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Reconstruction, Who Decides?

Frederick Deknatel

How will reconstruction unfold in Syria, given not only the staggering scale of destruction across the country after a decade of civil war, but also the limited resources and narrow, authoritarian interests of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad? A few token rebuilding projects already underway in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus provide an initial answer, even if the war still has not ended as of late 2021. Heavily promoted by Syrian authorities and in some cases paid for by their foreign patrons, these projects reflect how the Assad government sees reconstruction as a propaganda tool and vehicle for elite corruption. It is quickly prioritizing what to rebuild, and what not to—projecting an exclusionary vision of “victor’s justice” on Assad’s terms, while neglecting vast residential neighborhoods once held by opposition forces that the government either cannot rebuild, because it lacks the funds and resources, or will not as a form of collective punishment.

The government’s reconstruction agenda relies on co-opting Syria’s cultural heritage, so it is no accident that many of these early reconstruction projects involve symbolic sites such as historical mosques. The two most prominent are in Aleppo and Homs, where the medieval Great Umayyad Mosque is in the process of being rebuilt, and the late Ottoman-era Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque has been hastily restored. Both mosques have essentially been turned into a stage for Assad’s reconstruction message. In contrast to Syrian rebels and other opposition forces that the government has cast as “terrorists” alongside Islamist extremist groups since the earliest days of the war, it promotes Assad as the custodian and even guardian of Syrian culture and history. Although the rebuilding and restoration of both the Great Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo and the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque in Homs have been shrouded in progovernment propaganda, they offer a glimpse of Assad’s reconstruction agenda across Syria, with troubling implications for reconstruction in other countries devastated by civil war.

They also make clear that what the Assad government has in mind with reconstruction is limited at best, if it can even be called reconstruction at all. Its aim is

not to fully rebuild Syria and restore its urban landscape and infrastructure to prewar levels, but to use reconstruction as the next stage of the war, consolidating its authority and control of territory and seizing whatever economic and political advantages it can. The reconstruction that has begun in Syria is a warning sign for future conflicts—about self-interested governments and authorities that decide how and where to allocate limited resources, and about the pitfalls of reconstruction unfolding in an environment that is not yet post-conflict.

Assad's Reconstruction Agenda

It was called the “capital of the revolution,” but it soon became ground zero for Syria's civil war. Early anti-government protests in Homs, Syria's third-largest city, brought repression and state crackdowns that stoked some of the first armed opposition to Assad's rule. Homs had languished economically for years under the shadow of the capital, Damascus, and Aleppo, Syria's commercial hub in the north, then bore the brunt of the worst violence of the civil war—at least until rebels surrendered after a crippling government siege in 2014, and the fiercest urban warfare shifted to Aleppo. While the battle for Homs had included barrel bombs—crude incendiary devices dropped indiscriminately from government helicopters—along with other bombardments by Syrian forces, the battle for Aleppo included air strikes from Russian jets following Moscow's intervention in the war on Assad's behalf.

When the fighting ended in Homs, the city looked like a wasteland. “Homs is the only city in the whole of blood-soaked Syria that has had its market and center destroyed and completely shut down,” architect Marwa al-Sabouni, who witnessed this devastation firsthand, later wrote.¹ Homs was an image of urban destruction reminiscent of World War II, a Dresden for the twenty-first century. A similar fate awaited Aleppo, which fell back into government control in late 2016 following a joint Russian and Syrian blitz. Homs also offered a preview of what would happen to other cities in ruins when they were back under the authority of the Assad government, which was eager to quickly project power and a sense of triumph, most of all through selective and highly symbolic reconstruction projects.

In Homs, this meant the city's main landmark, the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque, built in the late years of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century over the site of a centuries-old mosque and mausoleum dedicated to the Arab military commander who led the Muslim conquest of Syria in the seventh century. It sits on the edge of Homs's historical Old City, which was a fiercely contested front line in the civil war. Several of the mosque's nine signature domes were damaged in the fighting, riddled with huge artillery holes, along with one of its minarets. Like other historical mosques and cultural heritage sites in Syria, the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque itself was covered widely in international media, as a kind of entry point into the Syrian conflict through reports on the damage it had sustained and whether opposition or government forces controlled the site.²

