

الأسد أو نحرق البلاد

'Assad or we burn the country'
is written on a wall by Syrian
government forces in Homs

'Assad or we burn the country'

Siege warfare in the Syrian civil war

Luuk van den Boomen MA*

Siege warfare has been the defining feature of the Syrian civil war. Several 'rebellious' towns, cities and neighbourhoods were under long-term siege between 2013 and 2018, most notably Dara, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and various neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Damascus. The grim logic of siege warfare is simple. If you deny your foe food and medicine, eventually, he will lose the physical and mental capability to fight. Sieges typically combine two key elements: encirclement of an area for the purpose of isolating it, and bombardment. Throughout the conflict the Syrian regime has successfully exploited siege tactics at the core of its counterinsurgency campaign. This article examines the logic of siege warfare as a counterinsurgency instrument and how it was put in to practice by the Syrian regime and its allies.

* Luuk van den Boomen MA is senior information specialist at the Netherlands Institute for Military History. Parts of this article are based on the author's masters thesis 'You are not allowed to have life there'. Urbicide: the politics of mass urban destruction in eastern Aleppo.

On December 19, 2016, convoys of green buses drove between bombed-out houses and destroyed neighbourhoods of eastern Aleppo, transporting opposition rebel fighters, their families, and tens of thousands of civilians out of the city. Five years after the start of the Syrian revolt, the city of Aleppo, a rebel stronghold in the north of the country, had finally collapsed. The fall of the city to government forces marked a major turning point in the civil war. For more than four years, the eastern parts of Aleppo resisted brutal regime bombardments and violent siege tactics. From 2012 onwards, a stalemate between the Syrian opposition, comprised of a mix of anti-Assad factions, and the Syrian government's army and its allies, had been in place. In the spring of 2016 Syrian government troops finally closed the opposition's last supply route into Aleppo with aerial support from Russia, and commenced the siege of the city, trapping perhaps as many as 300,000 people.¹ The opposition failed to break the siege and in December 2016, Assad's troops finally recaptured the eastern parts of the city.

The battle for Aleppo not only signified its strategic importance to the course of the conflict in Syria, but was also marked by an almost unprecedented destruction of the urban landscape.² When the battle for the city was over, news media outlets noted that the scale of devastation in Aleppo 'evoked comparisons with cities like Grozny and Dresden.'³ The encirclement and mass destruction of eastern Aleppo represents the core strategy of the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime: siege warfare. Although the Assad regime did not initially use siege warfare operations to reconquer lost territory or fight its counterinsurgency campaign, siege warfare would become the essential characteristic of the Syrian civil war. Aleppo was not the first city to undergo this brutal fate, nor was it the last. The regime's slogan 'either Assad, or we burn the

country', which pro-government soldiers and supporters chanted and graffitied on walls from the start of the revolution, was violently brought into practice.⁴

This article explores the use of siege warfare by the Syrian regime as a facet of its counterinsurgency doctrine during the Syrian civil war (2011-present). The first section of this article outlines the urbanised dynamics of the conflict and provides brief empirical data on Syria's sieges. It then analyses the theoretical argumentation for the logic of sieges as a counterinsurgency strategy, discussing the nature of siege warfare and the difference in enemy-centric and population-centric approaches to counterinsurgency. The following section briefly discusses how such military doctrines, also described as the 'Russian Way of War', has entered Syrian Arab Army (SAA) military doctrine. The last three sections describe how and why the Syrian military employed siege warfare in practice. The final section discusses how the nature, goals, and weaponry of the regime's sieges changed after the Russian entry into the conflict in 2015. Drawing on an analysis of first-person testimonies, news articles, open-source primary

- 1 D. Darke, 'Aleppo: Is Besieged Syrian City Facing Last Gasp?', *BBC News*, July 22, 2016. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36853689>.
- 2 According to conservative estimates, about 32 per cent of buildings in Aleppo had either been demolished, or damaged to a point beyond repair. It is important to stress however that a number of studies have shown that the damage was far more concentrated in the opposition-held eastern parts of the city; World Bank Group, 'Syria Damage Assessment of Selected Cities Aleppo, Hama, Idlib', March 2017; United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR-REACH), 'Syrian Cities Damage Atlas - Eight Year Anniversary of the Syrian Civil War: Thematic assessment of satellite identified damage', 16 March, 2019, 3.
- 3 K. Laub, 'Aleppo confronts vast destruction left by 4 years of war', *AP News*, 23 December, 2016. See: <https://apnews.com/article/00640d3a1566472cb7c176aad065f81>.
- 4 Z. Kaf Al-Ghazal, 'The Syrian regime's slogan "Assad or we burn the country" must not become reality', *Middle East Monitor*, 21 May, 2019. See: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190521-the-syrian-regimes-slogan-assad-or-we-burn-the-country-must-not-become-reality/>; S. Dagher, *Assad or we Burn the Country: How one Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2019) xviii.

materials, and human rights' reports,⁵ this article aims to generate a comprehensive understanding of the use of siege warfare as a form of counterinsurgency during the Syrian conflict.

5 These interviews were conducted either face to face, by video call, over the phone, or via social media and online messaging services. Many of the interviews were conducted in either the Dutch or English language. One interview however was conducted with the use of a Dutch-Arabic translator. Moreover, aside from mainstream media coverage, human rights and non-governmental organisations have published a vast amount of literature on Syria's sieges and the resulting urban destruction. These organisations have done vital work producing empirical assessments on the progress of Syria's sieges and the specific types of violence that this has included. Most notably, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), Institute for the Study of War. In addition, 'Siege Watch', a collaborative project from PAX, (a Dutch ngo), and the Syria Institute (a Washington, D.C.-based think tank), has produced periodic updates on sieges and urban warfare in Syria from 2015 to 2018, with a final report in early 2019.

