



**“Syria: From Battleground to Fairground**

**What future for Syria is being shaped by the early reconstruction framework unfurled by the regime?”**

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## SYRIA: FROM BATTLEGROUND TO FAIRGROUND

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*Introduction*  
ARCHITECTURE OR REVOLUTION

*« Warfare has the potential  
to revise historical and  
cultural sites as well as to  
create new ones » –  
Grodach, 2002.*

Reconstruction after warfare is always inherently political, because it can be weaponized to reshape the urban geography of entire neighborhoods and materialize political narratives into space. In the case of Syria, the conflictive agendas of the stakeholders involved in the reshaping of the country's future is the promise of an unstable aftermath. After losing Raqqa in 2017, ISIS controls in 2018 less than 10% of the country's territory<sup>1</sup>. The World Bank has estimated the reconstruction cost at 300\$ billion. Early construction sites have started to disseminate in the country; in a situation where Syria's population has diminished of 20%, with a newly-created diaspora of 6 million people<sup>2</sup>.

In a highly polarized international context, Syria's allies Moscow and Teheran are said to be in first line to reap off the benefits of the reconstruction. Al-Assad faces the challenge of reconciling highly irreconcilable agendas: attending to the interests of the militias and the regime's friends; ensuring a political and economic stability after seven years of strangling war; and rewarding Russia and Iran with the juiciest benefits of the reconstruction<sup>3</sup>.

This paper aims at analyzing both the reconstruction process and the narrative that are used by the regime to frame it. By doing so, it will reveal the reconstruction process as a catalyst for the battlefield's stakes, both locally and transnationally. The paper will demonstrate that Syria's future is embedded in its reconstruction process, socio-economically and spatially. Socio-economically because it showcases the prioritization of private stakeholders above the Syrian people; and spatially because it weaponized urban planning to reshape the urban geography of entire neighborhoods.

More precisely, the paper will answer the following questions. Is Assad's instrumentalization of urban planning to reshuffle Syria's demographic map to his advantage a sustainable strategy? To what extent can the Syrian reconstruction benefit the regime's allies and the country in itself? What future for Syria is being shaped by the early reconstruction framework unfurled by the regime?

The argument will be developed in three steps. First, it will evidence a factor that durably embeds war values into Syria's spatial memory: the use of urban planning to quell dissent and reframe the discourse embedded on territories. Second, the paper will examine the reconstruction as a catalyst for the stakes of the battlefield; not soothing but rather shifting the stakes of the war into the financial ecosystem of the reconstruction. Finally, the paper will highlight that if not carefully planned, the reconstruction process can only feed into the root causes that triggered the crisis, making the future of the country a mirror of its past.

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<sup>1</sup> Daher, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Young, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Daher, 2018.

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## 1. URBAN PLANNING AS A TOOL TO QUELL DISSENT

In *La Ville et ses Territoires*, Roncayolo states that « La pensée d'un groupe ne peut naître, survivre, et devenir consciente d'elle-même, sans s'appuyer sur certaines formes visibles dans l'espace »<sup>4</sup>. Reconstruction after warfare is always inherently political, because it can be weaponized to reshape the urban geography of entire neighborhoods. In the 1930's, Rene Danger, a French planner, was called in to reshape the “indulgent, seductive, mystical and violent” Levantine urban landscape that was more prone to foster rebellion. In Syria, urban planning has since been a tool to quell dissent<sup>5</sup>.

### 1.1. Rebuilding to Replace: Weaponizing Urban Planning

Indeed, the vision of reconstruction promoted by the regime answers two clear objectives: punishing the rebellious populations and ensuring Al-Assad's control of the neighborhoods that fostered dissent. To unfurl it, he has gone as far as deliberately demolishing hostile neighborhoods between 2012 and 2013<sup>6</sup>, and set into place a juridical apparatus that ensures the demographic map of Syria is reshaped to his advantage.

To punish and expropriate the opposition, Assad has produced jurisdiction that supports his goals: Decree 66 and Law 10. As early as 2014, the government announced its willingness to expropriate rebel suburbs (in the south east of Damascus) to replace them by private constructing firms. Following was the creation of a holding owned by the government to rebuild the informal neighborhoods of Qadam, Kafr Sousseh and Darayya<sup>7</sup>. While other neighborhoods are as damaged (Mazze 86 or Ish al Warwar), these ones are known for their support to the rebels. The neighborhoods, where construction have begun, represent 10% of Damascus' area<sup>8</sup>.

