

Which Way Forward?
Charting the Future of the Planning Industry in Post-Conflict Syria

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Abstract

Since calls for political reform began across cities in Syria in 2011, 12 million Syrians have been displaced, a third of the country's housing stock has been damaged or destroyed, and essential services and utilities like healthcare, education, and utilities have or are on the brink of collapse. The planning profession will have an essential role in determining the outcomes of an estimated USD\$400 billion national reconstruction program; at stake are opportunities for equitable community and economic development, and the future of the next generation of Syrian planners.

A Legacy of Failed Centralized Planning

After 50 years of one-family rule, scholars have described governance in Syria as “the Cult of Assad” (Wedeen 1999), and Syrian civil society as “embryonic” (Khalaf 2015).¹ Present in popular culture such as Zakaria Tamer's short story, *Tigers on the Tenth Day* (النمور في اليوم العاشر) (1985), and Nabil Maleh's banned 1993 film, *The Extras* (الكبارس), the Assad family regime has deeply rooted itself within nearly all aspects of community organization, from the General Women's Federation, to peasant movements, student and youth organizations, trade unions, the military and merchant classes (Rabo 1996). In his capacity as president and chief executive, Bashar al-Assad shares legislative authority with the People's Assembly (Parliament) and also oversees the Judicial

¹ The Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) has experienced extended periods of disruption since its establishment as an independent state in 1945. Following several and at times, dramatic, political transitions, the 1963 Ba'ath Revolution positioned Hafez al-Assad as head of the Ba'ath Party. The elder al-Assad ascended to the presidency in 1970 and ruled until his death in 2000; his son and successor, Bashar al-Assad, is entering his 20th year in office.

Branch (“Introduction to Syrian Law”; Collelo 1987). National emergency laws, implemented in near perpetuity just before the 1963 Ba’ath revolution, severely restrict personal liberties (Ghadry 2005).

Calls and demonstrations for reform in 2011 came on the heels of decades of economic, employment, and housing policy failure amidst rapid urbanization. The proportion of the population residing in urban areas grew from approximately 37 percent in 1960 to 55 percent by 2010. During this period Syria had one of the largest population growth rates in the world, represented at 2.54 percent from 1995 to 2000, and down from 3.5 percent in 1985. This has resulted in the subsequent urbanization of poverty across Syria, as well as strain on urban infrastructure and public services (UNEP 2013). A prolonged drought from 2006 to 2010 is estimated to have resulted in total or near total crop failure for 75 percent of agricultural households (Unruh 2016). With the agricultural sector already in decline, this event intensified the flow of rural to urban migration (Rollins 2017).

The private and public sectors in regions across the country failed to meet housing needs in urban areas. Of Syria’s 14 governorates, only five completed the full number of units permitted in 2010 (see Figure 1). Units which were constructed furthermore often failed to meet market demand for low- and moderate-income housing and thus remained vacant (Clerc 2012). The average number of persons per room increased nationally from 2.5 in 1970 to 3.74 by 2010 (Central Bureau of Statistics). One camp of planners, policy makers and decision makers sought to address this problem through massively unpopular and financially unfeasible urban renewal projects. In the central city of Homs, collective public opposition successfully stopped the planned Homs Dream project; publicly dubbed the Homs Nightmare, the project would have demolished a significant portion of the historic center for the erection of modernist glass high-rises (Al-Sabouni

2016; MsSyriano 2010). Of 15 urban renewal mega-projects identified by scholar Valérie Clerc in the Damascus region in 2010, all but two relied primarily on foreign investment from Arab Gulf countries. While some included housing, all were considered tourism projects, meaning that “at least 70 per cent of the financing and 40 per cent of the surface area are dedicated to tourism activities: hotels, furnished flats, and also malls” (Clerc 2010). Only four of these projects began construction before the start of the conflict; given their reliance on foreign investment and ongoing shortages of capital in Syria, it is unlikely that any will be completed any time soon (Clerc 2010).