Syria's sieges: civil war in an urbanized environment

When the 'Arab Spring' reached Syria in March of 2011, the popular outpouring of calls for political and socio-economic change were met with a harsh and violent response by Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian Ba'athist regime. The widespread revolt against the government gradually developed into a civil war when, by the summer of 2011, the regime's violent crackdown had created a sense among many in the opposition that only force would topple al-Assad's regime, and the revolution became militarised.

One defining feature of the conflict in Syria has been the extent to which it was fought and contested through urban warfare. The civil war



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grew out of urban protest movements in the major cities. These areas were typically large, densely-populated neighbourhoods, dominated by poor, working-class Sunni Muslims.⁶ These areas of 'urban poor,' as some scholars characterise these revolutionary neighbourhoods' residents, served as the epicenter of protests and opposition activity and therefore became the most heavily contested in the country.⁷ Syrian Tracker, a collaborative, crowd-sourced effort to document and geo-tag deaths in Syria, estimated that in the first months of 2013, over half of all deaths occurred in Aleppo, Damascus, and their suburbs.⁸ According to Syrian Martyrs, which was able to track the fatal casualties at neighbourhood level, more than half of all deaths in Aleppo occurred in just fifteen of the city's fifty-six neighbourhoods, and in Damascus, more than

sixty-five per cent of the deaths occurred in only seven of the capital's thirty neighbourhoods.⁹ Furthermore, UN-Habitat estimates that over two-thirds of Aleppo's heavily destroyed buildings are situated in the city's informal housing areas.¹⁰ Almost all these areas were either partly or fully besieged at one point during the conflict.

- 6 N. Hägerdal, 'Starvation as Siege Tactics: Urban Warfare in Syria', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020) 11.
- 7 D. Kilcullen and N. Rosenblatt, 'The Rise of Syria's Urban Poor: Why the War for Syria's Future Will Be Fought Over the Country's New Urban Villages', *PRISM* 4 (2014) 37.
- 8 The Syrian Tracker numbers as presented here are directly quoted from Kilcullen and Rosenblatt, and include all deaths in Syria in this time frame; Kilcullen and Rosenblatt, 'The Rise of Syria's Urban Poor', 37.
- 9 Ibidem.
- 10 'Aleppo City Profile: Multi Sector Assessment', *UN HABITAT*, May 2014, 9-10.

Destruction in Damascus



When revolutionary enthusiasm morphed into civil war in late 2011, opposition rebels found themselves largely ensconced in cities and urban territories. Faced with this multitude of urban enclaves engaged in armed resistance, regime forces effectively ceded control over large parts of the major population centres and systematically resorted to siege-operations, characterised by mass urban destruction. Throughout the war, up to forty different localities have been besieged, most in the suburbs of Homs and Damascus.¹¹ It is estimated that from the onset of the uprising up until 2018, around 2.5 million Syrians – more than ten per cent of the country’s pre-war population – lived at some point during the conflict under prolonged sieges or siege-like conditions imposed by the SAA. Such sieges lasted for months, but more often years. The longest-running siege was that of eastern Ghouta, which lasted from 2013 to 2018.¹² In many instances, these sieges led to increasing shortages of food, water, medicine, and basic necessities, eventually leading to malnutrition and death among the civilian population trapped inside the encircled enclaves.

By mid-2018 the regime and its allies had successfully recaptured almost all besieged areas and had re-established control over more than seventy per cent of Syrian territory.¹³ These sieges all followed a similar pattern: encirclement, isolation, systematic and indiscriminate bombardment, and finally – after months of starvation, dehumanisation, and the near total devastation of urban civilian infrastructures – collapse. Following the fall of each besieged territory, the remaining civilian population, mostly comprised of Sunni Muslims, were methodically and forcibly removed and relocated to Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps in the northern Syrian province of Idlib, thereby further consolidating the regime’s grasp on reconquered territory. Subsequently, the Assad regime’s strategy of siege warfare not only succeeded in recapturing strategically important rebellious population centres, but also facilitated the regimes’ ‘violent demographic engineering’ of Syria.¹⁴ As a result, the regime’s siege operations have greatly contributed to Assad’s ability to survive, and even win the conflict, although various analysts and policy makers predicted its imminent downfall.

The logic of siege warfare as counterinsurgency

Though not defined by International Law, the essence of siege warfare is to isolate enemy populations in terms of their separation from reinforcements and logistical supplies in order to weaken the defences and grind down resistance and support within the besieged areas.¹⁵ The logic of a siege follows a coercive bargaining logic: siege violence is designed to raise the costs of war continuation by maximally punishing the belligerent and its supporters.

Sieges typically combine two key elements: ‘encirclement’ of an area for the purpose of isolating it, and bombardment. In siege operations, both elements are combined and work in synergy to mutually reinforce the effects of besieging.¹⁶ It is important to note, however, that during a siege there is no need for total encirclement. What matters is the *effect* of

11 Siege Watch, ‘Final Report - Out of Sight, Out of Mind - The Aftermath of Syria’s Sieges’, *PAX*, February 2019, 7-8.

12 For a detailed account on the humanitarian catastrophies of the siege of eastern Ghouta see: A. Clements-Hunt, ‘“We lived the hardest days”: The Civilian experience of siege warfare in Douma, Eastern Ghouta’ (MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2020).

13 Hägerdal, ‘Starvation as Siege Tactics’, 10.

14 D. Gardner, ‘Syria is witnessing a violent demographic re-engineering’, *Financial Times*, 2 October, 2019. See: <https://www.ft.com/content/e40cb754-e456-11e9-b112-9624ec9edc59>; S. Ghosh-Siminoff, ‘Demographic Engineering in Syria Sets the Stage for Future Conflicts’, *New Lines Institute*, 13 March, 2020. See: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/syria/demographic-engineering-in-syria-sets-the-stage-for-future-conflicts/>: ‘As these areas have fallen back into regime hands, they have been repopulated by regime loyalists and the families of Iranian proxy militias who are mostly Shiite and from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.’

15 E. Mikos-Skuza, ‘Siege warfare in the 21st century from the perspective of International Humanitarian Law’, *Wroclaw Review of Law, Administration & Economics* 8 (2018) (2) 320.

