

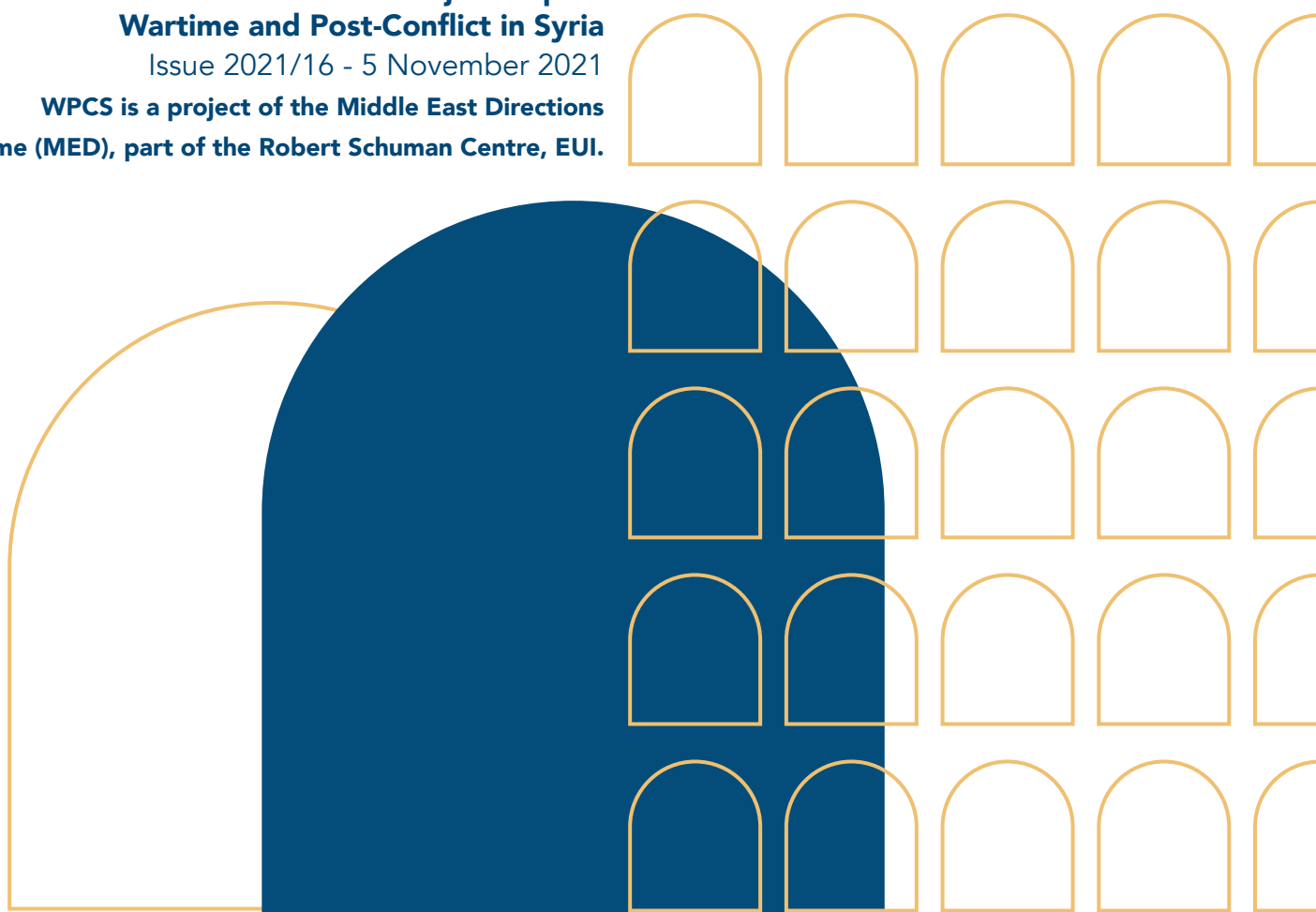
On the Edge of the Capital: Social Engineering in North-Eastern Damascus

Mazen Ezzi

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On the Edge of the Capital: Social Engineering in North-Eastern Damascus

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Executive Summary

The relationship between Damascus and its north-eastern outskirts has always been marked by the capital's desire to control the boundaries and functions of the towns and informal settlements within its administrative orbit. In the absence of sustainable housing policies, however, the capital was unable to effectively impose its will. Instead, its role was confined to that of a bare-minimum service provider. Over the course of the war in Syria, urban dynamics and the lives of residents were changed according to two models. The first was large-scale demolition and the displacement of local communities that had supported the opposition and that had rejected reconciliation. The second was low-intensity destruction and the enduring presence of those residents who were loyal to, or who were able to reconcile with, the regime. In the post-conflict era, the Damascus Governorate has reformulated the relationship between the capital city and its periphery in two ways. First, the governorate has imposed new zoning regulations and plans for reconstruction without any consideration for the rights of displaced peoples. Second, it has slowly carried out the rezoning process, and then has frozen its implementation for one of two reasons: the continued presence of residents in previously-zoned areas; or a lack of cooperation from informal settlement dwellers who acquired influence during the war.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, the relationship between Damascus and the inhabited areas on its outskirts has been characterised by tension and mutual dissatisfaction. The towns and informal settlements that surround the capital have not received the services that they expected from their administrative affiliation with Damascus. The capital, meanwhile, has not benefited from its expansion into these areas.¹ Throughout the war years (2011-2018), the situation deteriorated further as the capital's urban space shrank and as its immediate surroundings were heavily militarised. Certain marginalised Sunni-majority communities even broke away from the capital and attempted to define themselves as part of Rural Damascus. Meanwhile, some informal settlements dominated by minority groups were converted into defensive military strongholds for the capital and the regime. The war years brought about profound transformations in the social dynamics and urban landscape of the capital's outskirts, due mostly to destruction and displacement, but also because of urban policies. Examining these dynamics and policies is crucial for understanding the mechanisms involved in social engineering both during the war and the post-war period.

This paper deals with the north-eastern outskirts of Damascus, an area which today includes: Barzeh al-Balad and the informal settlement of Ish al-Warwar, in the Barzeh district; and Qaboun al-Balad, the Qaboun Industrial Zone and the Tishreen informal settlement, all of which are part of Qaboun district (Map 1). Until the mid-20th century, this area was a homogeneous social and economic space that belonged to the Eastern Ghouta region. Over time, the Damascus Governorate expanded and acquired land in the area, eventually annexing it in the 1960s. During this period, the area's social fabric gradually changed, and distinct population islands with diverse regional, sectarian, economic and social backgrounds formed. Parcels of land here were seized by the government for various projects, including a large industrial zone in the late 1940s; numerous military and security sites in the 1950s and 1960s; several newly-zoned residential neighbourhoods in the 1980s; and finally, a group of major roads connecting the capital to the northern governorates in the 1990s. Through these changes, the area lost the bulk of its farmland, while it continued to be designated as agricultural, rather than residential or commercial land. Since the mid-1970s, growing demand for affordable housing near the capital has led to the emergence of shanty towns in the area. These informal settlements have attracted migrants from rural areas who depend on Damascus for work and livelihood.²

Between 2000 and 2010, the Damascus Governorate prepared a number of zoning studies for parts of the area. These studies focused on entrenching the sector as a traffic hub for northern Syria and included a train station and several bus stations. Development projects, like the Eastern Park project and the rehabilitation of the capital's northern outskirts, were also planned, but they were not implemented.³ In the same period, and in cooperation with international organisations, the Damascus Governorate launched several programmes to study optimal solutions for dealing with the outskirts and the areas in violation of zoning codes, including in north-eastern Damascus. Two potential solutions were proposed: either the demolition of informal settlements and their reconstruction in cooperation with private real estate investors and developers; or their upgrading and regularisation within an integrated national programme. By 2011, no final decision had been made, but the Damascus Governorate and the Syrian government were leaning towards the first solution, rather than opting for sustainable urban development.

1 Saadallah Jabbour, "Urban Developments in Damascus and a General Organizational Chart for 1965-1985" (in Arabic), *Damascus University Journal* 17, 2 (2001): 77-93; Fabrice Balanche, "A City Under Baathist Watch: Damascus, the Syrian Capital" (in Arabic), *al-Jumhuriya*, 11 June 2012, <https://bit.ly/3BPdB44>

2 Saadallah Jabbour, "The Reality of Unplanned Housing in the City of Damascus and How to Deal with It" (in Arabic), Symposium of the Higher Council for Science, 27 March 2002, <https://bit.ly/3u4J3rJ>; Qassem al-Rabadawi, "Population Growth and the Problem of Informal Housing in the Cities Surrounding Syrian Governorate Centres from 1981-2010" (in Arabic), *Damascus University Journal*, 31, 3 (2015).

