

Mobility Control as State-Making in Civil War: Forcing Exit, Selective Return and Strategic Laissez-Faire

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how different actors attempt to control mobility during civil war, and how mobility control and processes of state-making interact in such settings. Mobility in civil wars is often considered a political act by the various actors involved: Leaving the country can be perceived as an act of opposition, as can moving between territories which are controlled by different, opposing factions. Drawing on literature on strategic displacement and migration politics and combining this with empirical insights from the ongoing wars in Libya and Syria, the paper identifies three mechanisms of mobility control in civil war settings: forcing exit, selective return as a form of expulsion, and strategic laissez-faire as the intentional absence of regulation regarding displacement and return. The analysis reveals that all three mechanisms are employed by state actor(s), rebels, and militias, and can be understood as elements of a new (post)war order that includes some citizens while excluding others depending on perceptions of political threats. We interpret the three mechanisms as ways in which actors in civil war settings attempt to manipulate a country's demography in their own favour in a process of state-making. The paper is based on fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2021 in Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Tunisia.

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Introduction

Civil wars present opportunities to reconfigure social contracts and power constellations. War often weakens, and sometimes destroys, state institutions; it can also facilitate the emergence of local orders with actors like religious authorities, tribes, rebels, and clans attempting to exercise state functions (Khalaf 2015; Arjona 2014, Worrall 2017, Migdal 2001, Staniland 2012). This often results in hybrid, inconsistent, and constantly fluctuating regimes of control. In Syria's civil war, for example, there is rarely a unique and cohesive authority that oversees different functions but rather a diversity of control and overlapping regimes (Vignal 2017). At the same time, civil wars, especially internationalized ones, produce the largest refugee populations (Schmeidl 1997), leading to mobility control becoming a central field in which actors attempt to exercise state functions.

In this paper, we call attempts to exercise state functions strategies of state-making.² These include attempts to fulfil government-like functions such as protection, justice, passing laws, raising taxes, the provision of basic services, and mobility control. In this paper, we specifically focus on attempts to monopolize the right to control and regulate movement. With this, we follow migration scholars who have long argued that controlling the movement of people across both internal and external borders is crucial for state formation and consolidation (Torpey 1997, 2000; Zolberg 1978, 2008; Vigneswaran and Quirk 2015; McKeown 2008). Nonetheless, our understanding of how different actors try to control mobility during civil war and how this interacts with state-making is still limited. This gap is linked on the one hand to the fact that findings from conflict studies have not been sufficiently brought into dialogue with the literature on migration politics and its role in state-making. On the other hand, it is related to insufficient data and the fact that internal and external displacement and return migration are commonly analysed separately instead of considering the full displacement journey. This is problematic since mobility in civil war settings is almost always multiple and includes internal and cross-border displacement as well as return trajectories across internal and external borders.

This paper asks whether practices of mobility control serve as strategies of state-making during civil war to build a better understanding of the functions of mobility control in such settings. It combines research on "strategic displacement" from the conflict literature with research on migration politics as a form of state-making and a part of wartime orders. It draws on qualitative empirical material from two internationalized intrastate wars which have triggered mass displacement within and across borders—the civil wars in Syria and Libya since 2011. Syria and Libya are emblematic cases of contemporary civil war states given the politically organized, large-scale, sustained violent conflicts that have occurred within their territories over the past ten years. They are characterised by an uneven state presence, with the Syrian regime continuing to govern after having re-conquered large, but not all parts of the country at the time of writing, and Libya consisting of two separate parts with competing governments after the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime.

Through the analysis of qualitative interviews with civilians and displaced people and expert interviews with international stakeholders and political and civil society actors in Libya, Tunisia, Syria and Lebanon, we have created a typology of practices of influencing, controlling, and coercing (im)mobility. Following our methodology of practice tracing, we derive three mechanisms of mobility control from these practices: forcing exit, selective return, and strategic laissez-faire. Forcing exit is performed through practices of extinction, deprivation, irregularisation and cross-line deportations, while selective return is practiced through

² We use the term 'state-making', rather than 'state formation', to signify both attempts by fully fledged states to remain a functional state or regain full functionality, and attempts by non-state actors to become more state-like.

arbitrariness, reconciliation agreements, and existential threats. What we call ‘strategic laissez-faire’ refers to instances where mobility remains largely unrestricted while basic rights are not provided.

Mobility control is performative as it tries to demonstrate the capacity to exercise force and take hold of a population irrespective of the actual capacity to do so. Research has established that actors actively construct authority, including over mobility, and utilise it to achieve different political goals in civil war settings; Sosnowski (2020b) calls this “imposing authority” (see also Hagmann and Péclard 2011; Kalyvas 2006). In this sense, and parallel to what Sosnowski (2020b) has written about ceasefires as tools of state stabilization/survival, mobility control can be understood as a type of “(post-)wartime order” which can be used by a range of actors to shift and reshape a society in a way which includes some citizens while excluding others (Sosnowski 2020b: 273-274). Once control of a geographical location is established, other efforts to create a state might follow, such as building up institutions, providing social services (McCull 1969), establishing ‘law and order’, or providing humanitarian assistance. In fact, who provides for the displaced is often a key question of national sovereignty in conflicts (Rahal and White 2022) and generates ‘rents’. However, while we point to the existence of strategies and attempts to control and coerce (im)mobility, this is not to say that individuals living in civil war settings necessarily comply with these. They can also react with evasion and resistance, as a growing literature on agency in displacement shows (Ali 2022; Etzold and Fechter 2022).

Importantly, mobility control is not limited to the external borders of a state but extends to internal borders as well – a characteristic that civil war states share with authoritarian and totalitarian states, where such control is often to the detriment of particular, “negatively privileged” status groups (for example the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, or apartheid-era South Africa, Torpey 1997, 243). Leaving the country and moving across internal conflict lines is often perceived as an act of opposition, irrespective of whether that was the intention. The same holds true for external and internal return to rebel- or regime-held regions. In fact, it even applies to immobility: staying in a rebel-controlled area can be seen as an act of resistance. This is one of the reasons why information on all forms of (im)mobility in civil war settings is highly sensitive, with reliable statistics often not available for researchers, resulting in inconsistent and patchy data. In Syria, for example, access restrictions and legislation targeting humanitarian agencies are hampering attempts to monitor figures and movements of internally displaced people (IDP) (IDMC 2021).

In the following, we first conceptualise mobility control and state-making in civil war. We then present our research design, methods, and analytical approach before we elaborate on the three mobility control mechanisms. This section focusses on mapping out the mechanisms and provides an empirically rich micro-level account of how different actors in Syria and Libya have attempted to control the mobility of displaced populations through different sets of practices. The final part reflects critically on mobility control as state-making in civil war and identifies possible avenues for future research.

1. Conceptualizing mobility control and state-making attempts in civil war

With our analysis, we aim to understand which types of mobility control take place in civil war settings, and which role they play in state-making efforts of different actors. The mobilities literature focuses on the ‘politics of mobility’, i.e., the socio-spatial inequalities that are (re)produced by differential access to or effects of various kinds of mobility (Cook and Butz 2018). While mobility is a fundamental aspect of daily life for people everywhere, access to

mobility is often experienced unequally along lines of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, age, and social class. Control over mobility is therefore a form of power with deep historical roots (Sheller 2018, 24-25).

