



Evaluating the Sociocultural Impacts of Urbanization Practices of a Totalitarian Regime by a Spatio-Chronological Analysis: Case Study of Damascus

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Abstract

Thinking about space and its temporal evolution to analyze, understand and manage sociocultural crises in the context of political domination is an approach that helps us understand the roles of different political and economic actors in internal conflicts. This places a premium on establishing methods using geographic technology to develop these approaches. In this context, this paper proposes a method of spatiotemporal analysis of urbanization strategies implemented by different political actors based on a case study of Damascus. Several significant correlations emerged in this study, in particular, the informality of settlements and the segregation of the different sociocultural groups that make up the city, which allowed us to synthesize the ways in which public authorities have acted differently on urban space in Damascus.

Subject Areas

Urbanization

Keywords

GIS, Damascus City, Conflicts, Urbanization

1. Introduction

The analysis of social phenomena and their spatial and temporal inscriptions has been illustrated since the beginning of the twentieth century by the work of Georg Simmel, the German philosopher and sociologist who inspired the Chicago

School. He considered space, the context of action, a social construction as well as one of several social and physical factors [1]. For a century, this trend continued to develop, leading to the recognition of space as “a structuring dimension of the materiality of the social” [2].

Therefore, combining geographical and political analysis allows us to understand the roles of the different political and economic actors and their networks and the results of their actions in spatial terms. This is all the more true in the urban domain, a space that is extremely artificial and whose forms reflect as many interpretations of the city by various social, demographic and ethnic groups and lend themselves to a reading of the distribution of activities and functions [3]. In a related vein, the analysis of the evolution of urban forms makes it possible to identify the result of the strategies of the powers that be and to bring to light hypotheses on the role of the state in the structuring of societies [4]. In the same vein, Lochak (1978) explained that the control of space appears to be an instrument of social control [5].

In this context, geographic information systems (GIS), as tools for spatial monitoring and analysis, can provide geographic data that, when interpreted, can be used to understand and analyze urbanization policies pursued by different types of political regimes and to monitor their effects over time on societal patterns and stability. This is particularly relevant in extreme political situations (conflict or crisis situations) where little information can be obtained on the ground. This is the perspective of this paper, which aims to do the following:

- To propose, on the basis of a case study, a method for the spatiotemporal analysis of urbanization policies under different types of governments and political actors.
- To analyze the results obtained in the context of this case study in Damascus, the capital of Syria, and to propose hypotheses that can explain how successive political regimes have acted on urban space, with the consequences of this action from a comparative perspective over time.

From a methodological and analytical point of view, this case study thus aims to show the different ways in which certain “urbanization” strategies implemented by political actors have transformed space, thereby affecting the diversity and stability of society.

2. The Context of the Study: Syria and Damascus

2.1. Syria, A Century of Political Upheaval

First, Syria, freed from Ottoman tutelage at the beginning of the 20th century, was under French mandate from 1920 until 1946—the year in which the Syrians obtained independence. The following period, which saw several coups d'état and the experience of the United Arab Republic with Egypt, ended in 1961 with a military coup. In 1963, the Baath Party took power; in 1966, another coup brought the left wing of the Baath Party to power [6]. Since 1963, without interruption, Syria has been under the rule of a single party, the Baath Party, which is the only

party to present candidates in elections and the only party to govern the country. A constitutional amendment in 1973 gave it the exceptional status of “the party ruling the state and society in Syria”. This translates into absolute control of all institutions (political, legal, police, military, administrative and economic) [7] and [8], the restriction of individual and political freedoms, and the widespread use of torture and arbitrary arrests; the oppressive methods of this regime have been documented by multiple sources [9] [10].

In March 2011, a popular movement against the Baatho-Assad regime turned into a revolution to which the regime responded with extreme violence, resulting in the transformation of the Syrian revolution into an armed conflict and Syria into a stage for regional and international score settling [11]. Since March 2011, the abuses of the Assad regime have been documented by journalists, researchers, activists, associations and human rights NGOs. Several reports, from the UN¹, Amnesty International² and Human Rights Watch³, have described the horror of prisons in Syria and demonstrated that the Syrian regime was carrying out a real policy of exterminating detainees and other crimes. The forced population displacement that has taken place in Syria since the beginning of the revolution is described as the largest contemporary forced population displacement [12].