16 For instance, attacks on markets and bakeries exacerbate starvation and deprivation for the besieged population. However, some analysts argue that, while both the elements of isolation and bombardment are powerful in their own regard, they may have somewhat limited synergies, as each element typically works over different timeframes. Bombardments are typically designed to work relatively quickly, whereas starvation may take a considerable longer time: Hägerdal, ‘Starvation as Siege Tactics’, 8; E. Gillard, ‘Sieges, the Law, and Protecting Civilians’, *Chatham House International Law Programme*, June 2019, 2.

the positioning of the besieging forces as they must 'be in a position to control entry and egress from a particular area, and thus movement in and out of weapons and ammunition, supplies and people.'¹⁷ This means that a total encirclement is not necessary anymore to qualify a given situation as a siege. Such was the case at Aleppo. The long and harsh battle for Catello Road, one of the final lifelines into the eastern parts of the city, indicated the beginning of a siege years before it actually occurred. However, since the spring of 2014, SAA forces surrounding Aleppo were in such a tactical position as to have the *effect* of operating as a besieging force. Amnesty International and various UN agencies have elaborately described the ensuing rapid deterioration of humanitarian conditions in the (partly) besieged eastern neighbourhoods thereafter.¹⁸

The fundamental characteristics of siege, isolation and blockade, have the sustained effect that civilians, the sick and wounded, cannot exit, and military or humanitarian aid such as water, food and medicine cannot enter. This violence is accompanied by indiscriminate bombardment and destruction, intended to further weaken the defences and grind down resistance, morale, and support within the besieged territory. As such, sieges essentially erase the categorical distinction between combatants and non-combatants, as the entire population of besieged areas constitutes the central target of such tactics.¹⁹ Herein lies the grim logic of siege warfare as counterinsurgency in the Syrian civil war.

Counterinsurgency theorists frequently paraphrase Mao Zedong's axiom 'the people are the water in which the insurgent swims,' and surmise that the objective of the counter-insurgent is therefore to separate the insurgents from the people. 'Rather than going fishing, as the metaphor suggests,' Joseph Holliday writes, 'Assad drained the lake.'²⁰ Following the rebels push into urban population centres across the country, the regime eventually opted for a counterinsurgency strategy that is described by various scholars and analysts as 'collective punishment,' or 'punishing the masses.'²¹

Sieges essentially erase the distinction between combatants and non-combatants

Through indiscriminate punitive measures and great suffering, either the will of the insurgents gets broken or it forces the population to turn against the insurgency. This so-called 'authoritarian approach' of counterinsurgency is characterized by indiscriminate violence which involves collective targeting and essentially places both insurgents and civilians at the core of violent coercive actions.

In his influential work 'The Logic of Violence in Civil War', Stathis Kalyvas has introduced the theoretical division between selective violence and indiscriminate violence in irregular wars.²² Based on this theoretical implication various scholars have brought forth two different

17 Gillard, 'Sieges', 3.

18 See for instance: Amnesty International, "Death Everywhere" War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Aleppo, Syria', *Amnesty International*, May 2015. See: https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/embargoed_5_may_aleppo_report_death_everywhere.pdf; '2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic', *UN OCHA*, November 2014, 28.

19 A. Dowdall and J. Horne, *Civilians under Siege: From Sarajevo to Troy* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 3-6.

20 J. Holliday, 'The Assad Regime: From counterinsurgency to civil war,' *The Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report* 8, March 2013, 20.

21 W. Todman, 'Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses: Siege Warfare as Counter-Insurgency', *An Exploration of Impact: Hunger, Cartoons & Philosophy* 9 (2017) (1) 1.

22 S. N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006) 31.



After years of intense fighting, Syrian government forces took control of Aleppo in 2016. An agreement was reached to evacuate the remaining opposition fighters and transfer them to Idlib Province. This ended the siege of Aleppo

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models of counterinsurgency: ‘population-centric’ and ‘enemy-centric’ counterinsurgency strategies.²³ Population-centric counterinsurgency attempts to provide protection, security, and services to populations living in areas where insurgents operate. This approach

assumes that by enhancing the populace’s collaboration with the government the legitimacy of the latter strengthens, while simultaneously weakening the insurgent’s position.²⁴ On the other hand, the enemy-centric counterinsurgency approach aims to undermine the insurgents’ support by ‘imposing punitive measures on the entire population living in the insurgents’ zones of operation, be they militants or civilians.’²⁵ Thus, this brutal strategy essentially revolves around gaining control through repression and terror.

Following this categorical distinction in counterinsurgency models, Professor of

23 L. Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013) 58.

24 M. Kitzen and M. Provoost, ‘Don’t Underestimate the Bear – Russia is one of the World’s Most Effective Modern Counterinsurgents’, *Modern War Institute*, 24 March, 2022. See: <https://mwi.usma.edu/dont-underestimate-the-bear-russia-is-one-of-the-worlds-most-effective-modern-counterinsurgents/>.

25 Todman, ‘Isolating Dissent’, 4.

26 D. Ucko, ‘The People Are Revolting: An Anatomy of Authoritarian Counterinsurgency’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39 (2015) (1) 45-46.

International Security Studies David Ucko argues that enemy-centric strategies are most likely to be implemented by authoritarian regimes.²⁶ The aim and logic of this indiscriminate violence is to punish the people for the insurgency in a way that separates the bond between the two, not through politics but with brutal force. Authoritarian regimes are able to adopt such violent methods because they are not constrained by the law, are uncontested by political rivals, and often control the flow of public information to their citizens through state-owned news and media. Thus, according to Ucko, the focus of counterinsurgency strategies for an authoritarian regime is not on winning so-called 'hearts and minds', but rather on 'selling the threat to the broader populace, surging support for both party and state, and whipping up a chauvinistic hatred for the perfidious rebels that justifies whatever response is deemed necessary.'²⁷ Whole civilian communities are arbitrarily labeled as 'terrorists', 'cancers within society', or 'foreign saboteurs', to justify the indiscriminate use of overwhelming firepower.