We define mobility control, building on Zolberg's (1978, 243) and Natter's (2019, 31) work, as (i) practices around formal policies, laws, and regulations governing internal and external border control, entry, and exit regulations; (ii) informal dynamics (for example, differences between administrations and localities); and (iii) *laissez-faire*, with the purposive absence of regulation. The rationale for including the absence of regulation is motivated by our wish to understand implementation gaps, degrees of lawlessness, and legal vulnerability along the full continuum of movement in civil war settings. We also see the societal and political negotiation of displacement terminology—in other words, processes of labelling mobile populations—as part of mobility control, because different terms indicate different reactions to displacement (Zetter 2007; Erdal & Oeppen 2017; Aubin-Boltanski & Vignal 2020).

Mobility control in civil war is characterised by a multiplicity of actors and shifts according to changing power dynamics. As Staniland writes (2012, 246), civil war is a contest over the shaping of political order in a contested area, which brings these conflicts conceptually very close to state-making. The Syrian regime, for example, has lost control over its external border over the course of the Syrian civil war, while frontlines have turned into internal borders. New non-state actors not only control swathes of territory, they actively manage sections of the border on which they also erect crossings (Vignal 2017, 819). Similarly, in Libya, shifting alliances have battled for control, creating anarchy and a power-vacuum which has exacerbated divisions between Libya's many tribal, regional, and institutional actors. This ultimately culminated in the division of the country into two separate state entities which have relied on militia groups for their security and border control.

In both countries, mobility control has deep roots that precede civil war; logics of exclusion and of reconfiguration of the social contract existed long before the respective conflicts erupted. In Syria, violent repression, in particular against Kurds and Muslim Brotherhood supporters, e.g., in Hama 1982, had been a decades-old practice. In Libya, political opponents of the former regime had long been persecuted in- and outside of the country (Nordheimer 1984; Dionne 1984). What is more, the Libyan state has a history of systematically discriminating against and excluding non-White and non-Arab minorities, such as Tebu and Amazigh communities. Qaddafi's Arabization policies focused on Libya being a white, Arab and Sunni Muslim nation, which was to be reinforced by erasing tribal and ethnic bonds. Such pre-existing dynamics are often accelerated by conflict, with previously established accountability mechanisms losing their meaning.

This overlapping multiplicity of mobility control in civil war and how it is linked to state-making is still understudied in the migration literature. On the one hand, regarding Syria and Libya, there is an abundance of studies on the politics of reception focusing on Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Dionigi 2017; Betts, Ali, and Memişoğlu 2017; İçduygu & Şimşek 2016; Janmyr 2016; 2018; Tsourapas 2019), and to a lesser degree, on Syria as a host state for forced migrants prior to the war (Chatty 2010; Hoffmann 2016). Some texts also focus on Libya as a host and transit state for migrants (Paoletti 2011; Phillips & Missbach 2017). Other scholarship has focused on the role of states in shaping return migration through their policies or institutions. Most of this literature, however, focuses on the return policies of Northern receiving states, especially in "organized" return contexts, such as "assisted voluntary return" (Cleton & Schweitzer 2021; Alpes 2020) or deportations (Kalir & Wissink 2016). Some attention has also been given to return policies of neighbouring receiving states in the Global

South (Şahin Mencütek 2019; İçduygu & Nimer 2020), and to the ways in which sending states control their citizens' political participation abroad and, in some cases, strip them of certain rights (Tsourapas 2018; Chaudhary & Moss 2019).

Yet how does mobility control figure in a civil war context, which presents opportunities to redefine the boundaries of a nation and its territory? How do different actors control mobility as one facet of state-making? Research from conflict studies has provided important insights into why people flee war (Adhikari 2012; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003; Moore and Shellman 2004), on refugees as political actors in civil war (Salehyan 2009; Bohnet et al. 2018), on their role in counterinsurgencies (Greenhill & Staniland 2007), and on the logics behind combatants forcing people to flee, for instance to gain control of a territory, or to learn more about displaced populations (Lichtenheld 2020, Greenhill 2010; Hägerdal 2019; Steele 2018; Zhukov 2015). Conflict scholars have coined the term “strategic displacement”, referring to targeted displacement to keep opponents from key resources (Zhukov 2015), or to displacement as a form of collective punishment (Balcells & Steele 2016; Steele 2018). According to Lichtenheld (2020), state actors have employed strategic displacement in two-thirds of civil wars between 1945 and 2008.

Steele (2019) identifies three types of displacement in civil war: individual escape (as a reaction to selective targeting), mass evasion (to avoid indiscriminate violence), and political cleansing (collective targeting based on shared traits like ethnicity, sect, political identity). Lichtenheld (2020), with a focus on state actors, also identifies three types of strategic displacement in civil wars: cleansing, depopulation, and forced relocation. He argues that strategic displacement is not only a strategy used by combatants to expel undesirable or disloyal populations, but also a strategy “to identify the undesirables or the disloyal in the first place”, as they are forced “to send costly and visible signals of allegiance and affiliation based on whether, and to where, they flee” (Lichtenheld 2020, 3). While research on demographic engineering (Morland 2014; Teitelbaum 2015) has focused on how ethnic groups deploy demographic strategies, conflict studies has thus contributed important insights into the logics of forcing exit. There is a gap, however, regarding why actors choose not to enact policies towards their own displaced population in civil war settings, and why origin countries are interested in regulating return migration. Several studies show that in some host states, not having any legislation might be a deliberate choice (Saghieh & Frangieh 2014)—termed by some scholars the policy of “no-policy” (Janmyr 2016) or of “strategic indifference” (Norman 2019).

War often weakens, and sometimes destroys, state institutions. At the same time, Migdal (2001) has shown that states are uniquely positioned to use compliance, participation, and legitimacy to protect and consolidate state territory (Migdal 2001, 52-53). Yet, local institutions emerging during war can also produce order (Arjona 2014). Some armed groups may choose to create new institutions to facilitate recruitment, provide access to political networks, allow for the accumulation of material resources, and to implement promised reforms. While the interplay of state, societal, and rebel forces as creators of institutions is certainly a characteristic of state-making in civil war (Arjona 2014, 1362), the dynamic process of negotiation and contestation of different actors to accumulate power and authority also needs to be considered (Sosnowski 2020a). Staniland (2012) argues that wartime orders vary according to the distribution of territorial control and the level of cooperation between states and insurgents; in his book “Ordering Violence” (2021), he also shows that how a government perceives the ideological threats posed by an armed group is a decisive factor shaping its responses. Building on these insights, we have developed our research design. We outline our methods, data, and analytical approach in the following section.

2. Research design, data, and analysis

In this paper, we analyse practices of mobility control across internal and external borders in two contemporary civil war states: Syria and Libya. In Syria, the regime survived but has to share power with a range of different actors (Vignal 2017, 814), while in Libya, two competing governments have been in place. While both are contemporary cases of internationalised civil wars with large numbers of internally and externally displaced people, possibilities to exit the country and flee across borders diverge considerably. Since 2014, it has become increasingly difficult for Syrians to enter neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Lebanon, for example, changed from a mutual mobility agreement which was still respected at the beginning of the Syrian conflict to one characterised by border closures and political actors advocating for a return of Syrian refugees. In contrast, the Libyan-Tunisian and Libyan-Egyptian borders have mostly remained open for Libyans. Tunisia, for example, adopted a *laissez-faire* approach towards Libyans tolerating their entry and presence without providing refugee status (Müller-Funk & Natter 2022).

