

Beyond the Square: Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings focuses on the urban spatial dynamics of the mass protest movements that have convulsed the Arab region since December 2010. The volume shifts attention away from public squares — and in particular Tahrir Square in Cairo — to consider the broader urban context in which the uprisings unfolded and how it has intersected with the events themselves. The essays are topically and geographically diverse, exploring a range of sociospatial phenomena in countries that have been at the heart of the Arab uprisings as well as those countries that have appeared peripheral to the regional upheaval. This breadth of perspective highlights the centrality of space and spatial concerns to the ongoing political transformations in the region. In this way, the volume provides a distinctive — and critical — analysis of one of the most significant political events of our time.

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"Revolutions do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are caused by a complex mix of domestic and international factors. They ultimately come to fruition in places, and not just in central squares. *Beyond the Square* fills a major gap in our understanding of how urban space factors into popular uprisings. It is a valuable contribution to the analysis of space and politics."

Asef Bayat, author of *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*

"Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta's *Beyond the Square* is unique in its scope and theoretical sophistication. Discussions of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) urbanism have tended to focus on a few "usual suspects": Cairo, Dubai, or the Maghreb. *Beyond the Square* expands the conversation, covering a much wider range of case studies and orchestrating them in a coherent way that speaks to the sociospatial in theoretically generative ways, going beyond the central, highly visible urban forms and delving deeper into less tangible but no less important sociopolitical contexts of contemporary urban politics in the MENA."

Ahmed Kanna, author of *Dubai, the City as Corporation*

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Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts), 2012

Part 1 (detail)

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Beyond the Square: Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings

Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta, Editors

BEYOND THE SQUARE

URBANISM
AND THE ARAB
UPRISINGS

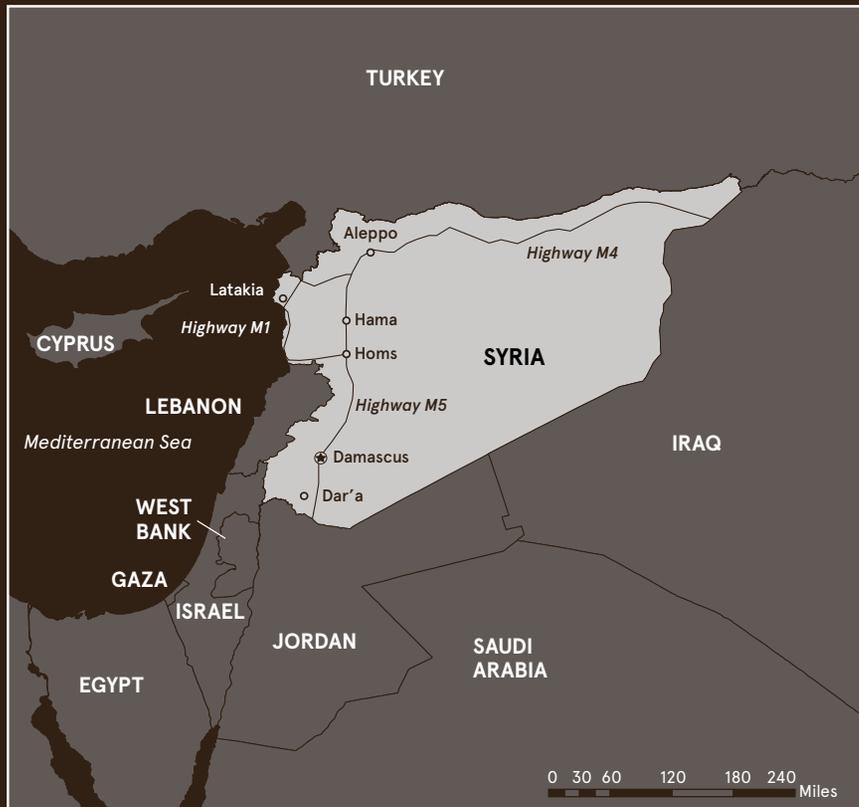
Deen Sharp and Claire Panetta, editors

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Urbicide and the Arrangement of Violence in Syria

Deen Sharp



ArcGIS World Countries Layer Package (<http://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?useExisting=1>).

Images of decimated urban corridors from across Syria have circulated widely in news media since the outbreak of armed conflict in early 2011. Such images are often mobilized as evidence of conflict’s futility and inherent evil. The urban ruination on display – from cities such as Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and the surroundings of Damascus – is on a scale not witnessed since the vast urban destruction of World War Two. These images highlight the fact that the destruction of the built environment has extended well beyond military targets or “collateral” damage to include, for example, entire residential neighborhoods.