In September 2012, Decree 66/2012 was signed, followed later by Law 10. Cusack, 2018, explains that « Once a development zone is decreed under Law 10, local real estate authorities have 45 days to produce a list of homeowners affected. If a homeowner is missing from the list, he or she has 30 days<sup>9</sup> to produce documents—in person or through a representative—proving ownership. The residents who can prove property in the designated area will have to all agree between receiving a share of the profits from redevelopment, selling shares on public option, or creating a company to invest in the development. Those who cannot provide proof in time, cede their property to the state. ». Human Rights Watch has warned against the “potential for abuse and discriminatory treatment”, in a context where 20% of the Syrian population is displaced or deceased and 70% of displaced lack basic ID<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Roconyalo, 1990. “The common sense of belonging of a group cannot emerge, survive and become self-aware if it does not rely on visible space materialization.”

<sup>5</sup> Rollins, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Rollins, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Yazigi, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Riachi, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Since then, Assad has amended the law in November 2018, changing the delay to produce legal documents from 45 days to a year. While this measure slightly softens the blow for wealthy displaced populations – that Assad needs for the reconstruction process–, it does not change anything for populations whose IDs have been blown up alongside their homes – these not only represent the most vulnerable, but also the populations that fomented and supported the uprising.

<sup>10</sup> Rollins, 2018.

As of December 2017, all inhabitants have been expropriated in Daraya, symbol of contestation against the regime, and Cham Holding CEO Jamal Youssef stated that up to 85% of preliminary infrastructure work was done<sup>11</sup>. Coupled with the creation of a supporting juridical apparatus, Assad's weaponization of urban planning is entirely reshaping the demographic landscape of Syria.

## 1.2. Syria Reconstruction Plan: Another Solidere?

In the region, another example of neoliberal post-war reconstruction is often compared to the Syrian reconstruction of Bassatine al-Razeh neighborhood: the Lebanese *Solidere*, unfurled in downtown Beirut in the aftermath of the civil war in the 1990's. Apart from both having a penchant of expropriating local dwellers to favor private stakeholders, they both make extensive use of PPP's (Public Partnerships with Private stakeholders) without being fully transparent on their nature, and neither of them details the shares of the affiliates of the holding company, even though they will actually be the main stakeholders in the rebuilding<sup>12</sup>. Both also aim at building sanitized areas destined to a wealthy clientele. To what extent are these common traits sufficient to affiliate the Syrian reconstruction to *Solidere*?

It is not the first time Al-Assad plans to expropriate dwellers of informal settlement, who represent 40% of Syria's residents and often simmer with dissent and anger. They are mostly constituted of low-class rural population who migrated at the rise of the rural crisis that has been affecting Syria for decades<sup>13</sup>. Assad had the intuition that a crisis could erupt at any moment, and in 2007, he tried to expropriate dwellers of Baba Amr in Homs in favor of a real-estate signed with Qatari holding Diar<sup>14</sup>. However, the grievance of the population became impossible to catalyze and the project was cancelled on the spot, with Assad firing Homs governor Iyad Ghazal in 2011 to give rest to the uprising. This shows well Assad's awareness in his ability to manipulate the direction of dissent by instrumentalizing urban planning to punish and alleviate.

However, it would unfortunately be a stretch of optimism to stop at the neoliberal component of both project to directly affiliate the Syrian Reconstruction with Solidere. Syria differs from Solidere because it does not specifically aim at carrying a neo-liberal vision – harmful to the population but at least consistent–. Assad's aim is to punish and replace the fringes of the population that oppose the regime. According to Yazigi, 2017, the main elements making Solidere possible are not even present in Syria:

- “A political deal backed by the main regional and international players;
- The prominent role of Rafiq Hariri, a powerful man with strong economic and political networks around the globe;
- A vision for what reconstruction should be based on, i.e. repositioning Lebanon, and Beirut, as an intermediation center between the Middle East and the West;
- Strong financial support from Saudi Arabia.”

