Civilian Survival: Life Under Siege, Occupation, and Displacement

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Introduction

Civilians have become the center of gravity in today’s wars and disasters. Whether trapped by sieges that sever lifelines, living under the constraints of occupation, or uprooted by mass displacement, ordinary people face an unrelenting calculus of risk

and survival. Civilian Survival: Life Under Siege, Occupation, and Displacement examines these experiences through the lenses of social resilience, humanitarian response, and recovery strategies. It documents how people endure, adapt, and resist, while critically assessing the systems meant to protect and assist them.

This book begins with the lived reality of crisis. We define siege, occupation, and displacement not as abstract categories but as overlapping conditions that reconfigure households, markets, governance, and the moral economy of communities. Sieges compress time and space, forcing hyper-local ingenuity as stocks dwindle and services fail. Occupations reorder authority and rights, shaping daily negotiations over movement, work, and safety. Displacement fractures social networks and exposes families to new hazards along uncertain routes and into precarious settlements. Across these contexts, civilians are not merely victims; they are strategists, organizers, and caretakers whose decisions determine survival.

Our approach blends survivor testimony, field practice, and empirical analysis. We draw from case studies across diverse geographies and income settings, triangulating qualitative accounts with public health indicators, market and price data, satellite imagery, and program evaluations. While the book strives for rigor and comparability, it also embraces humility: every crisis is particular, and every generalization risks obscuring local knowledge. The result is a framework that respects context while offering transferable tools for planning and action.

The primary audience includes aid workers, emergency planners, urban authorities, community leaders, and policymakers. For practitioners, the chapters translate evidence into practical guidance—how to organize water distribution under blockade, protect documentation during flight, negotiate humanitarian access, or choose between in-kind aid, cash, and services when markets are distorted. For planners and policymakers, the book offers decision frameworks for prioritization, safeguarding, and accountability, alongside strategies for financing and coordinating responses that center local actors rather than sideline them.

Ethics and protection run throughout. Assistance can help, but it can also harm—by exposing people to retaliation, distorting markets, reinforcing inequities, or collecting data that endangers those it seeks to protect. We therefore emphasize principled action rooted in international humanitarian law and human rights, robust safeguarding, and community-led accountability. The analysis addresses the politics of aid, the pressures donors face, and the compromises practitioners navigate when neutrality and access collide with the imperative to protect civilians.

Finally, the book looks beyond immediate relief to durable recovery. Early recovery must begin during crisis, not after it. We examine pathways that include return, local integration, and resettlement, and we consider what it means to rebuild social contracts where institutions are weak or contested. Recovery is not a straight line; it is

iterative and uneven, influenced by climate stressors, protracted insecurity, and the economic realities of households and host communities. By foregrounding social resilience and civilian agency, we argue for responses that invest in local systems, expand dignified choices, and widen the horizon of possibility even under siege.

Civilian Survival is therefore both a record and a guide: a record of how people persevere under extraordinary pressure, and a guide for those committed to reducing harm and enabling recovery. It invites readers to move beyond templates and toward practice that is evidence-based, context-specific, and accountable to the people it intends to serve.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Siege, Occupation, and Displacement

In the autumn of 2016, a woman in eastern Aleppo posted a short video online. She stood in what remained of her kitchen, a room with no ceiling, no running water, and a wall missing where an airstrike had passed through. Behind her, two children played with a broken plastic cup, pretending it was a telephone. She spoke calmly, almost conversationally, describing the day's ration of rice and the fact that the nearest functioning bakery was now a forty-minute walk away through several active frontlines. She did not describe herself as a victim. She described herself as someone who had to be somewhere by evening, and the route, as always, required choices about which streets were passable, which snipers had been active that morning, and which neighbors still had a working stove to share. The video lasted less than ninety seconds. It has since been viewed millions of times, not because it was extraordinary, but because it was not. This was simply what life looked like in a besieged city.

That kitchen in Aleppo, and hundreds of thousands of kitchens like it across the globe, is the starting point for this book. Before we discuss humanitarian law, before we unpack the mechanics of camp management or the ethics of cash transfers, we need to understand what the terrain actually looks like. Siege, occupation, and displacement are not neat categories in a textbook. They are overlapping, simultaneous, and often invisible to the outside world until something dramatic forces attention—a mass exodus, a famine headline, a viral video. This chapter maps the landscape in which civilian survival takes place: what these conditions are, how they have evolved, where they occur, and how they interact with one another to produce the particular kind of crisis that civilians endure.

