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## ***Policies of Reconstruction in Syria, Foreign Actors and the Issue of Refugees and IDPs***

*Dr. Joseph Daher*



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## **ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB**

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world.

In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

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## ***Bridging Academia and Activism***

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# ***About the Project***

## **THE LAY OF THE LAND:**

### ***A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon***

#### **Funded by the Ford Foundation**

This research project examines how, in the face of conflict and crisis, Syrian displaced individuals and communities in Lebanon are attempting to (re)organize themselves within the informal sector to secure access to essential services. We understand informality as a sector of goods and services that is outside of, but not necessarily disconnected from the formal purview of the state. In Lebanon, most citizens are already accessing resources such as water and electricity from within the informal sector. Whereas access to such services might ideally be seen as indissolubly linked to the rights of citizens, the distribution of such goods in Lebanon is hardly equal in practice. The access to goods and services by displaced populations is consequently further compounded in such a context where, by the nature of the country's political economy, must also acquire and secure their rights through informal networks.

By addressing this question of informalization and displacement, we reflect on practices of exclusion as experienced amongst Syrian displaced communities from different socio-economic backgrounds who are otherwise perceived as non-citizens in Lebanon. We aim to document through qualitative methods and life history approaches some of the ways Syrian communities have attempted to harness basic livelihood necessities. In so doing, we examine how the Syrian crisis is contributing to the reassembling of these networks, their hierarchies, and ultimately reshaping modes of governance and state borders between Syria, Lebanon and among Syrians themselves.

**Dr. Joseph Daher <sup>1</sup>**

As the Syrian regime has been consolidating its power with the assistance of its allies, Russia and Iran, in the past few years, Damascus also envisioned the issue of reconstruction as a major instrument for the consolidation of its power and networks of influence, while promoting new areas of investments and economic opportunities. In this perspective, it enacted a series of decrees and laws to frame and benefit from the reconstruction. These large real estate projects were expected to attract foreign capital, crucial for Syria reconstruction. However, several challenges, internal and external, continue to prevent a wide reconstruction process and the welcoming of foreign funding.

The cost of reconstruction was estimated between USD 260 and 400 billion at the beginning of 2019.<sup>2</sup> The vast and widespread destruction and damage throughout the country has had deep and negative repercussions on the Syrian economy, with the GDP decreasing from \$60.2 billion in 2010 to \$17.1 billion in 2017, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. The costs of repairing this damage are quite daunting. The Syrian government was lacking funds to tackle the high level of destruction throughout the country. Its annual budget in 2019 did not exceed SYP 3.882 trillion, around \$8.9 billion. In that same budget, the amount allocated for reconstruction was 50 billion Syrian pounds, no more than \$115 million.

At the same time, the country was facing a deep humanitarian crisis with 11.7 million persons in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, while more than 5.6 million Syrians living as refugees across the region. Overall poverty rates reached as high as 93.7% at the end of 2017, while abject poverty levels reached 59.1% in the same year.

Post-war reconstruction was nevertheless one of the main issues through which the regime and crony capitalists would consolidate their political and economic power while providing foreign allies with a share of the market to reward them for their assistance. The “war economy” model, put forward by various analysts to understand the current state in Syria, is often presented as something new, supposedly representing a rupture and departure from the economic dynamics that existed in Syria before 2011—rather than an exacerbation of those prior economic dynamics, albeit often with new networks and personalities.

In fact, the conflict actually deepened the Syrian government’s pre-war neoliberal policies while reinforcing the authoritarian and patrimonial aspects of the regime. National and foreign actors have already had an eye out for investment opportunities. Neighboring countries were already organizing conferences on the issue of reconstruction in Syria by mid-2016.

In this perspective, this article will analyze how the popular classes in Syria, especially the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and refugees are completely ignored in the discussions on and plans for reconstruction plans and economic policies in their own countries.

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<sup>2</sup> Former UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated the cost to be around 250 billion U.S. dollars, while the Syrian regime puts the sum at 400 billion U.S. dollars. Hodali, Diana (2019), “Rebuilding Syria, Who should foot the bill for Assad?”, Qantara, (online). Available at: <https://en.qantara.de/content/rebuilding-syria-who-should-foot-the-bill-for-assad>.

## Reconstruction Policies in Syria

The regime and its institutions have made use of a whole system of laws and decrees to expropriate properties from individuals and to frame and benefit from the reconstruction. One of these laws is Decree 66, which entered into force in September 2012 and allowed the government to “redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas” and replace them with “modern” real estate projects with quality services. Decree 66 allowed the Damascus governorate to expel the populations from two large areas in Damascus,<sup>3</sup> including Basateen al-Razi in the district of Mazzeh, in order to develop the high-end real estate project of Marota City<sup>4</sup>. The inhabitants of these areas were mostly working-class and lower-middle class people. Decree 66 was inspired to some extent by a 2007 Damascus Master Plan that had not been implemented because of the beginning of the uprising in 2011. This area was and still is considered an immensely lucrative real estate opportunity: undeveloped farmland and informal housing in some places within walking distance of the center of Damascus.