The concept of urbicide can be broadly understood as the deliberate destruction of the built environment. It is among the central analytics through which contemporary work in political geography has sought to move beyond the idea that such destruction results simply from the evil inherent in conflict. As Martin Coward has observed, the term has been deployed to resist placing the large-scale destruction of the built environment into the “conceptual dustbin” of “wanton destruction” (Coward 2009: 23).

Significantly, despite the widespread destruction of the built environment in Syria, the idea of urbicide has not been applied to the vast devastation of the country.¹ This essay, which is primarily theoretical in orientation, attempts to redress this lacuna in the scholarship on Syria’s ongoing civil war. However, I apply the concept to the Syrian conflict not simply to provide insight into the latter, but also to interrogate how we understand “urbicide” and to expose the concept’s limitations. In so doing, I hope to extend our application of the term beyond acts of destruction (and, as we will see, construction) to include a conceptualization of urbicide as a broader and continuous process.

Thus, this essay does not detail the empirical evidence of the built environment’s demolition since the onset of the Syrian uprising. For instance, it does not engage with the destruction of “symbolic” or “cultural heritage” buildings, which could be considered a distinctive form of urbicide.² Instead, and in line with Coward, I emphasize those elements of the built environment that are often excluded from analyses of urban

1. This essay’s focus on the destruction and transformation of the built environment in the course of the Syrian uprisings is not intended to marginalize the profound human suffering that the brutal conflict has produced. This piece is grounded in an approach that understands the human to be entangled in an arrangement of material and discursive elements; it subsequently considers a focus on the built environment as simultaneously a consideration of the human condition.

2. The destruction of Syria’s rich cultural heritage has gained much international attention and analysis (see, for instance, Deknatel 2014 and Youseff 2014) and various organizations monitor Syria’s cultural heritage. All six of Syria’s World Heritage sites have been placed on UNESCO’s “List of World Heritage in Danger.”

destruction – e.g., businesses, residences, and infrastructure. In addition, however, this essay engages the concept of urbicide beyond the idea of destruction. Specifically, it draws and expands upon other scholarship that has highlighted, somewhat counterintuitively, the (re)construction of the built environment as a form of urbicide.

This essay dispels some of the lingering ambiguity over what urbicide entails – either materially or immaterially – by looking carefully both at what is being targeted physically in the Syrian context and what is at stake politically or ideologically. Through this discussion of targets and stakes, I add another dimension to our understanding of urbicide. Specifically, I show how the concept can also include a struggle over urban arrangements, which I understand as a number of “systematizing networks which give a provisional order to urban life,” and which run through the city but also extend beyond its borders (Amin and Thrift 2002: 3). This struggle can entail destruction or construction of the built environment, but it can also involve processes in between those poles, such as granting or denying access to infrastructure like electricity, water systems, or roads. Further, I illustrate how, through the violent imposition of an urban arrangement, urbicide can paradoxically be generative of new spaces, such as a subterranean environment or new infrastructural configurations.

I argue that urbicide is the violent imposition of, or struggle for, urban arrangements meant to fix a given urban environment into a homogenized ethnic and/or political enclave. However, such efforts to enforce homogeneity are futile because an urban arrangement – even one violently imposed – necessarily creates the possibility of rearrangement and plurality. As Coward notes, drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger and focusing on the idea that “buildings” are constitutive of shared space and ineluctable alterity, “the built environment is always *already a shared space*” (2009: 61–62, emphasis Coward). As a result and as I show below, the violent imposition of an urban arrangement (i.e., urbicide) can paradoxically be generative and result in the configuration of new spaces or the creation of new urban arrangements.

Finally, to illuminate the distinct sociospatial formations urbicide engenders, it is imperative to consider not only the area of these arrangements, but their *volume* as well. This requires a shift from thinking only in terms of surfaces and areas to also thinking three-dimensionally in terms of height and depth (Elden 2013: 33; Weizman 2002, 2007). Considering how control of the skies or subterranean space forms urban arrangements provides a more expansive understanding of urbicide.

URBICIDE

Urbicide is the fusion of the word “urban” and the suffix “-cide.” While the urban is understood to be an intricate ecology of buildings and infrastructural arrangements that facilitates material and social circulations within it (Coward 2012), the suffix -cide indicates killing or slaying. Urbicide therefore has typically been understood to refer to the intentional destruction of the urban. Coward (2007) argues that urbicide is articulated primarily in relation to genocide, and he highlights two connections between the terms. Firstly, urbicide draws upon genocide’s sense of coordinated, systematic killing. Secondly, as a word ending in the suffix -cide, the term resonates with the ultimate crime of genocide (Coward 2007).