What Is a Siege?

A siege, in its most classical sense, is the deliberate encirclement of a place to cut off supplies, movement, and communication with the outside world. The tactic is as old as warfare itself. The Roman siege of Masada in 73 CE, the Ottoman siege of Constantinople in 1453, and the Union siege of Vicksburg during the American Civil War all followed a recognizable logic: surround, isolate, wait for starvation or surrender. What distinguishes sieges in the modern era is not the principle but the scale of civilian entanglement. Ancient sieges targeted fortified positions held by armed forces, and civilian suffering, while real, was often incidental. Today, the civilian population is frequently the primary target of the deprivation itself. The besieging party may calculate that starving a city's population is faster, cheaper, and more politically effective than storming its walls.

International humanitarian law addresses sieges under the broader framework of methods and means of warfare, particularly Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II, which prohibit starvation of civilians as a method of combat. Article 54 of Additional Protocol I prohibits attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including foodstuffs, agricultural areas, drinking water installations, and irrigation works. These provisions are well established in law and almost universally ratified. Their enforcement, however, is another matter entirely. In practice, sieges persist because the costs of maintaining them are low, the international consequences are minimal, and the besieging party often controls the narrative of what is happening inside the perimeter.

Modern sieges have taken many forms. Some are kinetic, enforced by airstrikes and artillery that make movement lethal—the siege of Mariupol in 2022, for example, where Russian forces encircled the Ukrainian port city for nearly three months, reducing entire neighborhoods to rubble while residents sheltered underground. Others are bureaucratic, enforced through labyrinthine permit systems, checkpoint delays, and administrative closures that restrict the flow of goods and people without a single shot being fired. The closure regime imposed on the Gaza Strip, for instance, has involved not only a physical barrier but a complex system of import restrictions, fishing zone limitations, and movement permits that ebb and flow with political calculations. Still other sieges are economic: the manipulation of currency, the cutting of supply chains, or the deliberate disruption of markets to create artificial scarcity. In South Sudan, competing forces have at various times blocked humanitarian convoys, destroyed crops, and attacked traders, producing famine conditions without ever laying formal siege to a single city.

What all of these share is a common mechanism: the deliberate or careless severance of a population from the resources required to sustain life. The length of modern sieges has grown dramatically. While historical sieges lasted weeks or months, contemporary sieges in Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and elsewhere have persisted for years. Eastern Ghouta was besieged from 2013 to 2018. Parts of Taiz, Yemen, were encircled from 2015 and, in some areas, remained cut off for years. This chronicity

changes the nature of the crisis. Acute emergencies become normalized. Malnutrition transitions from crisis to baseline. Children grow up knowing nothing else.

Occupation as a System

If a siege is about cutting off, occupation is about controlling. Military occupation occurs when one state exercises effective control over territory belonging to another without the latter's consent. The legal definition derives from Article 42 of the 1907 Hague Regulations: "Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army." The Fourth Geneva Convention, ratified by 196 states as of 2023, provides the most detailed framework for the obligations of an occupying power. These obligations include maintaining public order and safety, respecting family rights, ensuring food and medical supplies, and prohibiting collective punishment, deportation, and the transfer of the occupier's civilian population into occupied territory.

The catalogue of prohibitions is long. The reality of compliance is short.

The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, now approaching its sixth decade, illustrates how occupation reshapes daily existence. Checkpoints, permit regimes, settlement expansion, and the separation barrier have created a geography of controlled movement in which a short trip that once took minutes can take hours or become impossible overnight. The economic impact has been profound: the World Bank estimated that the Palestinian economy lost over fifteen billion dollars between 2000 and 2023 due to restrictions on movement and access. Unemployment in Gaza has at times exceeded seventy percent. But the deeper damage is less quantifiable. It is the slow, corrosive erosion of agency—the sense that your ability to live a normal life depends on the decision of a distant authority about whether your permit will be approved, whether your farm will be bulldozed, or whether the road to the hospital will be open today.

Occupation is not limited to the Palestinian context. Northern Cyprus has been occupied by Turkey since 1974. Western Sahara has been under Moroccan control since 1975, a situation that remains unresolved despite decades of United Nations mediation. Tibet, East Timor during the Indonesian period, and Crimea after 2014 all represent different manifestations of the same underlying condition: one group's authority imposed on another's territory, with the civilian population caught in between. In each case, the daily texture of occupation is shaped less by dramatic military events than by the mundane mechanics of control—who can travel, who can build, who can attend school, who can earn a living, and under what conditions.