This period of war resulted in the destruction of social bonds between Syrians, a division of the country and a series of conflicts between civilians, which illustrates one of the main mechanisms of totalitarian regimes, the destruction of social bonds [13]. Political instrumentalisation is another mechanism used by the Baathist regime to maintain power for half a century [14]. More specifically, the mechanisms of oppression are largely exercised through the control of space. This division of society and the instrumentalisation of space in Syria are illustrated in Balanche’s (2011) territorial analysis of the Syrian revolt [15].

A final characteristic of totalitarian regimes is the very tight control of information. Although testimonies abound, few precise data are available to measure the constraints of weighing concretely on the populations.

In this respect, geographic information systems and remote sensing technologies offer monitoring and spatial analysis tools that can provide information on field situations. These tools provide measurements that would otherwise be impossible to obtain and make it possible to obtain and process spatiotemporal information that can be interpreted in terms of sociopolitical actions. The potential of these methods to measure the effects of totalitarian regimes has been little exploited, and the methodology to be used to carry out this kind of study remains to be further explored [16]; these reflections have inspired the present article.

The terrain is represented here by the region of Damascus, the capital of Syria. Damascus is a city that represents and reflects Syrian social diversity and political dynamics, as its geographical position has given it a historical role as a regional,

¹Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 22 February 2016.

²Human slaughterhouse: Mass hangings and extermination at Saydnaya prison, Syria, 2016.

³Human Rights Watch, Syria: Detention and Abuse of Female Activists, 24 June 2013.

political, ethnic and commercial crossroads. The chronological study of its evolution allows us to understand its ethnic and confessional diversity as well as its division during armed conflict.

2.2. The Field: Damascus, A Place of Cultural Diversity

Founded in the fourth millennium BC, Damascus is considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities [17], and its symbolic place in religion is highly important [18]. Six unequal political periods can be recognized in its history: ancient Syria (Aramaic, Roman, Byzantine Damascus), the Ottoman Empire, the French Mandate period, the Post-Independence period, the Baath-Assadist regime and the Syrian Revolution. Traces of these periods are still visible in the urban fabric, and the city's neighborhoods each bring together a diversity of religious and ethnic communities and symbolize their own identity, inherited from this long history. In the 1930s, 250,000 people lived in Damascus, 76% of whom were Muslims, 20% were Christians and 4% were Jews [19]. In 1995, Damascus and its surroundings had 3 million inhabitants, followed by 3.5 million in 2000 and 3.8 million in 2005 [20]; these statistics are based on administrative registers and not on a real census. As a result, the population of Damascus is estimated to be higher today, and there are no official statistics on confessional and ethnic communities in Syria since the Baath regime took power. Since the 2011 conflicts, no data are available on the demographics of Damascus, but large waves of immigration have taken place during this period, suggesting strong population growth.

The revolution, followed by armed conflict, had a strong impact on Damascus between 2013 and 2018 and spread across the entire urban perimeter, with some exceptions.⁴

3. The Method: A Spatiotemporal Analysis of Urbanization Policies and Their Impacts on Social Diversity and Stability

This section aims to clarify the methodology and sources used.

3.1. The Dimensions of Spatial Analysis: Scales, Criteria, and Methodological Choices

The spatial analysis is based on an analysis grid covering the entire study area, which corresponds to the current extension of Damascus and a large part of the adjacent regions **Figure 1**.

- The **analysis grid** is centered on the Old City (the oldest area of Damascus). The center of the old city of Damascus was defined on the basis of the map titled "The Old City of Damascus at the end of the Ottoman Empire" **Figure 2**.
- The grid of analysis extends 10 km on either side of the center of the old

⁴Between 2013 and 2018 the Assad regime lost control over a large part of Damascus. These areas outside government control were controlled by different actors in the conflict, administered by local populations under the military control of different religious movements until April 2018. Fighters and tens of thousands of civilians have been evacuated from these areas to Idlib in northwestern Syria.

city, covering the present extension of Damascus and its surrounding areas.