The term first rose to prominence in American media and activist circles in the context of the large-scale urban transformations of the 1950s and 60s. Notably, Ada Louise Huxtable used the term in a 1968 *New York Times* article entitled, “Lessons in Urbicide,” in which she defined the concept as the killing of history and memory through the destruction of the built form. However, despite the circulation of the term throughout the 1960s and 70s, scholars usually identify Marshall Berman as the concept’s main propagator (see for instance Abujidi 2014 and Graham 2003). In his 1987 article, “Life in the Shadows: The Underside of New York City,” Berman defined urbicide as the killing of the city: “These stricken people belong to one of the largest shadow communities in the world, victims of a great crime without a name. Let us give it a name now: *urbicide*, the murder of a city” (emphasis Berman).

In articulating his understanding of the concept, Berman focused on the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which cut through his childhood neighborhood. In his view, the highway resulted not only in an assault on the physical structures of the built environment and the material dispossession of displaced residents, but also in a loss of identity. Berman claimed that the city was a place where some unspecified identity, a point for which Coward (2007) critiqued Berman, could take root, and thus the destruction of the urban built environment destroyed such identity, and in so doing, tore apart the very fabric of the city.

Since Berman’s use of the term urbicide, scholars, human rights groups, and international organizations have shown great interest in the concept and its associated phenomena. Scholars have applied it across a wide range of temporal and geographical contexts, from the 1992–1995 Bosnian war (Association of Architects DAS-SABIH 1993; Coward 2009) and contemporary South Korea (Watson 2013) to Lebanon’s civil war (Fregonese 2009) and the Israel/Palestine conflict (Abujidi 2014; Graham 2004). Further, in

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Tammam Azzam,
Storeys, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas,
185 x 235 cm,
Courtesy of the artist
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parallel with the growth of this scholarship, organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), the International Crisis Group (ICG), and UN agencies have shown an increased concern over the deliberate destruction of the built environment. HRW, for instance, has examined the phenomenon in conflict settings, calling for parties to be held accountable for the calculated demolition of “civilian structures” (see Solvang and Neistat 2014).

What is Targeted and What is at Stake?

Berman’s conception of urbicide resulted in a rich seam of work that has attempted to think through what exactly is targeted in the deliberate destruction of the built environment (such as Fregonese 2009; Shaw 2004). Stephen Graham (2003, 2004) has been one of the most notable scholars in this effort. Through his work on the Israel–Palestine conflict, Graham has greatly enhanced our understanding of what acts of urbicide target physically, how they do so, and with what consequences. Specifically, Graham introduced the ideas of “asymmetric urbicide” and the “denial of the city.” In defining “asymmetric urbicide,” Graham details the Israeli use of the D-9 armored Caterpillar bulldozer to demolish Palestinian urban spaces; this form of urbicide is asymmetric because Palestinian violence is “totally dwarfed by the vast scale, and continuous nature, of Israeli violence and repression against Palestinians” (2004: 193).

To illustrate the “denial of the city,” Graham suggests that both Palestinians and Israelis have attacked the “soft” target sites of everyday urban modernity, such as bars, bus stops, restaurants, and shopping centers, to deny their enemy the benefits of city life (2004: 128). In addition, Graham details the Israeli Defense Force’s destruction of Palestinian roads, utilities, electricity, communication networks, and medical infrastructure, which he argues is aimed at denying Palestinians the “fruits of a modernization that Israelis themselves have long enjoyed” (2004: 75). Thus, the targeting of infrastructure emerges as a means of “denying” the city to certain groups, rather than “killing” or “murdering” it.³

Graham (2004) further extends his consideration of urbicide by drawing on the work of Eyal Weizman (2004), who also focuses on the Israel/Palestine conflict. As Graham explains, Weizman argues that the Israeli “strategy of deliberate urban *destruction* is closely integrated with Israel’s efforts at carefully planned *construction* of place and space in the Occupied Territories” (2004: 194, emphasis Graham). In this view, urbicide

3. While Berman does discuss infrastructure, and specifically the highway, it is not a central concern for his conception of urbicide.

is not purely a destructive phenomenon, but can also be constructive. Thus a whole range of policies and practices—including discriminatory planning and building regulations, the introduction of surveillance systems and checkpoints, and the construction of roads and other infrastructure networks—must also be accounted for in the framework of urbicide (Graham 2003: 65–66). Notably, highlighting these constructive dimensions encourages us to think of the phenomenon as an ongoing *process* as opposed to a single, isolated act of destruction.