In 2017, despite the widespread devastation throughout the city, including to most of its vital infrastructure, Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman leader of Chechnya who is close to Russian president Vladimir Putin, announced that the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque would promptly be rebuilt, through the apparent goodwill of his opaque quasi charity, the Akhmad Kadyrov Regional Public Foundation. The news was initially announced via Russia's state news agency, TASS: it would fund the reconstruction, along with providing \$14 million to rebuild the even more prominent and more extensively damaged Great Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo. The Old City in Aleppo, like the historical center of Homs, was another vicious front line in the civil war; rebels had occupied the medieval, stone-vaulted souks that ran alongside the walls of the Great Mosque, while government soldiers had dug in atop the nearby citadel that looms over the city. In 2013, the Great Mosque's iconic, eleventh-century minaret was toppled—by Assad's own artillery, according to credible accounts on the ground, although the Syrian government insisted that “terrorists,” as they called the rebels, deliberately blew it up.

At a reopening ceremony in Homs in early 2019, after the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque had been briskly rebuilt, the city's governor thanked visiting Chechen officials for their largesse and called the mosque the first major reconstruction project in the Old City's Khaldiyyeh neighborhood. The rest of that neighborhood, though, has not been as fortunate. Just as damage to the mosque during the battle over Homs had drawn international headlines, so too did this Chechen-funded rehabilitation.³ During a government-arranged tour of Homs for a group of foreign journalists in 2018, Gareth Browne, a reporter for the *National*, a daily English-language newspaper in the United Arab Emirates, described Syrian authorities as “keen to show off” the rebuilt mosque as a symbol of the city back under government control. They appeared less enthusiastic about the rest of Khaldiyyeh, which was still a rubble-strewn ghost town. Brown quoted one anonymous Homs resident, who said of the restored mosque: “There is no one here to pray in it.”⁴ Although church leaders in Homs, under the eye of government officials, were also eager to show the foreign reporters “renovated chapels and reconstructed altars” in the neighborhood, there was “little mention of reconstruction in the predominantly Sunni areas—where residents are nowhere to be seen and regime flags are slapped on front doors.”

This reality did not prevent the Syrian government from promoting the restored mosque as an early sign of Homs's wider reconstruction. The Ministry of Tourism even features it in a video posted online in 2018, one of many propagandistic clips available on YouTube from the ministry. Over a triumphal soundtrack, drone footage shows the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque from above, its reconstructed domes and fresh brickwork standing out starkly amid the surrounding desolate, still-ruined city (fig. 12.1).⁵

The selective and early rebuilding in Homs was a decision made by Syrian authorities backed by their international partners, in Chechnya and by extension Russia, which intervened in the civil war to prop up Assad and occupy strategic parts of the country's Mediterranean coast. It also reflects a wider trend in Syria. In addition to the



Figure 12.1 The rebuilt Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque amid the ruins of the Khaldiyyeh neighborhood in Homs's Old City, 15 August 2018. Image: Andrei Borodulin / AFP / Getty Images

propaganda gains of showing off the reconstruction of a well-known mosque damaged in the war—even if it was damaged by Syria's own military, and even if the war is not over—the government can also project authority, not just about what it wants to rebuild, but what it does not. That underscores “a broader truth about Syria's reconstruction framework, namely that it will not rebuild Syria or stimulate recovery,” as Syrian architects and urbanists Sawsan Abou Zainedin and Hani Fakhani have argued. Instead, something more overtly political is at play, on the government's own arbitrary terms, whether in the selective reconstruction of religious sites in Homs at the expense of entire war-torn neighborhoods, or in a huge urban redevelopment project in Damascus funded by government insiders and built over expropriated land in the name of “postwar” prosperity. “By transforming the socioeconomic landscape through a reconfiguration of urban space,” Abou Zainedin and Fakhani insist, this form of reconstruction “aims to consolidate the regime's authoritarian control.”⁶

This is evident throughout Homs, according to researcher Jomana Qaddour, where “the divide between those who support and don't support the Syrian regime is the most notable fracture visible” in the city. “The regime's reconstruction and rehabilitation policies are solidifying this divide,” she has observed. “The regime is continuing to deprive former opposition-held quarters, including Bayyada, Waer, and Karam al-Zeitoun, of basic infrastructure, development funding, and services.” Meanwhile, it “is rewarding the political elite and minorities it needs to consolidate power,” even as “it is leaving behind many Homsis, even poor Alawites who fought on its behalf.”⁷