Methodologically, we apply a practice tracing approach (Adler & Pouliot 2011, Pouliot 2014) to identify mechanisms and characterise interactions between mobility control and state-making. Following Pouliot (2014, 241), we understand practices as “socially meaningful and organized patterns of activities” or “ways of doing things that are known to practitioners”. Practices are patterned and repeated; there is no such thing as a practice that occurs only once. We use practice tracing as many practices related to mobility control in Syria and Libya are not based on formal policy or public agreements, but are invisible, opaque, informal, and locally (re)negotiated. The basic objective of practice tracing is to understand what a practice counts as in the situation at hand and to move beyond singular causality toward cross-case insights. Our comparative approach is explorative, insofar as we mostly draw on the Syrian case and complement and contrast our analysis through cross-case insights from Libya. We use the concept of mechanisms for the theoretical abstractions we coin to classify these practices across cases. As Pouliot (2014, 238) writes, “mechanisms are analytical constructs whose objective is not to match actual social instances, but to draw useful connections between them”. Importantly, even when practices cannot be seen, they may be talked about through interviews or read thanks to textual analysis (Pouliot 2014, 246).

Methodologically speaking, the fact that practices describe ways of doing things that are known to practitioners means that practices must be understood from within the community of practitioners to restore the intersubjective meanings that are bound up in them. In our case, the community of practitioners consists of policymakers and stakeholders involved in migration governance and humanitarian aid on the local and national level. These policymakers and stakeholders can be Syrian or Libyan nationals (e.g., mayors, members of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) etc.), or internationals based in the countries (e.g., representatives of international organisations). Our study also includes the perspective of the governed, i.e., displaced people, who have experienced different types of mobility control.

We identify practices and mechanisms by drawing on three sets of data: First, a policy, document and press analysis including reports from NGOs and IOs; second, 88 narrative interviews with people who have experienced displacement (and to a lesser extent, people who have experienced immobility); and third, 31 expert interviews conducted with political actors, representatives of IOs, local and regional NGOs, and academics. Both types of interviews addressed how mobility within and across borders was controlled. The data was collected between 2018 and 2021 together with a team of research assistants based in Syria, Lebanon,

Libya, and Tunisia. Large parts of the fieldwork took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so that many interviews had to be conducted online. All interviews have been anonymised and are quoted using pseudonyms and codes (see annex for more information about our sample).³

Our analysis focused first on identifying different practices of influencing, controlling, or coercing (im)mobility in the accounts of our interviewees or in policy documents, reports and the press (see Table 1). We then classified these practices into three mechanisms which, we argue, can explain the motives behind these practices and their connection to state-making strategies in civil war settings.

Table 1: Practices and mechanisms of mobility control in civil war states

Mechanism 1: Forcing exit		Type of actors
<i>Practices of extinction</i>	Torture, killing, bombings, besieging	State actors and insurgents, cooperation with foreign state actors (bombings)
<i>Practices of deprivation</i>	Hindering access to aid, healthcare, education, food, water through border closures/control	State actors and insurgents, cooperation with foreign state actors
<i>Practices of irregularisation</i>	Hindering access to legal documentation, HLP rights, irregularising most cross-border movements	Mostly state actors, cooperation with foreign state actors
<i>Practices of deportation</i>	Deportations across conflict lines within the country	State actors and insurgents
Mechanism 2: Selective return		
<i>Practices of arbitrariness and informality</i>	Frequent and intransparent state policy changes, unreliable implementation, disinformation, corruption and nepotism	Mostly state actors
<i>Practices of deprivation</i>	Hindering access to private property, rights-stripping, fining	State actors and insurgents
<i>Practices of “taming”</i>	Security clearances, reconciliation agreements	Mostly state actors, cooperation with foreign state actors
<i>Practices of threatening extinction upon return</i>	Sending to the front, detainment or killing upon return	State actors and insurgents
Mechanism 3: Strategic laissez-faire		
<i>Practices of non-restriction</i>	Free movement for people considered loyal to governing actor	State actors and insurgents, little involvement of international community
<i>Practices of non-protection</i>	No HLP rights, no help in case of retaliation, no material support in case of return	State actors and insurgents, little involvement of international community

Our data and analysis have clear limitations. Given the volatile character of civil war, our analysis only provides geographical and temporal snapshots. We do not claim to

³ Narrative interviews: SYR = interviews with Syrians inside Syria who have experienced immobility, displacement and/or return; LEB = interviews with Syrians in Lebanon who left Syria in the context of the war; LIB = interviews with Libyans inside Libya who have experienced immobility, displacement and/or return; TUN = interviews with Libyans in Tunisia who left Libya in the context of the conflicts; expert interviews: SYREX = expert interviews about Syria; LIBEX = expert interviews about Libya.

comprehensively study all mobility control practices taking place in civil wars, nor all state and non-state actors present in both countries. Our data reflects our limited access to different localities due to security concerns and Covid-19 regulations. Some regions remained inaccessible to us and some virtual interviews with participants living in Libya and Syria avoided certain sensitive political topics to safeguard our respondents. Our expert interviews have a bias towards stakeholders in international organisations and international NGOs, as it was extremely difficult to engage with national and local political actors virtually during the pandemic. Our typology thus should be understood as a starting point for reflection to which future research can add.

3. Mechanisms of Mobility Control in Civil War Settings: Forcing Exit, Selective Return and Strategic Laissez-Faire

In the following, we present the results of our practice tracing exercise across our two cases. The mobility control practices we detected were not only applied by state actors; some actors challenging the state also engaged in them (HTS, Kurdish forces). Some practices were however dominated by state actors, especially when they were related to official policy (irregularisation, arbitrariness, “taming”). Some practices necessitated the cooperation with foreign state actors, like Turkey, Russia, or Lebanon, as they included bombings (practices of extinction) and border control (deprivation, irregularisation, “taming”). Laissez-faire practices, on the other hand, were generally accompanied by little involvement of foreign actors and international organisations such as UNHCR.

In both Syria and Libya, the identified three mechanisms were accompanied by the discursive construction of ‘unwanted elements’. In Syria, branding displaced people or entire regions as ‘terrorists’ or ‘defectors’ has become a common practice since 2011. As one of our respondents explained: “the regime sees us or sees the refugees and IDPs and most of the Syrian people actually as an enemy, actually in the last speech of Bashar Assad, he mentioned that ‘It’s very good that we get rid of the enemy’. (...) General ‘Issam Zahr el-Din for example, on the state television 2017, he warned the refugees never to set foot in Syria again; and he said exactly ‘We will not forgive them, and never forget what they have done’. And also the head of the Air Force intelligence, Jamil Hassan, in 2018, he said that ‘the regime only wants loyalists’, (...), so you know that they are thinking of refugees in that way” (SYREX11). And indeed, in one of his public speeches, Bashar al-Assad said that Syria had gained “a healthier and more homogenous society” through the exile of Syrians (RT 2017). He also repeatedly referred to IDP locations as hotbeds for “terrorists”, and to internal displacement as a result of “terrorism” (IDMC 2014, 13). Another respondent also implied that refugees outside of Syria were seen as a threat and as not (sufficiently) subordinate (LEBEX16).