Both Berman’s and Graham’s accounts have provided important insights into the material targets of urbicide; however, they have been less analytically and theoretically convincing as to what is at stake politically. In outlining “the politics of urban destruction,” Martin Coward (2007, 2009) addresses this concern. He argues that the logic and political stake of urbicide is the destruction of public/shared spaces (via the targeting of buildings), through which the very possibility of sociopolitical heterogeneity is removed (2009: 70). Coward terms this threatened heterogeneity “being-with-others” and claims that it is central to the formation of identities, which never exist in isolation but are in fact fundamentally contingent on the existence of an “other.”

Such heterogeneity (or plurality) is destroyed by groups, inter alia ethno-nationalists, who then attempt to replace it with a particular kind of homogeneity. As Coward explains, “the built environment is destroyed and an enclave politics is enacted in which partial homogenisations are achieved” (2007).⁴ However, the enforcement of such homogeneity is not confined to political views, but entails a reconstitution of the individual. Identity and difference are therefore the central political stakes in acts of urbicide. In this regard, Coward contends that the use of urbicide is a partial attempt to “re-constitute existence as being comprised of separate homogenous, sovereign individuals/groups” (2009: 95).⁵

4. This process is partial because, as Coward stresses, homogenization is impossible and the built environment itself “resists” such politics as it is fundamentally public and thus always open to alterity (2007).

5. Coward notes that to fully understand the political stakes of urbicide requires a reworking of liberal political theory and its establishment of the individual as the political subject. In Coward’s reformulation of liberal political theory, buildings are treated as an integral part of human existence. As he explains, buildings should not be considered as merely objects with instrumental value, but as parts of spatial networks that shape human existence (Coward 2009: 110). Using this conception of the relationship between people and buildings, Coward goes on to challenge liberal theory’s idea of the autonomous or sovereign individual.

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Urbicidal Arrangements

However, in illuminating what is at stake in acts of urbicide, Coward has lost sight of Berman and Graham's insights regarding material targets. Coward (2007, 2009) focuses specifically on the destruction of buildings in his account of urbicide and largely neglects the broader urban arrangements in which buildings are situated. Indeed, in more recent work (2012), Coward has refined his conception of the urban to align more closely with Graham's suggestion that both buildings and infrastructure are constitutive of an urban assemblage or arrangement.⁶ To that end, he has introduced the term metacities (2012). The metacity approach understands the urban to refer not only to the existential "quality of buildings," but rather to a complex ecology and infrastructural arrangement. Infrastructure is particularly critical to Coward's understanding of the metacity: "roads, public transport, communications, supply logistics, power generation, and waste removal are all vital in the constitution of the metacity" (472).

Coward (2012) does not link the concept of metacity to urbicide explicitly; however, the former has important implications for conceptualizing urbicide's targets. Specifically, when the urban is understood not to refer to buildings alone but to metacities as well, urbicide is no longer limited to ethno-nationalists' demolition of buildings to destroy plurality. It can now include attempts to target or gain control of complex urban arrangements and the material and/or social circulations within these arrangements. Urbicide can therefore be conceived not only as the deliberate destruction of the built environment but also as the violent attempt to impose certain urban arrangements in an effort to enforce political and/or ethnic homogeneity.

Understanding the urban as an arrangement made up of metacities necessitates moving away from the image of the city as a whole to one where it is a product of multiple interrelated systems that are continually made and remade. This understanding of the urban as an ever-fluctuating arrangement challenges the idea that a city can be "murdered" (Berman 1987). Cities, unlike people or other organisms, cannot be killed — they can only be (re)arranged or abandoned.

However, to fully comprehend the violent struggle over urban arrangements, this framework for urbicide requires another shift in thinking to the volumetric. It is important to consider urban arrangements not only in terms of flat areas, but also in terms of *volume* — i.e., height and depth. Current accounts of urbicide are too firmly rooted in the surface, with

6. I have chosen to use the term arrangement because Deleuze's concept of assemblage, or *agencement*, is more accurately translated into English as "arrangement" (Phillips 2006).

international organizations (such as HRW and UN agencies) and scholars (for instance, Abujidi 2014; Coward 2009; Graham 2004) focusing their analyses predominately on the bounded space of the city and the destruction (or construction) occurring "on the ground." As Weizman (2002) has expertly pointed out, geopolitics is a flat discourse that ignores the vertical dimension: "Since both politics and law understand place only in terms of the map and the plan, territorial claims marked on maps assume that claims are applicable simultaneously above them and below."