This all adds up to a grim picture of what reconstruction looks like under Assad. As Amr al-Azm, a Syrian anthropologist, archaeologist, and founder of The Day After Initiative, a Syrian civil society organization, told me in 2019, “The regime has two possible areas of interest in reconstruction: One, as a means to reward those areas and individuals that were loyal to it. Two, for the regime’s coterie to enrich itself” at the expense of this process. Those former opposition-held neighborhoods in Homs, and ones like them in eastern Aleppo that were destroyed by the Syrian and Russian siege in 2016, will suffer the consequences of that agenda. “The areas that have been most damaged, that most need reconstruction, the areas that were bombed by the regime that produced the refugees in the first place—the regime is not about to go and take all this money and rebuild their homes,” Azm added. “It’s going to take the money and reward the areas that were loyal to it.”⁸

In Aleppo, as in Homs, the Old City has been the focus of hurried reconstruction plans full of blunt symbolism designed to benefit the Assad government, while the most heavily damaged and outlying neighborhoods—which happen to have supported the opposition—have been largely ignored. And like Homs, one reason for that is the aid from Chechnya’s Kadyrov Foundation. The \$14 million it pledged to rebuild the toppled minaret of Aleppo’s Great Umayyad Mosque apparently went to quick use, with a crane erected outside the mosque’s battered courtyard, adjacent to where its famous minaret once stood.

“Since the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, the regime has seized both the city and the narrative, attempting to ensure its version of the truth is broadcast loudest,” British journalist Diana Darke reported from Aleppo in the spring of 2018. “One example is that the government lays responsibility for Aleppo’s destruction firmly at the door of ‘the terrorists.’” That was most evident at the Great Umayyad Mosque, where the rebuilding of the toppled minaret had already started and where, Darke wrote, “the truth about what this sacred space witnessed in the war is now being concealed under a cloak of restoration.” The young Syrian activists who had safeguarded parts of the mosque’s interior with sandbags and other makeshift protection during the height of the civil war were being forgotten, as the authorities proclaimed that they were the ones preserving and restoring Aleppo’s heritage and history. No building, perhaps, “could tell us more about the ebb and flow of Syria’s war than this once magnificent structure,” Darke added. The Syrian military’s own construction company—the largest in the country—oversaw the mosque’s restoration, rather than cultural heritage experts or the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and orders apparently came straight from the president’s office. The military engineer in charge of the project told Darke: “I have no idea why I was chosen for this job. Before this project, I built Aleppo airport.”⁹

If the Syrian government was racing to restore the Great Umayyad Mosque in order to project its authority and signal what life meant in Aleppo under Assad’s control, it was hardly subtle. Of course, not all symbolism is bad. “Rebuilding the mosque would be a major contribution to the regeneration of Syrian society,” as historian Ross Burns, a

former Australian ambassador to Syria and the author of *Aleppo: A History*, told an interviewer. “The Great Mosque is a very important symbol of Aleppo and a point of pride to all Syrians.” The rehabilitation and restoration of such cultural heritage sites also brought the promise of jobs for craftspeople, construction workers, and others in cities like Aleppo and Homs—although any prospect of eventually boosting Syria’s tourism industry, as Ross suggested, seemed optimistic at best.¹⁰

As with the media coverage of these sites during the height of the war, their reconstruction provided another entry point for an international audience. The implications, though, have risked being misunderstood or overstated. One story from NBC News declared in mid-2018: “Aleppo’s reconstruction is in full swing after years of war.”¹¹ It was not really the case at the time, beyond a few small rebuilding projects and some reopened businesses, such as a soap factory in eastern Aleppo whose roof had been “roughly patched.” And it still is not. But as Syrian authorities directed scarce resources to rebuilding or restoring landmarks like Aleppo’s Great Umayyad Mosque or the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Mosque in Homs, salutary and sometimes breathless media coverage often followed.

Can a Pariah State Rebuild?

Underpinning this entire situation around reconstruction, however, are the stark political realities in Syria after years of civil war, both on the ground—regarding whether the government or the opposition controls particular territory, and how much damage it sustained in the course of the conflict—and internationally, given that the Syrian government has been under international sanctions for years as a pariah state. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been engaged in nascent reconstruction projects in Syria, particularly in Homs, where it has overseen the reconstruction—or “rehabilitation,” as it says—of the city’s covered souk. But it is at pains to distinguish all this from any formal reconstruction, given the sanctions and the position of the UN that it will not support formal reconstruction until a political transition is underway in Syria. The UN calls its small-scale interventions—primarily to restore critical infrastructure like electricity, sewage, and water, or to repair damaged schools and hospitals—“rehabilitation,” “recovery,” and “community resilience.” The United States, for its part, delineates what little reconstruction work it has supported in the northeastern city of Raqqa as “stabilization,” after it drove out the extremists of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Da’esh) by flattening much of the city in air strikes.