What makes occupation particularly destructive for civilians is its duration. Wars end. Sieges are broken. Occupations can persist for generations, long enough for the occupied population's entire social, economic, and psychological landscape to be

reshaped around the constraints imposed by the occupier. Children born under occupation grow up with no memory of an alternative. Elders carry the weight of pre-occupation life, and the gap between memory and reality becomes a source of profound grief. This is not a natural disaster that passes. It is a condition that, without deliberate political change, becomes permanent in the minds of those who live it.

Displacement: The Longest Journey

Displacement is the third pillar of this book's terrain, and it is arguably the most widespread. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that by the end of 2023, approximately 117 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced from their homes—a figure that, if it were a country, would be roughly the population of Japan. This number includes refugees who have crossed an international border, asylum seekers whose claims are pending, and internally displaced persons who have fled their homes but remain within their country's borders. The majority of displaced people fall into that last category: internally displaced, often invisible to the international system, living in informal settlements, abandoned buildings, camps, or with host families in cities and towns that may themselves be under stress.

Displacement is not a single event. It is a process that unfolds in stages, each with its own dangers and decisions. The first displacement is often the most violent—the moment when a family leaves home because the shelling has become unbearable, because armed men have arrived in the village, or because there is simply nothing left to eat. This moment, which researchers sometimes call "the decision point," is shaped by a calculus that outsiders rarely appreciate. People do not flee at the first sign of danger. They wait, they hope, they try to protect property and livelihood. Many studies of displacement in Syria, Iraq, and South Sudan have found that families often delay flight for months or even years, hoping for a resolution that does not come. When they finally leave, it is often because a specific trigger—an attack, a death, the collapse of the local market—tips the balance from bearable to unbearable.

The journey itself is where much of the acute suffering occurs. Displaced families travel with what they can carry. They face checkpoints, banditry, sexual violence, exposure, and the hostility or indifference of the territories they cross. The Mediterranean crossing from North Africa to Europe has become one of the deadliest migration routes on earth, with thousands of deaths documented annually. The Sahel route from West Africa through the Sahara is comparably dangerous and far less reported. Within countries, displacement routes are shaped by geography, conflict lines, ethnic boundaries, and the presence or absence of humanitarian corridors. The Rohingya flight from Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2017, in which over 700,000 people crossed into Bangladesh in a matter of weeks, remains one of the largest and most rapid displacement events of the decade. The speed overwhelmed existing infrastructure, and the resulting settlements in Cox's Bazar became the densest refugee camps in the world.

But displacement is not only about the journey. It is also about what happens after. The duration of displacement has increased dramatically over the past three decades. The average length of a refugee situation, as calculated by UNHCR, is now well over twenty years. Protracted displacement means that people spend decades in situations that were designed as temporary responses to short-term emergencies. Camps established for a few months house multiple generations. Children born in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, established in 1991, have now had children of their own there. The concept of "return" becomes increasingly abstract when the place you left has changed beyond recognition, or when the conflict that drove you out has no resolution in sight.

Overlapping Conditions

What makes civilian survival particularly complex—and particularly interesting to study—is that siege, occupation, and displacement rarely exist in isolation. They interact, amplify each other, and create compound crises that defy simple categorization.

A family in Aleppo during the siege experienced all three simultaneously. They were besieged: cut off from supply routes, dependent on whatever food and medicine could be smuggled through tunnels or distributed from dwindling local stocks. They were under a form of occupation: multiple armed groups controlled different neighborhoods, enforced varying rules, and extracted resources from the civilian population. And displacement was omnipresent: those who could leave did, often multiple times, moving from one besieged neighborhood to another, then out of the city entirely, and then again when the destination itself came under attack.

This overlap is not unique to Syria. In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition's blockade created siege conditions in Hodeidah and Taiz, while the territorial control exercised by various armed groups introduced elements of occupation, and millions of Yemenis were displaced both internally and externally. In the occupied Palestinian territories, particularly Gaza, siege conditions imposed through border closures and import restrictions have combined with military operations to produce repeated waves of displacement, each one compounding the trauma and destruction of the previous round.