Weizman (2002) highlights the danger of this assumption by pointing out that in the case of Israel/Palestine, a "politics of verticality" has come to drive the logic of Israel's occupation: "New and intricate frontiers were invented... under which the Palestinian Authority was given control over isolated territorial 'islands,' but Israel retained control over the airspace above them and the sub-terrain beneath." I illustrate the centrality of volume to our understanding of urbicide through my exploration of it in the Syrian context.

URBICIDE IN SYRIA

The Syrian uprising began in southwestern Syria, close to the border with Jordan in the city of Dar'a, far removed from the country's main urban centers.⁷ On March 6, 2011, security forces arrested fifteen children, aged 10–15 years, who had graffitied the walls of their school with the popular slogan of the Arab uprisings that was being chanted in the streets of Egypt and Tunisia: "The people demand the fall of the regime!" The security forces transferred the children to the notorious Palestine Intelligence Branch, a principal interrogation center for Syrian military intelligence in Damascus. After their families failed to negotiate their release, Dar'a's residents revolted.⁸ Few, if any, Syrian watchers expected the uprising to begin in this small city.⁹

The government's response was swift and aggressive. By late April 2011, security forces and the military had moved into the city and imposed a

7. Dar'a occupies a vital military position between Damascus and Amman and borders the disputed Golan Heights to the west. According to the 2004 census, the city has a population of just under 100,000 people.

8. Protests reached a tipping point in Dar'a and beyond following the circulation of photos and videos of the tortured body of Hamza Ali Al-Khateeb, a thirteen-year-old boy who was reportedly walking to the town of Dar'a to join the protest when the Syrian security forces arrested him. After a month in custody, Al-Khateeb's body was returned to the family severely mutilated.

9. Dar'a's residents had a reputation in Syria for being loyal to the regime and, perhaps more pertinently, the Syrian Army maintained a large troop presence in the Dar'a province in case of a potential conflict with Israel. As the military analyst Joseph Holliday notes, "Deraa boasts a higher number of brigades per province than anywhere outside of Damascus" (2013: 36).

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complete curfew that lasted for three weeks, causing essential supplies to diminish rapidly (Leenders 2012: 422). Journalist Borzu Daragahi (2011) quoted a Syrian military source who noted that the “situation” in Dar’ a would be attended to by “any means necessary.” The military source added, “Even if this means that the city is to be burned down.” Anthony Shadid (2011), the late *New York Times* journalist, cited residents’ reports that eight tanks drove into Dar’ a with 4,000 to 6,000 troops, and that water, electricity, and phone lines were cut (A1). The city was under siege by the government. UNITAR/UNOSAT undertook a damage assessment of Dar’ a by analyzing satellite imagery from 2010–2014. They concluded that 351 structures had been damaged by 2014, with the majority of harm occurring before September 2013 (UNITAR/UNOSAT 2014a: 6).

That the government was deliberately destroying infrastructure and homes was clear to the city’s residents. It was also apparent that this was meant to send a message that the Assad regime would not accept any challenge to its rule. As a Dar’ a resident told Shadid, “They want to teach Syria a lesson by teaching Dara’ a a lesson” (2011: A1). In this way, and as Raphaël Lefèbvre (2013) argues, the events in Dar’ a mirrored those in Hama in 1982, when Hafez al-Asad’s regime decimated that city in an attempt to quell a Muslim Brotherhood-led revolt.

The destruction of Dar’ a did not halt the revolt, however. Unrest soon spread to Syria’s third largest city, Homs, and the coastal towns of Latakia, Idlib, al-Hasaka, and Dayr al-Zur. (Damascus and Aleppo remained largely marginal to the revolt until 2012.¹⁰) As the protests spread to these cities over the course of 2011, they became increasingly violent. This violence was exacerbated by the emergence of numerous armed groups. As the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICIS) notes, their formation has in part resulted from unnamed “influential states” extending financial and military assistance to warring parties, and from the involvement of non-state actors, as well. The latter

10. In the 1980s many of Syria’s urban centers experienced mass protests that culminated in the infamous devastation of Hama. The Syrian government cut telephone lines, closed roads, and sent a line of T-62 tanks into the city (Fisk 1990: 183–184). As Raphaël Lefèbvre (2013) details, “Throughout the month of February 1982, the Ba’ath regime’s most loyal forces shelled entire quarters of the city and bombed many of its residential areas—leaving between 25,000 and 40,000 dead” (xi). The urbicide of Hama entailed the deliberate destruction of the city’s entire urban fabric and, significantly, the process continued with a reconstruction designed to enforce a new urban arrangement.