Regime-led reconstruction programs involve building 12,000 housing units for about 60,000 people, mainly targeting high-income households<sup>5</sup>. The programs include schools and restaurants, places of worship, and even multi-storey garages and shopping centers. According to the Syrian authorities, 110,000 job opportunities and 27,000 permanent jobs will be created by these projects.

In April 2018, the Assad regime issued a new law, Decree No. 10, which expanded Decree 66 to the national level. It stipulated that property owners (and relatives by procuration or an attorney) will have to submit their title deeds to the relevant authorities, all of which

are local administrative units, within one year of an announcement of reconstruction plans for their locality. If they fail to do so, they will not be compensated, and ownership of their property will revert to the province, town or city where their property is located. Those who succeed in proving ownership of their property would get shares in the zone.

In addition to Legislative Decree 66 and Law No. 10, the Syrian regime has also used a further set of laws to manipulate and transfer housing and property rights and dispossess residents in order to develop real estate projects. At the beginning of 2019, The Aleppo City Council announced the launching of development works in sectors of al-Haidarieh’s informal area, located northeast of Aleppo. Al-Haidarieh was under opposition control during most of the conflict and was largely destroyed by the regime and Russian air forces. It was among the largest informal housing districts in Syria. This reconstruction project was conducted based on Law No. 15 of 2008, which provided the framework for large real estate projects, and regulated the establishment of investment in real estate development zones.

In the neighborhood of Wadi al-Jouz, Hama, that was completely destroyed by regime forces in 2013, under the Private Public Partnership (PPP) Law of 2016, involving the construction of 2,400 apartments worth SYP 40 billion (USD 86 million). The government used the urban planning law of 1982 (Law No. 5 of 1982) to destroy and rebuild this Hama neighborhood.

Alongside this situation, Decree No. 63, enacted in 2012, empowered the Ministry of Finance to seize immovable assets and property from individuals who fell under the counterterrorism Law No. 19 of 2012. In November 2018, the Syrian Ministry of Finance published the findings of a study documenting over 30,000 cases of

<sup>3</sup> Two areas in the southern suburbs of Damascus are concerned. The first, which has already started, includes Mazzeh, a residential area near the presidential palace, and Kafr Soussa. The area of the second zone includes Mazzeh, Kafr Sousseh, Qanawat, Basateen, Daraya and Qadam

<sup>4</sup> Marota in the Syriac language means ‘sovereignty and motherland’

<sup>5</sup> Prices per square meter range from 300,000 to 500,000 SYP according to the Executive Director of Damascus Sham Holding Company, Nasouh Nabulsi (Damas Post (2018c)).

property seizures as a result of “terrorist activities” by their owners in 2016 and another 40,000 seizures in 2017. In addition to these laws, Law No. 3 of 2018 was one of the main ways in which the regime legitimized its conduction of demolitions, and subsequently prevented the return of civilians. More generally, the regime has also made use of arbitrary, punitive demolitions, as well as antiterrorism legislation to raze whole neighborhoods that fell under the power of the opposition after 2011. As such, the Syrian government has passed more than 45 laws related to housing, land and property since 2011.

Despite this system of laws and decrees, the investments by public and national private actors were insufficient to rebuild the country. The state was seriously indebted and its national budget was far from reaching the amounts necessary to fund the reconstruction as mentioned in the introduction. Moreover, the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) schemes had funding problems as they relied on financing from banks, which was clearly

unavailable as the total assets of the 14 private-sector commercial banks operating in the country were SYP 2 trillion at the end of 2017, at that time, equivalent to only around USD 4.4 billion. In 2010, this figure had reached USD 13.8 billion. In terms of assets, it is important to note that some of the six state-owned banks are larger than their private sector counterparts, in particular the Commercial Bank of Syria. However, these banks have large debt portfolios. Therefore, the reconstruction required further foreign funding, alongside local private capital that was lacking, and the Syrian regime sought to welcome them through deepening its neo-liberal policies. The below sections will explain the process by which the Syrian state started including more of these neoliberal policies in its system.