Figure 1: Select Housing Characteristics

Governorate	No. Buildings Approved (2010)	No. Buildings Built (2010)	Pct. Units Vacant (2004)	Overcrowding Rate (2010)*
Damascus	2,002	2,368	9.4%	1.33
Aleppo	9,835	8,710	8.4%	1.67
Rural Damascus	29,121	23,755	8.7%	1.50
Homs	17,338	12,080	12.0%	1.50
Hama	17,751	10,067	11.4%	1.75
Lattakia	16,912	10,407	17.1%	1.31
Idleb	8,183	8,908	9.9%	1.89
Al-Hasakeh	2,787	3,330	12.6%	1.98
Deir-ez-Zor	2,826	2,228	7.2%	1.90
Tartous	12,916	14,439	13.7%	1.22
Ar-Raqqa	6,036	8,467	6.8%	1.92
Daraa	10,955	8,633	7.8%	1.65
As-Sweida	5,646	4,470	10.8%	1.20

Quneitra	1,869	1,717	13.7%	1.80
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Caption: Only five of Syria’s 14 governorates (in bold print) completed all or more of approved housing units in 2010. The highest overcrowding rates were present in Aleppo Governorate, where formal residential housing development underperformed by over 1,000 units, and the poor rural governorates of Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor, ar-Raqqa, and Quneitra.

Source: *Central Bureau of Statistics*.

The greatest growth in development has therefore taken place in the informal sector. Locally known as *mukhalafat* (مخلفات), meaning inconsistencies or contraventions, or *ishwa’iyyat* (عشوائيات), meaning random, anarchic, or unplanned, the Madinatuna Aleppo City Development Strategy identified four legal characteristics of informal housing settlements ranging from nonconformance with organizational plans and land uses, design or construction incongruous with building regulations, and unregistered land ownership or lease (“Al-Sukun al-’Ishwa’i / Mashakilna”). The breadth of the term *informality* thus includes the residences of ranking public officials and the urban middle class as well as lower-income households (Fernandes 2008). Informal housing is estimated to have housed 40 percent of Damascus residents and 50 percent of Aleppo residents before the war (Unruh 2016).

Methods

Research for this study began with a broad review of literature in English, Arabic, and French published since 1960. Syrian scholarship, media, and cultural production in this period have been constrained by government censorship and threats of violence; the list of works cited thus draws on a number of academic articles and publications, state and non-state media, reports by international institutions, websites and blogs in order to fill in some of the gaps in the historical record. At the same time, however, the degree of documentation of atrocities committed during

the Syrian Civil War has been likened to “Nazi-like record-keeping” (Hof 2019). Future studies of this time period will benefit from access to the full historical record.

This study also utilizes data from the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). The Central Bureau of Statistics has published online census results from years 2004 and 2011; the 2004 census is much more comprehensive and includes many more variables than the 2011 census, however. A limited number of interviews were conducted for this study; the identity of those individuals representing recent Syrian graduates of university-level architectural or planning degree programs have been omitted.

Weaponization of Planning in Syrian Reconstruction

Ongoing violence in Syria is severely impacting the human and built environments. Over 30 percent of the nation’s housing stock is estimated to be damaged or destroyed, with additional disruption to public health, education, and utilities services (*The Toll of War* 2017). These and other threats and actions have displaced 12 million Syrians since 2012 (“Syria Refugee Crisis Explained” 2020). The conflict has thus exacerbated a preexisting national housing crisis while also weaponizing planning against civilians to restart unpopular urban renewal programs. One of the greatest examples of this is the aforementioned Homs Dream project. In 2012, the Syrian army besieged and heavily bombarded the Baba ‘Amr district in a mass-casualty event made infamous by the murder of foreign journalists Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik. Areas of severe and total destruction overlap extensively with the boundaries of the original Homs Dream plan, and the area has since been declared a redevelopment district towards the full project’s execution (*No Return* 2017).