11. This does not mean there were no protests against the Syrian government in Damascus or Aleppo. In April 2011, Al Jazeera reported on anti-government protests in Aleppo and the scholar Lisa Wedeen (2013) likewise cites a number of protests in Damascus in 2011. However, it is widely accepted among scholars and analysts that Damascus and Aleppo largely remained outside the revolt until the opening months of 2012.

group includes organizations like Hezbollah and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), and a flow of foreign fighters “driven by hard-line religious ideology” (2015: 19). Thus, the main parties currently involved in the Syrian conflict are the Syrian government (headed by the Assad regime), the Lebanese political party and militant group Hezbollah, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jabhat al-Nusra,¹² the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS),¹³ and the People’s Protection Units (YPG),¹⁴ in addition to the countless smaller groups that have often splintered from some of these main organizations.

Bounded Urbicide

Although the term urbicide has not been widely employed in the Syrian context, various organizations have documented instances of urban destruction that could easily be understood as such. Numerous reports by groups such as HRW, the ICG, and UN agencies have detailed the deliberate destruction of residential neighborhoods by both the Syrian army and opposition groups (ICG 2012; IICIS 2015: 5; Solvang and Neistat 2014).

For instance, in their report, *Razed to the Ground: Syria’s Unlawful Neighborhood Demolitions in 2012–2013*, Solvang and Neistat (2014) of HRW focus on urban destruction in two residential districts in Hama and five in Damascus. The report notes that “since July 2012, Syrian authorities have deliberately demolished thousands of residential buildings, in some cases entire neighborhoods, using explosives and bulldozers, in Damascus and Hama” (1). A resident of one of the destroyed houses told HRW, “When the bulldozers approached our house, my husband went outside to talk with the army soldiers. My husband was begging them to spare our house but they shouted: ‘We want to destroy, we want to destroy.’ They didn’t explain to us what was happening” (Solvang and Neistat 2014: 13). Solvang and Neistat conclude that this destruction by the Syrian government “served no military purpose and appeared to punish the civilian population” (2014: 1).¹⁵

12. This group is an offshoot of Al-Qaida in Iraq and its formation was announced in January 2012.

13. Following a breakdown in its alliance with Jabhat Al-Nusra, ISIS formed and rapidly expanded in 2014.

14. In mid-2012 the Syrian government withdrew from Kurdish majority areas and was replaced by the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria.

15. Accompanying the report, HRW released some of the videos that recorded this residential demolition and that formed the basis of its report. The film’s voiceover highlights the parallels to Israeli anti-Palestinian urbicide policies, as outlined by Graham (2003; 2004): “This is not Palestine. This is not south Lebanon,” he says. “This is Qaboun [a neighborhood in Damascus].”

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In addition to targeting whole cities or residential districts, the Asad regime and anti-government forces have also undertaken more focused actions aimed at the destruction of urban life. This has included targeting civilian infrastructure, markets, shops, schools, hospitals, and other public spaces in an effort “to render life unbearable in areas out of [their] control” (IICIS 2014: 16). For example, Kilcullen et al. (2014), Solvang (2013) of HRW, and Gutman and Raymond (2013) have all recorded the extensive destruction of bakeries by various factions in the conflict. Kilcullen et al. note that 40% of bakeries in opposition-held Aleppo are closed, destroyed, or damaged, with at least one-third of them lost to shelling. Similarly, Physicians for Human Rights has reported that from March 2011 to 2014 there were 150 attacks on 124 different medical facilities (Cousins 2014: 221). Meanwhile, the IICIS (2015) calculated that 5,000 schools, which have been frequent targets for both opposition and government forces, have been destroyed throughout the country since the start of the conflict (10).

However, in line with the discussion above, it is not only the destruction of the built environment that warrants attention – reconstruction efforts are significant as well. In her analysis of “post-uprising Syria,” Valérie Clerc (2014) outlines how government reconstruction policies have also been used to enact urban destruction. Clerc notes that urban renewal projects (entailing demolition and reconstruction) have been undertaken in specific neighborhoods deemed to support the revolution (2014: 12). She argues that “the authorities used urban planning as a weapon, not only by destroying opponents’ houses and bombarding the quarters held by the armed opposition, but also by drawing up projects for urban renewal (i.e. demolition and reconstruction) of specific neighborhoods” (2014: 12).

At stake in this deliberate targeting of Syrian residences, bakeries, hospitals, and schools, and also in the regime’s construction policies is, as Coward has asserted, an attempt to eradicate plurality, be it ethnic or political. In some cases, this has been driven by an ethno-nationalist agenda, wherein perpetrators of urbicide target certain aspects of the built environment that they associate with a particular ethnic group. As Khaled Yacoub Oweis (2013) reports, quoting an “influential” cleric turned rebel commander, “One has to concentrate on their [Alawites’] strongholds and on their dwellings and their infrastructure. If (Alawites) continue living as they’re doing in peace and safety while wedded to the regime they will not be affected.”