According to Yazigi, the situation today is Syria has all those elements missing. Still, rebuilding sites have started, and the reconstruction business displaced the local and international stakes of the Syrian crisis from the battleground to a fairground.

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<sup>11</sup> Riachi, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Yazigi, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Daher, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Yazigi, 2014.

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## 2. THE SYRIAN RECONSTRUCTION CAKE: GOLD RUSH OR MINEFIELD?

World Bank latest estimate for the economic loss of the Syrian war reach 300\$ billion<sup>15</sup>. In Western media and Syrian media alike, the reconstruction has been depicted as a juicy cake coveted by many international players, Teheran and Moscow in chefs-de-file, allegedly ready to inject billions into the project. To what extent is the reconstruction catalyzing the political stakes of the war?

### 2.1. Reinforcing the Patrimonial Nature of the State

Apart from speculating on the buildings and favoring private stakeholders, the reconstruction is also a powerful tool for the regime to ensure and consolidate its political and economic power among elites. Almost all reconstruction sites are handled by very close friends of the regime, the last one to date being the emblematic project construction in the neighborhood of Basateen al-Razi, handled by Aman Group, belonging to Samer Foz, a very close friend of Assad. The real estate properties being built by Aman Group amount to a total of 312\$ million<sup>16</sup>. Almost all the powerful businessmen handling the reconstruction projects are Sunni; Assad's strategy has been the transcending of sectarian boundaries in his clientelism to ensure the continuous support of the elites.

### 2.2. International Players: Catalyzing the stakes of the battlefield

The reconstruction is advertised by Assad as the occasion to reward his international allies. Iran, Russia and on a smaller scale China are on pole position and have already started to divide the benefits of the reconstruction.

“Deals worth \$1.01 billion with Russian companies were announced in October 2015 following a visit of a Russian delegation to Damascus.” states Osseiran, 2017. Moscow has also ensured control of Syria's phosphate and gas fields. As far as Iran is concerned, they have announced the rebuilding of power plants in Latakia and Deir Ezzor<sup>17</sup>. A Chinese-Arab company also committed for a 2\$ industrial construction site rehabilitation<sup>18</sup>. In Lebanon, Tripoli has been preparing itself to become a decisive hub in the war's aftermath. A construction site started in 2016 to multiply the port's capacity by three, after Receiving two massive Chinese cranes in winter 2017. A cluster of foreign investment firms was created, with the establishment of a SEZ (Special Economic Zone) offering tax exemptions to investors. Future investments may include the rehabilitation of the military airport and the rehabilitation of a railroad between Tripoli and Homs<sup>19</sup>.

As far as European, American, Saudi, Qatari and Turkish firms are concerned, the regime has declared that they would have to ask to their respective governments to apologize before taking part in the reconstruction. In August 2017, Assad even stated that “the regime would not let its enemies accomplish by political means what they were unable to accomplish on the battleground using

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<sup>15</sup> Daher, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Osseiran & Daher, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> De Clermont-Tonnerre, 2018.

terrorism”<sup>20</sup>. Hence, the reconstruction marks the opening of a new battlefield catalyzing the stakes of the war and the highly polarized international context.

### **2.3. The Rise of the Militias**

On the ground, the cards have been hugely reshuffled by the rise of new powerful and uncontrollable stakeholders that also want their slice of the cake: the militias. These para-military loyalists groups have gained incredible leverage and local stranglehold during the war, to the point that they represent the main threat to Assad’s supremacy in a possible post-war state. The regime is aware of the rising power of the militias, and has recently condemned the men who “used to oversee the black-market trading that kept the economy afloat under years of western sanctions but who have grown so powerful that loyalists see them as the biggest menace to Syria’s future.”<sup>21</sup>

The urban planning vision that Assad has weaponized came with a double-edge, since by advocating decentralization and “the devolution of certain powers away from the central government to the local councils where ordinary people have more influence”<sup>22</sup>, it increased the local stranglehold of militias and para-military groups. Asking them to go back to mere citizens after their years of power and weapons is a challenge that Assad is well aware of<sup>23</sup>. In August 2017, fighters from Nusur Homs killed a police officer who asked to control their ID; at the beginning of 2018, Baath Brigades beat a student in front of Aleppo University. The threat posed by these stakeholders lies in the fact that they have helped the regime throughout the war, and above all, that they are profoundly anchored in the territories and the urban landscapes of Syria. They have helped shape the war, and will want their say in the shaping of the country’s future.