There is no doubt that the reconstruction process has been linked to the general deepening of neoliberal policies. In February 2016, the Syrian government announced its new political economy strategy entitled the “National Partnership”, which replaced the social-market economic model developed prior to the uprising of March 2011. In this framework, the PPP Law was passed in January 2016, six years after it was drafted as a reference to this new strategy. This, in turn, authorized the private sector to manage and develop state assets in all sectors of the economy except oil. The Economy and Foreign Trade Minister, Humam al-Jazaeri, declared that the law was “a legal framework for regulating relations between the public and private sectors and [met] the growing economic and social needs in Syria, particularly in the field of reconstruction,” while also providing the private sector with the opportunity “to contribute to economic development as a main and active partner”. Already prior to the war in Syria, the government regarded PPPs as key instruments to accelerate the mobilization of private capital, especially in the energy sector. Investments in electricity infrastructure were, for example, needed to attract private investment and lower the cost of business operations. In a report developed by the World Bank in cooperation with the Syrian Ministry of Electricity in 2010, it was estimated that about USD11 billion of investments would be required in 2020 for new generating capacity (7,000 megawatts) and expanding the country’s transmission and distribution networks.

In this framework, in September 2018, Prime Minister Khamis announced during a meeting with representatives of companies and businessmen participating in the Damascus International Fair that the government would probably open 50 infrastructure projects in the country to private investors under public-private partnerships. Similarly, Fares Shehabi, MP, head of the Syrian Federation of Chambers of Industry, and the Aleppo Chamber of Industry, in a session in

Parliament in October 2018, called to deepen the PPP process in the public industrial sector to expand the investment opportunities of the private sector.

In January 2020, Bashar al-Assad ratified laws granting three contracts to the Qaterji brothers a strategic role in Syria’s oil distribution sector. The Qaterji Group was allocated the right to establish two oil refineries and expand an oil terminal in the Tartous Port. About 80 percent of these two refineries are owned by the Arvada Petroleum Company,<sup>6</sup> while the Ministry of Oil and Natural Resources gets 15 percent and the Lebanese Sallizar Shipping SAL has 5 percent. Refining has remained a state monopoly, although before 2011 the government had been seeking to attract private investment into the sector.

In February 2020, the Syrian government has sought to contract private investors under Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) deals, or through the PPP law, for some state-owned food production companies. The month after, in March, the Partnership Council accepted two new projects to be carried out under the PPP law: the building of a 50 MW photovoltaic power plant in Deir Attiyeh, in the Damascus Countryside governorate; and the establishment of a production line to manufacture medicinal vials at the General Company for Glass Industry in Aleppo.

Various countries in the MENA region have meanwhile adopted PPP legislation to deepen privatization policies in public services and state urban infrastructure. International financial institutions have very often insisted on the necessity of privatizing public infrastructure as a condition for the provision of loans. The most recent Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprises (CEDRE) agreements that were concluded in Paris in April 2018 mentioned, for example, the need for Lebanon to establish PPPs in exchange for \$11 billion in donations and loans.

<sup>6</sup> Arvada, which was founded in Damascus in June 2018, with a capital of one billion SYP (USD1.02 million), belongs to Hussam Katerji, who holds 34 percent of the company’s shares whereas his two brothers have differentiated shares; Mohammed Baraa Katerji has 33 percent stake in the company and Ahmed Bashir Katerji gets 33 percent.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, PPPs have become a fundamental element in the economic and political strategy of Vision 2030 promoted by Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. The 2020 National Transformation Program, which was presented after the 2030 Vision, details the economic policies of the new Saudi leadership team and places private capital at the center of the Saudi economy. The Saudi government stated its plans to conclude PPPs for many government services, including more traditionally social sectors such as education, social housing and health. The Financial Times described these plans as “Saudi Thatcherism.”

The approach to reconstruction has been somewhat similar with private actors promoted to leading actors. In July 2015, the government approved a law that allowed the establishment of private sector holding companies by city councils and other local administrative units to manage public assets and services. This opened the way for regime cronies to generate business from public assets. In the fall of 2016, a holding company, Damascus Cham Private Joint Stock Company, was established with a capital of SYP 60 billion, (around USD 120 million) to be completely owned by the Damascus Governorate. This holding oversaw managing the reconstruction of the Basateen al-Razi area in Damascus Governorate. In 2018, the Homs governorate also announced the establishment of a holding company and in 2019 the Aleppo and Damascus countryside governorate followed. Damascus Cham Holding Company is the only company amongst the ones mentioned above that had started its operations.