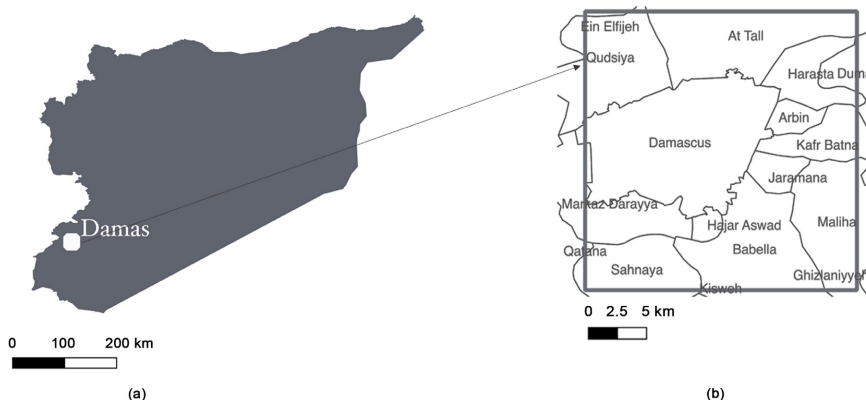


Figure 1. (a) Location of the study area in Syria and (b) study area.

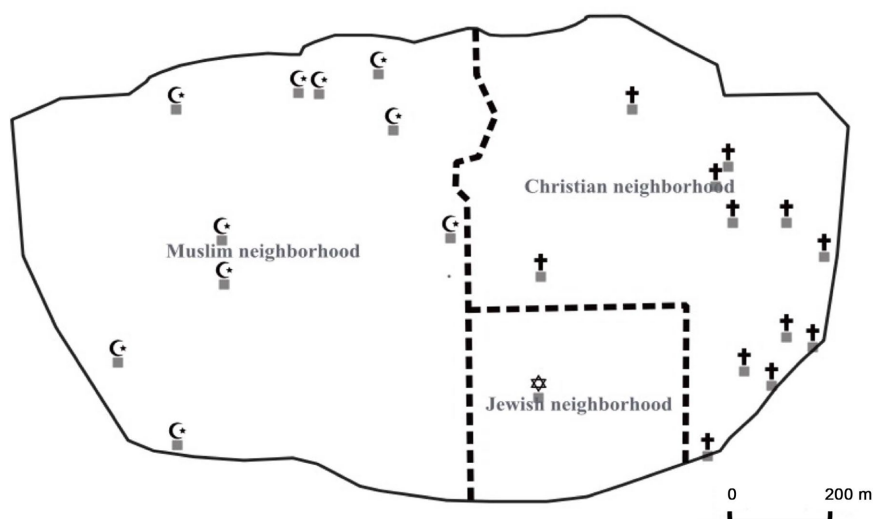


Figure 2. Map of the Old City of Damascus at the end of the Ottoman Empire (cartographic production: MOBAIED Samira). Source of map: 1:5000 map of Damascus, 1932 © PUPS/RFI [21].

- Within this analysis grid, the basic unit (referred to as the “**analysis window**”) was determined from the dimensions of the smallest district of the Old City, the Jewish Quarter (map no. 3). This basic unit was then transferred to all the districts of the present-day city.

This **spatial analysis window measures 250 m** on one side; in terms of spatial accuracy, the choice of this spatial scale ensures that information from the smallest areas of Damascus is included in the study.

Thus, the database on which this study is based contains **9025 analysis windows where spatial records** could be made for each of the criteria considered.

3.2. The Dimensions of Temporal Analysis

The time step determined in this method is one century (from 1920 to 2020) con-

sidering that this time step allows the study of urban and demographic evolution, as well as changes in urbanization policies in a city under different types of political regimes.

During this century, the succession of different political regimes allows us to define four main periods of unequal duration but characterized by a certain unity of public policies applied to the city:

- The first period before 1920 covered all the phases of urbanization preceding the end of the Ottoman Empire.
- The second, between 1920 and 1945, corresponds to the urbanization carried out under the French mandate.
- The third was between 1945 and 1970, when urbanization occurred during the postindependence period.
- Finally, the fourth period, between 1970 and 2020, covers the urbanization carried out during the Baath regime. This period actually includes 3 political phases: that of Hafez Al Assad between 1970 and 2000, that of his son Bashar between 2000 and 2010, and that of the Syrian revolution since 2011. However, these three phases remain under Baathist regime governance, and since there is no noticeable difference in the policies implemented within the city, they have not been distinguished.