3 Al-Iqtisadi, "Plan to Beautify the Northern Entrance to Damascus in Preparation for the Eastern Park Project" (in Arabic), 25 October 2011, <https://bit.ly/3AwLeqC>

This approach was in line with the government's move toward a social market economy designed to attract private foreign investment, preparing the legal environment for real estate development.⁴

At the onset of the 2011 uprising, residents of Barzeh al-Balad, Qaboun, and parts of Tishreen joined the anti-regime protests, while Ish al-Warwar and other parts of Tishreen became loyalist strongholds. The north-eastern outskirts of Damascus became a conflict point between the regime and the opposition, and a place of violent clashes between Damascus and Eastern Ghouta. The Damascus Governorate took advantage of the outcome of this warfare to change the character of some of these areas with a form of social engineering.

A number of reports have documented destruction and demolition in residential areas and resulting forced displacement, especially in some parts of north-eastern Damascus.⁵ Other studies have focused on changes in informal settlements throughout the war,⁶ or on the legal and legislative framework for regulating the reconstruction of informal settlements and war-damaged areas.⁷ By investigating the north-eastern outskirts of Damascus as a whole, this paper aims to expand the body of research to include internal dynamics in and around the capital. The research is organised around two questions: how has armed conflict overlapped with civil sectarian, regional, and class rivalries in north-eastern Damascus; and how has the conflict's end reshaped the relationship between this area and the capital city? The paper presents two models of social engineering that emerged in the war and the post-war period. The first applies to Qaboun and Tishreen's informal settlements, which were subject to large-scale demolition and displacement, and which are currently being rezoned. The second includes Barzeh and the informal settlement of Ish al-Warwar: here, most residents have not been displaced and the Damascus Governorate does not, at present, seem to be in a hurry to implement new zoning plans.

This study is based on primary data gathered from 37 interviews conducted by the researcher between June and August 2021. Those interviewed included activists, researchers, 'reconciliation' committee members, social dignitaries and former and current officials in local administrations. The research also draws on many relevant articles that were analysed and cross-referenced in comparison with open-source materials and the author's personal archive. Unless noted, the data presented in this paper are taken from interviews.

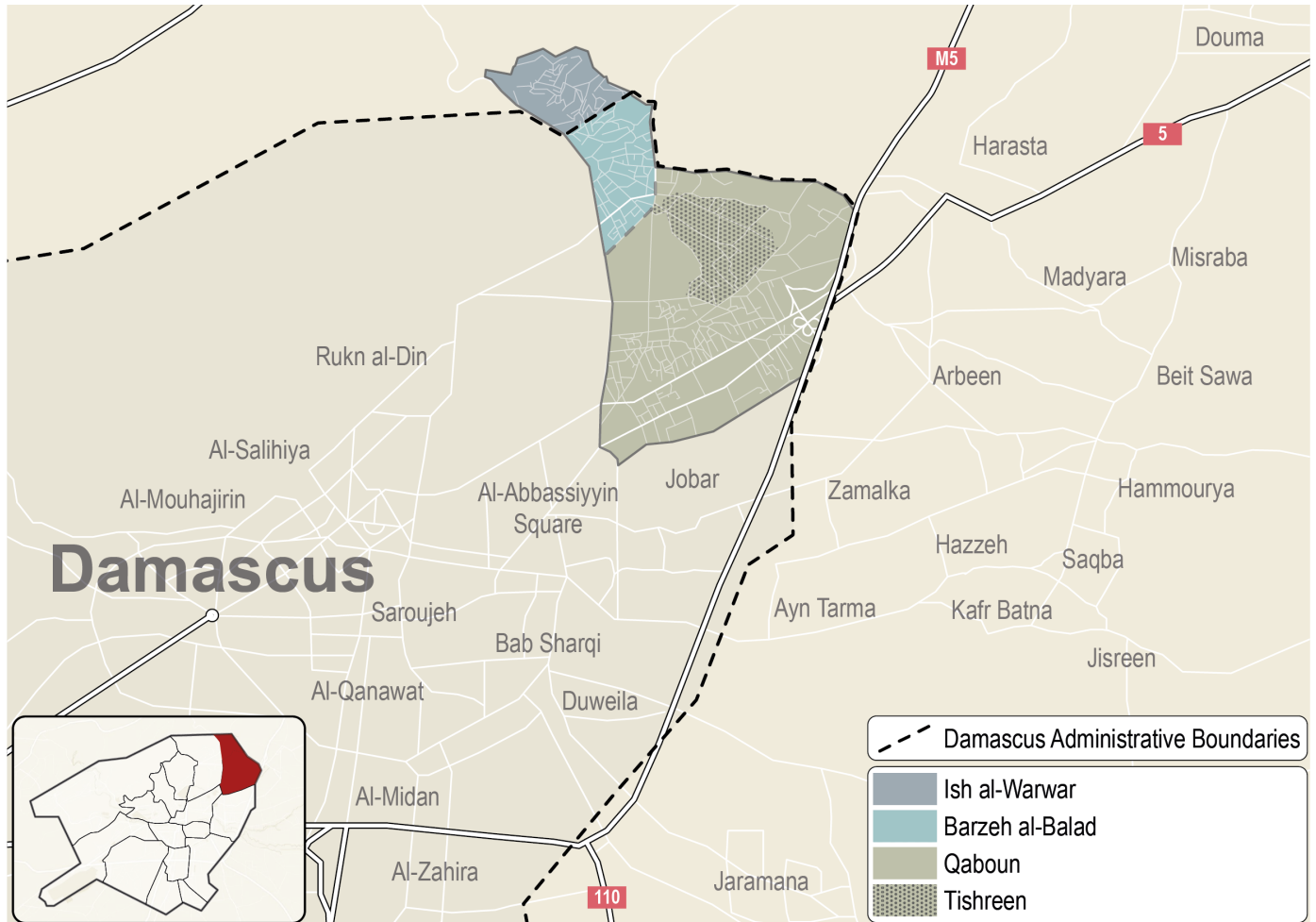
4 Valerie Clerc, "Sustainable Urban Development and Informal Settlements in Damascus" (in French), *Hal*, 29 October (2011), <https://bit.ly/39oBUZW>

5 Human Rights Watch, "Razed to the Ground: Syria's Unlawful Neighbourhood Demolitions in 2012-2013," 30 January 2014, <https://bit.ly/3EspBJH>; Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Residents Blocked From Returning: Government Demolishes Homes, Denies Property Rights," 16 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/3zx0zX0>

6 Raymond al-Maalouli, "Informal Settlements and the Syrian Revolution: The Case of Slums in Damascus and Its Suburbs" (in Arabic), *Rowaq Maysaloon*, 20 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3us4QtW>; The Day After, "Informal Settlements in Syria: The Harvest of Decades of Neglect" (in Arabic), December 2020, <https://bit.ly/2WvN10s>

7 Valérie Clerc, "Informal Settlements in the Syrian Conflict: Urban Planning as a Weapon," *Built Environment*, Alexandrine Press, 2014, 40 (1), 34-51, <https://bit.ly/3ApQDPm>; Arab Reform Initiative, "Law No. 10 on Reconstruction: A Legal Reading of Collective Zoning Expropriation in Syria," (in Arabic) 28 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Y5qvM0>; Jihad Yazigi, "Destruct to Reconstruct: How the Syrian Regime Capitalises on Property Destruction and Land Legislation," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, July 2017, <https://bit.ly/3iknQp6>

Map 1: The North-Eastern Outskirts of Damascus



Source: The author.⁸ Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui.

8 The administrative boundaries of the Damascus Governorate have sometimes been disputed between the governorate and the municipalities of Rural Damascus. The boundaries differ according to references and sources.

1. Displacement, Demolition, and Rezoning

Qaboun al-Balad, the Qaboun Industrial Zone and the Tishreen neighbourhood have different social, residential and zoning histories. However, their inhabitants and urban landscapes have all been affected similarly by the war and its aftermath. Before the war, the area was inhabited by diverse types of residents and property owners. These included: the original population of partially-zoned Qaboun al-Balad; Damascene merchants who owned factories in the industrial zone; and poor migrants who came from various rural areas to live in the informal settlement of Tishreen. The 2012–2017-armed conflict between the opposition and regime forces, destroyed most of these areas and displaced the entire population, except for one Tishreen neighbourhood. The Damascus Governorate's post-war zoning and reconstruction decisions, drawing on plans dating back to before 2011, includes redrawing the capital's administrative boundaries, expropriations and rezoning.