The deepening of neoliberal policies was reflected by the new economic strategy of National Partnership and the PPP law. These measures should be considered as a means to transform the general conditions of capital accumulation and empower economic networks linked to the regime, rather than simple technocratic

measures. Historically, states have often seized upon crises as moments of opportunity to restructure and promote changes in ways that have not been envisaged before, and saw such crises as significant opportunities to expand the reach of the market in a wide range of economic sectors that have previously been largely dominated by the state itself. In Lebanon, after the civil war, Hariri’s vision for Lebanon’s political economy and reconstruction process were centered on the liberalization of capital flows and the deregulation of the tax system as means to entice foreign capital to invest in economic infrastructures. In this context, the character of neoliberalism in Lebanon was heavily oriented towards opening up the economy to foreign investment flows, primarily aimed at the banking, financial, and real estate sectors, further deepening the heavily financialized nature of the Lebanese economy. At the same time, the geographic distribution of reconstruction funding was characterized by the same regional inequalities as before the Civil War, with the bulk of investments concentrated in Beirut and Mount Lebanon – around 80 percent of the total – and the remainder outside of these areas. These projects were marked by the blurring of lines between public and private property and helped consolidate Hariri’s increasing political and financial power. The best example of this is the case of the private company, Solidere, which the Hariri family had the biggest shares in and was the driving force in the company’s lobbying. Solidere was given exclusive rights to rehabilitate infrastructure and develop the downtown business area in Beirut and was accused by property owners of forcibly purchasing their properties at less than their market value. More largely, other sectarian political parties in the post-civil war period benefited from the neoliberal and clientelist policies to consolidate their power, both economically and politically.

## The Rise of New Businessmen Networks Connected to the Regime

Some businessmen linked to the regime have also started to appear and with time they became more prominent. Prior to the crisis, these individuals were outside both the crony capitalist circles and the dependent business elite networks, but they had accumulated some economic power especially at the local level. The emergence of some of these figures to national prominence has been observed during the reconstruction process. The most important of them is Samer Foz, who during the war has become one of the country's most powerful businessmen. Before the uprising in 2011 he owned the Aman Group, a contractor for real estate development and food commodities. In the course of the war, Mr Foz's business interests expanded massively to include aviation, the cable industry, steel, sugar, car assembly and distribution, hotel management, real estate development, pharmaceuticals and the banking sector.

In August 2017 his company, Aman Group, also announced that it would participate in partnership with the Damascus Governorate and Damascus Cham Private Joint Stock Company in the reconstruction of the Basateen al-Razi area in the Mazzeh district of Damascus. Aman Damascus, the company established by Aman group for this project, announced it had USD 18.9 million in capital. In November, Damascus Cham Holding granted the Aman Group the right to develop real estate properties worth around USD 312 million as part of the Basateen al-Razi project.

Other business personalities and companies have also benefited from lucrative contracts with Damascus Cham Holding as part of the reconstruction of Basateen al-Razi:

- Zubaidi and Qalei LLC, owned by Khaled Al-Zubaidi and Nader Qalei;
- Kuwait-based businessman Mazen Tarazi, who is active in a variety of economic sectors <sup>7</sup>
- Talas Group,<sup>8</sup> which is owned by businessman Anas Talas (Damascus Cham 2018b, Eqtissad 2018).
- Exceed Development and Investment, owned by private investors Hayan Muhammad Nazem Qaddour and Maen Rizk Allah Haykal.
- Rawafed Damascus Private joint venture, owned by Rami Makhoulouf and close associates and composed of Ramak for Development and Humanitarian Projects LLC and four other companies.
- Bunyan Damascus, which is a partnership with two companies, Apex Development and Projects LLC and Tamayoz LLC.

These members of the new business elite which are a great majority, were unknown before the war, have been able to capitalize, both economically and in terms of political influence, on opportunities created by the departure of business elite networks. Some of these individuals, such as Samer Foz, but also the Qaterji family<sup>9</sup> and Khodr Ali Taher, known as Abu Ali Khodr,<sup>10</sup> have also benefited from important economic opportunities by acting as middlemen in trade deals between the regime and various actors, while others have acted as frontmen or close associates with regime cronies hit by sanctions. These networks of businessmen have for their far majority accumulated their wealth directly or indirectly by their connections and loyalty to the Damascus' regime.

<sup>7</sup> In early January 2018, the Syrian Civil Aviation Authority granted a license to an airline established by Mazen Tarazi. Mr. Tarazi held 85 percent of the shares in the company, with his two sons, Khaled and Ali, holding the rest. Mr. Tarazi has demonstrated his support for the regime on a number of occasions.

<sup>8</sup> The company is mainly active in the production and distribution of food products from its base in the UAE. The company has developed its own food brand, Tolido.

<sup>9</sup> Three brothers, businessmen Muhammad Baraa, Hussam, and Muhammad Agha have risen to prominence these past few years. They struck deals initially with the Islamic State and then the Syrian Democratic Forces to transfer oil and wheat from areas under its control to the areas controlled by the regime.

<sup>10</sup> He has become one of the Fourth Division's Brigade commanded by Maher al-Assad, the brother of Bashar, most important contractors for convoy protection since 2016.