In Libya, similar practices can be observed: On the one hand, anti-Qaddafi militias branded people from entire tribes or regions as “henchmen” of the old regime (*azlām*), which became a term of accusation and slander in Libyan society and media (Jaidi & Tashani 2015; TUN22; TUN25). Displacement across conflict lines in Libya and to a neighbouring country was often interpreted as political affiliation. One Libyan respondent said that “people from the East displaced to the West or to Turkey are perceived as enemies in the East” (LIB1), others mentioned “hate speech against those who have left” (LIB3). On the other hand, Libyan political actors also used depoliticised terminology to refer to displaced Libyans. For example, IDPs were usually labelled as *nāziḥ*; the verb *nazaḥa* in Arabic refers to moving to other lands but also to being displaced (in war), without a specification of whether displacement happens within or across borders, or of a legal status. Libyan officials and Libyan reports referred to

externally displaced Libyans as “Libyan migrants” (LIBEX4), thereby depoliticising displacement and downplaying protection needs. After all, Libyan “refugees” would have access to a different set of rights and assistance than “migrants”, who supposedly left of their own accord. A Libyan woman living in Tunis summarized the approach of the Libyan state(s) as follows, “Our government isn’t offering us the needed services and we face problems that we have no one to trust that can represent us or protect us because the embassy itself isn’t cooperating [...]. Our government or representatives supposedly or even the people who speak for us are not helping at all as if we have no one [...]. So we the people who live here have to take care of ourselves and with the few social connections that we made” (TUN20).

3.1. The mechanism of forcing exit

The objective of this mechanism is to force certain groups which are perceived to be unwanted elements of a future state to leave through strategies of immobilisation and existential threat which can border on ethnic cleansing. One family of practices in this category are those primarily aimed at extinction. These include the most extreme and violent practices mentioned in our data, such as torture, targeted killings, bombing and besiegement. In Syria, government sieges and bombings of rebel strongholds have been a significant driver of immobilisation but also in-line (internally, within conflict lines), cross-line (internally, across conflict lines), and cross-border displacement (across international borders) throughout the war; in some areas, these practices produced high death rates among trapped populations, while in other areas, they resulted in a population exodus. Also, the practice of targeting civilians in opposition-controlled areas forces exit by making such areas unliveable (IDMC 2014, 10). Imprisonment, forced disappearances, and torture can equally be seen as practices of forcing exit by infusing existential fear in those who survive and witness it. As one Syrian respondent said: “the mass arrests, security crackdowns, the harassment, forced disappearances, systematic siege, starving, destruction. And now confiscation of land and demolition of buildings, naturalization of foreign militias. (...) From these points you know that’s how the regime is thinking about refugees and IDPs” (SYREX11). In Libya, different militias have been terrorising civilians over their alleged political affiliation through threats, beatings, shootings, and brutal treatment during detention (TUN1, TUN2, TUN8, TUN12, TUN14, TUN15, TUN16, TUN19, TUN22, TUN24, TUN25).

Another family of practices revolves around depriving populations of aid, healthcare, education, food, water and other services and goods. This includes practices of border control, where different actors restrict access to areas across both front lines and state borders, resulting in international humanitarian agencies being unable to provide aid and services, and in supply difficulties, which in turn force those to leave who cannot survive without such aid. In Idlib, for instance, borders with Turkey have been closed since 2015, which our respondents described as the area turning into a prison, the population being cut off, and no one coming in (SYR6, SYR7, SYR11). Similar dynamics can be discerned for restrictions on cross-line movement, too, which has become almost impossible for humanitarian actors wanting to provide aid to IDPs inside Syria: “Currently, the crossings are closed between the areas of the Syrian regime and the areas of northern Syria, liberated from the regime’s control” (SYR15). A respondent from Damascus described the borders between government-controlled (goS) and rebel-held areas in Syria in 2020 as follows: “I have the feeling that parts of the country are cut off. (...) The difficulties were when you were cut off from the rest of the country. That is, you are locked up from outside” (SYR20).

A third family of practices aims at irregularising and criminalising those moving within or across frontlines and borders. This family includes practices by state actors and rebel groups of

controlling internal movement through checkpoints, but also of preventing IDPs from acquiring legal documentation, like ID cards or birth certificates. This has been the case for many IDPs in rebel-held areas in Syria or those with a “security sign” attached to their name (SYR19; SYR6; Danish Refugee Council & Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2019, 13-16). Furthermore, fleeing civilians can also be subjected to a process of registering and screening before authorities allow them to enter IDP centres, for instance in Eastern Ghouta; many IDP shelters have in fact operated as detention centres (EASO 2020a, 22). In Libya, respondents also talked extensively about dangers at checkpoints and their fears of being recognised or being persecuted by militias because of their family name or their tribal affiliation. One interviewee referred to the main road from the south of Libya to Tripoli, for example, as “suicide road” for this reason (TUN6).

Irregularisation and criminalisation also happen at external borders, where practices of border closures and control allow certain groups to pass, but not others, thereby irregularising the latter’s movements. The extent of this depends on the nature of said borders, on whether they are internal or external, and whether they are fortified with walls or porous and in large parts unguarded. Syria’s neighbouring countries, in particular Turkey with its border wall, but in part also Lebanon and Jordan from 2015 onward, have closed their borders for Syrians permanently or intermittently, thereby criminalising those fleeing the country. At the same time, INGO staff, for instance, can request special permission to cross both internal and external borders, as can those working for key local councils or the Syrian interim government. Movement across the border for medical reasons was also still allowed at the time of writing. Since 2014, Turkey had relaxed the border closure on high holidays to allow families to reunite for some years, a measure, which, however, was cancelled in 2022 (Nour 2022). All other movement is considered irregular and a criminal offense. This practice depends in large part on cooperation with state and non-state actors in neighbouring countries, often based on their involvement in the conflict. This is most effective when political interests align; for example, in Lebanon, the change from open borders between Syria and Lebanon to their closure was supported by the Lebanese government.

Fourth, practices of deportation aim at forcing exit across conflict lines. Examples from Syria include people from rebel-held areas who were deported because of so-called “reconciliation agreements” between regime and insurgent forces after or shortly before the regime reconquered territory. The regime’s negotiators offered specific deals for different areas, resulting in distinctive kinds of movements/deportations; for example, those that demonstrated strong resistance in fighting the regime faced total population removal and safe passage to rebel-controlled areas (Hinnebusch & Imady 2017, 7), such as deportations from Rif Damascus to Idlib (SYR5), or from opposition-controlled Eastern Aleppo to opposition-controlled Idlib in 2016. The famous green buses which shuttled people have been used for all deportations and have become a performative symbol of opposition defeat (Barnard & Saad 2016).

3.2. The mechanism of selective return

The mechanism of selective return aims at sorting and controlling returnees as a sort of selective expulsion by repelling some groups of displaced people from returning and by re-subjecting others under the control of state and non-state actors. Within this mechanism, we discern four families of practices: Practices of arbitrariness and informality, practices of deprivation, practices of ‘taming’, and practices of threatening potential extinction upon return.