“We don’t do reconstruction,” Moises Venancio, a UNDP adviser for Syria based in New York, told me in 2019. “No one does reconstruction in Syria. It’s the international position, but it’s also the position adopted by the UN Secretary-General.”¹² That assessment was later echoed by a senior humanitarian officer who told the *New Yorker*’s Luke Mogelson: “It’s become a collective consensus among donors that we will not do

reconstruction in Syria. ‘Reconstruction’ is a dirty word. It’s political. We don’t want to do anything that will eventually benefit the regime.”¹³

Whether or not there will be international funding to rebuild Syria is something of a Catch-22. The United States and European countries imposing sanctions on the Assad government have held out the prospect of Western aid as an incentive for negotiations that could end the war, maintaining that they will not fund any major reconstruction unless Assad either gives up power or agrees to a political settlement. But Assad is as entrenched as ever. He has shown little to no sign of yielding to Western pressure or agreeing to reforms in exchange for reconstruction aid, especially after holding onto power at all costs throughout the war. The United Nations keeps a similar position—that it will not support or facilitate physical reconstruction until there is a viable political transition underway. But that is nowhere in sight, as the conflict goes on and several rounds of attempted peace talks have all come up empty. A UNDP official in Damascus, speaking on the condition of anonymity, put the situation bluntly to me in an interview: “Concerning Western players, what you read in the news is what we also see here” in Syria. “There is no appetite [from the Assad government], and there are all the political conditionalities, so nothing is happening.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, as with UNDP’s efforts in Homs, this has not precluded the start of some other restoration work, particularly in Aleppo, with the tacit support of international nongovernmental organizations involved in preserving cultural heritage, even if many still lack the necessary funding.¹⁵ Sections of the covered souk in Aleppo are already being rebuilt and restored with funding from the Aga Khan Foundation after the labyrinthine medieval market was gutted by fire early in the civil war and sustained various other forms of damage amid the fighting. “In a process that has so far taken five years,” according to the *Guardian*, “650 metres of covered souk has been rebuilt or rehabilitated, out of an original total of 9km.” But an architect involved in that project said that rebuilding and restoring the entire souk would take “10 to 20 years, minimum.”¹⁶

It is clear that Syria’s government, after years of war and international isolation, cannot afford the ballooning costs of rebuilding the country, estimated at well into the hundreds of billions of dollars. But even if sanctions eased, what vision do Syrian authorities have for the country after a decade of war? “We lost the best of our youth and our infrastructure,” Assad told an audience of supporters in Damascus in 2017. “It cost us a lot of money and a lot of sweat, for generations. But in exchange, we won a healthier and more homogeneous society in the true sense.”¹⁷ That dark triumphalism has been on display ever since, even though Assad is ruling over a shattered country with pockets still out of his control. When the war began, Syrian soldiers and pro-Assad militias issued a threatening message—“Assad, or we burn the country”—that was often scrawled on the sides of buildings and left as sinister graffiti in besieged towns and cities. The ultimatum in that notorious slogan has now extended into reconstruction. Without the resources to rebuild all of Syria, the government is nevertheless trying to



Figure 12.2 Restoration work underway at the Great Umayyad Mosque in the Old City of Aleppo, 14 August 2018. A crane stands over the rubble of the toppled eleventh-century minaret, whose stones have been catalogued and organized in the mosque's courtyard. Image: George Ourfalian / AFP / Getty Images

assert its authority by deciding how to allocate scarce resources, such as aid from friendly allies, into early reconstruction projects that reward its supporters, punish or ignore its opponents, and carry a maximum return on propaganda. It is a form of selective reconstruction by fiat (fig. 12.2).

Who Pays? And Who Can Cash In?