1.1. Qaboun: A Residential Zone without Residents, An Industrial Zone without Industry

Until the 1960s, Qaboun was a part of Eastern Ghouta and was rural. Most of its inhabitants, all of whom are Sunni Muslims, were landowning farmers who specialised in the cultivation of fruit trees. Qaboun consisted of an old town (Qaboun al-Balad) with detached multi-story houses that were spread out across fertile agricultural land.⁹ Following Syrian independence in 1946, Damascus immediately began expropriating large areas of Qaboun in order to build military and security posts to protect its northern entrance.¹⁰ In the 1960s, Qaboun was annexed to the modernised and expanded capital without any urban planning for its housing needs. The town gradually lost its agricultural character as largely unplanned residences were built. Since the 1980s, the loss of arable land has caused Qabounis to leave agriculture in favour of other professions, such as trade and motor vehicle repairs. Auto shops proliferated in western Qaboun's industrial zone, on both sides of the international M5 Highway and on the extension of the Adawi Highway. The local land through which these roads pass was expropriated in stages. An industrial zone was also established to the south of Qaboun on expropriated land in 1948, and the area was later rezoned and expanded in 1972 and 1984. The Qaboun Industrial Zone was the only one of its kind in Damascus. It specialised in textile and food industries, in addition to the manufacture of plastic syringes, paint, rubber, and spare auto parts. It was made up of small and medium sized factories, mostly private sector with some large public sector factories.¹¹

The Damascus General Master Plan, issued in 2001, described Qaboun as being in violation of city zoning codes. It also included topographical plans and initiated detailed zoning studies for the area.¹² The Qaboun Zoning Plan was issued in 2002. It preserved a few sites in Qaboun, including the old town, that it considered zoned areas and redesigned them for residential and commercial ends.¹³ Meanwhile, large areas continued to be designated as agricultural land, upon which it is illegal to build. The plan also noted extensive new expropriations for the implementation of public utility projects such as roads and service facilities, including a train station and a bus station.

9 This land is irrigated by two branches of the Barada River: Yazid from the north and Tora from the south.

10 Damascus established these military sites in Qaboun to face what it perceived as potential internal dangers from northern governorates, especially Aleppo. Over time, these sites have expanded. They include the Special Forces Command, the Military Police Command, the Police College, Military Intelligence Branch 211, and the Air Force Intelligence branch located between Qaboun and Harasta.

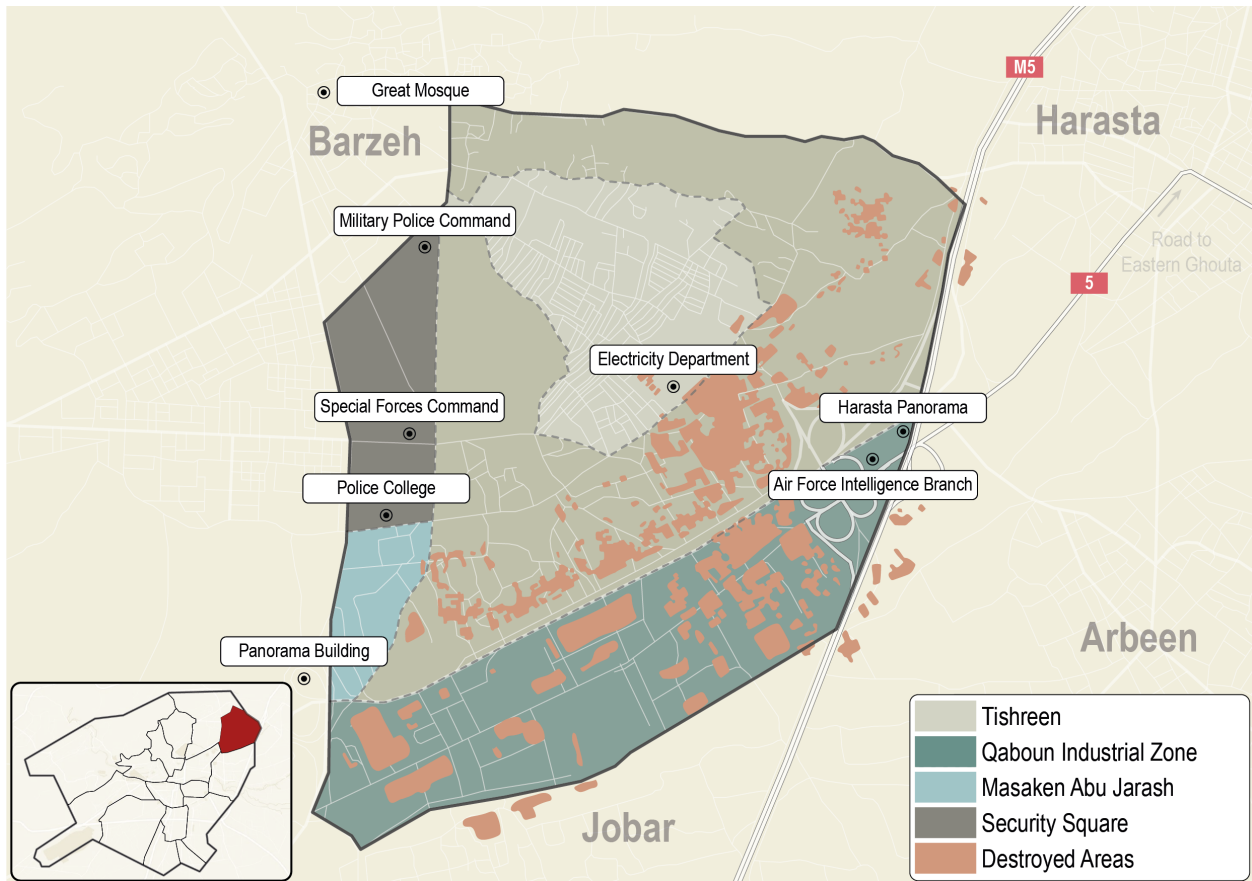
11 They include the United Commercial Industrial Corporation also known as al-Khumasiya, the Spinning and Weaving Corporation in Damascus, the Modern Company for Conserves and Agricultural Industries, the Metallic Construction and Mechanical Industries Company, the al-Ahlia Company for Rubber and Plastic Industry, and the Technical Institute for Chemical Industries.

12 Saadallah Jabbour, "The Reality of Unplanned Housing."

13 'Residential' differs from 'commercial' in terms of the area in which building is allowed in relation to the original land area.

Although the marked lands were immediately expropriated, these projects were not implemented due to bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of funding. In the end, this plan divided Qabouni residents into two types: those who lost their land to expropriation; and those where the land designation shifted from agricultural to residential. Owners in the second group had the opportunity to get rich by building residential flats with the help of Qabouni businessmen who had begun working in building and construction in the 1990s. Many Qabounis felt that these rapid changes were unjust, and that Damascus was expanding at their expense. When the war came, a significant portion of the population chose, perhaps not surprisingly, to join the opposition against the regime and, in many cases, fought to the bitter end.

Map 2: Qaboun



Source: The author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui.

In early 2011, regime forces responded to peaceful protests in Qaboun with extreme violence. In 2012 and 2013, the area switched sides between opposition and regime forces. The regime's security priority was to prevent Qaboun from becoming a link between opposition forces in Damascus and Eastern Ghouta. Thus, regime forces expelled the residents from Qaboun's southern and eastern edges – in the areas adjacent to Jobar and Harasta – and bulldozed large areas (Map 2). They did so under the supervision of the Damascus Governorate, and without any clear justification.¹⁴ The opposition took the area, however, tightening its control over Qaboun in mid-2013. It was then able, between 2014 and 2016, to transform the town into a supply line for food and fuel with an extensive network of tunnels to besieged Eastern Ghouta as far as Arbeen and Harasta. From 2014 due to violent internal fighting in opposition-controlled areas in Eastern Ghouta, each opposition faction had its own tunnel.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Razed to the Ground."

After three years of relative calm in the area, regime forces mounted a major military campaign (February - May 2017). This ended with the opposition surrendering and the vast majority of the remaining residents being displaced to northern Syria.¹⁵ Regime forces did not offer the Qaboun factions any agreement that would have allowed residents to stay. Instead, they used high-explosive munition in the campaign's final days. Their aim was to make the area uninhabitable. Qaboun's surrender was negotiated between officers from the Fourth Division and Air Force Intelligence who led the campaign and Qabouni businessmen who acted as mediators.¹⁶ When regime forces entered Qaboun, only a handful of residents remained around the Great Mosque and the Coffee Square, in a few habitable buildings.

Further extensive demolitions were carried out after the fighting ended and lasted until October 2018.¹⁷ Immediately after the town surrendered the Fourth Division's Security Bureau hired contractors to demolish most of buildings there and to recycle rubble: they used the pretext that the buildings lacked structural integrity. Among the contractors were groups associated with the Damascene businessman Muhammad Hamsho, and others associated with the cousin of the Syrian President, Major General Riad Shalish.¹⁸ Some of the Qabouni businessmen who negotiated the surrender were also involved in iron extraction. While the Damascus Governorate prevented people from returning to their homes, properties were demolished and their rubble removed before property rights could be established through specialised committees affiliated with the Damascus Governorate. This raised fears about what would happen to unregistered properties at the General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs.

In August 2019, the Damascus Governorate began preparing a new detailed zoning plan: No. 105 for the Qaboun residential area, under the Planning and Urban Development Law No. 23 of 2015. This law allows administrative units to seize ('expropriate') up to 40% of a private property.¹⁹ The plan did not include the narrow residential strips located to the south of the Police College known as Masaken Abu Jarash (Abu Jarash Housing), a zoned residential area that remained in regime control throughout the war and that was not destroyed.

