapons particularly following the Ghouta chemical attack in

attacks were carried out after Security Council Resolution 2209.² The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has repeatedly stated that these attacks constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, violations of international humanitarian law and the 1925 Geneva Protocol (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2024).

In 2017, a Syrian government warplane attacked the town of Khan Shaykhun in the north-western province of Idlib with a nerve agent, killing at least 90 people, including 30 children (Human Rights Watch, 2017). In 2018, in the city of Douma, Assad government forces conducted another chemical weapon attack, which resulted in the deaths of 39 civilians by asphyxiation and injuring more than 550 (SNHR, 2019). As a result, the Syrian government is allegedly highly responsible for the use of chemical weapons and other grave violations that constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes. The scale and distribution of chemical weapons use during the Syrian civil war can be summarized through available monitoring reports. Table 3 shows the main indicators of chemical weapons attacks and their documented humanitarian impacts.

Table 3. Chemical weapons attacks in the Syrian civil war

Indicator	Value
Total documented chemical weapons attacks (2012–2023)	222 attacks
Attacks attributed to Syrian government forces	98%
Attacks attributed to ISIS	2%
Total deaths from chemical weapons attacks	1,514 deaths
Injured victims	11,080 injured
Major attack example	Eastern Ghouta, Khan Shaykhun, Douma

Source: Author’s own study based on SNHR, Human Rights Watch, and Global Public Policy Institute reports.

4.2. The Implications of the Civil War on Civilians in Syria

The Syrian civil war officially ended on December 8, 2024, when Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew the Assad government in a 12-day offensive. However, the Assad government’s humanitarian legacy remains devastating.

August 2013. It is clearly stated in the resolution that, “chemical weapons have been used in the ongoing conflict between the parties in the Syrian Arab Republic, also against civilians, including children, on a relatively large scale.” The resolution mandated the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile under international supervision and supported the framework agreement between the United States and Russia for the disarmament of Syria’s chemical arsenal.

² Security Council Resolution 2209 (2015) was the first UN resolution to explicitly attribute responsibility to the Syrian government for chemical attacks after the disarmament process had begun. The Resolution condemned in the strongest terms the use of chlorine gas as a weapon and reaffirmed that chemical weapons use constitutes a serious violation of international law.

The Assad government is responsible for widespread atrocities, including torture, chemical weapons attacks, and mass detentions, many of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2025).

Although the total number of deaths in the Syrian civil war varies depending on different sources, according to the SNHR (2025), 656,493 people have been verified to be killed in the Syrian civil war since the revolution began in March 2011. According to the SNHR report, out of these total number at least 231,805 civilian have been killed since the beginning of the civil war. It is suggested in the report that 91% of these civilian deaths were carried out by the Assad government and its allies (Iranian and Russian forces). Among these victims were 16,659 women and 30,498 children, killed by government forces, which demonstrate a pattern of mass and indiscriminate violence against the civilian populations throughout the war.³ While estimates of casualties during the Syrian civil war vary depending on the source, current monitoring reports provide a rough overview of the extent of civilian casualties. Table 4 summarizes documented civilian casualties and their demographic distribution.

Table 4. Civilian casualties in the Syrian civil war (2011–2025)

Category	Number of victims
Total deaths in the conflict	656,493
Total civilian deaths	231,805
Civilian deaths attributed to the Assad government and allies (91%)	210,943
Women killed	16,659
Children killed	30,498

Source: (SNHR, 2025, 18 March).

These numbers are verified by reliable sources, however, the conflict environment in Syria makes it harder to report the exact numbers. A comprehensive report by the United Nations Human Rights Office (2022) presents the highest ever estimate of civilian deaths related to the conflict in Syria. The report covers the period from March 2011 to March 2021, and estimated that at least 306,887 civilians were killed as a direct result of the fighting, which is equal to approx. 1.5% of the country's pre-war population. This number includes 143,350 civilian

³ While women and children constitute a smaller proportion of recorded civilian casualties, this does not contradict the claim that civilians are deliberately targeted. In the context of many civil wars, adult men are disproportionately overrepresented among civilian victims, as they are often perceived by state forces as potential supporters or collaborators of opposing groups. Therefore, men of combat age are more frequently subjected to detention, execution, enforced disappearance, or other forms of violence. Consequently, the demographic structure of civilian casualties in civil wars shows a higher proportion of adult male victims, even when violence against civilians is systematic and deliberate.

deaths who were verified with detailed information, such as the person's full name, birth date, and place of death (OHCHR, 2022).