Within the context of the Syrian civil war, the same logic has been applied to address restive population centres across Syria. In many of his statements, al-Assad himself referred to opposition forces as 'foreign saboteurs' and 'terrorists.' In an interview with the BBC in February 2015, Assad gave further indication of this rhetoric. When the reporter asked about the humanitarian situation of civilians in the isolated areas, Assad responded by saying 'that's not correct for one reason, because in most of the areas where the rebels took over, the civilians fled and came to our areas, so in most of the areas that we encircle and attack are only militants.' He continued by saying that 'the natural reaction of any person, of the people, of the families, of the population, is to flee from any area where they expect a conflict.'²⁸ In addition, Major-General Jamil Hassan, Head of Syria's notorious Airforce Intelligence Agency, has echoed Assad's messages, stating that 'a Syria with ten million trustworthy people obedient to the leadership is better than a Syria with thirty million vandals,' and that 'Syria will

not accept the presence of cancerous cells and they will be removed completely.'²⁹ This rhetoric reflects the manner typical of Ucko's model of authoritarian counterinsurgency.

SAA military doctrine: the 'Russian Way of War'

The counterinsurgency doctrine of collective punishment has a long precedent in Ba'athist Syria. In February 1982, following an uprising of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama, government forces began to seal off access to the city on the pretext of cleansing it from terrorists and insurgents. Rifaat al-Assad, uncle of Bashar, adopted rhetoric consistent with the doctrine of collective punishment, declaring at the time that 'all those who are not with the regime must now be considered against it.'³⁰ After a short siege of three weeks, thousands of soldiers invaded the city, leveling much of it with tank and artillery fire, and killing tens of thousands of people.³¹ During the siege and subsequent bombardment, indiscriminate shelling destroyed whole neighbourhoods of the city.

Many analysts have traced the genesis of siege warfare and collective punishment within SAA

27 Ucko, 'The People Are Revolting', 32, 43.

28 Dagher, *Assad or we Burn the Country*, 63; N. Hassan, 'Assad infuriates Syria demonstrators with saboteur claims', *The Guardian*, 10 June, 2011. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/20/syria-assad-address-saboteurs>; 'Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: Facing down rebellion', *BBC News*, 31 August, 2020. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/10338256>; 'Assad's BBC interview: Key excerpts', *BBC News*, 10 February, 2015. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31311895>: full transcript available on: 'President al-Assad to BBC News: we are defending civilians, and making dialogue', *Syrian Arab News Agency*, 10 February 10, 2015. See: <http://sana.sy/en/?p=28047>.

29 M. Chulov, "'We can't go back": Syria's refugees fear for their future after war', *The Guardian*, 20 August, 2018. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/30/we-cant-go-back-syrias-refugees-fear-for-their-future-after-war#:~:text=%E2%80%9CAfter%20eight%20years%2C%20Syria%20will,province%20with%20allies%20in%20Beirut>.

30 L. Robson, *The Politics of Mass Violence in the Middle East* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020) 163-164; Todman, 'Isolating Dissent', 9.

31 S. Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018) 134-135; R. Lefevre, *The Ashes of Hama* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013) 59: Ismail bases an estimated number of around 10,000-25,000 casualties on Amnesty International Reports and fragmented records. Lefevre estimates a figure of 40,000.

military doctrine back to Soviet counter-insurgency doctrines. Following the Arab Armies' defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967, and partly in response to US support for Israel, the Soviet Union began to invest in its military relations with various Arab countries, including Syria. As part of this process, a significant number of SAA officers were sent to the USSR for military training, and in turn, Soviet military advisors were placed at Syrian army training stations throughout Syria.³² The Syrian military embraced the Red Army's organization, tactics, and operations to a greater extent than other Arab nations with military ties with the Soviet Union.

Through its experience fighting previous insurgencies in Ukraine after World War II, and during the occupation of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union placed overwhelming firepower and siege tactics at the core of its counterinsurgency doctrine.³³ This 'Russian Way of War' is characterised by the deliberate use of indiscriminate violence and collective punishment as a way to prevent insurgents from 'mobilising popular support while simultaneously augmenting governmental control.'³⁴ To save soldiers' lives, close combat infantry operations is substituted for firepower. The use of such overpowering military force – often through the use of its numerically superior artillery units – is generally a response to tactical and/or operational difficulties and in territory in which the population is (presumed to be) mostly on the side of the insurgents. After the Soviet-Afghan War, massive fire support was also a key characteristic of Russia's counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya.

This 'Russian Way of War' is characterised by the deliberate use of indiscriminate violence and collective punishment

Strategic revision and operational necessity: the epiphany of siege warfare

The SAA conducted its first siege of the conflict as early as 25 April 2011. Following the first weeks of civil unrest and violent clashes between government troops and armed protestors, the SAA's 4th Armoured Division surrounded and isolated parts of the city of Daraa in the south of the country. During the ten-day military campaign to 'cleanse' the city of restive elements, in which regime forces used overwhelming firepower from tanks, helicopters, and up to 6,000 troops, over 500 Syrians were killed and more than 2,500 people were detained.³⁵ While this early example clearly illustrates the influence of the 'Russian Way of War' on SAA military doctrine, tactics of collective punishment and siege warfare were however not at the centre of the regime's initial military response to the broiling insurgency.

During the onset of the conflict, violent clashes between pro-government forces and revolutionary fighters were characterised by brutal urban combat, often with little or no territorial gain, while both parties sustained heavy casualties. While militarily superior, government forces could not conquer rebel strongholds directly due to the characteristic challenges of urban combat terrain. Though at the time many news outlets described the progression of the conflict in terms of big military offensives, the growing conflict could best be described as a 'street war'. In September

32 M. Eisenstadt and K.M. Pollack, 'Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries', *Middle East Journal* 55 (2001) (4) 552.