The nature of Assad's authoritarian government has led to this outcome. "Inequality and injustice are at the heart of Syria's reconstruction," scholar Joseph Daher has noted. "The process of rebuilding Syria, which remains very limited, aims to ensure that all power in the country flows from the country's despotic regime and its networks."¹⁸

For example, take Samer Foz, an accused war profiteer and one of the crony Syrian businessmen close to Assad who has been sanctioned by the United States and the European Union. He has tried to cash in on reconstruction, having already "built his fortune" off the war, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, as he sold vital supplies, including basic foodstuffs, to different parts of the country under the sway of different combatants. Foz is one of the government financiers with a major stake in Marota City, billed as the largest investment project in Syria, which aims to build a collection of luxury high-rises over land in a Damascus neighborhood that was seized during the civil war from Syrians who opposed the government. He owns a steel plant in Homs, promoting it as a key cog in the city's reconstruction, as it has been used to melt down scrap metal and forge it into new rebar. Foz told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2018, somewhat incredulously, "If I don't think about reconstructing my country, who will?"

He wanted “the furnaces of his Homs steel plant to be a cornerstone of Syrian reconstruction even before a political settlement.”¹⁹

In both Aleppo and Homs, reconstruction has begun “unequally,” according to Daher, “sometimes in the same city.” In heavily bombarded eastern Aleppo, which was under the control of various opposition groups until late 2016, “the government has made no efforts to enhance living conditions or rebuild residential areas,” he added. “In such places, the provision of state services has been minimal.” Instead, the remaining residents there—if they either stayed throughout the war or have since returned after fleeing the fighting—have had to eke out any attempts at small-scale rebuilding on their own.

In 2019, a UNDP official in Damascus told me that the most noticeable transformation in Aleppo in the year after the government reestablished full control was the small shops that had suddenly opened on a once “spectral” and ruined street in eastern Aleppo, whose businesses had all shuttered during the war. The stores were selling basic construction materials like cement by the bag—“not for big companies,” the official said, “but for people” who had returned. They were either refugees or the internally displaced attempting to rebuild their homes themselves. “These returns didn’t happen because it’s a paradise,” the UN official said of Aleppo. “No. It happened because many of these people didn’t have any savings anymore to pay the rent somewhere else, or the host communities were also exhausted. They were forced to come back.”

Since the UN’s interventions have to stop short of anything resembling full-scale reconstruction, given its limited mandate in Syria, UNDP and other UN agencies instead prioritize providing humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable Syrians, like those in eastern Aleppo. (The UN has nevertheless been criticized for working with the Assad government, since it is the authority on the ground, and even contracting with Syrian entities linked to Assad to deliver aid, which has risked compromising its humanitarian mission in Syria, according to some critics.)²⁰ When it comes to reconstruction, the UN is also limited by sometimes-byzantine formulas that restrict its activities. For instance, UNDP can rebuild a school or medical clinic partially damaged in the war, but not if its walls are destroyed down to its foundation. It bases such “rehabilitation”—again, not formally considered reconstruction, according to the UN—on some bleak calculations. “The red line is 30 to 40 percent of the initial level” of the building, this UN official explained to me. “So if damage goes beyond 30 to maximum 40 percent of the initial volume of the building, then we consider it reconstruction and we don’t intervene.”

This official described Aleppo in early 2019 as “completely paralyzed in relation to any kind of reconstruction.” Little has changed in the city, it seems, in the years since. There was a rumored master plan for Aleppo’s “restoration,” as the Syrian government had purportedly described it, but “it is a master plan that nobody has seen; officially it has not been launched.” The official described the master plan, which was apparently still being finalized and had not been shared fully with UNDP, revealingly: “It’s owned by the government.” This sounded even more like reconstruction on Assad’s terms.

Whether or not it was part of this mooted master plan, in late 2017 the Syrian government designated fifteen “priority areas” for reconstruction in Aleppo, eight of which were in the western and central parts of the city, which had remained under its control throughout the war. They had therefore sustained far less damage than rebel-held eastern Aleppo, including the Old City, and infrastructure and many public services were still largely intact. That inequity within the city itself was also evident in Homs, where neighborhoods that had either remained under government control or whose residents were considered by the authorities to be sufficiently loyal were identified as priorities for reconstruction, to the neglect of formerly rebel-held areas.