In June 2020, the governorate approved the zoning plan and announced that objections to it were to be handed in within one month. It is worth noting that the property owner or his or her legal representative had to be present in person at the Damascus Governorate building to view the plan and to submit an objection. They also needed valid title deeds.²⁰ However, most property owners were forcibly displaced to northern Syria and pursued by the security forces.²¹ The plan is still under review at the time of writing, awaiting ratification and will be issued by special decree. Rights holders in Qaboun residential areas will not obtain alternative housing under law No. 23 of 2015. Instead, they will receive shares of the plots built after zoning. Theoretically, this will be equivalent in size to the area of their expropriated property.²²

15 Raed al-Salhani, "Are Factional Clashes a Prelude to Withdrawal from Qaboun?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 29 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/3lV6G2C>

16 Sawt al-Asima, "Revealed: How the Damascus Neighbourhood of Qaboun is Being Sold" (in Arabic), 12 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/3nXN5RL>

17 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Residents Blocked from Returning," 16 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ZqPQko>

18 Riad Shalish is a former director of the Military Housing Establishment for the Ministry of Defence. Raed al-Salhani, "When the Regime Used War to Destroy Qaboun" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 26 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/3EIWWRp>

19 Enab Baladi, "Outside the Scope of Law No. 10, Damascus Governorate Approves the Zoning Plan for Qaboun and Yarmouk" (in Arabic), 25 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3zzmBID>

20 The Syria Report, "[Qaboun Residents Lose Real Estate Rights Amid Demolition](https://bit.ly/3m29WdH)," 19 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3m29WdH>

21 Qusay Abdelbari, "Al-Qaboun: Hamsho Owns Its Steel, Its Zoning Plan Almost Approved" (in Arabic), *Iqtisad*, 20 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lPQZtl>

22 "They shall have developmental shares in the residential plots after zoning, in proportion to the appraisal of the value of their expropriated real estate." Council of Ministers website, "Law No. 23 of 2015 on Planning and Urban Development" (in Arabic), 8 January 2015, <https://bit.ly/3tVRAGN>

In July 2021, displaced persons were allowed to return and take up residence in Qaboun al-Balad on two conditions. First, they needed security clearance from Air Force Intelligence and, second, a report from a specialised technical committee stating that their property is habitable.²³ Few, however, were able to return to the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, the Damascus Governorate continues to seize large parts of Qaboun. In September 2021, it annexed parts of the area near Jobar with what it called the “zoning plan for some of the interconnected areas between Damascus and its countryside.”²⁴ This decision is part of the redrawing of the administrative boundaries in the vicinity of Damascus. It also fits into the planning for public utility projects or investment projects in accordance with urban planning and investment laws.²⁵

The Qaboun Industrial Zone is another excellent example of the tense relationship between the governorate of Damascus and its north-eastern outskirts. In 2012, the industrial zone suffered tremendous destruction and fell out of the control of both opposition and regime forces. The Damascus Governorate later bulldozed all public sector factories in 2018, which facilitated their expropriation. According to accusations levelled by private sector industrialists, the governorate exaggerated the level of destruction to justify removing the entire area.²⁶ Zoning plan No. 104, issued for the Qaboun Industrial Zone in June 2019, amends its land type from industrial and agricultural to residential and commercial.²⁷ The area’s industrialists, most of whom are Damascene, fought a long legal battle with the governorate to keep their factories, offering repeatedly to bear the costs of rebuilding.²⁸ The battle ended in mid-September 2021 with Presidential Decree No. 237, which creates a “northern entrance to Damascus zoning area” based on plan No. 104. This decision means that the status of the industrial zone will be changed, and that the industrialists will be forced to move 750 factories to the industrial city of Adra.²⁹ The Damascus Governorate added the area around the international M5 Highway, from the Panorama Building to the entrance to Harasta, to the “northern entrance to Damascus zoning area.” Plan 104 is the first practical application of the provisions of Law 10 of 2018, which stipulates the establishment of development zones within an administrative unit’s General Master Plan. In return for covering zoning and infrastructure expenditures, Law 10 allows the governorate to acquire 20% of the zoned area in the form of investment plots.

In its quest to justify breaking up the land and the new zoning system, the Damascus Governorate is stressing a cultural and identity-based logic. For example, it claims that the zoning plan 104 will preserve “Damascus’ identity” as a city of services, finance, and investment, that is neither industrial nor agricultural.³⁰ The Damascus Governorate’s approach to Qaboun shows that the governorate is the real decision-maker in redrawing its administrative boundaries, dividing its sub-areas and deciding area types in terms of service and investment. The governorate has brought back old zoning plans drawn for Qaboun from before 2011. It is taking advantage of the lack of residents as it works to update, to expand and to redraw said plans.

23 Sawt al-Asima, “Damascus Governorate Announces New Zoning Plan for the Districts of Qaboun, Barzeh, and Jobar” (in Arabic), 19 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/3hQsDOM>

24 Syria Daily News, “Damascus Governorate Announces Zoning Scheme for Some Interconnected Areas between Urban and Rural Damascus” (in Arabic), 6 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3nPBnZz>

25 Official statements focus on the economic feasibility of a project, which refer to the Investment Law No. 18 of 2021. The law introduces the concept of Special Economic Zones, whose most important type, with regard to HLP rights, is the so-called development zone. A development zone is “an investment zone for purposes of development or real estate development, or for reconstruction in cases where the area was damaged by the war”. The Syria Report, “[Syria’s New Investment Law Establishes Special Economic Zones.](https://bit.ly/2Z9rMTy)” 26 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Z9rMTy>

26 The Syria Report, “The End of the Qaboun Industrial Zone,” 15 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ZiSusP>

27 The Syria Report, “Qaboun to be Rezoned Under Controversial Reconstruction Laws 10 and 23,” 8 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ppK2CM>

28 Nawar al-Dimashqi, “Qaboun Industrial Zone: Stalled Production and an Industry Under Threat” (in Arabic), *Kassioun*, 2 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3uuHovP>

29 The Syria Report, “To Demolish or Not to Demolish: Unclear Prospects for the Qaboun Industrial Zone,” 24 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3neOSjA>

30 Mohammad Rakan Mustafa, “Sorour to ‘al-Watan:’ ‘Damascus’ Identity is neither Industrial nor Agricultural, Damascus is a Services City” (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 21 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3jmRc6Y>

1.2. Tishreen: The Capital Overflows with Migrants

Although it falls within Qaboun municipality, Tishreen informal settlement is very different from Qaboun in terms of zoning and population. It was built in violation of zoning codes in the 1980s. These were informal settlements on private, agriculturally-designated land, that mostly belonged to Qabounis, although some was owned by the people of Barzeh. The landowners worked with contractors who built in violation of zoning codes. They divided the land into small plots, constructed a large number of illegally zoned homes, and sold them at low prices.³¹ Residents of these informal settlements represented a very diverse mix of people who had migrated to the capital from rural areas. They were brought together by poverty and by the pursuit of labour opportunities.³²