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## **3. BACK TO THE FUTURE**

The Corbusian rhetoric of « Architecture or Revolution »<sup>24</sup> is in the Syrian case as relevant as ever. If not carefully planned, the reconstruction process can only feed into the root causes that triggered the crisis, making the future of the country a mirror of its past.

### **3.1. Delusions of Grandeur**

Western and Syrian Propaganda Media have often depicted the Syrian reconstruction as a juicy cake where Al-Assad and his allies Teheran and Moscow have all to gain. To what extent is this narrative true?

Latest World Bank estimate for the cost of the war amounts to 300\$ billion<sup>25</sup>. After seven years of war, the Syrian regime is bloodless. Its massive debt and lack of fund partly explains the privatization model developed by Assad (Public-Private Partnerships), but the PPPs are by no mean sufficient to even

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<sup>20</sup> Daher, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Solomon, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Syrian Law Journal, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Daher, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Le Corbusier, 1923.

<sup>25</sup> Daher, 2018.

initiate the first reconstruction stage. “Not only have most of Syria’s prominent investors left the country but local banks are in no shape to provide funding. At the end of June 2017, the combined assets of Syria’s 14 private sector banks stood at \$3.5 billion, which is less than a 10th of the assets of a single large bank in Lebanon or Jordan, such as Bank Audi and Arab Bank.” states Yazigi, 2017. While the PPPs will benefit a tiny circle of happy fews, it is tremendously far from the reality needed to initiate the reconstruction.

What about Teheran and Moscow? The price they have paid to keep Assad standing is already very high, with respectively 35\$ billion and 4\$ billion spent on the war. They do not have alone the financial resources to invest billions in the reconstruction of Syria. With the Trump administration pulling out the Iranian deal, Teheran’s top priority is to focus on its strangled economy. Iran has indeed announced a loan of 1\$ billion for Syria – a small amount compared to what is needed –, but with an exclusive condition: that the money is solely used to buy Iranian products<sup>26</sup>. As far as Russia is concerned, it has acquired the rights to exploit Syria’s oil and gas fields, and the only infrastructure that has been discussed is a “a rail track linking the phosphate mines to the port of Tartous in order to facilitate and reduce the costs of exporting phosphate to the benefit of the Russian company exploiting the mines.”<sup>27</sup> By doing so, not only does Russia deflect a much needed source of revenue for Syria, but it also deters China to invest in the reconstruction, its condition *sine qua non* being an access to those natural resources.

Caught in a game of political antagonisms and international sanctions, “the countries and institutions that have the money and which traditionally fund such large-scale financial efforts, namely the Gulf countries, the European Union, the United States and, through it, the World Bank” are awaiting a political deal to make a move on Syria. Every day that passes sees hope of this deal diminish. Assad has controlled Homs for 4 years; the city offers a striking example of what reconstruction could look like at the national scale. Starr, 2018, states that “aside from some privately funded efforts to rebuild churches and a Chechen warlord paying to renovate the as-yet-unfinished Khalid Ibn al-Walid mosque, the only completed project is the city’s Old Souk.” The countries able or willing to fund such large scale reconstruction projects have lost the war. What remains in Assad’s hands is a poisoned victory, and a local demographic map that has been deeply disturbed.

### **3.2. Rebuilding Syria without its Diaspora and Middle-class?**

The profound reshaping of Syria’s demographic map triggered two main stakes that are essential to take into account when speaking of the country’s future: the diaspora created by the massive displacement of population; and the disappearance of Syria’s middle-class after years of exhausting economic conditions.

The war indeed cost the country its middle-class. “Before the conflict, Syria was known for its large middle class. Today, about 86 per cent of the country live below the poverty line. The brain drain has sucked away those most needed, such as doctors, who often travel to several cities each week because of a shortage of medics.”, states Solomun, 2017. The skilled diaspora that had the means to flee could be a crucially-needed facilitator in the reconstruction process, but they have to be brought back. If the reason why they left is still at the head of the State, their return seems unlikely. This catch-22 situation probably hinders any hope of socially and economically sustainable future for Syria.