“The government’s favoritism of its supporters has been reflected in funding discrepancies,” according to Daher. He noted that “the combined value of state investment projects in 2015, for example, reached nearly 30 billion Syrian pounds (around \$70 million) for the coastal governorates of Tartous and Latakia, both regime strongholds.” But Aleppo, by contrast, “was allocated 500 million Syrian pounds (around \$1.2 million), despite being in greater need of restoration.” In 2015, Aleppo was still divided between the government-held west of the city and the rebel-held east, but these gaps in funding have persisted as the government reestablished control over the whole city and of more of the country. “Out of 11 billion Syrian pounds (around \$22 million) earmarked for repairing and constructing roads across Syria in 2017,” Daher reported, “almost half was to be spent in coastal areas, which was less affected by the war but constituted one of its key constituencies.” Still, like so many things in Syria, many of these projects “have not yet materialized due to a lack of funding.”

Echoes of Beirut?

The warning signs of where this kind of selective reconstruction could lead are next door in Lebanon, especially in Beirut, which, like Aleppo and Homs, was the urban front line of a brutal civil war. When Lebanon’s fifteen-year conflict ended in 1990, central Beirut was in ruins. Its reconstruction was not overseen by an authoritarian government like that of Assad but by a single private real estate company, called Solidere, whose largest shareholder was the country’s billionaire prime minister, Rafik Hariri. Solidere essentially bought up all of Beirut’s heavily damaged historical downtown, displacing many residents and small businesses, and structured the entire area as a single corporation that larger landowners could buy stock in, in exchange for selling their property rights. Solidere then rebuilt the city center for a narrow elite—wealthy Lebanese, as well as investors from the oil-rich Persian Gulf—and with little care or attention to preserving the ancient archaeological ruins, from as far back as the Roman and Phoenician eras, that were under all the rubble and unearthed during reconstruction. The rebuilding introduced new levels of destruction after the war, as “more buildings were torn down during reconstruction than were destroyed by the war, transforming Beirut’s war-scarred layers of history from the Roman, Mamluk, Ottoman and French periods into a city without memory.”²¹



Figure 12.3 Rue Weygand in devastated downtown Beirut after the end of Lebanon’s fifteen-year civil war, 23 December 1990. Image: Marc Deville / Gamma Rapho / Getty Images

Solidere restored some Ottoman and French (League of Nations) Mandate-era buildings that had been heavily damaged in the war, but they became, for example, luxury stores and banks. Glittering new towers also went up, some designed by prominent international architects, in what many of Solidere’s critics saw as imposing a hollow vision of Dubai on Beirut. “It’s a kind of censorship in the middle of the city, a fairy tale,” Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury said in an interview in 2006. “It has no relationship to our lives today.”²² Meanwhile, as billions of dollars were invested in Solidere’s redevelopment scheme, other decimated areas of Beirut languished, with reconstruction often at the whim of local warlords-turned-politicians (fig. 12.3).

The Syrian government may already have its own version of Solidere in mind—if not in Aleppo and Homs, at least in Damascus, with Marota City, a huge luxury development that is being built over expropriated land on the southwestern edge of the capital by government-aligned entities in the name of reconstruction. There are differences from Beirut, to be sure: most of all, the particular neighborhood in Damascus, Kafr Sousseh, is not the central business district that downtown Beirut had been. The context in Syria is different, too, since the civil war has not ended. Yet researchers Noor Hamadeh and Krystel Bassil have noted “a strikingly close resemblance to the ‘Solidere’ model” in Marota City, as the project represents similar dynamics and interests at play to those with Solidere in Beirut.²³

Solidere “led to the systematic violation of property rights, the exclusion of communities, and the profiteering of war criminals,” Hamadeh and Bassil write, and Marota City could do much the same. The land for Marota City was acquired coercively

through new laws ostensibly designed to “improve” and redevelop informal areas that had expanded on the outskirts of Damascus before the conflict—and whose residents rose up against the government in the civil war. Human rights observers have warned that those laws, most of all one known as Decree 66, are “not only being used to forcibly dispossess” residents in Damascus, “but also to engineer demographic change.”²⁴ Marota City, according to Hamadeh and Bassil, shows how “the regime is using urban development as a weapon of war to punish and exclude opposition communities.”

The Syrian government is also following the investment model of Solidere, forming state-backed holding companies to oversee what are effectively real estate projects dressed up as postwar reconstruction—not just in Marota City but also in an incipient redevelopment scheme in Homs, in the former rebel-held area of Baba Amr. These holding companies have been investment vehicles for the government’s inner circle of financiers, including Samer Foz and Assad’s cousin, billionaire tycoon Rami Makhoul, once called “one of the primary centers of corruption in Syria” by the US State Department. Makhoul, who has also been under US and European sanctions, had a public falling-out with Assad in 2020.