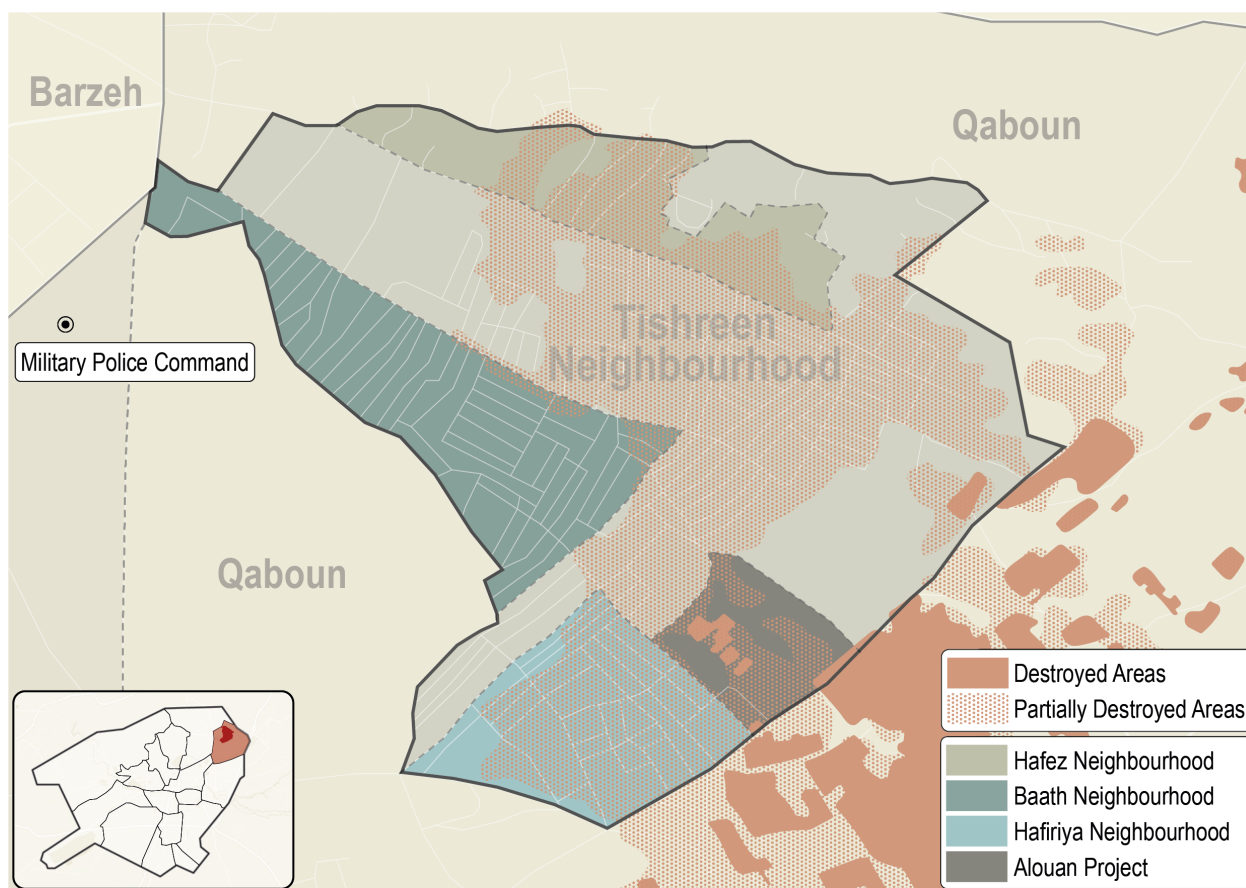
Tishreen informal settlement consists of a main street, called Tishreen, with three surrounding streets also called neighbourhoods: Hafiriya, Hafez and Baath. Each neighbourhood has a clear sectarian or regional character (Map 3). The most prominent, Hafiriya, is a Sunni-majority neighbourhood inhabited by mostly Sunni migrants from the town of Hafir al-Fouqa, in the al-Tal district of the Qalamoun region. While migrants from Idlib went to make up most of Tishreen's residents, they were most densely concentrated in the Hafez neighbourhood. Most Alawi migrants from Jableh in the countryside around Latakia and from Masyaf in the countryside around Hama lived in the Baath neighbourhood. These neighbourhoods were populated as they were being built: relationships of kinship, region, and sect were the main factor behind the clusters found there.

Before 2011, there was no apparent hostility between the various Tishreen neighbourhoods. Peaceful coexistence prevailed with extreme poverty and a severe lack of basic services, including schools and medical clinics. The residents did the best they could. For instance, when the residents of Hafiriya first started to migrate to the neighbourhood in the 1980s, they sold grapes and figs from Hafir in Damascus. They then became day labourers in agriculture, construction, and portage in Damascus and the surrounding countryside. In the early 1990s, however, some started trading in smuggled goods, especially food and electronics, which were procured by officers from the Syrian forces then deployed in Lebanon. The smuggling trade grew in Hafiriya to the point that the area came to be known as the 'smuggling market.' The residents of Hafiriya were not used to the rise of social dignitaries. Those who became rich from the smuggling trade started working in construction and they built in violation of zoning codes. As for the first wave of migrants from Idlib, they worked in sewing and were construction day labourers. Later, new waves from Idlib and the children of the first wave of migrants, enlisted in different parts of the security and police apparatus in Damascus and its countryside, faring somewhat better than their peers. Finally, Baath neighbourhood, which is closest to the Military Police headquarters to the south of Barzeh, served as a refuge for poor Alawi migrants and for former leftist political detainees who could find nowhere else to live. A large percentage of its residents worked as day labourers, as lottery ticket sellers or as hairdressers and barbers, and a small portion enlisted in the army or the security forces.

31 The land was divided into *kasbahs*, each covering 23.25 square metres. It has remained 'agricultural land' in the name of its new owners. Often, deeds were for the land alone, or contracts for the sale of real estate arranged with a lawyer or notary.

32 Al-Jaml, "Tishreen Neighbourhood Deemed Illegal" (in Arabic), undated, <https://bit.ly/3EI7aBr>

Map 3: Tishreen Informal Settlement



Source: The author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui.

In mid-2012, the three neighbourhoods joined the armed conflict based on sectarian – and to some extent regional – identities. Civil violence has caused people from the same sect or region to huddle together in neighbourhoods, from which those from other sects or regions were expelled. Whereas the Alawite Baath neighbourhood stayed loyal to the regime, and many of its residents joined the Popular Committees and the National Defence Forces (NDF), a number of police officers from Idlib defected and gradually established armed opposition factions.³³ Hafiriya residents also supported the opposition and established several armed battalions, albeit with less involvement in military action than their neighbours from Idlib.³⁴ These neighbourhoods were gradually emptied of civilians by armed clashes, in addition to raids and field executions carried out by regime forces in Hafiriya and Hafez between 2012-2013.³⁵ The Baath neighbourhood has also witnessed successive waves of displacement, due to the deteriorating security situation, yet it still has residents and has not been subjected to the same level of destruction as the two other neighbourhoods. NDF leaders seized the homes of many displaced Sunni residents from Baath, selling them or giving them to close relatives.

During the final military campaign in the area in early 2017, regime forces used explosive hoses extensively to force their way into Tishreen and to demolish poorly constructed, code-violating buildings. The neighbourhood was subjected to the severe destruction, to get rid of this large informal settlement and to displace its residents. The opposition declared Tishreen a disaster zone on 25 February 2017,

³³ The most prominent Idlibi factions were the Khaled al-Zawahira Brigade, and the Jabal al-Zawiya Brigade, affiliated with the 1st Brigade in Barzeh; and the Salafi Legion Faylaq al-Rahman in Eastern Ghouta. During different periods, groups appeared in Tishreen that pledged allegiance to Ahrar al-Sham and the al-Nusra Front, as well as to cells of the Islamic State. The Idlibi factions united to eliminate IS in 2016.

³⁴ They all joined Jaysh al-Islam in 2015.

³⁵ A small number of those who were stranded returned to the neighbourhood after the Barzeh truce came into effect.

describing what was happening there as demographic change.³⁶ Between March and May 2017, opposition factions and the remaining civilians in Hafez and Hafiriya neighbourhoods were displaced to northern Syria.³⁷ This forced displacement was not the result of an agreement. Rather, it came from commands issued by the Air Force Intelligence and Fourth Division officers who had led the military campaign.³⁸ As in Qaboun, rubble recycling teams appeared after the opposition left only adding to the scale of destruction.

Baath neighbourhood, on the other hand, has remained largely intact and has been continuously inhabited by civilians since mid-2018. It is still predominantly Alawite, even though Sunni families loyal to the regime have returned to their homes there. A hidden struggle is currently taking place in the neighbourhood to take control of the properties of the absentees who preferred to leave because they were unable to make the necessary repairs. At the beginning of 2021, the *mukhtar* asked tenants to provide valid lease contracts, or else to vacate the properties. This was likely an attempt to inventory available property for investment purposes. The rise of the *mukhtar*, currently the most powerful figure in the neighbourhood, filled the void left by the regime's marginalisation of the NDF and the local Air Force Intelligence group.³⁹ Many Alawites in the Baath neighbourhood believe that steps taken by the government to weaken the loyalist armed groups that "defended the neighbourhood" during the conflict are a prelude to rezoning. Residents will not, afterwards, have the power to reject the rezoning of Tishreen.⁴⁰

The Damascus Governorate excluded Tishreen from the Qaboun zoning plan No. 105. This was despite previous statements made by governorate officials in which they claimed to be working on a single zoning plan for the two areas. The Governor of Damascus visited Baath neighbourhood in June 2021 and inspected the removal of debris and the opening of roads there. This did not reassure the residents, however, as far as the status of their properties in a new zoning plan was concerned.⁴¹ The remaining residents there worry that the comprehensive zoning of Tishreen will include their neighbourhood. Because the land is classified as agricultural, the buildings there are in violation of zoning codes. Any urban planning law will recognise only the land and not the illegal properties built there. In such cases, and according to Decree 66, which provides for the establishment of two new development zones in Damascus, owners of informal real estate will be given an annual rental allowance only if they enrol in one of the alternative housing projects; these alternative projects are not free.⁴² As such, many Baath residents would no longer be able to live in Damascus due to their extreme poverty. They believe, however, that if their neighbourhood is demolished, it will not happen without "compensation commensurate with their sacrifices to the state."⁴³ Theoretically, however, it is illegal to provide residents with exclusive compensation that was not specified in the laws related to urban planning or development zones within the boundaries of administrative units.