Projects like Homs Dream are being made possible in large part through recently enacted legislation. Legislative Decrees 63 and 66 of 2012, Law 19 of 2012, and Law 10 of 2018 function conjunctively to expropriate private real and other immobile property (agricultural property like olive trees, pasture, and orchards) and evict residents and land users in declared redevelopment zones throughout the country (Unruh 2016; *Reflections on Future Challenges* 2017; *No Return* 2017; Mostapha 2018; Hanna 2018; Daher 2019). The Assad regime's flagship postwar reconstruction project and premier example of state expropriation is Marota City in Damascus. Drawing its name from the Syriac word for *sovereignty*, the project has evicted 6,733 households from the informal agricultural neighborhood of Basatin al-Razzi for the construction of Marota City. A conservative estimate suggests that over 30,500 people were displaced in preparation of the 12,000-unit redevelopment envisioned as a new urban center (Karam 2018).² By mid-2020, only the project's administrative and sales building have been completed and occupied, however (Figure 2). The project's Facebook page shares images and videos of crews preparing new foundations, but sanctions restricting access to foreign capital paired with Syria's own poor financial position mean Marota City is unlikely to be completed in the near to mid-future (Hagedorn 2020; *Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum* 2019).

Advancement of projects like Marota City and Homs Dream without sufficient capital must be considered within the contexts of their destruction. Residents of Basatin al-Razzi and Baba 'Amr expressed interest in political reform before the outbreak of violence across the country in 2011 and early 2012. Defined by Martin Shaw (2004) as the intentional destruction of buildings and urban fabric in order to destroy popular resistance, urbicide is the chief methodology of the

² Figure calculated using reported number of households displaced and average household size in the Mezzeh sub-district from the 2004 census. While this data source is significantly more outdated than the alternative, it is assumed that the sub-district-level data of the earlier census more accurately reflects the concerned geographies than demographics of the entire Damascus governorate, for which later data sources are available.

Figure 2

16 May 2014



Basatin al-Razzi is identifiable as the clusters of grey-roofed structures interspersed throughout an agricultural area. Construction has not begun by mid-May, 2014.

2 June 2014



By early June of 2014 infrastructure construction has begun along the western extent of the neighborhood. One building has been razed to clear the path for the extension of a new arterial road through the area. The white outline of the Marota City administrative building is visible.

7 May 2016



An extensive new road network stretches towards the eastern end of the neighborhood. A new roundabout is visible at the center, facilitating east-west and north-south circulation, including to the main highway to Beirut, which forms the southern boundary of the district. Most of the neighborhood's fields and orchards have been razed.

2 May 2017



Properties ancillary to the new road network are demolished, beginning with those at the center of the neighborhood.

2 December 2017



Many properties are demolished. A new street grid takes shape.

28 May 2020



Little progress has been made since late December of 2017. Some more buildings along the site periphery have been demolished. Cars visible in the parking lot of the Marota City administrative building indicate occupancy.

Assad reconstruction scheme. It is the common denominator between experientially disparate neighborhoods like Baba ‘Amr, where buildings and urban life ranked along the scale of “moderate” to “severe” to “destroyed” after aerial bombardment, and Basatin al-Razzi, where no gunfire was exchanged.³ The mega-projects envisioned by the Assad regime are the logical second phase of a national project to eliminate political opposition and spatially concentrate control. For this reason, they must be considered as violent acts in still conflicted and contested spaces. Similar to the urban renewal projects planned before 2011, initiatives like Marota City, Homs Dream, and others will likely fail due to insufficient capital, as well as local and international legal challenges and capacity constraints.⁴ Also like their predecessors these projects can be expected to absorb what limited capital and entitlements do exist without delivering the dwelling units needed to replace that which was destroyed during the war. Under these conditions informal construction will be a likely, if not inevitable, outcome, as overcrowded households, refugees, and other displaced persons seek out postwar opportunities.