On his side, Rami Makhoul, Bashar al Assad's cousin, and the richest man in Syria, represented the mafia-style process of regime-led privatization following Bashar al-Assad's arrival to power in 2000. His economic empire was vast, including telecommunications, oil and gas, as well as construction, banks, airlines, and retail. Makhoul was also the main shareholder of the Cham Holding Company, while holding more than 300 licenses as an agent for big international companies. According to different various sources, he controlled (whether directly or indirectly) nearly 60 percent of the Syrian economy, due to a complex network of holdings.

More generally, the war has deepened the speculative commercial economic model which is present throughout the region, characterized by investment in short-term profit-seeking, mostly in trade, real estate, and service sectors to the detriment of the productive economy, including the manufacturing and agricultural

sectors. It has allowed the emergence of new business actors, often with links to the security services, involved in various sectors of the war economy and increasingly seeking rapid returns on investments. The economic and business interests of these new actors often contrast with the possibility of re-boosting the manufacturing sector. This process had already started at the beginning of the 2000s with the liberalization of the Syrian market, but traders have significantly increased and deepened their domination of the Syrian economy in these past few years, notably at great expense of manufacturers.

Large real estate projects are expected to attract foreign capital, which is crucial for reconstruction in Syria. However, this is highly unexpected in the short and mid-term if the current political and economic conditions remained the same and the remaining of international sanctions. The countries that were the biggest supporters of the Assad regime, particularly Iran and Russia, were seeking to benefit economically from the deepening of neo-liberal policies and the marketization of the economy, including reconstruction plans.

Following the recapture of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, Aleppo governor Hossein Diyab stressed that Iran was going to “play an important role in reconstruction efforts in Syria, especially Aleppo.” In March 2017 the Iranian Reconstruction Authority announced that it planned to renovate 55 schools in the Aleppo province. In mid-September 2017, Iranian officials declared that they would repair and reconstruct the electricity infrastructure in Damascus and Deir Zor, and an Iranian company was awarded a contract to supply electricity to Aleppo. These deals are worth hundreds of millions of dollars if finalized.

In September 2018, a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the electricity sector was signed between Syria and Iran and it included the provision by Teheran of new power generation stations in Lattakia and Baniyas and the repair or improvement of others in Aleppo, Deir Zor, and Homs. A month later, Iran struck a new deal with Damascus to build a USD 46 million power plant in Latakia. In August 2018, the Syrian Ministry of Public Works and Housing agreed with Iranian private companies to build 30,000 residential units as part of the General Organization for Housing’s projects in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. A few months later in February 2019, Iraj Rahbar, the deputy head of the Mass Construction Society of Iran, announced that his company was planning to build 200,000 housing units in Syria, mostly around the capital, as a result of a memorandum of understanding that was signed a few weeks before in a meeting in Damascus of the Joint Syrian-Iranian Higher Committee. The agreement, he explained, would be implemented within three months and be funded through a new USD 2 billion Iranian credit line.

As for Moscow, already in October 2015 a Russian delegation visited Damascus and announced that Russian companies would lead Syria’s post-war reconstruction. Deals worth at least USD 930 million emerged from these negotiations. A further Russian parliamentary visit to Syria in November 2016 resulted in Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem reportedly offering Russian firms priority in rebuilding Syria. In mid-December 2017, a Russian delegation mostly composed of the heads of major Russian companies led by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin was again in Damascus for talks with Bashar al-Assad on investment and reconstruction in the country, referring to “major economic projects,” including the “oil, gas, phosphate, electricity and petrochemical industries” and also transport and trade.

In February 2018, Syria and Russia signed an agreement on cooperation in the electrical power field in the “framework of developing the electrical system through reconstructing and repairing the Aleppo thermal plant and installing a Deir Zor power plant, in addition to expanding the capacity of the Mharda and Tishreen plants.” In March 2019, Russian private companies announced their readiness to transfer and introduce their construction techniques and skills to Syria for the reconstruction process in collaboration with the Syrian Ministry of Public Work and Housing. More recently, the Russian company Stroytransgaz signed a contract with Syrian authorities to manage the Tartous Port for a period of 49 years. The Syrian Minister of Transport explained that Stroytransgaz is expected to invest some USD 500 million during the contract period, notably to develop and expand the port and allow larger ships to dock. This came amidst an addition to the two other contracts concluded in previous years by the Russian company with Damascus for the development of the phosphate mines in Khneifis and the management of the fertilizers production complex near Homs operated by the General Fertilizers Company. Stroytransgaz now oversees all the production, transport and export chain for phosphate, from the mines to the port.