Throughout these periods, a cadastral system existed in Syria; first, the system and practice of land administration, the “Tabo” documents, were put in place during the Ottoman Period; second, during the French mandate (1923-1946), a land cadaster was established with land registers in all the governorates; and second, the Syrian Civil Code was established in 1949. In this context, politics of urbanization can be compared between different periods.

3.3. The Criteria for Analyzing Urban Development in Damascus

The Four criteria are used to discriminate between neighborhoods according to their sociocultural situation: religious and ethnic diversity, social levels and population growth and the legality of the urban landscape.

The information used to develop these criteria comes from the following sources:

- Map of urban development in Damascus between 1920 and 2020 [22]
- Map of the urban development of Damascus through 1960 [23]
- Map of urban development in Damascus between 1938 and 1994 [24]
- Data on the legality of urban landscapes: This element provides information on informal and irregular neighborhoods. It allows for a comparison of urbanization policies between the choices of different political actors. The data needed for the characterization of neighborhoods were adapted from the study by [23] using two categories, formal and informal settlements (**Table 1**).

Each of these criteria was analyzed in relation to the different political contexts of the different periods considered.

An additional criterion was considered for a shorter and more recent phase, from 2013 to 2018, during the period of the Baathist regime. This period was

Table 1. Sociocultural criteria for the analysis of urbanization in Damascus.

Sociocultural criteria		Categories for each criterion
Sociocultural criteria	Legality of urban landscapes	Informal settlement Formal housing
	Ethnic Groups	Arabs
		Kurds
	Cultural diversity	Syriacs
		Sunni Muslims
		Shia Muslims
		Alawites
		Christians
		Druze
		Yezidis
Social Level	Jews	
	Low social level	
	Average social level	
Type of population growth in neighborhoods	High social level	
	High population growth	
	Average population growth	
	Decreasing Population	

characterized by the revolution linked to the armed conflicts in Damascus and was characterized by the destruction or preservation of certain neighborhoods. This degree of destruction of neighborhoods is indicative of the regime's position toward certain sociocultural groups in Damascus, which were thus more or less protected or targeted. This material impact of the conflict on the city's neighborhoods [23] makes it possible to identify three categories of neighborhoods: undamaged, damaged or destroyed.

3.3.1. Characterization of Urbanization

For our purposes, it is necessary to answer two main questions to characterize each analysis window in the city of Damascus:

- Who is in charge of urbanization policies in each area?
- How was the urbanization of each area carried out?

Two elements help to answer these questions:

1) The period during which each neighborhood was built indicates the political regime in charge of urbanization operations (or lack thereof) and allows comparison of the policies pursued by each regime.

2) Characterization of urban landscapes: This element provides information on informal and irregular settlements, areas defined by the UN as contiguous housing areas with inadequate housing and basic services. These areas are not recognized or taken into account by the state as an integral part of the city and equivalent to other neighborhoods [25]. These data are, however, significant in the context of a

comparison between the urbanization policies of different regime types.

3.3.2. The Distribution of Cultural Diversity in Damascus

This variable aims to provide information on the distribution of different faiths and ethnic communities across the city. It reflects the ethnic identity of the neighborhoods and allows for an understanding and comparison of urban policies in terms of mix in the city, as well as a comparison between the policies of the regimes toward these ethnic and religious components.

The organization of Syrian society is complex in this respect, as it is a multi-community society. From a confessional point of view, the Syrian people are broadly divided between Muslims and Christians, but the Muslims themselves are subdivided into Sunnis and Shiites, and the Shiites in turn are subdivided into several branches: Shiites, Alawites, Ismailis, Druze and Yezidis. Eastern Christianity in Syria includes Syriacs, Greek Orthodox, Catholics and others.