In this conflict, however, political plurality is just as much a target as its ethnic counterpart. The ICG, HRW, and IICIS all connect the destruction of the built environment to various parties’ attempts to raise the

costs of dissent or alignment with opposing political groups. Indeed, “either al-Asad, or we burn the country” is one of the first slogans chanted by pro-government supporters and can often be found graffitied on walls by government soldiers and supporters (Jalabi 2013: 76).

Urban Arrangements

The examples of urban destruction/construction can easily be understood as manifestations of urbicide according to the definitions outlined above. Significantly, however, they all take place within the municipal and imagined boundaries of cities and are focused on the ground. This provides only a partial understanding of how the urban has been targeted and transformed in the course of the uprising. For a full account of urbicide, considerations of destruction and (re)construction in the urban center (or more generally within some bounded notion of the city) must be supplemented with an examination of the “systematizing networks which give a provisional order to urban life,” and which run both through the city and beyond its borders (Amin and Thrift 2002: 3). That is to say, it is necessary to expand the scope of investigation to include the complex ecologies of buildings and infrastructural arrangements that are constitutive of contemporary urban life and which often reach beyond the city’s ostensible limits.

Infrastructure forms a critical urban arrangement in this regard. Urban flows inside a city – of people, foodstuffs, electricity, water, etc. – are directly connected to its infrastructural arrangements – of roads, power cables, sewers, etc. – both within and beyond its physical boundaries. It is therefore unsurprising that in the fight over cities, main supply routes have emerged as central sites of conflict and comprise an important focus of concern among military analysts.

In the Syrian context, roads have been intensely fought over, guarded, and rearranged.¹⁶ Writing for the consulting company Caerus (closely linked to the US military establishment), Kilcullen et al. (2014) detail how armed groups on all sides have posted restrictive checkpoints along Aleppo’s busiest roads that have impeded movement in the city (4). Checkpoints are used not only to secure territory but also to control the residential population within districts, and to regulate the movement of key commodities and people through the city’s major arterial roads (Kilcullen et al.

16. Specifically, the M5 and the M4 highways have both been the sites of extensive battles and part of the broader reason for intense fighting in northeastern Syria (Mulcaire 2012; Petrocine 2014). The M5 highway is particularly important as it runs the length of Syria’s western corridor, where most of the Syrian population is located. It connects Damascus to major cities such as Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia in northeastern Syria and Dar’a in the south, and also allows access to Jordan.

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2014: 20). Further, they have noted that the price and availability of bread in Aleppo has fluctuated greatly in relation to which faction controls the main supply route to the city: "Bread price fluctuations [in Aleppo] reflect conflict outside the city for control of supply routes" (53).

In addition to road infrastructure, both the Syrian government and opposition groups have frequently targeted food, water, and electricity systems. Nouar Shamout (2014) of Chatham House documents attacks on several wastewater treatment plants, sewage facilities, dams, and water pipes that have been felt acutely in the country's largest cities. For instance, Tabqa Dam, which as the largest dam in Syria is critical not only for its rural uses but also for supplying drinking water and electricity to Aleppo, has become a central site of conflict, with rebel groups and government forces engaging in fierce battles over its control (Saad and Gladstone 2013: A8).

IICIS notes that Jabhat al-Nusra and the smaller splinter groups of the Islamic Front and Jaish al-Mujahideen have all targeted Aleppo's electrical grid and water supply to deprive the civilian population of potable water and sanitation (2014: 20). Urban areas' food infrastructures have also emerged as prominent military targets. The IICIS (2014) reports, for instance, that ISIS fighters intentionally targeted the Al-Faisal Flour Mill north of Aleppo, dismantling equipment and detonating explosives inside the mill, because of its importance to the city's food supply (21).

Kilcullen et al. report that the Syrian government has not only destroyed electrical infrastructure but has also withheld electricity from opposition-held neighborhoods in Aleppo (2014: 41). Similarly, a Dar'a resident described to a journalist how, after the neighborhood of Mahata surrendered to the Syrian government in 2011, it soon had its electricity and water restored (Abouzied 2011). By withholding infrastructure rather than destroying it, the government is able to "deny the city" and then grant it back on its own terms.