36 Al Aan TV, YouTube, "Local Council in Damascus Declares the Neighbourhood a Disaster Zone" (in Arabic), 25 February 2017, <https://bit.ly/2XOWgcE>

37 Members of factions affiliated with the 1st Brigade retreated to Barzeh and left one month later with the first batch of IDPs headed to Idlib.

38 These commands were conveyed to the factions and residents through a well-known merchant from the Tishreen neighbourhood known as 'the Baron.' Raed al-Salhani, "The Baron Hands Over Tishreen Neighbourhood to the Regime" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 13 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/39t1ehl>

39 In early 2019, the Minister of the Interior ordered the arrest of one of the most prominent leaders of an armed group affiliated with the Air Intelligence – an Alawi from the Baath neighbourhood who was accused of being responsible for dumping the bodies of Hafiriya civilians into a mass grave. Sawt al-Asima, "Rahmoun Orders the Arrest of the Largest Shabih from Tishreen Neighbourhood" (in Arabic), 5 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/3lSEWel>

40 Telegram interview with a former leader of the Popular Committees in Ish al-Warwar, 13 August 2021.

41 Damascus governorate website, "Damascus Governor Inspects Road Constructions in Tishreen Neighbourhood," 12 June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3FSBiug>

42 The Syria Report, "Explained: Who Is Entitled to What Under Decree No. 66?," 3 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/2ZupWw7>

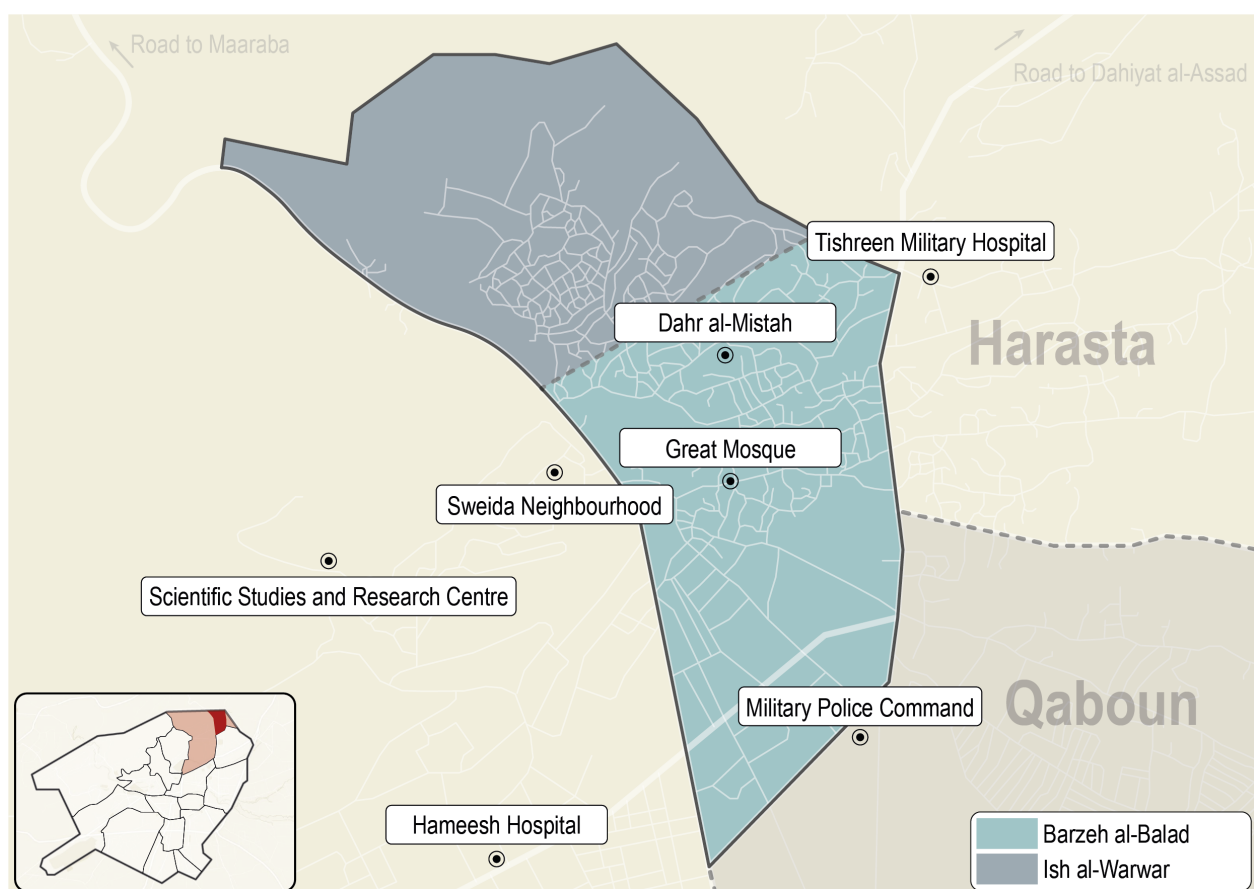
43 Interview with a former leader of the Popular Committees in Ish al-Warwar, *ibid*.

The successive zoning plans that have been issued and the way in which the area's administrative limits have been redrawn are revealing. They show that the Damascus Governorate is focusing most of its attention on rehabilitating the area surrounding the northern entrance to Damascus and the highways that link Damascus to the north. At the same time, the governorate is postponing work in the inner areas of Qaboun and Tishreen due to a lack of necessary funding for housing or investment projects. Moreover, the Damascus Governorate shows little eagerness to release a zoning plan for Tishreen or to press for the eviction of Baath neighbourhood residents. The residents of these informal settlements are poor migrants, and the expropriation of their land may end with them receiving some slight compensation. By contrast, the governorate has issued zoning plans at a faster rate for residential and industrial areas in Qaboun and has limited the possibility for objections. The governorate fears that the original Qabouni landowners might be able to get it back if they had adequate legal means. By issuing zoning plans, the governorate is able to achieve legal finality on the matter. What we are seeing in Qaboun is fully-fledged social engineering, whereas what is happening in Tishreen is partial social engineering. However, in both cases, the Damascus Governorate is constrained by a lack of funding.

2. The Remaining Residents and the Threat of Rezoning

Despite their different sectarian backgrounds and their different political choices in early 2011, the residents of two rivaling neighbourhoods, Sunni majority Barzeh and Alawite majority Ish al-Warwar, are facing a similar fate. During the conflict, Barzeh sided with the opposition, while Ish al-Warwar took up arms on the side of the regime. The military forces in control of the two areas fought battles and committed sectarian abuses before they eventually became partners in the smuggling trade in 2014. Their cooperation contributed to a ‘reconciliation’ between the regime and the Barzeh opposition forces in early 2017 and helped remove the spectre of forced displacement. After 2018, the Damascus Governorate developed a similar vision for the two areas in terms of planning, despite Ish al-Warwar being an informal settlement and Barzeh being a zoned area. In both cases, the fact that the residents did not leave makes it more difficult to forcefully rezone the area (Map 4).

Map 4: Barzeh al-Balad and Ish al-Warwar



Source: The author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui.

2.1. Ish al-Warwar: Zoning is More than Just the “Click of a Button”

The Ish al-Warwar neighbourhood came into being in the 1970s as a scattered collection of homes in a rugged mountainous area overlooking Barzeh al-Balad. It quickly became one of Damascus’s most crowded and poorly-served informal settlements. Residents claimed public property and divided it into small plots on which they quickly built contiguous residential buildings, sometimes without maintaining proper structural building standards.⁴⁴ The neighbourhood is chaotic in zoning terms.

⁴⁴ Those who own property in these types of informal settlements do not have property deeds except for sale contracts certified by a public notary or a lawyer.

The land is owned by the municipalities of Barzeh in Damascus and Maaraba in Rural Damascus, which means that the area falls under the authority of their respective municipalities. The Damascus Governorate is, however, directly responsible for providing services in Ish al-Warwar, which is subject, in turn, to Qaboun police jurisdiction.

Most Ish al-Warwar residents are Alawites from the Masyaf area in the countryside around Hama. They started gathering in the neighbourhood at the end of the 1970s, because of the disintegration of their agricultural properties and the lack of job opportunities. Some of the streets in Ish al-Warwar are named after Masyaf villages, such as Deir Mama, al-Naqir, and Baarin. Ish al-Warwar also included small streets inhabited by migrants from Deir al-Zor and Qalamoun in Rural Damascus. A large percentage of the residents were – and still are – low-income, low-level employees working in the public sector and governmental institutions, especially the army and security services. They are among the least educated and privileged of those who serve in these sectors. Those who have managed to rise socially often moved to zoned and socially superior Alawite areas closer to the centre of Damascus, such as Dahiyat al-Assad.⁴⁵

In 2011, as sectarian polarization increased, armed Popular Committees loyal to the regime were formed in Ish al-Warwar: these joined the NDF at the end of 2012. They took control of the neighbourhood and imposed illegal taxes on locals, which prompted some residents to appeal to the army to intervene.⁴⁶ The Ish al-Warwar NDF and Barzeh opposition forces fought fierce battles, and by the end of 2013 there was much destruction in the areas between the settlements. Both sides carried out sectarian cleansing operations: Sunnis were expelled from Ish al-Warwar and Alawites from Barzeh. Clashes continued until the 2014 truce, which was intermittently violated by sniping, kidnappings, ransom demands, and identity-based killings.