At the same time, Syria is also an ethnic mosaic: it includes Arabs (mostly Syrians but also Palestinians and Iraqis, war refugees who have settled in Damascus), Kurds, Turkmen and Circassians, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslims and form part of the religious majority. The Assyrians, Syriacs and Armenians are among the Christians. In addition to these initial ethno-religious differences, there is other diversity according to the type of life, urban area, rural area, Bedouin space, and region of origin. Since the Syrian state does not recognize the Yezidi religion, which is linked to the Kurdish ethnic group, the Yezidis are considered to be Muslims [26]. Their presence is resolved in Kurdish majority neighborhoods.

The cultural diversity taken into account when analyzing the dynamics of Damascus is based on two elements. The first is the distribution of communities from a confessional point of view, which distinguishes between Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, Alawites, Druze, Yezidis, Christians and Jews. The second element corresponds to the different ethnic communities (Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, etc.). For these analyses, three periods corresponding to the dimensions of temporal analysis explained above were considered: the period in the late Ottoman Empire, the period under the French Mandate in 1936 and the period in 2020 after the conflict.

The information on the cultural diversity of the neighborhoods is partly based on the following data, complemented by the author's own knowledge of recent conflicts:

- A map of cultural diversity in Damascus in 2020 [22]
- A Map of the Cultural Diversity of the Ancient City of Damascus in the Late Ottoman Empire [27]
- A Map of Cultural Diversity in Damascus under the French Mandate [27]

3.3.3. Characterization of the Social Situation of the Neighborhoods

This variable aims to provide information on the demographic evolution of neighborhoods by taking into account two aspects, the overall social level of the neighborhood and the population growth by period, and allows for the analysis of potential links between urbanization policies and certain social phenomena.

The characterization of the social situation of Damascus neighborhoods into three categories (low, medium and high social level), **Table 1** was based on two sources that were adapted for the analysis:

- The first is the study by Wind and Ibrahim (2020) [22] based on a social survey.
- The second source is the study by El-Ibrahim (2001) [24], which reports demographic evolution in the different districts of Damascus between 1980 and 2000. In this context, three categories of growth per annum are identified: “High population growth” when population growth increases more than 1.5% per annum; “Average population growth” when population growth increases between 0.5% and 1.5% per annum; and “Decreasing population”.

3.3.4. Neighborhood Conditions and Conflicts

This variable, inspired by the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research [28] on the consequences of violent conflicts in several cities, which include the use of weapons, destruction and the presence of victims and refugees, provides information on the impacts of armed conflicts on Damascus neighborhoods.

Between 2013 and 2018, some Damascus neighborhoods were indeed heavily affected or even completely destroyed by the war. A map of these areas developed by Wind and Ibrahim (2020) [22] was used to extract three states of neighborhood destruction as a result of the conflict, from intact neighborhoods to those that were completely destroyed (**Table 1**). These neighborhood destruction data were cross-referenced with the sociocultural composition of the neighborhoods.

4. Analysis

The set of Damascus maps was georeferenced and integrated into the GIS using ArcGIS 10.5.1 software [29]. The information related to each layer was extracted in each of the 9025 spatial analysis windows on the 250 m sides.

All records for the variables presented above were collected for each of the spatial analysis windows. Given the large number of variables processed and the complexity of the data, each variable was analyzed according to the different political actors, those responsible for the urbanization policy decision-making process during this century, defined in the section “The dimensions of temporal analysis”. Factorial correspondence analysis (FCA) [30] proved to be the most suitable method for reading and analyzing the results and possible correlations. All analyses were carried out using the program R version 4.0.5.

Table 2. Results of the correspondence analysis between the different variables.

Variable 1	Variable 2	The square chi	P value	Significance
Legality of neighborhoods	Political actors	172.7026	1.201375e-34	**
Cultural diversity of neighborhoods	Political actors	4958.805	0	***

Continued

Social level of the neighborhoods	Political actors	376.3356	2.148807e-76	**
Population growth in neighborhoods	Political actors	878.5433	2.397474e-184	**
Legality of neighborhoods	Conflicts in neighborhoods	1673.101	0	***
Social level of the neighborhoods	Conflicts in neighborhoods	4179.153	0	***

It should be remembered that the results presented in this study do not aim to describe the evolution of urbanization in Damascus but rather, through the main lines that characterize urbanization in this city during the last century, to highlight their correlation with successive political contexts. From this perspective, we shall retain three main features deduced from the analysis of correspondences.