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<sup>26</sup> Yazigi, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Yazigi, 2017.



### 3.3. A Reconstruction with no Vision

In warfare, the narratives framing the conflict are as decisive as the conflict in itself. The reconstruction process is usually the occasion for the winner to force its narrative on the foreground and materialize it into space. In the case of Syria, no broad and comprehensive reconstruction narrative is being brought forward<sup>28</sup>.

This lack of broad reconstruction vision manifests itself in the advancement of the construction sites: while the juridical apparatus has been very efficient in expropriating hostile dwellers and starting the building of wealthy gated neighborhoods, the rest of the reconstruction process is nearly at stage zero. The city of Raqqa, “liberated” in 2017, is still composed at 80% of ruins. In Homs, Maria al-Sabouni argues that the architecture and the city’s layout fostered alienation and unrest. “Brutal unfinished concrete blocks, aesthetic devastation and divisive neighborhoods that zoned communities by class, creed, or affluence”, destroyed by the war and likely to be rebuilt the same, leaving the uprising’s wounds wide open.

The punishing reconstruction carried out by Assad even aggravates the root causes of the crisis. According to Yazigi, 2014, it does not address the deep causes of the development problem that led to the uprising, ie « the migration of populations from rural zones to urban centers due to the socio-economic crisis that has been permeating the Syrian countryside’s for years ». The future laid out for Syria on these unstable foundations is best summed up by Starr, 2018:

“The decay that saw Syria an economic backwater for the entire 40 years of Hafez al-Assad’s regime is back. For *Syria 2020*, read *Syria 1970*. Anyone who lived through those days would shudder at the thought that Syria’s future would look like that again.”

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#### *Conclusion*

### REBUILDING SYRIA: ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL?

*“People re-interpret the significance of places, introducing myths – pieces of the past amalgamated into a coherent narrative – into the construction of monuments in sites of violence and tragedy.”*  
– Grodach, 2002

In light of this development, early talks of reconstruction sound at best delusional. While urban planning is being successfully weaponized by Assad to expropriate and punish the hostile neighborhoods, it is highly unlikely that it will succeed as a strategy to quell dissent. The reconstruction process is set to reinforce the economical root causes that fostered the uprisings of 2011, as well as

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<sup>28</sup> Yazigi, 2017.

deepen the dependence towards foreign powers and investors<sup>29</sup>. The patrimonial and clientelist nature of the regime is as striking as ever, but is threatened by the rise of para-military militias that emerge as new stakeholders that will want their say in the shaping of Syria's future. Syria's middle-class has disappeared, up to 86% of the population lives below the poverty line. The reconstruction does not even succeed in carrying any narrative that can materialize into space.

The simmering root causes of the uprising are still lurking. "To this day, Syrians debate what fuelled the uprising. Some blame sectarianism. Others, the class divide. Others note that rural populations — desperate after years of drought, crammed into ramshackle suburbs seeking jobs — were the first to take up arms. Beneath all these interpretations lies a struggle for resources in a country running short of them, and distributing them less than equitably. In places such as Homs, Sunnis say state jobs went to Alawites. In Sunni cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, the benefits of Assad rule were bestowed on the urban and wealthier classes. This provides a loophole for reconciliation: loyalists here rely on an interpretation of the uprising as driven by ignorance and desperation."<sup>30</sup> Even the discourse and the narratives that will help frame the conflict are still to be built.

Even though the reconstruction will highly benefit diverse private companies, neither Iran nor Moscow have the financial resources to support the reconstruction effort. They only invest in assured returns on investment, not in the much needed housing infrastructures. The countries that usually fund such post-war efforts have lost on the battlefield. Caught in a web of political antagonism or international sanctions, they are awaiting an everyday-less-likely-to-happen political deal to make a move.

Homs or Raqqa provide striking examples of what the reconstruction process will look like; with Raqqa still 80% in ruins, no construction project in sight and ISIS still lurking in the shadows. The narrative shimmered by Assad of a juicy reconstruction that will benefit his allies will not provide the needed housing and basic infrastructures that have been destroyed. The reconstruction as unfurled so far by the regime is all in all another brick in the wall – the wall alienating the Syrian people from their nation-state and their common sense of belonging.

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<sup>29</sup> Daher 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Solomon, 2017.

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