It is important to note that this ability to "deny the city" is not passively accepted by residents. Evidence of this can be seen in the new roads that emerge when an old one is blocked by a checkpoint (UNITAR/UNOSAT 2014b: 6). In other words, roads can be blocked or destroyed but they can also be created or rearranged. This suggestion brings us back to the idea that urbicide can paradoxically result in the formation of new urban spaces and the creation of new arrangements to existing urban life. This aspect of urbicide is particularly evident when we consider the phenomenon volumetrically.

The Volume of Urbicide: On Moles and Hornets

A distinctive "symmetrical urbicide" has emerged in the Syrian conflict. As a Syrian businessman told the AFP journalist Sammy Katz, "This is a war of moles against hornets" (2013). The hornets refer to the Syrian army's bombardment from the air and the moles to the vast network of tunnels constructed by anti-government groups.

The army's aerial assault has relied on barrel bombs, low-cost cylinders filled with explosives, fuel, and steel fragments that are manually deployed from helicopters (Lloyd 2013). The bombs have become synonymous with the government's indiscriminate destruction of the Syrian urban landscape. As the military analyst Richard Lloyd (2013) notes, "The main objective of the Syrian barrel bomb program is to provide cheap and lethal damage to urban areas in Syria." While reporting on barrel bombs and their destruction of the built environment has been extensive, only the area of their impact has been considered, with little attention given to their ancillary effects.

Significantly, the Syrian military's aerial dominance and the devastation it has wrought have pushed urban life below the surface. Several reports have noted how the "conflict in Syria has gone underground" (Sweid 2014) and how "tunnels snake their way all over Syria" (Shay 2014). These tunnels, which often follow the paths of existing infrastructure in urban areas, are well ventilated and electrified (and even have surveillance cameras), and enable anti-government groups to transport humans, food, and weaponry (Sweid 2014; Winter 2014). They are also used to plant "tunnel bombs," most famously used in an attack on the Carlton Citadel Hotel in central Aleppo. This bombing, for which the Liwa al-Tawhid Brigade claimed responsibility, killed an estimated 30-50 troops (Sweid 2014; Winter 2014).

The destruction of cities from the air has also resulted in a broader submersion of urban life. The targeting of medical facilities and schools has led staff to build subterranean operating rooms (Cousins 2014: 221). Entire schools are likewise being reconstructed underground (Brumfield and Abedine 2012; Safar 2014). In northeast Syria, Chris Chivers (2013) reports that some families have moved into underground shelters, which, some sources allege, include former pens for livestock, Roman ruins, and even crypts (A1).

The vertical politics of the Syrian conflict illuminates the power of volume (Elden 2013: 49). It illustrates not only the "depth of power" (Elden 2013: 40) but also the depth of resilience among anti-government groups challenging the government's efforts to enforce separateness and homogeneity from above. Syrian responses to the government's aerial assaults

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show us that attempts to violently impose certain urban arrangements can never be fixed and always leave open the possibility of rearrangement.

CONCLUSION

In examining urbicide, this essay has suggested that the phenomenon should be understood as more than the simple destruction or construction of the built environment. The concept must be expanded to account for the fact that urbicide's central concern is often the arrangements that give a provisional order to urban life. Urbicide, understood as the violent attempt to impose a certain urban arrangement that will enforce political and/or ethnic homogeneity, can result in the large-scale destruction of buildings or infrastructure, but it can also entail processes in between destruction and construction, such as the provision or withholding of infrastructure.

However, urbicide is rarely undertaken without contestation and tends to engender various forms of resistance. This resistance can itself result in the configuration of new sociospatial formations. By exploring the volumetric aspects of urbicide in the Syrian conflict, I have illustrated one instance of this phenomenon: the subterranean space Syrians have used to survive and to engage in acts of armed resistance. Locals have submerged many aspects of daily life in order to challenge and endure attempts to impose a homogenous political and/or ethnic urban arrangement. In addition, anti-government groups have submerged the conflict by utilizing tunnels to engage in armed conflict. In so doing, they have produced new urban arrangements that attest to their resilience.

While urbicide may not always produce such arrangements, the nature of the urban as a fundamentally shared space suggests that urbicidal acts are inherently limited in their ability to enforce a politics of separation. Coupled with the impossibility of murdering the city, this dimension of the urban ensures the endurance of heterogeneity. Failures by the Asad regime and anti-regime groups to enforce their preferred political and/or ethnic homogeneity through urbicide is illustrative in this regard: despite continued efforts, Syria cannot be homogenized politically or ethnically.



Tammam Azzam, Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* (Freedom Graffiti), 2013
Digital Print and Mixed Media, 140 x 140 cm, Courtesy of the artist
© Tammam Azzam

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