4.1. The Development of Informal Areas

In terms of the legality of the urban landscape, a significant correlation was obtained between the two variables “political context” and “legality of construction” **Table 2**. The results show that the emergence of informal urban areas is related mainly to the period during which the Baath regime was implemented. Eighty-seven percent of informal areas were built from the 1970s onward, while all areas built during the French mandate and the postindependence period were formal settlements.

With regard to the distribution of cultural diversity in the neighborhoods, there was a significant correlation between the two variables “political context” and “geographical distribution of cultural diversity within the city” (**Table 2**).

The results show that the neighborhoods are grouped according to the different types of government that have taken place in Damascus over the past century. In other words, each political regime has had a particular way of organizing the populations in the city. The main results of the analysis are as follows:

- During two specific periods, the postindependence government period and the Baath period, neighborhoods with a majority of the Sunni Muslim population were built. However, there are three main differences in the characteristics of the neighborhoods between these two periods.
 - The difference in the social level in these neighborhoods from one period to the next (detailed below in Urbanization and the social division).
 - The neighborhoods built under the Baath regime are largely located in the rural areas around Damascus, where there is a high percentage of informality.
 - The neighborhoods built under the Baath regime are home to citizens of other nationalities, Palestinians and Iraqis: refugees who settled in Damascus between 1970 and 2000.
- The “mixed” neighborhoods that include both Sunni and Shia Muslims are correlated with the period of the old city of Damascus, built and developed

before 1920.

- The neighborhoods with a majority of Christian inhabitants belonged to two periods, the first corresponding to that of the old city of Damascus before 1920 and the second to the period of the French mandate; as they were then surrounded by informal areas, no expansion of these neighborhoods was possible. During the period of the Baath regime, the neighborhoods with a majority of Christian inhabitants were always mixed neighborhoods associated with Christians and Druze.
- Most Kurds have been maintained continuously since the postindependence and Baath regime periods.

4.2. Urbanization and Social Fissures

The correspondence analysis still revealed a significant correlation between the two variables “political context” and “geographical distribution of social categories in urbanized areas within the city” and between the two variables “political context” and “population growth in the different districts” (Table 2).

The main results of the analysis can be interpreted as follows:

- The neighborhoods with a modest social level are the result of urbanization during the Baath period.
- The neighborhoods with a high social level are areas that were developed during the French mandate and in the postindependence period.
- The presence of middle-class neighborhoods was continuous in Damascus throughout the 20th century.
- Neighborhoods with very high population growth are correlated with areas built during the Baath government period.
- The neighborhoods with declining populations are located in the areas built during the French mandate.

4.3. Neighborhoods and Conflict Lines

Correspondence analysis also revealed a significant correlation between the two variables “social level of the neighborhood” and “degree of destruction of the neighborhood during the conflict”; there was also a significant correlation between the two variables “type of urbanization of the neighborhood” and “degree of destruction due to the conflict”.

To summarize the main results of the analysis:

- The neighborhoods that were destroyed were mainly poor neighborhoods, and the other neighborhoods were spared.
- These are also mainly informal settlements; the other settlements have been spared.

5. Discussion of Results of the Main Lines of Urbanization in Damascus During a Century: Toward the Social Divide and the War

The Several significant correlations emerged in this study, which paves the way

for further investigations and useful comparisons. In particular, we will examine two particular points relating to urbanization, the informal nature of housing and the segregation of the different sociocultural groups that make up the city, before concluding in a more synthetic manner on the central point of this article, the way in which the public authorities, agents of the regimes in place, act in a different way on the urban space depending on the populations that occupy it.

5.1. Informal Areas for Half a Century

An examination of the way Damascus developed attests to an increasing prominence of informal settlements in the urban fabric. In these informal settlements, there is a parallel political order controlled by different civil and religious leaders. A universe operating according to its own codes and rules is built up with a set of practices that are transgressive or even illegal, such as the construction and drilling of wells without a permit, unauthorized connections to the electricity network or various forms of trafficking in contraband products. The population lives in great professional insecurity. This “marginal” functioning generates particular representations of what is legitimate and legal for the inhabitants of these neighborhoods. It goes hand in hand with specific practices and logics of circumvention in these areas, such as informal arrangements or clientelism [31]. In these areas, inhabitants construct and express their own “relationship to the world” [32] [33], of various values, laws and relationships with the state.

