



REBUILDING WITHOUT BUY-IN: THE RISKS OF SYRIA'S TOP-DOWN RECONSTRUCTION

Haid Haid

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About the author

Dr Haid Haid is a Syrian columnist and a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative. He is also a Consulting Research Fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Program. Previously, Dr Haid was a Program Manager focusing on Syria and Iraq at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Middle East Office in Beirut. He has also worked as a Senior Protection Assistant at UNHCR's Damascus office. His academic background includes a bachelor's degree in sociology, a postgraduate diploma in counselling, and two master's degrees – one in social development and another in conflict resolution. He also holds a PhD in war studies. His interdisciplinary research interests include governance, peacebuilding, political economy, political transition, and accountability.

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Executive Summary

- Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria's transitional authorities have placed investment at the center of their reconstruction agenda. Rebuilding has been framed less as a public recovery process shaped by social needs, open debate, and transparent priority-setting, and more as a centrally managed effort to mobilize capital, package projects, and signal progress to regional and international investors.
- This approach has produced a largely top-down model. Key decisions are often made within narrow official and business circles before affected communities are meaningfully informed and engaged. The assumption appears to be that political authority, administrative approval, and visible delivery will be enough to secure public acceptance. Yet in a country where property rights, displacement, and urban redevelopment remain deeply contested, this is a risky calculation. When projects are announced before residents are consulted, and grievances are addressed only after opposition emerges, initiatives presented as recovery can quickly become flashpoints.
- The cases examined in this report show how these tensions play out across different settings. In Homs, Boulevard al-Nasr illustrates how privately funded redevelopment can revive older grievances when it intersects with unresolved histories of expropriation and displacement. In Aleppo, the reconstruction of the Haydariyyah neighborhood highlights the risks of restarting stalled Assad-era redevelopment plans without transparency, participation, or credible safeguards. In Damascus, Marota City and Basilia City show how wartime redevelopment frameworks are being repackaged as investment opportunities, risking the normalization of past injustices rather than their resolution.
- Other cases point to related but distinct concerns. In Jobar and Qaboun, controversy centered on a financing model that appeared to require residents to surrender part of their property rights in exchange for reconstruction, making rebuilding feel less like a return than renewed dispossession. Al-Jahiz Park, also in Damascus, shows that investment-led rehabilitation can also trigger pushbacks when it appears to alter access to, or control over, shared public space.
- These cases do not suggest that opposition to reconstruction is inevitable, uniform, or widespread. Rather, they identify the conditions most likely to generate friction: limited early engagement, unclear rules, weak safeguards, unresolved rights claims, and the perception that communities are being asked to accept decisions made without their consultation.
- The report argues that community pushback should not be dismissed as a series of isolated local disputes. It is a warning sign of a deeper weakness in Syria's emerging reconstruction model: the failure to meaningfully involve those most affected by redevelopment. A process detached from local needs and priorities risks reviving old grievances, creating new forms of exclusion, and legitimizing outcomes that many communities experience as imposed rather than shared.
- As Syria's transitional authorities reshape the country's urban and economic landscape, today's decisions will determine who is able to return, who gains from reconstruction, whose rights are acknowledged, and whose voices are excluded. A reconstruction process that sidelines affected communities cannot lay the foundations for peace, stability, or prosperity.

Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime, reconstruction has quickly and understandably become a central priority for Syria's transitional authorities. They present rebuilding as both an economic necessity and a marker of national recovery. Investment conferences have been organized, redevelopment plans unveiled, and major projects showcased as signs that the country is starting to recover from years of war.¹

Yet rebuilding in Syria does not take place in a neutral setting. The country is emerging from conflict with weakened institutions, limited public resources, extensive physical damage, and widespread displacement. At the same time, communities engage with reconstruction against a backdrop of unresolved grievances, disputed property claims, legal uncertainty, and longer histories of coercive urban change and dispossession.² Notably, community fears are reinforced by the recent memory of Assad-era reconstruction efforts, which remain very present and shape concerns that new rebuilding plans could reproduce earlier patterns of exclusion and dispossession.

In such a context, reconstruction is not only about restoring physical infrastructure. It is also about rebuilding the relationship between people and the state. Roads, housing, utilities, and public facilities matter, but they are not enough on their own to restore confidence in public authority or create a sense of shared recovery.