33 Some scholars argue that the Soviet army's counterinsurgency doctrine is in essence an ad hoc developed strategy, as it had in actuality little experience in counterinsurgencies up until the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, and thus had not developed a nuanced military doctrine. Therefore, its counterinsurgency doctrine clearly emphasised the great conventional campaigns of the Red Army: Scott McMichael, 'The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War', *Parameters* (December 1989) 23.

34 Kitzen and Provoost, 'Do not underestimate the Russian Bear'.

35 Todman, 'Isolating Dissent', 2: Todman sees herein that siege warfare was always at the centre in the SAA's military doctrine. However, the empirical evidence on combat operations elsewhere in the country during this stage of the conflict indicates otherwise.



The Syrian government (armoured) forces were weakened by faulty tactics, well-equipped opposition fighters, and defections

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2012, a CNN news crew captured how, for over a week, rebel fighters in the city of Aleppo battled for just one hundred feet of ground.³⁶ Such images illustrate the generally unprofessional state of both SAA and rebel forces and highlight the inherent stagnation of urban warfare.

By the end of 2012, nearly 18 months into the conflict, the Assad regime was forced to reconfigure its strategic approach to the conflict. The regime's initial counterinsurgency campaign, characterised by 'clear-and-hold counter offensives,' had proven ineffective. Intense urban combat saw the SAA's strength decline rapidly. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) pro-regime forces had lost around 22,000 men in combat by late 2012.³⁷ Furthermore, the SAA's armoured divisions, once the 6th largest armoured force in the world, had been almost decimated due to a combination of faulty SAA

tactics in urban areas, and increasingly better-equipped opposition fighters.³⁸ Government forces had been weakened further by extensive defections of rank-and-file Sunni soldiers from amongst their ranks. The Institute for the Study of War estimates that, by the summer of 2012, pro-regime forces had lost between 60,000-

- 36 E. Solomon, 'Syrian rebels say Aleppo theirs "within days"', *Reuters*, 31 July, 2012. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-rebels-aleppo-idINDEE86U0BE20120731>; CNN News, 'Rebels battle for 100 feet in Aleppo', *YouTube video*, 6 September, 2012. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsjv0VTKuYw>.
- 37 'Nearly 585,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the Syrian Revolution', *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, February 2023. See: <https://www.syriahr.com/en/152189/>.
- 38 J. Janovsky, 'Nine Years of War – Documenting Syrian Arab Army's armoured vehicle losses', *Bellingcat*, 27 March, 2018. See: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/03/27/saa-vehicle-losses-2011-2017/>: During the first 1.5 years of the conflict, opposition forces rapidly gained experience in fighting armoured formations in urban territories and captured a substantial amount of ATGMs. In addition, SAA not rarely sent armoured vehicles into rebel-held territory with minimal infantry support. This resulted in substantial government losses.

'We knew what had happened to Hama, and we knew what would happen to our city'

100,000 men through defections.³⁹ In sum, the SAA and other pro-government forces had lost approximately half of its military strength by the end of 2012.

To maintain its power, the Assad regime primarily limited its control to loyal areas and focussed on the protection of Damascus from the growing insurgency in Eastern Ghouta. Secondly, it needed to regain control over Syria's three strategic population centres; Hama, Homs, and Aleppo. Controlling these cities was crucial for the regime to maintain its legitimacy. Furthermore, these urban hubs are connected via the M5 highway, the strategic artery of the country, connecting Damascus in the south to the provincial capitals in the north. Even in pre-war strategic planning these four cities were considered to be the 'centres of gravity' of the Syrian state.⁴⁰ The M5 highway was also a key

supply route for the regime, and other cities and suburbs that border the route were therefore inherently key terrain. Accordingly, throughout late 2012 and early 2013, regime forces slowly began to pull back from the countryside and areas dominated by the opposition, effectively surrendering vast areas of the country's north and east to the opposition.⁴¹ This strategic withdrawal from frontlines across the country allowed the regime to consolidate its forces near Syria's crucial population centres. From the beginning of 2013, the regime had contiguous control over the country's heartland and western coastlands, but within its domain lay numerous urban rebel enclaves and strongholds. To counter the possibility of further defections and the massive losses due to intense urban fighting the SAA began to employ siege warfare at the core of its military doctrine. By encircling opposition areas and shelling them from a distance, the SAA was able to limit casualties and defections.

Up until 2015 SAA sieges were primarily concerned with isolating opposition enclaves, preventing the revolution from spreading geographically. In addition, the regime's mass urban destruction campaigns that accompanied its siege warfare operations, gave the regime the ability to hold urban areas hostage. In other words, the regime's massive urban destruction and siege warfare also performed a 'communitive function,' with a clear deterrence dimension.⁴² Rebel commanders in Aleppo and Idlib have frequently described their unwillingness to confront government forces more aggressively in these population centres, concerned that the regime will destroy the city if they keep pushing.⁴³ In some instances, it is reported that rebel attempts to gain new neighbourhoods in the city have been prevented not by SAA forces, but by civilians who feared regime bombardment. 'We knew what had happened to Hama,' one interviewee testified, 'and we knew what would happen to our city. Some people opposed the (revolution's) goals because of this, and some people left because of this.'⁴⁴ Furthermore, the resources of opposition factions were often already limited and thus not able to provide for the people in newly-captured

39 Holliday, 'The Assad Regime', 27: It is difficult however to accurately account for the numbers and whereabouts of the majority of SAA defectors. In April 2012, leading rebel defector Mustafa Sheikh estimated 50,000 defectors, while another opposition leader suggested 90,000 the next month. In July, a defected officer from the SAAF intelligence agency cited regime-internal estimates of 100,000, while Turkish intelligence estimated around 60,000 defectors.

40 E. Berelovich, 'The Syrian Civil War – Evolution of the Syrian Army's Way of War', *Military Strategy Magazine* (February 2021) 2; V. Szybala, 'Assad Strikes Damascus: The Battle for Syria's Capital', *The Institute for the Study of War*, January 2014, 11-12.