Reconstruction on these terms risks consolidating government control and making anything even resembling postwar reconciliation among Syria’s various ethnic and religious communities less and less likely. “I don’t think only Aleppo will be punished, but most of the Sunni majority will be punished,” exiled Syrian writer Nihad Sirees told me in an interview in 2019, as he predicted that Syrian authorities would ignore the former rebel-held neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo, denying them what little resources are available for reconstruction.²⁵ Sirees expected reconstruction to be plagued by widespread corruption within the government and among its Russian and Iranian backers. “Rebuilding is like a golden egg,” he said. “Everyone sits and is waiting to get it, or to get a good part of it.”

Sirees, who is from Aleppo, has chronicled the city’s history in his novels, plays, and screenplays, several of which became wildly popular television dramas in Syria and the wider Arab world. An engineer by training, he lived in Aleppo for much of his life, including many years in which he was ostracized by the government and cast as a traitor because of his writing about the history of the ruling Ba’ath Party. The Syrian government started banning his novels in 1998, even though he was one of the most prominent writers in the country. In 2012, with the civil war approaching Aleppo, he had to flee Syria.

“We will talk about rebuilding theoretically, but not realistically, because who knows when the rebuilding will start,” Sirees told me. He was skeptical of the government’s well-publicized restorations underway in Aleppo’s Old City—and of the suggestion that they represented anything like reconstruction. “I don’t think that to fix an arch somewhere in the Old City, or a minaret or something, it is not rebuilding. We’ll keep talking theoretically until there’s a political solution in Syria.”

Popular and Grassroots Enterprise

There are nevertheless exceptions to this harsh picture. They reflect wider tensions and realities in Syria today, and in similar contexts where countries are nearing the end of a long civil war or entering a new, post-conflict phase. The Assad government may want to project authority, but its control is still limited in several provinces of Syria. Even in the areas where it has reestablished control, including Aleppo and Homs, it is in many respects weaker today, militarily and economically, because of the war's toll. So, smaller forms of reconstruction will emerge, and already have, at the margins and outside of the control of the state.

In 2014, a young Syrian architect and art historian from Damascus, Khaled Malas, who was then living in Basel, was invited to design a Syrian pavilion at the annual Venice Architecture Biennale.²⁶ Malas, who is part of an Arab architectural collective called Sigil, used the funds provided by the exhibition to build what he called a "displaced pavilion" in an undisclosed part of southern Syria—later revealed to be in Deraa, the once-quiet town on the Jordanian border where the popular uprising against Assad essentially began with the first protests in March 2011. Malas worked remotely with local activists on the ground there to build a well, which they piped into the local water network. The first project in a series in Syria that Sigil called "Monuments of the Everyday," this wasn't just a public demonstration or architectural experiment; the well provided water for fifteen thousand people whose basic infrastructure had been pummeled by barrel bombs dropped by government forces. After the Venice Biennale, the activists with whom Malas had coordinated built a second well.

"If nothing else, this project is a humble salute to those brave men and women in Syria who are able to maintain a semblance of everyday life for themselves and their communities in the face of death striking at them from multiple directions, including from above," Malas told an interviewer in 2014.²⁷ The wells are still operating today, in an area that has been outside Assad's control since 2011, governed in part by the local councils and popular committees that formed in the early, more hopeful days of Syria's civil uprising.

Malas was not done. He followed up the wells with a project at the Marrakech Biennale in 2016: a windmill that generated electricity in a building in the devastated Damascus suburb of Ghouta. The building was home to an underground field hospital, so Malas's project, which he and the Sigil collective called "Current Power in Syria," was much more than just another experimental architectural intervention for an international art exhibition or biennale, in this case about "electricity as a nation-building device" over the past century of Syrian history, as Malas later put it.²⁸ Like the wells, the windmill in Ghouta was practical infrastructure, too, and a small but essential form of reconstruction: it powered a field hospital. For Malas, it also "got him banned from his native Syria."²⁹

Malas and Sigil's work has been described as "rural architectures of resistance in Syria," echoing their own description of the windmill as "an act of creative resistance,

one that takes power literally.”³⁰ The writer and critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie said Malas “uses the codes, production channels, and communication circuits of the art world to build symbolic but useful pieces of infrastructure in Syria.”³¹ In doing so, she added, Malas “illustrates how communal utilities such as water and power have shaped ideas about nationalism and citizenship. In this sense, the people who built the windmill in the Ghouta are testing out what a sounder, healthier Syrian state could be.”