The Future of the Syrian Planning, Scholarship, and Student Life

The impacts of the war and the Assad regime’s weaponization of planning threaten the pipeline of future planners and planning-adjacent professionals, beginning with elementary school and continuing on through higher education and early employment. According to the United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF), over 7,000 Syrian schools—one in three—have been damaged or destroyed since 2011 (*Facts and Figures* 2018). In 2016 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reported that 5.6 million

³ For a detailed aerial assessment of property damage, see: *Syrian Cities Damage Atlas: Thematic Assessment of Satellite Identified Damage*. REACH, United Nations, 16 Mar. 2019.

⁴ In 2019 the Syrian regime estimated that rebuilding what was lost will cost USD\$400 billion. The national budget in 2018 was only USD\$8.9 billion, however, and only \$115 million was allocated for reconstruction activities (See: Hodali 2019; Daher 2019).

Syrian children were in need of educational assistance, with 2.1 million children inside Syria and 700,000 Syrian children outside of the country not enrolled in formal education (*Evaluation 2016*). Many now school-aged children have never enrolled in formal education, posing long-term challenges to literacy and computational skills development.

Educational disruption is acute among university students and others seeking advanced degrees. In addition to the increased politicization of higher education since 2011, safety and security concerns, compulsory military service for university-aged males, internal displacement, and emigration have presented significant obstacles to accessing higher education in Syria (Dillabough et al. 2019). Like in many countries outside of the United States, urban planners in Syria conduct their training and education in schools of architecture. Each of the nation's five public universities offers an architectural program, with the most recent one established at al-Furat University in Hasakeh Governorate in 2011 but not yet inaugurated. Most architecture programs were established in the early 1980s, with Ba'ath University's program extending to a second campus in Hama in the 2013-2014 academic year. As of 2013 there were thus five officially active architectural degree programs in Syria with 403 faculty members educating 5,291 students (*Dalil Manẓuma al-T'aleem al-'Aalī*). These numbers are likely to have decreased drastically since that year, however, with significant funds for higher education diverted to primary and secondary education and military activities. Paired with increased politicization of higher education, the conflict and military have moved "directly into universities either by bribing students and faculty to support the regime or by using security informers to ensure students comply with security demands for information" (Dillabough et al. 2019). The Faculty of Architecture at Aleppo University came under direct attack in 2013 during an aerial bombardment that killed at least 82 people and caused many students and faculty to flee to Jordan (Sheikh 2016; Sands 2013).

The civil war has also impacted Syrian students studying in Lebanon, where 1.5 million Syrian nationals have sought refuge since 2011. A 2014 report by the Institute for International Education estimated that there were as many as 70,000 displaced Syrian students inside Lebanon. Despite this significant increase in the population, the Lebanese Ministry of Higher Education at the time speculated that only 6,500 to 10,000 Syrian students were enrolled in Lebanon's universities. At the public Lebanese University, the number of enrolled Syrian students more than halved from over 6,000 in the 2010-2011 academic year to just 2,644 in 2013-2014. This is likely due to a number of factors including the constrained economic situation of Syrian students and families as well as compulsory military service for university-aged males (Watenpaugh et al. 2014).

The pipeline of professional planners has been further disrupted by the absence of meaningful training and professional development opportunities. The collapse of the Syrian economy has delayed or put a stop to most public and private infrastructure and community development programs, and international sanctions prohibiting foreign engagement in Syrian reconstruction activities have constrained almost all international agencies from aiding in reconstruction beyond the provision of shelter and very limited instances of infrastructure and utility rehabilitation (*UNHCR – Syria: Main Activities 2020; Ways out 2019*). The Syrian Parliament approved only USD\$115 million for reconstruction activities in the 2019 budget out of an anticipated USD\$400 billion need; the previous year, \$70 million of public funds for reconstruction went just to development of Marota City (al-Frieh 2018; Karam 2018; Hodali 2019; Daher 2019). One young Syrian architect and engineer remarked that “Youngsters don’t have a chance to do anything other than the monkey work” on ongoing reconstruction projects (interview with author 2019). Furthermore, employment prospects for this population were already poor

before the Civil War, with over 18 percent of 20-34 year old professionals in the Construction, Real Estate and Renting sectors unemployed (Central Bureau of Statistics 2010 Census, Table 53/C). Without adequate training and work experience, the next generation of planners, architects, engineers, and builders may be less equipped to manage national reconstruction efforts.