The first family of practices is situated at the gap between official policy offering safe return and practices on the ground, which concerns mostly state-actors. For example, the Syrian regime has been trying to foster an image of stability since reconquering large parts of the state territory, among others by repeatedly calling on refugees to return. It is important to note that the number of returnees remains low despite the Syrian regime and its supporters (Russia, parts of Lebanon) peddling a discourse of return. Several decrees and regulations have been passed in this regard, including the waving of some fees and fines for late registration of vital life events or for border crossings, as well as decrees around conscription (SYREX2). Also, external actors have supported the return narrative; Russia has been particularly active in this regard, for instance with a jointly convened Refugee Return Conference in Damascus in December 2020. At the same time, the Syrian government as well as other political actors have been enacting informal practices to repel Syrians from returning, signifying a lack of a clear strategy and a high degree of arbitrariness, with decisions depending on individual officers. This applies to both internal and external return movements. One respondent indicated how some sections of the Syrian society evaluate the return policies of different actors: “All governing actors have a return policy: goS [government of Syria], SDF [Syrian Defence Forces], HTS [Hay’at Tahrir ash-Sham, Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant], but we see no return, so (...) they are completely failing at implementing their return policy, which makes you question – do they really have a return policy, or have they just written a policy to appeal to their patron, or to their sponsor? So, does the Syrian government really want Syrians to return, or are they just doing it because Russia told them to do it? And does the Syrian opposition really want Syrians to return to its areas or are they doing it just because Turkey told them to do it?” (SYREX9). Practices in this family point to the unreliability of how returnees will be treated at internal and external borders and checkpoints (Danish Immigration Service 2019), to practices of disinformation, for instance contradictory reports on who needs to apply for a ‘reconciliation agreement’ (EASO 2020b), as well as to corruption and nepotism.

Practices of deprivation include hindering access to private property, rights-stripping, and fining upon return, which is another strategy undertaken by state and non-state actors to repel potential unwanted returnees. An example for this family of practices is the arbitrary demolition of private property in former rebel-held areas for ‘state reconstruction projects’ (SYR10; SYR19; SYR20; EASO 2020, 34), as it regulates return to those areas. They also include rights stripping, especially House, Land and Property (HLP) rights, and even citizenship, with the Syrian Law 10 being a prominent example. This law essentially legalised the expropriation of those Syrians who cannot or are not allowed to return to their property in government-held areas (Abu Ahmad 2018), illustrating how different practices can interlink to produce a certain outcome. This repelling practice also extends to internal return: Internal returnees are prevented from accessing their homes and property by government checkpoints in some (usually previously rebel-held) areas (SYREX5). One example are checkpoints in formerly opposition-held areas in South Damascus, the purpose of which is to control the flow of individuals entering and exiting Damascus, particularly people considered ‘undesirable’, i.e., former residents of Eastern Ghouta and other opposition-held districts outside of Damascus (Danish Immigration Service 2019, 13-16). In Syria, it has also become common practice that returnees must exchange 100 USD into Syrian pounds at the border at a conversion rate set by the government, thus essentially “preying upon those vulnerable families who are often returning because, you know, they’ve exhausted their resources and they have no other options” (SYREX4). Here, practices depriving Syrians of access to their private property are perpetuating practices preventing legal return, together forming a continuum of deprivation and irregularisation. Abboud (2020) has similarly argued in this regard that Syrian citizenship is increasingly bifurcated along the lines of settled or reconciled and rejected citizens.

Practices of ‘taming’, in contrast, refer to security clearances and “reconciliation agreements” required for return across conflict lines and international borders. Syrian refugees who want to return to Syria from outside the country, for example, need to apply for a security clearance or “sorting out of affairs” (*taswiyat al-waḍaʿ*; EASO 2020b, 18) issued by Syrian security services prior to relocating and in some cases, a so-called reconciliation agreement. First, the authorities check whether a person has a “security issue”. This goes back to a decades-old practice of the ruling Syrian Baath party, which has long relied on a system where citizens report on each other to security agencies. As a result, approximately 15% of all citizens reportedly have security issues. Second, refugees need to go through a so-called “reconciliation” process if their name is on a blacklist (Alpes 2021, 19). For this, a reconciliation committee consisting of officers representing the regime’s security branches, dignitaries, clerics, and officials from the region, decide on a case-by-case basis whether applicants are allowed to return. During this process, potential returnees must share extensive personal information with the security apparatus, which then reportedly uses such data to blackmail or arrest individuals who are perceived as a “security threat” (Alpes 2021, 18-20). According to some sources, several Syrian refugees in Lebanon have already been denied security approval, thereby losing access and legal claim to their property (Danish Immigration Service 2019, 24). In the context of cross-border return, practices of taming also require the cooperation with the host country – which happens if political interests align. In Lebanon, in 2017, for example, non-state actors, particularly Hezbollah, negotiated the “repatriation” of Syrian refugees with militant groups, without direct involvement of the Lebanese government or the United Nations (Içduygu & Nimer 2020, 421). Hezbollah, in cooperation with the General Security Office (GSO), opened several “repatriation centers” across the country for refugees to register for return and to perform security clearances (Houssari 2018; Reuters 2018). These steps were, however, in line with the view of the Lebanese government on “repatriation”. One respondent explained: “The Lebanese want Syrians to go back asap; the government calls this its refugee policy.” (LEBEX12).

A fourth practice employed by state and non-state actors in Syria and Libya is threat through potential extinction upon return. This includes forcible conscription and detention, but also threats to be killed or executed upon return. In Syria, there is strong evidence that people returning to government-held areas were conscripted and sent to the frontlines of the conflict; as one respondent explained: “Returnees are very very disinclined to indicate that they are refugee returnees [...] but again, it is related usually to forced conscription, fears of forced conscription or detention in government-held areas. [...] IDPs who have returned to government areas as well as to a lesser extent refugee returnees who end up getting conscripted, are sent to Idlib and they’re put right on the frontlines; it’s absolutely retribution and punishment. [...] That is relevant for refugees but particularly IDPs” (SYREX4). The following vignette from Northwest Syria illustrates the mechanisms of forcing exit and selective return and the ways in which people have reacted and resisted to such attempts to control mobility.

Demographic engineering in Jabal al-Zawiya

Jabal al-Zawiya is a mountainous region in Idlib Governorate and illustrates why state and non-state actors employ different mechanisms of mobility control to make a state or state-like entity which is supported by a critical mass of supporters. It illustrates how mobility control practices fulfil a performative function for actors laying claim to state-like power, for instance to border control. Some of our interviewees and other observers described the mobility control practices in Idlib Governorate as “demographic engineering” (SYREX9; SYACD 2020), which we see as a state-making strategy that relies on emptying government-controlled areas of perceived political threats by displacing them to rebel-controlled areas, and by depriving inhabitants of rebel-held areas of services, citizenship rights, and sufficient means to survive.

Jabal al-Zawiya has remained one of the strongholds of the Syrian opposition since 2011. It was shelled and raided by the Syrian Army in 2012, experienced a siege in 2015 when “the area turned into a prison” (SYR6), and was still being bombed at the time of our fieldwork (2020). At the time of writing, the area was controlled by a rebel government under (Islamist) Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (Yūsuf 2021). When HTS won the inter-factional war with several other armed groups in North-West Syria, it changed the landscape in terms of who had both security and administrative control over the area (SYREX2). Jabal al-Zawiya was portrayed by our respondents as a region run by parallel institutions, caught between regime, rebel and Turkish forces, competing over who controls mobility and who decides who belongs. “We pay for different items in different currencies. We pay for gas and fuel in Turkish, which in turn is fluctuating against the USD. (...) As for pricing, in our region there is a ‘rescue government’ and an interim government in the Afrin regions, they are setting the prices. But there are also long arms of the regime everywhere” (SYR6). On the other hand, the region was completely deprived of public services: “Education is not available here because the schools are destroyed. Now there are no public services of any kind, the nearest hospital is 38 km away from us in Idlib province. (...) There are no human rights organizations or international organizations that are providing assistance because we live in an area of direct conflict” (SYR11). According to estimations, two thirds of the population of Idlib need humanitarian assistance (EASO 2020a, 15).