This phenomenon of informality has long been studied and characterized from an economic perspective, but its impacts from a political and social perspective have been demonstrated more recently [31]. The informality of housing is a public policy issue.

First, the large area occupied by informal areas in Damascus was tolerated and even encouraged during the last five decades under the Baath regime. This situation was the result of what can be called a sort of tacit arrangement between the powers that be involved and the actors controlling these areas, with the former turning a blind eye to the latter’s actions in exchange for a political non activism that allowed the party to remain in power.

Subsequently, strong correlations between these areas and those of the popular uprising were revealed. This uprising is partly rooted in the stark differences in living conditions, wealth, declining education and health conditions, and strong economic and social disparities, all of which created a strong division in Syria and pitted the two zones, formal and informal, against each other within the city of Damascus. Clandestine practices facilitated the arming of the populations of the informal areas against the regime, thus breaking the tacit agreement with the Baathist regime. As a result of the uprising, the inhabitants of these areas were evacuated and forcibly displaced to other regions.

This situation could evoke different works on evictions and conflicts around urban legitimacies, such as those carried out by sociologists Julie Blot and Amandine Spire. For the latter, public policies can use informal housing as an

instrument to facilitate the evacuation of the population; the authors present numerous examples of the expropriation of the occupants of informal areas and insist on the stigmatization of the vulnerable people who occupy them. A telling example is that of Phnom Penh in Cambodia, studied by Blot, where the processes of displacement and relocation of populations aimed to promote the resettlement and stabilization of poor populations in the periphery, allowing an economic elite close to power to take over central land [34]. The relocation processes of the inhabitants of informal areas in Damascus can be likened to a process of *déguerpissement*, defined as a massive eviction of occupants of informal neighborhoods or slums [34].

Even if similarities exist between the situations in Phnom Penh and Damascus (the presence of spatial injustice in the city, the brutal relocation of the inhabitants of these mainly informal areas, and their resettlement in other unselected areas), the parallel between the two case studies must stop there. Indeed, in Phnom Penh, the eviction of poor inhabitants is motivated by an economic objective of modernizing the city and enriching part of its population, whereas in Damascus, it is the context of political conflict that has led to the military eviction of the inhabitants for a decade. However, even in Damascus, these expulsions do not necessarily exclude economic aims, which may be revealed by subsequent monitoring of the city's development.

5.2. City Policies and the Instrumentation of Space

5.2.1. Urban Segregation

The notion of urban segregation is defined by Préteceille [35] and Oberti [16] as the unequal distribution of social groups between neighborhoods in a city. In their work, the researchers stress the need to take into account the urbanization trajectory of an entire urban ensemble throughout history, as focusing on specific neighborhoods allows only a limited view [16]. They also showed that the effects of segregation influence the construction of social identities linked to different neighborhoods.

This segregation can be social or ethnic, and it can be characterized by several methods, including statistical analyses [35]. Other researchers have studied segregation mechanisms from the point of view of separation logics, which are built on strategies of distinction and avoidance between inhabitants according to their income and residential trajectories [36].

In Damascus, the conflict of the last decade has split the city, creating a socio-ethnic spatial division between socially diverse and relatively well-to-do formal neighborhoods and poor and less ethnically diverse informal neighborhoods. According to sociological studies [36] that attest to the essential role that public authorities can play in creating conditions that favor equality and in building cohesion and social justice, Damascus has not evolved in this direction, and the powers that have, on the contrary, favored segregation, which has had destructive social effects that were partly responsible for the civil war.