After the Barzeh truce took effect in January 2014, the NDF entered the smuggling trade. They brought food, fuel, and gas into Barzeh from Ish al-Warwar under the supervision of the Republican Guard. Smuggling operations into the opposition stronghold ended, however, after Barzeh reconciled with the regime in May 2017. The NDF in Ish al-Warwar then took advantage of its security privileges to move its smuggling enterprise from Rural Damascus to Damascus proper.⁴⁷ These transgressions angered senior regime officials, who issued orders in June 2018 to dissolve the NDF in Ish al-Warwar, but the group refused to implement them.⁴⁸ In fact, the NDF has relied on the support and mutual business interests of Alawite officers in the army and security forces. The group has also been able to maintain its core elements by finding sources of income, including collecting ‘taxes’ at checkpoints, smuggling, and dealing in contraband. The NDF continues to control the area, despite threats from Air Force Intelligence and requests that it surrender its weapons and hand over members wanted for kidnapping, theft, and drug trafficking.⁴⁹

Ish al-Warwar has not been subjected to forced displacement, though many civilians have left for their original villages due to concerns about violent clashes and general insecurity. The Damascus Governorate has not listened to residents’ repeated complaints about deteriorating services. In April 2019, the Prime Minister of Syria and the Governor of Damascus visited Ish al-Warwar to inspect infrastructure and to meet with people who clamoured for improved services. However, this visit was not followed by any noticeable improvements. The Damascus Governorate seems to see Ish al-Warwar as a *fait accompli*: having decided that it is unable to improve the neighbourhood’s situation, the governorate ignored it completely.

45 For more on Dahiyat al-Assad, see Khader Khaddour, “Assad’s Officers’ Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal,” *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 4 November 2015, <https://bit.ly/39vJ0fg>

46 Kassoun, “Letter from a Citizen” (in Arabic), 13 December 2012, <https://bit.ly/3u3Cki4>

47 Abd al-Hadi Shabbat, “100 ACs Smuggled in Trucks in the Centre of Damascus. Customs Investigate!” (in Arabic), *al-Watan*, 22 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/3iyDNYP>

48 Sawt al-Asima, “Exclusive: Militias in Barzeh, Ish al-Warwar, and Dahiyat al-Assad Dissolved, Annexed to Regular Army” (in Arabic), 9 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/3u4nzwv>

49 Al-Modon, “Ish al-Warwar: Clashes between Loyalist Militias Unrelated to the Opposition” (in Arabic), 2 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3CE9BTM>

The Damascus General Master Plan issued in 2001 classified Ish al-Warwar as an informal settlement that needed a detailed zoning plan.⁵⁰ Despite repeated rumours that the area would be zoned and razed to build residential towers for alternative housing, no zoning plan for Ish al-Warwar has been issued as of the time of writing. In 2020, the Damascus Governorate began talking about a study to prepare a zoning plan for Barzeh that would include Ish al-Warwar. Governorate officials emphasised, however, that the plan would not be implemented for a long time due to limited resources, and that it is not as simple as the “click of a button.” They further added that due to the area’s steep and rugged topography, it is difficult to find alternative housing for its residents.⁵¹ Moreover, as the land in Ish al-Warwar is public property, according to all urban planning laws, those who built informal real estate there will receive a rental allowance for only a limited period in the event of zoning.⁵² The owners of these properties may be entitled to apply for alternative housing that is not free. But that would only be if the Damascus Governorate had a surplus of such housing. The applicants would then have to pay the costs for their alternative housing in instalments. The residents of Ish al-Warwar categorically reject this option, as they consider that their great sacrifices “to defend the state” deserves more than “disavowal and lack of recognition.”⁵³ Their refusal to accept zoning plans stems from the inability of the Damascus Governorate to provide them – or any resident of informal settlements built on public property – with alternative housing. However, unlike Baath neighbourhood in Tishreen, the continued presence of a militia – the NDF – that is capable of imposing its will may pave the way for bargaining over any project to rezone the informal settlement and better conditions for the population.⁵⁴

2.2. Barzeh al-Balad: Eliminating ‘Reconciliation’ Leaders and the Problem of the Residents Who Remained

Unlike the relatively new-established informal settlement of Ish al-Warwar, Barzeh was a small village surrounded by sprawling agricultural land to the northeast of the capital. This was the territory that was annexed to Damascus in the 1960s.⁵⁵ Damascus expropriated large swathes of Barzeh land in order to build two modern districts, Barzeh Musbaq al-Sonaa (Barzeh Prefabricated Homes) and Masaken Barzeh (Barzeh Housing), as well as critical military and medical sites.⁵⁶ The old town, or Barzeh al-Balad, which consists mostly of single-story traditional Arab houses, was not expropriated. Barzeh residents continued their traditional activities in agriculture and soap manufacturing. Newer generations began working in contracting and building materials, especially in the stone mills on the road from Damascus to Baghdad. At the end of the 1980s, the Barzeh zoning plan was issued, and some residents were able to work with contractors to build flats on their zoned properties. Although Barzeh’s buildings were connected to Qaboun from the south, significant cultural and social differences have remained between the two areas. Barzeh’s complex character has traditionally fallen somewhere between Damascus and Eastern Ghouta and its residents used to describe themselves as *basatina* (orchard keepers) to distinguish themselves from their neighbours. Moreover, Barzeh was not as conservative as either Qaboun or the old neighbourhoods of Damascus. This could be seen in the relaxed religious attitudes of local farmers and in the way that women and men were partners in the management of household affairs and agricultural production.

50 The Syria Report, “Explained: Informal Housing Areas in Damascus.”

51 Ather Press, “Damascus Governorate Prepares Barzeh Zoning Plan... Declares: It’s Not Implemented Yet” (in Arabic), 2 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/2W1mlyK>

52 Including controversial wartime laws, such as Legislative Decree No. 66 of 2012 and Law 10 of 2018, which amended and expanded the former.

53 Telegram interview with an NDF leader residing in Damascus, 5 August 2021.

54 WhatsApp interview with dignitary from Ish al-Warwar, 12 August 2021.

55 The Barzeh area currently includes: Barzeh al-Balad, Masaken Barzeh, al-Manara, al-Abbas, and Ish al-Warwar.

56 Scientific Studies and Research Centre, Tishreen Military Hospital, Ibn al-Nafis Hospital, and Hameesh Hospital.

In 2011, the old square of Barzeh al-Balad became a 'Mecca' for demonstrators from several areas. The demonstrators benefited from narrow, difficult to infiltrate streets, and from the armed protection provided by defecting soldiers who were native to the town. At the beginning of 2012, these soldiers formed an armed group called the 1st Brigade, which took control of Barzeh at the end of the same year.⁵⁷ This was followed by a series of armed raids and sectarian massacres carried out by the regime and the Ish al-Warwar NDF. Between 2012-2013, many properties were bulldozed in Barzeh to expand the perimeter around the main road dividing Barzeh and Qaboun. This operation, which was supervised by the Damascus Governorate under military protection, further exposed Barzeh to regime gunfire and tightened its blockade.⁵⁸ The old city suffered massive destruction from both artillery and air bombardment, as well as from the levelling of the buildings between it and Harasta.

In January 2014, the 1st Brigade signed a truce with the Republican Guard, which began with the reconciliation of Moadhamiyat al-Sham at the end of 2013.⁵⁹ This truce was made possible by the regime's desire to neutralise its opponents in a strategically valuable area that opened vital roads leading to the Tishreen Military Hospital, to the Scientific Studies and Research Centre and to Ish al-Warwar.⁶⁰ The 2014 truce gave birth to a commercial partnership between members of the 1st Brigade and officers from the Republican Guard and the NDF. Thus, Barzeh became a major crossroads for the smuggling of food and fuel through tunnels connecting Qaboun to besieged Eastern Ghouta. The 1st Brigade also established an economic bureau that imposed taxes on the passage of goods and that mediated arms deals on the black market between regime forces and Ghouta's opposition forces. This commercial partnership contributed to making Barzeh relatively calm and prosperous, causing a large influx of IDPs from Ghouta.

Due to these factors, Barzeh al-Balad was spared during the final military campaign in Tishreen and Qaboun in February 2017. Unlike in Qaboun where local merchants and businessmen acted as mediators, in Barzeh al-Balad leaders of the 1st Brigade negotiated the 'reconciliation' agreement, which was concluded in May 2017. This agreement included the 1st Brigade handing over all its weapons, settling the status of its fighters, and conscripting men wanted for compulsory service into the pro-regime Qalamoun Shield militia to fight IS in al-Badia. Those who rejected the agreement – mostly fighters from the Damascene neighbourhoods of al-Salihiya and Rukn al-Din and fighters and civilians from Tishreen who had retreated to Barzeh – were forced to flee to northern Syria.