Jabal al-Zawiya is a textbook example of practices of immobilization, forcing exit and selective return by state-actors and for practices of immobilization by rebel groups: The Syrian regime has persecuted and killed activists in the region, bombings have destroyed 90 per cent of the urban and civil infrastructure such as hospitals, schools and universities, the region was subjected to a government siege, and internal mobility control is exercised through checkpoints, the blocking of humanitarian assistance, massive depopulation campaigns, and cross-line deportations. Respondents reported having been displaced within the region of Jabal al-Zawiya itself, to other areas in Idlib Governorate, but also to neighbouring Aleppo Governorate and across the borders to Turkey and Lebanon, with some in-line and cross-border return movement to Jabal al-Zawiya. As one respondent from the region put it, “After Ramadan, we returned to the area of Jabal al-Zawiya, the population was 200-220,000 people before the displacement and after I returned, almost the entire population of the area was not exceeding 100 [...]. Now about ten percent of the population have returned to the area” (SYR11). At the same time, the region has become a refuge for IDPs from former rebel-held areas across Syria and has experienced a lot of in-line displacement. With the closure of the borders to Lebanon and Turkey, Jabal al-Zawiya’s population has become increasingly immobilized. In 2020, the region was surrounded by regime forces on three sides, with one remaining northern corridor for evacuations (SYR11). Rebel forces also restrict the exit movement of civilians from Idlib Governorate. As one interviewee explained, both HTS and to a lesser extent the Turkish armed forces were very restrictive at checkpoints around Idlib: “if you want to leave as an IDP from HTS areas to self-administration-controlled areas, they levy quite large fees that are completely informal, they’ll just take what they want from your car” (SYREX4). Few can afford to pay a smuggler to leave for Turkey, which in 2020 required almost \$ 1,000 per family – an absolute fortune. For others, staying against all odds equals resisting a regime they loathe.

Our respondent Karim’s case (SYR6) illustrates how the mobility of perceived ‘enemies of the state’ is being enacted by the Syrian regime and how he has reacted to these attempts to control his mobility. Karim was born in Jabal al-Zawiya in the mid-1980s and was working in a ministry when the demonstrations began in 2011. His family was known to support the opposition, so he had a ‘security issue’ attached to his name since the very beginning of the conflict. This made it extremely difficult for him to pass the military checkpoints which abounded in the area.

It was “almost impossible”, for instance, to drive his sister to hospital when she was about to give birth. In 2012, during the government shelling, Karim fled Jabal al-Zawiya to Turkey to join other activists and to work with an international NGO providing aid to Syrian civilians. While the Syrian-Turkish border itself was still open and easy to pass, it took him almost two days to circumvent Syrian Army checkpoints on the way to the border. But he returned to Syria after just one year, and by crossing directly into rebel-held territory, as he wanted to support the population in his region, safeguard his property, and ultimately considered staying an act of resistance: “If we left, we would have to leave our lands and fortunes here and we would have been labelled as displaced.” Also, properties in Idlib had lost in value: “The same is true of real estate that is marked with signs that they are owned by ‘terrorists’. Even if we can take it [the property] back, we lose a lot. (...) Here in Idlib, the lands are all falling in price because we are considered terrorists.” Since then, our respondent has stayed in Jabal al-Zawiya working for NGOs assisting civilians and IDPs. He has been unable to obtain official documents for his son due to the ‘security issue’ attached to his name: “Since 2011, there are mainly people with no registration, there were people who went to regime areas to register their new-borns but many were very afraid to do so.” In this way, Karim and his family are slowly excluded from the Syrian society and state, illustrating how the Syrian regime is re-making itself as a state without opposition forces. The following section dives into a very different mechanism of mobility control in civil war – strategic *laissez-faire*.

3.3 The mechanism of strategic laissez-faire

The third mechanism we encountered in Syria and Libya is the strategic absence of legislation and control regarding displacement and return. This mechanism refers to practices which allow the movement of some groups (non-restriction) and prevent that of unwanted groups by providing insufficient protection (non-protection). The term *strategic laissez-faire* highlights the role of intentionality, which we define as “being aware of one’s action causing harm, and (not) acting nonetheless” (Tyner & Rice 2016, 48). *Laissez-faire* thus should not be seen as a mark of indifference, but as one tool of many in the complex array of disparate regulations and practices of mobility control. Strategic *laissez-faire* is the least costly mobility control mechanism and necessitates little institutionalisation or capacity, which makes it a mechanism easy to employ for state and non-state actors alike. Efforts mainly revolve around masking the selective character and the intentionality of these practices. For Libya, one respondent outlined how both governments do not deal with IDPs in practice, leaving this task to NGOs or private families and tribal structures instead (LIBEX5). Yet, it can also be a welcome choice of action for strong state actors. In Syria, a respondent characterized the government’s partial reluctance to fulfil key state functions of mobility control and protection as “unfortunate non-enforcement”, which can take the form of “bureaucratic impediments”, but also of bribes, difficulties to get official documentation, or a lack of transparency on due process with regard to mobility control: “there is absolutely no specific mechanism that has been created to be able to monitor and use it as a recourse” (SYREX7). We have identified two families of practices in this mechanism: practices of non-restriction and practices of non-protection.

In both our cases, governments and other political actors have allowed in-line, cross-line and cross-border (exit and return) movements for certain parts of a population, in what we call practices of non-restriction. For instance, Syrians who are perceived as either neutral or pro-government are not required to sign reconciliation agreements, and some also returned without a security clearance (SYR12, SYR13, SYR15, SYR16, SYR18). In Syria’s rebel-controlled Northwest, respondents described how they could move rather freely within rebel territory. In Libya, in contrast to militias, state actors have left the exit of citizens somewhat unobstructed:

With some short exceptions (Covid-19 and prolonged border closure of Ras al-Jedir in 2015), the Libyan-Tunisian border has, despite its increasing securitisation, remained open to Libyans. Libyan interviewees in Tunisia – with few exceptions – reported they had been able to cross the border to Tunisia and Egypt quite easily. Having said that, border posts are manned by different militias, which impacts displacement patterns. For example, in the aftermath of the toppling of Qaddafi, his (perceived) supporters mainly used the Ras al-Jedir crossing controlled by the Amazigh city of Zuwara, while opposition supporters crossed through Dehiba-Wazen, which was controlled by a local militia. In East Libya, opposition-affiliated militias controlled the Libyan-Egyptian border post in 2011 (TUN1). Thus, the choice of border crossing offers some insight into perceived or real political affiliations of those crossing the border.