41 Holliday, 'The Assad Regime', 19: The uneven distribution of SAA forces throughout the country in the initial months of the conflict had made it impossible for the regime to regain control of Syria, but has made it easier to maintain control over a more limited geographical area.

42 Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 26.

43 Holliday, 'The Assad Regime', 20, 23.

44 Interview with H., May 11, 2021.

territory. Knowing that regime forces would 'punish' these territories with indiscriminate bombardments, many opposition fighters were reluctant to enter more deeply into regime-held neighbourhoods, fearing that the civilians would turn against them. Regime tactics of collective punishment thus had sometimes successfully undermined opposition's attempt to take other Syrian urban centres.

Urban destruction as collective punishment

Based on Russian notions of collective punishment, and in line with the authoritarian model of counterinsurgency, Syria's sieges were characterised by the mass urban destruction of the rebellious enclaves. Massive indiscriminate bombardments, as well as the targeted and deliberate destruction of crucial infrastructure, such as hospitals, bakeries, and food markets, were designed and employed to inflict maximum civilian harm.⁴⁵ Siege operations designed to conquer urban territory often heavily rely on indiscriminate bombardments. The 'benefits' of such bombardments is that they allow besieging forces to capture an area without sustaining heavy casualties and that they can do so relatively quickly, putting maximum pressure on the besieged locality to surrender. The downside of this tactic is that they require enormous firepower, consuming expensive munitions at a rapid pace.

At the start of the conflict, the SAA and Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF) did not command the required firepower for such siege operations. Before the conflict SAA/SAAF munitions were designed for conventional war with Israel over the Golan Heights and most of its arsenal was intended to combat an armoured Israeli invasion and to deal with the threat of Israeli air superiority, and thus did not have much close air support.⁴⁶ Therefore, government forces relied heavily on field artillery and ground-to-ground missiles, often Russian-made, for a certain amount of their firepower. Such weaponry was often unconventional and indiscriminate by nature and was used to strike



PHOTO AVRON

Barrel bomb replica at the Imperial War Museum, London. Barrel bombs were the cheap solution for Syria's tactical shortcomings during the war

residential areas kilometres behind the actual frontline. Various reports published by the SNHR emphasise the wide variety of such weapon systems, ranging from improvised barrel bombs, chemical weapons, cluster munitions, thermobaric bombs, incendiary weapons, mortar shells, SCUD-type ballistic missiles, white phosphorus, and GRAD multiple launch rocket systems, often launched from makeshift artillery platforms mounted on the back of Iranian-sponsored pickup trucks.⁴⁷ Such weapons are significantly more destructive and inherently more indiscriminate than

45 In order to inflict maximum damage, and to undermine rescue operations, the SAAF often conducted so called 'double-tap' strikes: In such strikes, the initial airstrike is followed by a second sortie, usually nearby and within thirty minutes after the first strike. In these types of attacks, those who come to tend the wounded or who try to document the event are at a particular risk of being killed or wounded: Amnesty International, 'Death Everywhere', 21-22.

46 E. Field, 'The Origin of The Barrel Bomb: Assad's Weapon of Fear', *The Global Scout*, 10 February, 2015. See: <https://archive.ph/20150216074935/http://theglobalscout.com/2015/02/origin-barrel-bomb-assads-weapon-fear/#selection-303.304-303.404>.

47 'Weapons', *Syrian Network for Human Rights*. See: <https://snhr.org/blog/category/report/thematic-reports/weapons/>; Atherton, 'A dismal science': For instance, thermobaric bombs, also known as vacuum bombs, are designed for use against defensive positions and concrete bunkers. They are dropped from aircraft on unguided parachutes and exploit atmospheric oxygen to disperse a mix of fuel and oxygen as a cloud, which is then ignited by a secondary detonation. This can penetrate any building or defense with openings not totally sealed. The resulting blast causes an immense fireball, a massive blast wave, and a vacuum that sucks up all surrounding oxygen, powerful enough to crush cars.

conventional weaponry, which is designed theoretically for attacks against military targets.

Besides mortars, heavy artillery and Surface-to-Surface Ballistic Missiles (SSBM's), the Syrian government has relied extensively on its air force to bombard restive areas with aerial bombs and air-to-surface missiles. In addition to conventional ammunition, for the duration of the conflict the SAAF has increasingly employed a new type of makeshift aerial explosive devices, commonly known as barrel bombs. Barrel bombs are tubes or containers, typically built from oil drums, scrap metal, or rebar, filled with an explosive payload. The explosive materials used can be as simple as diesel fuel and fertilizer, though the bomb may also contain metal shrapnel such as nuts and bolts or even chemicals, such as chlorine, to increase its lethality. It is estimated that the bombs potentially cost as little as \$200 to \$300.⁴⁸ These barrels full of explosives are then dropped from helicopters onto opposition-held areas. The use of barrel bombs is widely documented on the internet and social media. Various videos of these bombs dropping appear on YouTube,

occasionally in disturbing mega-compilations. These videos are often shot and distributed by Syrian citizens who document attacks on their neighbourhoods.⁴⁹ Some videos even appear to have been shot from inside an SAAF helicopter, showing the container being rolled out of the aircraft and then aimlessly tumbling to the ground. Because of their rudimentary and improvised nature, the SAAF increasingly employed barrel bombs to reduce the cost of its protracted aerial campaigns while increasing its ability to extend them further over opposition-held territory.