In December 2019, Syria's parliament approved oil exploration contracts signed earlier in the year with two Russian companies (Mercury LLC and Velada LLC) in three blocs—including an oilfield in northeast Syria and a gas field north of the capital Damascus.

At the same time, there are serious doubts about the implementation of economic projects between Syria and its allies—especially with regards to some reconstruction plans, but also the memoranda of understandings concluded between the allies in recent years. For example, the Syrian government failed to secure the necessary funds for its contribution to electricity sector deals with Iran and Russia. As a result, Iran and Russia pulled out. In addition to this, the selling-off of key national economic assets to foreign actors nurtured significant criticism from large sectors of Syrian society, including among regime loyalists.

Syrian Transport Minister Ali Hamoud was obliged to provide more details on the Tartous deal with Russia, partly to deflect this strong criticism. He claimed that Syria was not giving up the port, which is Syrian and will remain so, rather that it would be managed by a great country that is a friend to Syria. The minister also justified the deal along the lines of the investments required to expand the port's capacity to enable 100,000-ton ships to dock, arguing that the Syrian government doesn't have the funds necessary to carry out these works. Therefore, it was necessary to bring in a foreign investor.

At first, the government will receive 25 percent of the revenues generated from the port's activities, a figure that will progressively rise to 35 percent later on. The agreement with the Russian company could increase Tartous port's revenues to \$84 million, instead of the \$24 million that the port currently makes. Finally, Hamoud stressed that the rights of workers in the port would be protected, claiming that all workers will remain in place and that they will be offered Russian language courses. However serious doubts have already surfaced on these guarantees. One of the first measures of the Russian company STG Engineering was to create new employment contracts, which could lead to worker dismissal and layoffs. The head of the port union, Fouad Harba, stated in *Al-Watan* newspaper that "the union is against this procedure, and strongly opposes it and asked workers not to sign any new contracts".

In addition to this, the increasing weight of foreign actors in some sectors of the economy has also various

consequences on economic networks established by regime elite networks, such as in the case of Tartous port, which is now managed by a Russian company, and economic networks of the Fourth Brigade linked to it.

In August 2017, the Chinese government hosted its "First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects," during which a Chinese-Arab business group announced a \$2 billion commitment by the government for the construction of industrial parks in Syria. In December 2017, Qin Yong, the vice president of the China-Arab Exchange Association, estimated investments in Syria of a similar value and explained that the companies he had accompanied to Damascus, Homs and Tartus – including the China National Heavy Duty Truck Company – planned to build roads, bridges, airports and hospitals and to restore electricity supplies and communications. In May 2019, Chinese authorities were planning to open a permanent trade center in the Adra Industrial City near Damascus. China was, however, still reluctant to engage massively in such an unstable country. For Beijing, investments in emerging countries are often, as in Africa, conditioned on privileged access to natural resources. However, Syria is quite weak in raw materials. Further, whatever raw material Syria owns has already been promised in shares to Moscow and Tehran.

On the Arab political scene, a few countries expressed their willingness to take part in the Syrian reconstruction process, such as Egypt, Oman, Jordan and Lebanon. Moreover, some Gulf monarchies led by the United Arab Emirates are changing their positions regarding Syria, and an increasing process of normalization towards Damascus is taking place on the Arab political scene. Already in August 2018, UAE citizen Abdul Jalil Al-Blooki visited the premises of Damascus Cham Holding and attended one of its meetings. This visit confirmed the efforts by the UAE to normalize its relations with Damascus.

In December 2018, the situation accelerated once more towards a re-legitimization and rehabilitation of the Assad regime among its Arab counterparts. First, Sudanese former President Omar Al-Bashir, visited Syria in mid-December, becoming the first Arab League leader to visit the country since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, and on 27 December the UAE re-opened its embassy in Syria after seven years. A day later, Bahrain followed suit. Both states justified their decisions with the need to reactivate an Arab presence and role in Syria, and also to counter the deepening influence of Turkey and Iran in the country. Saudi Arabia had also lowered its opposition to

the Damascus's regime in 2018, but without any official rapprochement between the two countries. Riyadh maintained however its primary focus on countering the influence of Iran in Syria, as reflected in an interview by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman in March 2018 asserting that Bashar al-Assad was staying, but hoping that he would not become a "puppet" for Tehran. Most likely, it was the United States' pressures that put the brakes on further rapprochement between Riyadh and Damascus. For instance, momentum to get Syria back into the Arab League has been ebbed since 2019.