The other side of such practices of non-restriction are what we call practices of non-protection. For instance, the Libyan state(s) have not systematically addressed the issue of return, including the return of former Qaddafi supporters and those perceived as such. There have been only hesitant attempts to develop a policy; for instance, members of parliament visited neighbouring countries to talk to Libyans and convince them to return, and in Cairo, the Libyan Embassy opened a separate office to listen to the problems of displaced Libyans (The New Humanitarian 2013). But nonetheless, high-level political actors dealing with displacement highlighted that they take limited responsibility for Libyans abroad who have political views that are not in line with the current government. A representative of the Libyan Ministry of Displacement and IDP Affairs explained: “we are in dialogue with Libyans abroad, some of them have political demands and ask for safe corridors. Unfortunately, the ministry cannot help with security corridors for all migrants, especially those with a political view, those who participate in demonstrations, who want to participate in political demonstrations, those supporting the previous government” (LIBEX4).

In fact, many of our Libyan respondents who were perceived to be affiliated to the former regime either felt misrepresented by or were afraid to contact the embassy. A respondent whose family name suggested an affiliation to a pro-Qaddafi tribe explained: “When I returned to Libya, they found me, tied me up and beat me, they tortured me and broke my hand. My hand is filled with iron sticks now and I have all the papers to prove it, I underwent surgery twice and up until last week, I kept having issues with those who beat me up” (TUN22). Many also highlighted that there is no state support for damaged or looted property which could support their return; instead, they reported the uncontrolled looting and appropriation of their properties, sometimes with the explicit knowledge of state actors: “There are properties which were taken in 2014, we had lands in [street name] and [place name]. They were taken by people we call ‘Guardians of the Blood’ [a militia], and people who are considered legalized militants who belonged to the parliament in Tubruq, and we tried to get them back by law, but of course weapons spoke louder than the law till this very moment. They still rob people of their properties; they hunt for properties” (TUN2). In general, our Libyan respondents also reported a complete lack of support after private property was destroyed through war action: “[the] state promised reparation but [it was] all lies” (TUN10), “when [I] returned, the house needed to be fixed, but there was no support, there are still no services, I received only family support, no NGOs or IOs” (TUN12). In this policy vacuum, mixed with different degrees of capacity, displaced people rely on family and tribal support, local communities, and charities, and – to some extent – the support of international NGOs. The following vignette illustrates how the mechanism of forcing exit interacted with the mechanism of strategic *laissez-faire* in Tawergha in Libya by forcing cross-line movement and by preventing return through non-protection.

Extinction, cross-line deportations and non-protection in Tawergha

The population of the town of Tawergha, located south of Misrata and 240km east of Tripoli, has been exposed to practices of extinction, cross-line deportations, and non-protection since 2011. The majority of Tawergha's population used to be non-Arab Libyans, many of them descendants of African slaves brought to Libya in the 18th and 19th centuries. During the Libyan uprising of 2011, pro-Qaddafi forces used Tawergha as a base for attacks on Misrata when they besieged the city. Later that year, after Qaddafi's regime was overthrown, militias from Misrata took revenge and terrorized the inhabitants of Tawergha over their alleged loyalty to Qaddafi: militiamen shot, raped, arbitrarily arrested and beat up civilian Tawerghas, leading to the displacement of almost the entire town (HRW 2011; TUN15, LIB17, LIB18). The commanders of the Misrata brigade said in 2011 that the residents of Tawergha should never return (HRW 2011). People of Tawergha experienced multiple displacements, ranging from in-line to cross-line and cross-border displacement: many Tawerghas fled to the Jufra region, south of Misrata, and from there to Benghazi and Tripoli; some also left Libya to Tunisia or Egypt (HRW 2011). Since then, around 40,000 Tawerghas have been displaced across Libya living in camps or old school buildings in and around Tripoli and Benghazi (HRW 2013).

The National Transitional Council (NTC), the *de facto* government of Libya between 2011 and 2012, did not have a concrete plan for Tawerghas; instead, authorities repeatedly left their camps unguarded, leading to militiamen entering and committing more atrocities (HRW 2011). Since 2012, initiatives towards national reconciliation have stalled and the Tawerghas' displacement has remained largely unresolved (LIBEX2, LIBEX4, LIBEX6, LIBEX8, LIBEX9, LIBEX11, LIBEX12, LIBEX13). "Basically, there is no solution in sight, I mean, of course, the return to Tawergha has been a topic of discussion for quite some years but here we are in 2020 and there's still only a couple hundred people who managed to go back to Tawergha" (LIBEX13). In 2011, the general attitude towards Tawerghas across a range of actors in Libya was to "dump" them somewhere else: The NTC at one point suggested building "a whole city for Tawergha" near the southern oasis town of Jalo, or in Sirte, Qaddafi's hometown, until national reconciliation and return becomes possible (Aly 2011). In the interim, high-level aid officials have advocated for a temporary solution that would improve living conditions. In 2018, a reconciliation agreement under international auspices between Misrata and Tawergha ended the hostility between the two cities. According to the agreement, Tawerghas were allowed to return to their city. The Government of National Accord (GNA) pledged to rebuild it and pay compensation to those affected in both cities (France24 2020). Yet, at the time of our fieldwork (2020), a large majority remained displaced and refused to return, neither believing in safe return nor in finding a rebuilt city (LIB17; LIB18; TUN15).

Our respondent Farah (LIB18), a 38-year-old nurse who grew up in Tawergha in a large family, narrated how she, together with other Tawerghas, was imprisoned by a militia and then deported to East Libya in 2011, after several attempts to escape violence in the city: "After that, about 40 cars came to us with medium weapons. (...) Military cars came to us, armed with weapons and they told us, young men from the age of 11 years and over, go and enter the mosque and put the women in a large yard." After 17 days, another militia entered the area and transferred many Tawergha families, first to al-Jufra, a region south of Misrata, and later to Benghazi: "We came to Benghazi in October and we stayed for five days in one area, and then they told us that there are camps prepared for us, in the (anonymized) area inside Benghazi." Farah stayed in [anonymized] camp in Benghazi until 2014, when it got burned down during the war and she and her family took refuge in Ajdabiya in Northeastern Libya for seven months. They returned to [anonymized] camp after it being rebuilt by the local community. The directors of the two main Tawergha camps in East Libya reported in fact the complete absence of state support, with

local charities, NGOs, IOs and INGOs filling the void and Tawerghas working as daily laborers in Benghazi to survive (LIBEX1; LIBEX12). Farah talked about not having any hope to return to Tawergha in the future given the absence of state protection in West Libya. Even if state actors and militias did not actively restrict her return to Tawergha through selective return practices, the absence of protection immobilised her and excluded her from her previous hometown in West Libya in practice. Farah's experience clearly illustrates how practices of forcing exit and non-protection are linked to state-making strategies that aim to politically and ethnically homogenize parts of the Libyan territory in order to make them more 'governable'.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined mobility control practices during civil war which we derived from original data collected in Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, and Syria. We demonstrated that these practices serve as strategies to (re)make the state by disposing of a part of the population to neutralise dissent in (former) opposition strongholds, or by getting rid of former regime supporters in case of a regime change. Importantly, some practices of mobility control are more visible than others. We identified three mechanisms of mobility control: Forcing people to exit a region or state, or actively deporting them cross-line; disincentivizing the return of displaced people through practices of selective return which ultimately constitutes a form of expulsion for some groups; and leaving the mobility of some groups mostly unobstructed, but without guaranteeing protection or services, in what we call practices of strategic *laissez-faire*. In fact, including the absence of regulation in an analysis of mobility control can maybe explain why previous research may have underestimated the extent of strategic displacement in civil war countries (e.g. Lichtenheld 2020).