During the implementation of the 'reconciliation' agreement, however, the Fourth Division discovered that weapons and fighters were being smuggled from Barzeh to Eastern Ghouta. As a result, the 1st Brigade lost the support of its biggest advocates among regime forces, namely the Republican Guard and the NDF officers who had sponsored the 'reconciliation' agreement.⁶¹ In 2018, security apparatuses dissolved the Qalamoun Shield militia in Barzeh, arrested the former 1st Brigade leaders, confiscated their property, and executed the most prominent among them.⁶² Pressure from influential figures in Ish al-Warwar, who accused the leaders of the 1st Brigade of being responsible for murders and kidnappings between 2012 and 2014, seems to have contributed to a change in attitudes to the 1st Brigade.⁶³

57 The Damascus-based 1st Brigade was the Syrian Army's first unit after the French mandate ended in 1947. The 1st Brigade in Barzeh was joined by the Qasioun Regiment, which consisted of Damascene fighters from al-Salihiya and Rukn al-Din.

58 Human Rights Watch, "Razed to the Ground."

59 Mazen Ezzi, "Post-reconciliation Rural Damascus: Are Local Communities Still Represented?", (Florence: Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, Middle East Directions, 27 November 2020), <https://bit.ly/3CpXgmw>

60 The Barzeh truce included a ceasefire, the opening of roads for civilians, the release of detainees from the regime's prisons, the restoration of services to the neighbourhood, and the repair of infrastructure in preparation for the return of civilians, provided that regime forces be deployed at the roads into Barzeh and the opposition remains inside with its weapons. The New Arab, "The Barzeh Truce: One Agreement, Two Narratives" (in Arabic), 11 February 2014, <https://bit.ly/3kuMPHM>

61 Raed al-Salhani, "Barzeh Displacement: Why was Brigadier General Qais Farwa Reduced in Rank?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 29 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/39sSE22>

62 Raed al-Salhani, "Abu al-Tayyib: Once a Commander of the 1st Brigade, now a Watermelon Seller" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 18 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XTTMtr>

63 Raed Al-Salhani, "Rustom Ghazaleh's Lawyer Files a 'Judicial' Case Against 'al-Mishar'?" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 10 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/3CBFNxz>

Conflicts between the regime's various branches, and regime officers' desire to seize wealth may also have played a role in the elimination of 1st Brigade leaders.⁶⁴

The Barzeh 'reconciliation' model ended with the arrest of a significant number of officers from the army and security apparatuses accused of cooperating with the opposition,⁶⁵ and the arrest of hundreds of young men from the town.⁶⁶ The elimination of 'reconciliation' leaders did not have much of an impact on the local community. These leaders acted out of their own interests and were somewhat divorced from their surroundings. This ultimately weakened their ability to mediate between the community and the regime's security and military authorities. In reality, their liquidation was a relief to many townspeople who had long accused them of stealing aid and of disloyalty. Yet there is also the fear of becoming completely vulnerable to the regime.⁶⁷

Although Barzeh al-Balad is zoned, inhabited, and devoid of informal settlements, it is now threatened with rezoning under the pretext that it violates zoning regulations. Any rezoning process will not be without complications given that most of the area's residents are still there and given that they have the capacity to submit objections to any new zoning plans. Imposing and implementing such a plan would mean expelling thousands of residents and turning them into displaced people who would demand alternative housing. This scenario would be an additional burden on the Damascus Governorate.

The governorate's designation of Barzeh as an area that violates zoning codes cannot change the fact that it was previously zoned, which increases the legal complexity of the process. For example, the Planning and Urban Development Law No. 23 of 2015 stipulates that a property that has previously been subject to zoning laws cannot be annexed to a new development zone, except by presidential decree. The governorate has issued conflicting statements over the past years about the dates on which the Barzeh zoning plans would be issued.⁶⁸ The most recent solution reached by the governorate was to work on a 'draft zoning plan' for Barzeh that would include Ish al-Warwar,⁶⁹ but to delay issuing the plan and possibly "freeze its implementation after it is issued."⁷⁰ Regardless of the zoning plan, however, the governorate of Damascus continues to take parts of Barzeh al-Balad. It has, for instance, annexed a ten-hectares to Qaboun,⁷¹ and served eviction notices to the residents of an area that crosses Barzeh diagonally: there are plans to build a road that directly connects Ish al-Warwar to Tishreen Hospital.

In the past years, the differences between Barzeh and Ish al-Warwar – in terms of zoning, forms of ownership, and social background – have all narrowed. The war has brought about a new reality in which the residents of Ish al-Warwar have a strong voice and in which they are able to defend their interests. Meanwhile, Barzeh's 'reconciliation' agreement ensures that its residents will remain where they are. The governorate of Damascus views the region as a single block and is not yet ready to address its future, under the pretext that there are zoning complexities. At the same time, it continues to redraw Barzeh's administrative boundaries, it expropriates land in the town, and divides it with roads. Ish al-Warwar is being ignored, and there is low-intensity social engineering in Barzeh, something constrained by legal complications and limited funding.

64 Apart from revenue from the tunnel trade, the 1st Brigade received a last payment from the MOC – about USD 600,000 in salaries for its members – one week before signing the 'reconciliation' agreement. In addition, the brigade commanders owned a construction material factory in the al-Makasir district, which had cost, it has been estimated, more than USD 100,000. They also had a partnership with a money transfer company in Istanbul, and dozens of properties and farms in Barzeh. Raed al-Salhani, "Rural Damascus: Abu Bahr and His Supporters in the Face of the Shalish Family!" (in Arabic), 8 October 2018, *al-Modon*, <https://bit.ly/3hXWvZA>

65 Sawt al-Asima, "The Arrest of 30 Regime Officers Following Barzeh Incidents," (in Arabic), 29 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XKEJ5w>

66 This occurred despite the Russians holding up some of these leaders as successful models for reconciliation and inviting them to the Sochi National Dialogue Conference in January 2018.

67 Signal interview with a former 1st Brigade leader residing in Damascus, 5 August 2021.

68 The Syria Report, "Zoning Framework for Barzeh: Does it Include Ish al-Warwar?" (in Arabic), 10 February 2021, <https://bit.ly/3B4nUQy>

69 A draft zoning plan is a preliminary visualization of the general zoning plan developed by the administrative unit.

70 Signal interview with an official in the Damascus Governorate, 20 July 2021.

71 Emmar Syria, "Damascus Governorate: Finalizing the Plan for the Qaboun Residential Area Next Week," (in Arabic), 26 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nZISgC>

Conclusion

Examining the events that took place in north-eastern Damascus both during and after the war reveals that a new process of social engineering has emerged. It has resulted, in large part, from the overlap between local communities' civil dynamics and political conflict between the regime and the opposition in the war years. This process has then been strengthened by the Damascus Governorate's attempts to redraw its administrative boundaries and to rezone the area according to its service needs. North-eastern Damascus' urban layout and population were subjected to the regime's political and security agendas during the conflict and consequently changed dramatically. In the period following the war, the Damascus Governorate has become a larger presence in the rezoning and reshaping of the demographic-urban environment of the area.

Multiple factors have shaped the reconfiguration of the capital's relationship with its north-eastern outskirts. First, residents' sectarian backgrounds have played a decisive role only in the case of the enduring Alawite presence in the informal settlements of Ish al-Warwar and the Baath neighbourhood. Sectarian identities have not, however, been a decisive factor in and of themselves when it comes to preventing rezoning and destruction, as evidenced by what has happened in the Baath neighbourhood. Second, the local community's political position *vis-à-vis* the regime played a role equivalent to sectarian difference in the continued presence of Barzeh's Sunni residents. But this has not prevented the expropriation and the dismemberment of zoned areas, as in Barzeh itself. Third, when Sunni sectarian affiliations overlapped with a political position that rejected reconciliation, the result was demolition, forced displacement, and rezoning. This happened in partially-zoned residential Qaboun despite the fact that it was inhabited by people who were originally from the area; and in the Hafez neighbourhood and the 'smuggling market,' which were inhabited by migrants from Idlib and Rural Damascus. Lastly, an area's zoning history has not played a decisive role in rezoning; while the Damascus Governorate is turning a blind eye to the informal settlement of Ish al-Warwar, Qaboun's industrial zone is being eliminated even though it had been previously zoned.

Damascus still does not offer sustainable urban development to its north-eastern outskirts. This can be seen in the way that the Damascus Governorate has thoughtlessly returned to old zoning plans for the area. These plans are being updated without consideration either for the demographic or for the urban realities that brought war to the area, or the events of the years that followed. Damascus does not seem serious about finding development solutions to the problems that plague informal settlements. Instead, it is maintaining a policy of expropriation that unjustly undermines the material and cultural rights of forcibly displaced local communities.

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