At the end of December 2018, a delegation from the UAE company Damac Properties headed by its Senior Vice President for International Development, Wael Al-Lawati, visited Damascus. Damac is a real estate developer and one of the largest companies in the UAE and Arab world with assets of more than USD 7 billion and an annual revenue above USD 2 billion. At the Four Seasons Hotel Mr. Al-Lawati met representatives from two Syrian companies, Telsa Group and Al-Diyar Al-Dimashqiah.<sup>11</sup> Towards the end of January 2019, a visit to the UAE by a delegation from Damascus Cham Holding to encourage investment in Syria was announced. It was represented by its Chief Executive Nassouh Nabulsi and accompanied by Syrian businessmen and industrialists led by Muhammad Hamsho. The delegation met several UAE chambers of commerce and industry, in addition to UAE businessmen. In the framework of the 61st edition of the Damascus International Fair, between August 28 and September 6, a high-level economic delegation from the UAE visited Damascus. This delegation included around 40 persons, including heads of real estate development companies and commercial entities, and members of the Chambers of Commerce in the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Sharjah and Umm Al Quwain. In addition to this, 26 UAE companies were exhibiting their products at the Fair. However, prospects of investments have been

stalled as the US has tightened sanctions on Syria and pressured the UAE and other Gulf monarchies to halt their rapprochement with Syria, as they are unwilling to jeopardize their relations with Washington. At the same time, the UAE's economy is facing difficulties of its own, while the emirate of Dubai is preoccupied with its preparations for Expo 2020.<sup>12</sup>

At the time of writing, the level of reconstruction funding by foreign capital remains unclear but insufficient, particularly as Russia and Iran are having increasing difficulty in maintaining their levels of financial and material support for the regime. The participation by other foreign actors in the reconstruction of Syria is linked to the development of other regional and international issues and negotiations, notably regarding Iran, in addition to the issue of sanctions imposed by the USA<sup>13</sup> and the European Union<sup>14</sup> on Syria, which constitute an obstacle that may scare off foreign companies. Threats of falling under US sanctions are also putting off most international and Chinese multinational companies, such as Huawei, which recently announced its withdrawal from Syria and Iran. In November 2018, the US increased its pressure on Syria by announcing that it will seek to impose sanctions against any party (including shipping companies, insurers, vessel owners, managers and operators) involved in shipping oil to Syria.

The European Union and the US<sup>15</sup> have repeatedly declared that their support for the reconstruction of Syria and an end to sanctions would depend on a credible political process leading to a real political transition. In this framework, in January 2019 the European Union imposed new sanctions on eleven prominent businessmen, including Samer Foz, and five entities on the list of those subject to restrictive measures against the Syrian regime and its supporters because of their involvement in luxury real estate development, such as the Marota City reconstruction scheme, and/or their acting as middlemen on behalf of the regime in various trade deals.

<sup>11</sup> Both companies were established relatively recently, Tesla in 2015 and Diyar Al-Diyar Al-Dimashqiah in September 2018. Maher Al-Imam is the general manager of the former, while Muhammad Ghazi Al-Jalali, a former minister for communications and a board member of Syriatel, and who is under EU sanctions, is a founder of Diyar.

<sup>12</sup> For more information, see Joseph Daher, (2019), "The dynamics and evolution of UAE-Syria relations: between expectations and obstacles", European University Institute and Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria project (WPCS), October 2019, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/64727/MED\\_2019\\_14.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/64727/MED_2019_14.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

<sup>13</sup> They notably ban exports, sales or the supply of services, along with any new investments, into Syria by any US individual. They also forbid any dealings by US individuals in Syrian oil and hydrocarbon products and importing them into the United States.

<sup>14</sup> EU Sanctions include asset freezes, travel bans, trade restrictions, financial sanctions and an arms embargo. The European sanctions also target Syria's electricity network, banning EU companies from building power plants, supplying turbines or financing such projects. The latest European sanctions in January 2019 target all the investors in the Marota urban master plan.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to the sanctions imposed in 2011, in December 2017 the US Congressional Foreign Affairs Committee unveiled the No Assistance for Assad Act, which prevented the Donald Trump administration from using non-humanitarian US aid funds for the reconstruction of Syria in areas held by the Assad regime or associated forces (USA Congress 2017).

At the same time, the regime was able to take control of billions of dollars from international humanitarian aid delivered by UN agencies. The international humanitarian organizations operating from Damascus also had to rely on local implementing partners such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and to choose their sponsors from a list of “national NGOs” by the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, such as Syria Trust (founded and chaired by Syrian first lady Asma al-Assad), or charities such as al-Bustan, owned by Rami Makhlouf.

The reconstruction plans of Damascus and other cities do not tackle the issue of refugees and the possibility of their return, while pressures on refugees in neighboring countries to push them to return to Syria are increasing, regardless of the consequences on their security and safety. So far, Syrian authorities are only taking in small flows of returnees. For many refugees, the Syrian state still presents a threat to their safety or at least it creates administrative obstacles to their returning to their original homes. Many refugees come from areas that have been completely destroyed. This did not prevent Russia’s efforts since 2018 in encouraging regional host countries, including Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, to “facilitate” the return of Syrian refugees.