Recommendations

Universities, art galleries, think-tanks and policy institutions have sought to raise awareness in communities outside of Syria, but often without direct representation of individuals from Syria (Azzouz and Abdelal 2019). Focus groups conducted by Syrian engineer and architect Ammar Azzouz and Abeer Abdelal of young Syrian architects in late 2017 identified the need for additional academic and educational support, opportunities to connect with international researchers, online courses in project management in construction, knowledge transfer between English and Arabic, and training opportunities outside of Syria (Azzouz and Abdelal 2019). Individual American architects, planners, and professional associations can support meeting these needs through the following:

1) Publish resources in Arabic and disseminate them broadly among Syrian audiences.

While targeted primarily to professionals in the United States, institutions like the American Planning Association (APA) have published ample resources in English concerning issues adaptable to the Syrian context. This includes guides to understanding and implementing green infrastructure and conserving water resources, the role of broadband internet in promoting job growth and civic engagement, and step-by-step guides for organizing inclusive and equitable public planning processes. The APA and similar institutions should consider working with Syrian professionals to prioritize the most useful multimedia resources for translation or

adaptation into Arabic, including print and digital reports, video recordings and podcasts to reach wide audiences across Syria and other Arabic-speaking countries.

2) Promote professional exchange by sponsoring participation for Syrian professionals and students at in-person conferences, webinars, and fellowship programs.

Syrian and American professionals would benefit from two-way knowledge exchange and interaction. Professional associations like the APA have taken an increased interest in international issues, and created a new standing “International Track” of programming at the group’s annual national conference. The APA and participating agencies and corporations should consider fundraising and professional sponsorship for travel, lodging, and registration costs for Syrian participants, as well as promoting participation in online programming and sharing conference recordings.

3) Provide scholarship support for Syrian students inside Syria and abroad.

Some universities and academic institutions in the United States and Europe have responded to threats against Syrian students by providing scholarship and fellowship opportunities to displaced scholars. One early implementor is Columbia University, whose Scholarship for Displaced Students and Emerging Displaced Students Fellowship programs provide continued access to education for displaced students and scholars at campuses in New York as well as on the continents of Asia, Africa, and South America. Foreign support of Syrian students may take the form of financial assistance towards the cost of tuition, supplies, travel or accommodation, mentoring, or professional development programs.

4) Monitor Syrian planning initiatives and speak out when prompted.

Reconstruction and nation building after conflict or great disasters can be an immense challenge, albeit with significant potential for opportunity (Bollens 1999; Bollens 2000; Wood

2005; Uyttenhove 1990; Johnson and Olshansky 2006). At the same time, reconstruction and recovery processes that do not equitably account for the needs of all those impacted risk producing stagnant economies, political impotency, and further erosion of civil society (Ellwood 1992; Bollens 2012). For these reasons American and other non-Syrian planners must seriously consider their involvement in Syrian reconstruction activities if and when international sanctions prohibiting their participation are relaxed. Lack of political reform and the Assad regime's continued approach to expropriative urban renewal strategies mean planning in Syria will likely continue to be used for violent means into the foreseeable future.

Following the lead of Syrian practitioners and scholars, foreign planners and other professionals should carefully monitor ongoing planning and reconstruction activities in Syria. Given the violent nature of the Assad government's current approach to reconstruction, foreign professionals should refrain from participating in, voicing support for, or otherwise advancing government planning, architecture, development, or other reconstruction activities. In turn, professional associations, institutions, and corporations can exercise their experience in government lobbying to advocate their home governments for policies that advance just and equitable development in Syria. This they should only do with policies and programs promoted or vetted by Syrian partners with popular support.

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