The civil war in Syria not only led to the victimization of hundreds of thousands of civilians but also displaced millions of people. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2025), more than 14 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes since the war began in 2011. An estimated 7.4 million of them are displaced within Syria, often in areas devastated by bombardment, siege, or ongoing insecurity. Within the country, 70% of the population requires humanitarian assistance, and an estimated 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line. Meanwhile, more than 6 million Syrian refugees fled from the country, primarily to neighboring countries (such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq), Europe, and other countries. This mass displacement was a direct result of systematic violence against civilians.

4.3. A Comparative Perspective: Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars

The Syrian civil war reflects broader trends identified in the literature on civil wars, where the state or dominant armed actors frequently use violence against civilians as a strategic tool. Internal conflict experts have long argued that civilian suffering is not merely a byproduct of war, but often a calculated strategy aimed at weakening rebel organizations, preventing civilian cooperation with opposition groups, and consolidating political control over disputed territories (Downes, 2011; Kalyvas, 2006; Valentino et al., 2004). Therefore, the Syrian case fits a broader empirical pattern observed in many major civil wars over the past thirty years.

A notable example of this is the Bosnian War (1992–1995), where systematic violence against civilians, including massacres, forced displacement, and ethnic cleansing, was used to change the demographics of disputed territories and consolidate territorial control. The ethnic cleansing campaign, primarily carried out by Bosnian Serb forces, aimed to eliminate populations perceived as political or ethnically hostile, thereby reshaping the political geography of the conflict (Burg, Shoup, 1999; Toal, Dahlman, 2011). The Srebrenica massacre of 1995, in which more than 8,000 Bosniak civilians were killed, stands out as one of the most infamous examples of the deliberate targeting of civilians in modern European conflicts (Power, 2002).

A similar logic of mass violence against civilians can be observed in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Although the Rwandan case is often classified as genocide rather than a traditional civil war, the dynamics of organized civilian victimization were closely linked to the political and military struggles for power. Mass killings of Tutsi civilians and moderate Hutus were organized by state institutions and militia networks to eliminate perceived political threats and maintain the authority of extremist groups within the administration (Des Forges, 1999; Straus, 2006).

More recent civil wars in the Middle East and North Africa exhibit similar patterns. In the ongoing conflict in Yemen, aerial bombardments, blockades,

and attacks on civilian infrastructure have resulted in numerous civilian casualties and humanitarian devastation. The Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes and blockades of ports and supply routes have significantly contributed to civilian suffering, leading the United Nations to describe the conflict as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises (Salisbury, 2020; United Nations, 2022).

Similarly, the conflict in Libya following the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's administration in 2011 involved repeated attacks on civilian areas and infrastructure as rival groups vied for control of territory. The disintegration of the Libyan state and the proliferation of armed militias led to widespread violations against civilians, including indiscriminate bombing, arbitrary detention, and forced displacement (Pack, 2019; Wehrey, 2018).

Taken together, these examples reveal that the Syrian conflict is part of a broader pattern observed in contemporary civil wars where violence against civilians frequently serves strategic political and military purposes. A brief comparison with other civil wars further highlights both the similarities and differences in the patterns of violence against civilians observed in the Syrian conflict and similar dynamics in Bosnia, Rwanda, Yemen, and Libya, where the state or sovereign armed actors deliberately target the civilian population to weaken opposition forces or reshape territorial control. Although the instruments and aims of violence have differed in these cases – ranging from ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and genocide in Rwanda to aerial bombardment and siege warfare in Yemen and Syria, and militia-based violence in Libya – the aims of civilian victimization have had many similarities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined state violence against civilians in civil wars with an in-depth analysis of the Syrian case. The study does not demonstrate the civilian victimization in Syria as a collateral damage or unintended consequence of conventional warfare (Walzer, 1977). Parallely, the study does not acknowledge the civilian victimization in Syria as mainly a principal-agent problem (Shapiro, 2013; Weinstein, 2006), or emotion-based violence (Petersen, 2002). Instead, the analysis of the study demonstrates that violence against civilians in Syria was mainly strategic, based on political control and deliberate coercion. The finding of the study shows that the Syrian case is applicable for other strategic violence theories; such as Kalyvas' (2006) *selective violence*, Pape's (1996) *denial and punishment strategies* and Sullivan's (2012) *collective violence strategy*, the *desperation theory* (Downes, 2011; Hultman, 2007), and *the theory of indirect violence* by Balcells (2010).