A massive return of refugees would be a major challenge for the regime, politically, economically and in terms of infrastructure, particularly if many were to return within a short period. In addition to this, remittances sent by Syrians to their families inside the country have become one of the most important sources of national income and therefore help boost internal consumption. According to World Bank data, the value of Syrian expat remittances in 2016 reached about \$1.62 billion – an average rate of about \$4 million daily and representing a little more than 10 percent of GDP.

In addition to this, the focus in providing housing for wealthy strata of society in the reconstruction plans launched by the government and the private sector do not facilitate or encourage the return of IDPs and refugees from regions that suffered from destruction and damage. The return of civilians to certain areas was also complicated by various measures pertaining to the regime’s security institutions. Moreover, the war demolished many Syrian land registries, including at the deliberate initiative of pro-regime forces in some recaptured areas, making it complicated for residents to prove ownership of their lands and homes. Alongside this situation, a significant percentage of displaced people had lost their ownership documents or never obtained them in the first place, according to Laura Cunial, a legal and housing expert at the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). According to the survey published in 2017, nearly half of Syrian refugees surveyed by the NRC and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees refugee agency (UNHCR) said that their home had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair by the war, while only 9 percent had their property title deeds with them and in good condition. Wide sections of those refugees came from informal areas, representing around 40 percent of all housing units in Syria prior to the uprising in 2011. However, even those who had the necessary documents often found it difficult to access their properties. The process of entry into the areas controlled by the regime often requires obtaining entry permits from various branches of security to cross-checkpoints. This process involves blackmail, bribes, and threats of detention. Residents were also required to pay electricity, telephone, and water bills for years of absence during the war, which equated to nearly 50 percent of the cost of these assets.

Similarly, reconstruction efforts might be distinct and diverge according to the varying levels of influence and presence of foreign states in certain areas outside of the sovereignty of the Syrian state. More generally, a key question to assess is if Syria will witness parallel reconstruction efforts in areas controlled by or under the strong influence of different political actors such as the Syrian Government, the Democratic Union Party (known through its acronym as the PYD) or Turkish-controlled northern areas. Differences in reconstruction plans between and within regions may have consequences on local sectarian and ethnic dynamics in post-war Syria.

Forceful displacements of populations were still occurring in 2018 and 2019. New military offensives and bombings of Syrian's regime forces and its allies between April and end of August 2019 in North Western Syria resulted for example in the forced displacements of 400,000 additional individuals.

The humanitarian, socio-socioeconomic, and political status quo in Syria is catastrophic at all levels. The vast majority of the Syrian population inside the country suffers from unemployment, rising inflation, and worsening living conditions. The structure of the economy was modified considerably, with low-conflict regions benefiting from the transfer of companies and industries and witnessing significant growth in public and private investments in these areas.

By the mid-2019, the reconstruction process was very much limited and the scale of destruction remained massive. The regime however, was already using reconstruction plans as a means to strengthen its patrimonial and despotic character and its networks, while also serving as an instrument to punish or discipline former rebellious populations. In addition to this, IDPs and refugees were left out by the current reconstruction plans.

The resilience of the Assad regime with the assistance of its foreign allies did not however signal the end of all problems for Damascus. On the contrary, the regime would have to deal with a series of contradictions and challenges: on the one hand, satisfying the interests of crony capitalists and heads of militias, and on the other, accumulating capital through economic and political stability, while granting shares to its foreign allies in the reconstruction business and other economic sectors such as natural resources. These objectives were rarely overlapping. Mounting criticisms were levied increasingly by civilians in regime-held areas against the criminal practices of the pro-regime militias and socio-economic difficulties. The Syrian Pound's massive devaluation since October 2019 and its impact on the Syrian economy and population also created increasing popular frustrations. The Syrian population was facing increasing inflations and a constant diminution of their purchase power. The harsh devaluation and currency wide fluctuation also created economic uncertainty and instability. At the same time, Western sanctions against the country were increasing and resulted in additional difficulties and harmed large sectors of the society, particularly the most impoverished.

The catastrophic humanitarian, political and socio-socioeconomic situation in Syria therefore begs the question of how the regime will deal in the future with a large majority of the country's population suffering from unemployment, increasing inflation, and worsening living conditions. In this framework, the conditions for a successful reconstruction are far from present. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in the end of March 2020 would most probably deepen the socio-economic situation of the vast majority of the Syrian population, as sources of incomes are continuously being reduced and the cost of living is increasing, while the Syrian government's measures to limit them are insufficient. This situation could increase even more the social and political discontent against the regime.

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