5.2.2. A Periodization of Urban Policies in Damascus

To go even further, this study ultimately allows us to understand the instrumentalisation of space in Damascus for political purposes. During the three periods studied, according to the political regime in place during each period **Table 1**, the main aspects of the policies implemented in the urban framework are as follows:

- The first period, 1920-1945, was particularly marked by the definition of the borders of modern Syria, a process that took place over a long period. This process began after the First World War, in the context of the adjustment of the French and British colonial empires in the Middle East [37], and continued with the drawing of the northern border between Syria and Turkey. This phase witnessed important waves of immigration of very diverse populations between 1921 and 1939 [38], which partly enriched the great cultural diversity of Damascus (diversity documented by the works of Bernard in 1924 [39], Thoumin 1937 [19] and by Arnaud 2001 [40]). These two periods, that of the old city of Damascus built and developed before 1920 and that of the French mandate, correspond to the establishment of mixed neighborhoods and neighborhoods with a majority of Christian inhabitants.
- A second period, from 1945 to 1970, saw the emergence of neighborhoods in Damascus with a high social level and a majority of Sunni Muslims. During this period, the postindependence government served the interests of the bourgeois class in Damascus and Aleppo, whose members largely occupied the most important political and administrative positions in the country between 1942 and 1963 [41].
- The third period, between 1970 and 2020, is subdivided into two phases: the first under the rule of Hafez Al Assad (from 1970 to 2000) and the second under that of Bashar Al Assad (from 2000 to 2020, with the start of the popular uprising in 2011). During the last five decades, Syria has been under the control of a single party, the Baath Party, which has controlled all other institutions since 1963 [7]. This period is characterized by tensions between the popular class and the urban bourgeoisie, tensions orchestrated by the regime seeking to build a broad social base, and whose objective was to counteract the urban bourgeoisie in power before the arrival of the Baath regime [42]. To establish legitimacy among peasants and the popular classes, the Assad regime has employed political instrumentalisation in all areas [14]. There are several examples of this since 1963, such as the imbalance in the Syrian economic space linked to pro-Baathist spatial structures [15].
- For five decades, the state's extreme indulgence of the expansion and maintenance of informal areas, which were neither equipped nor organized, was another variation of this strategy of instrumentalisation, as these areas are easier to control and evacuate than formal housing. For half a century, these areas have experienced a sharp deterioration in their social conditions, leading to the popular uprising, which has resulted in the destruction of these areas and the forced displacement of their inhabitants.

- The other visible trend in urbanization in Damascus during this period was the impoverishment of the ethnic mix of neighborhoods in favor of a logic of segregation. The relationship established between the power of the Assad regime and society is more like a relationship between a clan and its clientele [43]. The regime relies on a strategy of organizing society through confessional community networks, which is reflected in the control of the landscape. Fabrice Balanche's 2011 territorial analysis of the Syrian revolt reflects the territorialization of a society organized by communitarianism [15].

5.2.3. The Control of Space in Damascus and the Manufacture of Civil War

However, within the city of Damascus, the social fissures revealed during the last decade of conflict can largely be attributed to the spatial distribution of communities. The segregation policies of the last century have impoverished the socio-ethnic mix of the city and caused a social division that has generated tensions in society. The politicization of urbanization and the instrumentalisation of space in Damascus thus played a role that cannot be underestimated in the outbreak of the civil war.

The transformation of the people's revolution, initially a movement to challenge a totalitarian regime, into a civil war in which different components of the population clashed, proved to be a very favorable context for maintaining the totalitarian regime. Space appears here as the main instrument of the Baathist regime since its arrival in power in Syria, which is in line with the conclusions of Fabrice Balanche [15] [44]. On the other hand, it can be suggested that understanding the role of this instrumentation of space is highly important for understanding and preventing conflicts.

The analytical approach presented here, taking space as its object, calls for a chronological analysis of the urbanization policies carried out by successive political actors and assesses their impact on conflicts; this approach is part of broader research on spatiotemporal geographical methods to measure and anticipate crises related to the political situation and conflicts in Syria [45]. Its application to other cities can be enriched according to the availability of other types of data, which could thus allow for a better understanding of all public actions in the city, also no studies have been conducted at alternative spatial or temporal resolutions; this could yield interesting comparable results in Syria or elsewhere in the world. These data could be not only the location of the city's basic facilities but also data of a sociological or ethnological nature collected in the field and not only from statistics; these data are obviously not available for Damascus. Including this additional information would allow us to discuss the different hypotheses that emerge from the spatial and statistical analyses employed by our method.

Ethics Statements

This research was prepared and published according to the principles for ethical research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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