We demonstrated that for some of the identified mechanisms, cooperation with state and non-state actors in neighbouring countries is crucial, in particular when it comes to practices of irregularisation, taming, and *laissez-faire*. Forcing exit and selective return across international borders necessarily depends on the aligning interests of sending and receiving states. We also showed that our three mechanisms are deeply linked to how the different actors perceive—and discursively construct—displaced populations. Forcing exit and selective return as a form of expulsion are practices directed towards people who are perceived as threatening and undesired, while strategic *laissez-faire* is practiced towards populations perceived as not actively engaged in the political struggle.

In Syria, different actors have employed practices of forcing exit and selective return; strategic *laissez-faire* was only applied to specific groups of displaced Syrians, namely those perceived as unthreatening. In Libya, strategic *laissez-faire* practices were more frequent, as well as some practices of forcing exit, due to the fact that two competing state actors are governing two separate parts of the former Libyan state. Because both governments have their own territory, it is less important to identify the opposition; rather, anti-Qaddafi actors put emphasis on identifying supporters of the toppled Qaddafi regime out of fear of a counter-revolution.

We hope to have shown that the questions of who can move, who can return, and who cannot, are central to state-making strategies in civil war settings. For one, mobility control has a performative function, as it can demonstrate a challenged state's continued capacity to exercise force, but also a rebel group's capacity to behave as a state-like entity. Secondly, actors seek to define who is 'desirable' or 'undesirable', thereby reconfiguring the social contract between the state and its citizens. This means that mobility control becomes a key question of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, as it decides who belongs to a surviving state or who will be part

of a new, state-like formation, and with that, who will be part of conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. If mobility control practices lead to a 'homogenisation' of a population, formerly integral parts of that same population are excluded from any 'reconstruction' efforts. What does this mean for the future relationship between the state and its citizens? What role do old and new local elites play in such processes, and who benefits from such practices of mobility control? With our typology, we offer a first step to answering these questions for Syria and Libya, but also for other civil war contexts which are characterized by displacement and different practices of mobility control.

Future research could further theorize and systematize the causes of variation of mobility control mechanisms in different types of civil wars with different types of actors dominating. Studies could also use our ideas to analyse how practices of mobility control interlink with and influence practices of providing aid to displaced populations in civil war. While we focused in this paper specifically on mobility control and not the provision of aid, our data clearly shows that there are processes of selection and assorting at work in how different state and non-state actors manage and organise humanitarian aid to different groups of the displaced.

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Annex

Table 1: Overview of in-depth interview respondents Libyans in Libya

Background characteristics	
Current city of residence	
Tripoli	7
Benghazi	12
Type of mobility and displacement (several choices possible)	
External returnee	7
IDP returnee	5
IDP	7
Immobile	4
Time of mobility and displacement (several choices possible)	
2011-2013	7
2014-2018	11
2019-2020	4
Not displaced	2
Original region of residence in Libya	
West Libya	6
East Libya	13
Year of birth	
1955-1959	1
1960-1964	1
1965-1969	0
1970-1974	1
1975-1979	5
1980-1984	3
1985-1989	2
1990-1994	3
1995-1999	2
2000-2004	1
Sex	
Male	7
Female	12
Educational attainment	
Primary school	1
Middle school (grade 7-9)	1
Secondary school (grade 10-12)	1
University or equivalent	16
Total	19

Table 2: Overview of in-depth interview respondents Libyans in Tunisia

Background characteristics	
Place of residence in Tunisia (Tunis, Sfax)	
Tunis	16
Sfax	9
Year of arrival in Tunisia	
2011-2013	2
2014-2018	11
2019-2020	12
Original region of residence in Libya	
West Libya	14
East Libya	7
South Libya	4
Year of birth	
1960-1964	2
1965-1969	1
1970-1974	2
1975-1979	1
1980-1984	5
1985-1989	2
1990-1994	8
1995-1999	2
2000-2004	2
Sex	
Male	15
Female	10
Educational attainment (enrolment)	
Middle school (lower secondary, grade 7-9)	1
Secondary (higher secondary, grade 10-12)	5
University or equivalent	19
Total	25

Table 3: Overview of in-depth interview respondents Syrians in Syria

Background characteristics	
Current place of residence	
Damascus/Rif Dimashq	9
Aleppo/Idlib	11
Type of displacement (several choices possible)	
External returnee	8
IDP returnee	4
IDP	9
Immobile	5
Original region of residence in Syria	
Damascus/Rif Dimashq	9
Aleppo/Idlib	11
Year of birth	
1955-1959	0
1960-1964	0
1965-1969	1
1970-1974	0
1975-1979	2
1980-1984	1
1985-1989	2
1990-1994	6
1995-1999	7
2000-2004	1
Sex	
Male	8
Female	12
Educational attainment	
Primary school	0
Middle school (grade 7-9)	0
Secondary school (grade 10-12)	4
University or equivalent	16
Total	20

Table 4: Overview of in-depth interview respondents Syrians in Lebanon

Background characteristics	
Place of residence in Lebanon (Beirut and suburbs, Shtora)	
Beirut and suburbs	17
Shtora	7
Time of arrival in Lebanon	
Before the war	1
2011-2013	11
2014-2018	12
2019-2020	0
Last place of residence in Syria before emigration	
Damascus	4
Rif Dimashq	10
Hama	2
Homs	3
Rif Aleppo	2
Aleppo	2
Daraa	1
Type of displacement (several choices possible)	
Externally displaced	24
IDP	15
External returnee	1
Migrant	1
Year of birth	
1950-1954	1
1960-1964	0
1965-1969	0
1970-1974	1
1975-1979	1
1980-1984	4
1985-1989	7
1990-1994	9
1995-1999	1
2000-2004	0
Sex	
Male	9
Female	15
Educational attainment (enrolment)	
Primary school	5
Middle school (grade 7-9)	3
Secondary school (grade 10-12)	2
University	14
Total	24

Table 5: Overview expert interviews

Libya	
Tarhouna IDP camp	Libya
IOM Libya	Tunisia/virtual
Libyan Red Crescent	Libya/virtual
Libyan Ministry of Displacement and IDP Affairs	Libya/virtual
ICRC Libya	Libya/virtual
UNHCR Libya	Libya/virtual
Libyan Red Crescent	Libya/virtual
UNHCR Libya	Tunisia/virtual
International Medical Corps Libya	Libya/virtual
Danish Refugee Council Libya	Tunisia/virtual
OCHA Libya	Libya/virtual
Tawergha IDP camp	Libya
IOM Libya / DTM	Libya/virtual
INGO Forum Libya	Tunisia/France/virtual
UNHCR Tunisia	Tunisia/ virtual
Terre d'Asile Tunisia	Tunisia/ virtual
Syria	
Syrian Arab Red Crescent	Syria/virtual
Norwegian Refugee Council	Syria/virtual
Namaa Developmental Association	Syria/virtual
Durable Solutions Platform	Jordan/virtual
Jesuit Refugee Service	Syria/virtual
North-East-Syria NGO Forum	Syria/virtual
Syria INGO Regional Forum	Jordan/virtual
Norwegian Refugee Council/DSP	Lebanon/virtual
Baytna	Turkey/virtual
Syrian Center for Policy Research	Europe/virtual
Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity	Turkey/virtual
UNHCR	Jordan/virtual
EU Mission to Syria	Lebanon/virtual
Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs	Lebanon/virtual
International Humanitarian Relief	Syria/virtual