The Syrian case clearly demonstrates that the civilian victimization was used mainly by the Assad government as a strategic tool to stay in power and to control territories. Different instruments of violence (aerial bombardment, siege warfare, chemical weapon attacks, and torture) were applied in opposition-held areas

to deter the civilians from collaboration with opposition forces and to punish those who are thought to be collaborating. The systematic bombardment of civilian areas, destroying civilian infrastructure, and indiscriminate killing of civilians by the Assad government forces, by using different violence methods, demonstrate how violence was used as a collective punishment strategy. In Syria, Eastern Ghouta was a notorious example for the *punishment strategies* and *collective violence strategies*, as the city was besieged for more than five years, deprived from any aid, and systematically bombed. Another example was the Saydnaya prison where state institutions were used for mass detention, torture and collective punishment. These examples show how civilian victimization was deliberate and strategic in the Syrian civil war.

The effectiveness of these instruments of violence can be assessed within the context of the administration's primary objective of maintaining political control and weakening opposition forces. In many instances, the systematic use of aerial bombardment, siege warfare, and detention has contributed to the collapse of opposition-controlled areas and the displacement of civilians perceived to be supporting anti-government groups. These strategies have helped the administration regain control over key territories, particularly in areas such as Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta. However, the use of such large-scale violence has also led to serious humanitarian consequences, international condemnation, and long-term social and economic devastation. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed or injured, millions of people were displaced, and the demography of the state has changed. Thus, while these tools may have been partially effective in achieving short-term military and political objectives, they have deepened the humanitarian crisis and contributed to the long-term instability of the Syrian state. The destruction of cities and the dismantling social life in Syria caused a situation that needs decades to recover.

In conclusion, this study questioned an important problem: why civilians have become the center of violence in contemporary civil wars. The Syrian civil war demonstrates that violence against civilians is best understood as strategic and deliberate actions to shape the wartime power struggles and postwar political order. By empirically linking the Syrian case to existing literature theories of strategic violence, this article contributes to the literature of political violence studies and conflict studies.

STRATEGICZNE WYKORZYSTYWANIE PRZEMOCY WOBEC LUDNOŚCI CYWILNEJ W WOJNACH DOMOWYCH: STUDIUM PRZYPADKU WOJNY DOMOWEJ W SYRII

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje strategiczne wykorzystywanie przemocy wobec ludności cywilnej w wojnach domowych, odwołując się do wojny domowej w Syrii jako studium przypadku. W pracy zastosowano teorie przemocy strategicznej jako ramy analityczne służące wyjaśnieniu, w jaki sposób i dlaczego rządy autorytarne wykorzystują przemoc wobec ludności cywilnej jako narzędzie polityczne, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem przypadku Syrii. Badanie ma charakter jakościowego studium przypadku i opiera się na metodzie analizy dokumentów. Wyniki wskazują, że różne formy przemocy wobec ludności cywilnej podczas wojny domowej w Syrii były

stosowane przede wszystkim przez rząd Baszara al-Asada i jego sojuszników jako strategiczny instrument utrzymywania kontroli nad zagrożeniami politycznymi w czasie konfliktu oraz kształtowania powojennego porządku politycznego. Artykuł wnosi wkład do badań nad konfliktami oraz nad przemocą polityczną.

Słowa kluczowe: przemoc wobec ludności cywilnej; wiktyimizacja ludności cywilnej; wojna domowa w Syrii; rząd Asada

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