While Malas’s wells and windmill are unusual in terms of the international attention they received, given their connections to the global art world, they represent the kind of grassroots rebuilding efforts that many Syrians, by necessity, have already taken up themselves and will keep doing in the years to come. “There will always be some local enterprise,” Amr al-Azm told me. “Eventually, some people will make their way back home. Those people will look at their homes and do some clearing themselves. It will all be very localized, on a very individual basis.” Such small-scale reconstruction is evident in Aleppo and Homs. In Aleppo, for example, local historians and preservationists formed their own “Friends of Bab al-Nasr” committee to restore one of the damaged medieval gates to the Old City. “We’re not rich, but we do have some money to spend on our city,” one of its members, Alaa al-Sayed, told the BBC in 2018.³²

Behind the government’s boasts about rebuilding Syria according to its exclusionary vision of “victor’s justice”—that “healthier and more homogeneous society in the true sense,” as Assad proclaimed—reconstruction on the ground will more often look like something else, something far more modest and limited. “Anything that does get done, maybe the government will send a bulldozer to move rubble out of the way, or to open a street, but it’s going to be very piecemeal, very slow, very small scale,” Azm said. Reconstruction will ultimately reflect the reality of just how much has been destroyed in Syria, and how weak the government remains, despite its claims to power and authority.

Conclusion

There is an unavoidable tension in discussing reconstruction in the context of Syria—what it really means, and whether what is unfolding now can even be called reconstruction if the civil war has not ended. But in considering the question of who decides, it is clear that the Syrian government will seek credit for any rebuilding projects that it can use to buttress its claims of legitimacy, especially in a city like Aleppo, whose reconstruction might promise new and better international headlines. But Syrians themselves will still determine many other forms of reconstruction, often on a localized and enterprising scale outside the government’s authority and remit, whether it is their own modest civic infrastructure or even their own houses.

This question about who shapes reconstruction has been asked before, the most relevant case being neighboring Lebanon, starting in the 1990s when its civil war was finally over. The fact that some of the same dynamics and problems from the rebuilding of Beirut are now evident in Damascus and Homs underscores how quickly reconstruction can be co-opted—by self-interested authorities and elites motivated by

the desire to consolidate political control and seize the economic windfalls, often through corrupt means. This already looks in many cases like “victor’s justice” in Syria, but it was more opaque in Lebanon, since there was hardly a single victor in that protracted war. Yet even in more clear-cut, post-conflict scenarios, where war has definitively ended, reconstruction could still be steered in narrow and divisive directions unless there is a more representative government that is responsive to popular will and not tainted by corruption.

Finally, in countries such as Syria, where cultural heritage sites have been damaged in conflict and become an immediate focus of reconstruction or restoration after the fighting, they risk being co-opted. If they are prioritized in reconstruction over housing and basic infrastructure, the question should be asked, Why? Is the rebuilding or restoring of a damaged cultural heritage site—a medieval mosque, perhaps—being done for purely symbolic reasons, and even overt propaganda designed to burnish the reputation or legitimacy of local authorities, especially autocratic ones? Of course, damaged cultural heritage sites may also be deliberately kept as ruins, for their own symbolism. Consider Dresden’s Frauenkirche, the eighteenth-century Lutheran church destroyed in the Allied firebombing in 1945, which East German authorities never rebuilt. The rubble was left as a war memorial for fifty years—not only because the communist government could not afford to rebuild it, but because the church’s stark ruins sent an intentional message about what American and British bombers had done to the city. Only after reunification did Germany’s new government decide to rebuild it; the carefully reconstructed church reopened in 2005, six decades after its destruction.

So far, the fate of some prominent cultural heritage sites in Syria has taken a different course. But given the scale of destruction, many other historical sites across the country will not be rebuilt so quickly, let alone hastily by a government looking to soften its image internationally—it simply lacks the resources. As with Syria’s wider reconstruction, the restoration and rebuilding of its cultural heritage sites reflect what the government fundamentally wants to achieve, and project, through reconstruction: that it retains all power and authority, despite ruling over a country shattered by a war of Assad’s own making.

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