The interaction between these conditions matters because it determines what interventions are feasible. A siege can be addressed by negotiating humanitarian corridors or lifting blockades. An occupation requires political solutions that address the underlying power imbalance. Displacement demands durable solutions—return, local integration, or resettlement—that are politically complex and resource-intensive. When all three converge, as they so often do, no single policy response is adequate. The humanitarian system, which tends to organize itself around discrete crises and

sectoral mandates, struggles with the messy, overlapping reality on the ground.

The Scale, Mapped

It is worth pausing to consider the geographic scope of what we are discussing. At the time of writing, active sieges, prolonged occupations, and major displacement crises affect virtually every region of the world. Sub-Saharan Africa hosts the largest number of internally displaced persons, with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia among the most affected countries. The Middle East and North Africa have seen some of the longest and most destructive sieges and occupations of the past two decades, from Iraq to Syria to Yemen to Palestine. South Asia continues to deal with the consequences of partition-era displacement and ongoing tensions in Kashmir and Myanmar's neighborhood. Ukraine's displacement crisis, triggered by the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, produced Europe's largest refugee movement since World War II and brought siege and displacement back into the foreground of Western public consciousness.

These crises are not random. They cluster in regions where state fragility, resource competition, ethnic or sectarian tension, and great-power rivalry intersect. They are sustained by global arms flows, diplomatic paralysis, and the frequent unwillingness of powerful states to enforce the norms they have formally endorsed. And they affect real people—people with names, kitchens, children, and memories of lives that predated the crisis.

The Civilian at the Center

Too much of what is written about these conditions focuses on the strategic, the political, or the military dimensions. This book inverts that lens. The central actor in siege, occupation, and displacement is not the general or the diplomat or the aid organization. It is the civilian—the person trying to keep their family fed, safe, and together under conditions that seem designed to make that impossible.

Civilians in these settings are not passive. They negotiate with armed groups for access to markets. They organize informal schools in basements. They develop intricate knowledge of which roads are safe at which hours. They pool resources, share information, and maintain social bonds under extraordinary pressure. This capacity for adaptation—what we will call social resilience, examined in depth in later chapters—is not a feel-good narrative of human spirit. It is a survival mechanism, often exhausting and always incomplete, that determines whether a family makes it through the week.

Understanding this civilian perspective requires a methodology that goes beyond statistics and satellite imagery, though those tools have their place. It requires listening to people: the grandmother in Mosul who navigated three checkpoints to reach a clinic, the father in South Sudan who walked for eleven days with his four

children after fighting destroyed his village, the teacher in Gaza who continued holding classes in a basement while the building shook around her. These stories are not ornaments. They are data—perhaps the most important data we have about what works, what fails, and what matters when institutions collapse.

Setting Up the Questions

This book will move from mapping to mechanics, from description to prescription, from understanding to action. The chapters that follow will examine civilian harm and the legal frameworks designed to prevent it, the logistics of survival under blockade, the health consequences of collapse, the particular vulnerabilities of women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, and the information environments in which rumor and risk communication shape life-and-death decisions. We will look at how communities organize themselves, how aid workers negotiate access, how documentation—or the lack of it—determines who gets help and who falls through the cracks, and how recovery begins even before the fighting stops.

But all of that analysis rests on the foundation laid here: a clear-eyed understanding of what siege, occupation, and displacement actually mean for the people who live them. These are not metaphors or abstractions. They are conditions—physical, political, and social—that reshape every dimension of human existence. And they are the reality in which the rest of this book takes place.

Before we go further, one note on language. Throughout this book, we use the term "civilians" to refer to all people who are not members of armed forces or organized armed groups, in line with the standard definition in international humanitarian law. We recognize that in practice the line between civilian and combatant is often blurred, that young people may be conscripted against their will, and that entire communities may be treated as combatants by parties to a conflict regardless of individual status. The categories are legal constructs imposed on messy realities, and we will not pretend otherwise. But the category remains essential: it is the basis of legal protection, humanitarian programming, and the moral framework that, however imperfectly, still matters.

The landscape drawn in this chapter—siege, occupation, displacement, their overlap, their scale, and their human reality—will not change by the time you finish this book. The conflicts will continue. New crises will emerge. But the questions remain constant: How do people survive? What helps them? What harms them? And what do we owe each other when the structures of normal life have been demolished? The rest of this book is an attempt to answer those questions with honesty, rigor, and respect for the people who live them every day.