Many of the regime's conventional munitions were ill-suited for the objective of destroying urban structures. As Eliot Higgins, co-founder of Bellingcat, notes, the development and use of barrel bombs in the conflict may have been an attempt by the regime to devise new methods that better destroy structures and buildings than the conventional stock arsenal.⁵⁰ Barrel bombs were the cheap solution for this tactical shortcoming during the war. Their use has also allowed the SAAF to expand its dwindling fleet of aircraft for assault operations to include SAAF MI-17 transport helicopters as well. Furthermore, the technological development of the barrel bomb indicates the increasing dependence of the Syrian Army on the weapon during the conflict. Visual investigation shows how, over time, government forces have refined their use of the weapon, adding fins to stabilise the projectile tumbling down, or adding parachutes to the device to increase the devastating impact on the surrounding buildings.⁵¹ The first use of barrel bombs in the war was reported during an aerial attack on the city of Homs in August of 2012. And in 2021, nine years later, the UN estimated that the SAAF had dropped a total of nearly 82,000 barrel bombs during the conflict, killing an estimated 11,087 civilians.⁵²

Because of their imprecision, most barrel bombs have been dropped on opposition territory far behind the frontlines.⁵³ Therefore, paradoxically, residents of opposition-held neighbourhoods sought out homes close to the front because they knew that these areas would not be

- 48 B. Moses, 'The Mystery Of The Syrian Barrel Bombs', *Brown Moses Blog*, 30 August, 2012. See: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-mystery-of-syrian-barrel-bombs.html>; E. Higgins, 'A Brief Open Source History of the Syrian Barrel Bomb', *Bellingcat*, 8 July, 2015. See: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/07/08/a-brief-open-source-history-of-the-syrian-barrel-bomb/>: While covering the Syrian conflict, Eliot Higgins took the pseudonym Brown Moses from the Frank Zappa song 'Brown Moses'.
- 49 T.R. DeGhett, 'The Build-It-Yourself-Bombs', *Foreign Policy*, 3 July, 2014. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/03/the-build-it-yourself-bombs/>; Wall Street Journal, 'Barrel Bombing Campaign Intensifies in Aleppo, Syria', *YouTube video*, 17 April, 2015. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3W9Bgzkq8>; F. Wolf, 'Syrian regime Barrel Bomb Being Dropped', *YouTube video*, 27 October, 2012. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ipPPf1d29g>; For an extensive overview of such attacks on neighbourhoods in Aleppo, see: 'Spatializing the YouTube War', *Conflict Urbanism Aleppo*, <http://aleppo.c4sr.columbia.edu/spatializing-youtube.html>.
- 50 Moses, 'The Mystery Of The Syrian Barrel Bombs'.
- 51 Field, 'The Origin of The Barrel Bomb'; Moses, 'The Mystery Of The Syrian Barrel Bombs'; Interview with W., 27 April, 2022.
- 52 J. Marcus, 'Syria conflict: Barrel bombs show brutality of war', *BBC News*, 20 December, 2013. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25466541>; Moses, 'The Mystery Of The Syrian Barrel Bombs'; Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'In Nine Years, the Syrian Regime Has Dropped Nearly 82,000 Barrel Bombs, Killing 11,087 Civilians, Including 1,821 Children', 15 April, 2021, 1.
- 53 K. Roth, 'Barrel Bombs, Not ISIS, Are the Greatest Threat to Syrians', *The New York Times*, 5 August, 2015. See: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/06/opinion/barrel-bombs-not-isis-are-the-greatest-threat-to-syrians.html?_r=0.

bombed. Because the weapons are so inaccurate, they are not dropped near the frontlines as this might cause casualties to regime forces. The proximity of some civilian homes to the frontlines can be illustrated by the testimony of one of the interviewees, who, over the duration of the battle for Aleppo, had to move three times.⁵⁴ The inherent static nature of urban combat, in which conquest is often measured in streets and houses, shows the close proximity of the refuge many civilians sought. Additionally, people would only live their lives on the bottom floors of the houses, since the upper floors would often totally collapse when buildings were hit.⁵⁵

The SAAF had dropped a total of 82,000 barrel bombs during the conflict, killing 11,087 civilians

The Russian bear steps in

On September 30, 2015, Russia announced that it would intervene directly in the conflict, joining the war on the Syrian government's side. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, the Kremlin had provided the Assad regime with significant financial aid, material support, and diplomatic backing. Moscow, however, had not officially disclosed any direct involvement in the conflict thus far, despite reports of Russian officers and soldiers (in the form of private military contractors) rotating through the campaign to gain combat experience and to secure promotions.⁵⁶ After the Russian Duma had officially approved the military operation, air strikes on predetermined targets began almost immediately.⁵⁷ The Russian intervention proved to be a crucial turning point in the conflict. By the summer of 2015, it looked as if the Assad regime was finished. It is estimated that in August 2015 the Syrian government only controlled less than a fifth of the country's territory.⁵⁸ The combination of Russian Air Force (RuAF) airstrikes and SAA and Iranian-backed militias' ground operations broke the stalemate that was largely in place throughout the country. With this surge in military power government forces went on the offensive, placing more territory under siege and intensifying other key sieges into air and ground assaults.

When Russia joined the war, it plunged the conflict into a volatile new phase, as foreign militias played an increasingly prominent role and sophisticated Russian aircraft replaced old Soviet-made SAAF aircraft and munitions, putting new weight of firepower on opposition-held enclaves throughout the country.⁵⁹ The

54 Interview with I., 6 June, 2021.

55 Interview with W., 27 April, 2022.

56 S. Charap, E. Treyger, and E. Geist, 'Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria', *Rand Project Air Force Research Report*, January 2019, 6.

57 To justify its intervention, Moscow claimed that it was fighting ISIS terrorist groups. However, an overall examination of the RuAF bombing campaign in Syria proves this assertion to be deceptive. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) reported that 85-90 per cent of Russian air strikes were on areas under the control of the armed opposition, and often on densely populated areas. Not on regions under the control of ISIS or ISIS-affiliated terrorist groups. See: Syrian Network for Human Rights, '“They came to kill us”: Russian forces kill 570 civilians, including 152 children and 60 women', 17 December, 2015, 1; Opposition activists even sardonically called the regime and Russia's sorties 'the air force of ISIS': M. Weiss, 'Russia's Giving ISIS An Air Force', *The Daily Beast*, 13 April, 2017. See: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russias-giving-isis-an-air-force>.

58 C. Strack, 'Syrian government no longer controls 83% of the country', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 2 August, 2015. See: <http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>.

59 A. Lund, 'Not just Russia: The Iranian Surge in Syria', *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 23 May, 2016. See: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63650>: It is important to note that besides the Russian military intervention, a simultaneous surge in Tehran-backed Shia fighters and Iranian troops filtering into Syria also played an important role in the conflict. Aron Lund argues that the decisive impact of the Russian air campaign in Syria should not be viewed in isolation, and that Iranian ground forces had a decisive impact on this crucial turning point in the conflict.

PHOTO KREMLIN



Syrian President al-Assad and Russian President Putin confer with military leadership. Russia's intervention created and facilitated a massive escalation in the Syrian regime's siege warfare tactics

RuAF brought with it a vast array of advanced weapon systems and high-tech aircraft and helicopters. However, an estimated 95 per cent of RuAF munitions dropped in Syria between 2015 and 2017 were unguided 'dumb' bombs.⁶⁰ It is widely reported that during its aerial campaign, Russia has fired cluster munitions and incendiary weapons on urban areas. Airwars, an ngo that documents airstrikes in

countries like Syria and Iraq, has tracked more than 1,300 strikes that allegedly involved the RuAF, and listed over 7,000 potential civilian fatalities by September 2016.⁶¹ This database of incidents indicates that Russia, like its Syrian ally, systematically targeted civilian infrastructure and residential neighbourhoods.

When the SAAF and RuAF utilised 'smart' bombs and guided missiles, it primarily targeted vital civilian infrastructure, such as food markets and health facilities. Between July and December 2015, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) reported 172 verified attacks on hospitals or medical facilities across Syria.⁶² It is important to note that these attacks targeted the same facilities multiple times, and that these facilities were often hit with precision-guided 'smart' bombs. The high number of documented attacks on hospitals and the weapons used by the RuAF and SAAF indicate a deliberate and consistent strategy to inflict maximum damage to opposition-held territories.

60 'Death in the City: High levels of civilian harm in modern urban warfare resulting from significant explosive weapons use', *Airwars*, May 2018, 12.

61 S. Oakford, 'A year of Russian airstrikes leaves thousands dead', *Airwars*, 29 September, 2016. See: <https://airwars.org/news-and-investigations/a-year-of-russian-airstrikes-has-left-thousands-of-syrians-civilians-dead/>.

62 'The Failure of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 in Preventing Attacks on Healthcare in Syria', Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), January 2017, 3: These attacks were conducted with a variety of weapons, such as barrel bombs, cluster munitions, incendiary weapons and bunker busters. For an in-depth analysis of one such attack, see: Evan Hill and Christiaan Triebert, '12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia', *The New York Times*, 13 October, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/russia-bombing-syrian-hospitals.html>.

Russia's intervention in Syria created and facilitated a massive escalation in the Syrian regime's siege warfare tactics. It allowed the SAA to steadily increase its stranglehold on besieged areas and to intensify its bombing campaigns on opposition territories, combining both indiscriminate attacks and precision strikes to destroy residential neighbourhoods and vital sites of civilian infrastructure in a way that would gradually force the besieged enclaves to surrender and disperse. After Russia's entry in the conflict, various urban population centres held by opposition forces fell, one by one.⁶³

Conclusion

This article sought to explain the rationale behind the Syrian regime's 'Assad or we burn the country'-strategy, and the implementation of its siege warfare campaign in practice. Through deliberate and methodical siege tactics the Syrian regime and its allies were able to quell the revolt and gradually capture and regain opposition-held territory. The grim logic of sieges is simple. If you deny your foe food and medicine, eventually, they lose the physical and mental capability to fight. To achieve this goal, sieges typically combine two key elements: encirclement of an area for the purpose of isolating it, and bombardment. Both these modalities of violence are synergic and exacerbate the impact of siege tactics on the besieged populations. Sieges in Syria were characterised by indiscriminate bombardments and extensive urban destruction, resulting in significant suffering for civilians trapped within the besieged areas.

Several factors were involved in the regime's decision to employ siege warfare as a facet of counterinsurgency. First, based on the authoritarian model of counterinsurgency, the Syrian regime viewed siege warfare as a way to punish areas that were seen as 'disloyal' to the government. Through destruction and terror, the regime could create a sense of hopelessness and desperation among the population, making it more difficult for the armed opposition to find support. Furthermore, such tactics of

collective punishment and reprisal bombardments have prevented the revolution from spreading to other territories. Second, because of the intense Russo-Arab military relations during the Cold War, the SAA had assimilated siege tactics in the 'DNA' of its military doctrine and a shift to this strategy was therefore easily made. Finally, siege warfare proved to be a relatively 'cheap' and effective endeavour for SAA and SAAF forces, as it required limited manpower and allowed regime forces to utilize its military advantages provided by its heavy artillery and air force on urban population centres. After Russia's intervention, the military power dynamics changed even further. With Russian air support government forces were able to gain ground and encircle opposition-held areas more effectively, leading to a significant increase in the number of sieges. This allowed the government to exert greater control over the country and weaken the opposition, but at a significant cost to the civilian population.

During the ongoing war in Ukraine, the destruction of cities like Mariupol and Severodonetsk evoke eerie comparisons with the devastating sieges of Syrian cities. The tactics, and even some of Russia's soldiers, have come directly from the Syrian civil war. Although Russia is now fighting a regular adversary, the patterns of indiscriminate attacks and destructive elements of siege warfare show a certain degree of continuity from its 'Syrian playbook'. Urban warfare holds the premise for the future. More and more, combat is centred on large urban population centres.⁶⁴ Given the success of Syria's counterinsurgency campaign of siege warfare, it is likely that authoritarian regimes in the future will exploit siege tactics to conquer urban territory and to exert control over the population living there. ■

63 In sequence of their collapse: Darayya fell in August of 2016, Ramousah in September 2016, Eastern Aleppo in December 2016, Homs in May 2016, and various opposition enclaves in Eastern Ghouta and rural locations near Damascus in the first quarter of 2018, just to name a few.

64 L.A. DiMarco, *Concrete Hell. Urban Warfare From Stalingrad to Iraq* (Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2012) 26.