Yet, the prevailing official approach has been largely top-down and investment-focused, with decisions made by central authorities without much input from affected communities. Reconstruction is treated mainly as a technical and financial

exercise, focused on speed, visibility, and attracting capital. This often comes at the expense of public participation and the rights of residents and local communities. As a result, authorities have pushed projects forward before deeper grievances have been adequately addressed.³

This dynamic has created a growing disconnect between official narratives and lived experience. At the policy level, reconstruction is framed as a pathway to economic revival and modernization. On the ground, however, it is often associated with uncertainty, risk, and unresolved claims, particularly around ownership, displacement, compensation, and access to public space.⁴

Reconstruction projects appear to be designed and agreed upon within limited official and investor circles before being presented to affected communities. With little opportunity to influence decisions early on, residents are left facing unclear outcomes regarding compensation, property rights, and the ability to return to, or remain in, their areas. As a result, rebuilding is not always perceived as a process of recovery, but frequently as a source of concern and dispute.⁵

This helps explain why reconstruction projects in different parts of the country have triggered similar reactions of protest and contestation by local communities. While the details vary, responses often reflect common concerns: weak consultation, limited transparency, insecurity over rights, fears of privatization, and a sense that investment priorities outweigh local needs.⁶ When these wider social and political dimensions are sidelined in favor of visible construction and investment mobilization, rebuilding risks remaining incomplete, even where it appears successful on paper.

1 Haid Haid, "Syria Needs a New Reconstruction Approach," *Al Majalla*, 10 October 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/327059/opinion/syria-needs-new-reconstruction-approach>.

2 Haid Haid, "Restoring Stolen Homes and Livelihoods in Post-Assad Syria," *PAX for Peace*, 8 September 2025, <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/restoring-stolen-homes-and-livelihoods-in-post-assad-syria/>.

3 Haid, "Syria Needs a New Reconstruction Approach."

4 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, October 2025.

5 Haid, "Syria Needs a New Reconstruction Approach."

6 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, December 2025.

This report explores how reconstruction is evolving during Syria's transition. It begins by examining the investment-led model adopted by the authorities and the logic behind it. It then looks at a set of cases from Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo to show how this approach plays out in practice, and how it is received, challenged, and reshaped by local actors. Finally, it points to the need for a shift towards a more inclusive framework that places greater emphasis on rights, accountability, transparency, and public participation.

The analysis draws on 45 semi-structured interviews conducted inside Syria between July 2024 and May 2026 with residents, civil society actors, officials, investors, analysts, and journalists, as well as others directly involved in or affected by reconstruction. Interviewees were granted anonymity to ensure they could speak openly. The report also relies on open-source material, including official statements, project documents, and local reporting.

At its core, the report argues that episodes of community pushback should not be treated simply as isolated local disputes or reactions to particular projects. Instead, they should be seen as warning signs of a deeper structural flaw in Syria's emerging reconstruction model: the failure to engage meaningfully with the people these projects affect most.

Reconstruction that is detached from local needs and priorities risks becoming something other than recovery. It risks reproducing old grievances, generating new exclusions, and using the language of rebuilding to legitimize outcomes many communities experience as imposed rather than shared.

As Syria's transitional authorities reshape the country's urban and economic future, the choices made now will influence who returns, who benefits, whose claims are recognized, and whose voices remain marginal. Syria's reconstruction cannot produce peace, stability, or prosperity if it continues to overlook the very people it is meant to serve.

1. Reconstruction as Capital Mobilization

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the transitional authorities have made attracting investments the centerpiece of their reconstruction strategy, presenting it as the primary route to rebuilding a devastated country. This has meant that reconstruction has been approached less as a broad public recovery effort than as a project of capital mobilization with profit as a key incentive: packaging reconstruction projects as lucrative opportunities, courting investors, and signaling momentum to regional and international business circles.⁷

Interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa has articulated this approach in explicitly political as well as economic terms. He has shown little interest in international development loans, instead presenting investment as a more sovereign and politically acceptable path. In official rhetoric, this is cast as self-reliance rather than dependence. As Sharaa told an audience of business and financial elites in Riyadh, "We chose the path of reconstruction through investment; we did not choose the path of rebuilding Syria through aid and assistance"⁸. The statement was intended to project confidence, autonomy, and a break with the aid-driven logic associated with conflict management.

That position is understandable up to a point. Syria's state capacity is badly weakened, public finances are constrained, and the scale of destruction is immense. No government facing such conditions could realistically rely on domestic resources alone. External capital will inevitably play a role. The problem lies not in the decision to seek investment itself or to adopt an investment-led recovery strategy, but in the model through which reconstruction is being conceived and governed: a model that is neoliberal in economic orientation and highly centralized in governance.

7 Ibid.

8 Timour Azhari and Yousef Saba, "Syria Has Attracted \$28 Billion in Investments in the Past 10 Months, President Sharaa Says," *Reuters*, 29 October 2025, <https://shorturl.at/QoHGu>.

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Economically, it privileges privatization and the creation of a business environment that prioritizes investors over the interests of local residents. Politically, it concentrates decision-making within narrow state circles tied to the presidency, including the Sovereign Fund and the Syrian Investment Authority, while leaving affected communities at the margins.⁹

As one Syrian researcher noted: “There is broad agreement that no clear reconstruction strategy currently exists. Reconstruction is framed less as a state-led recovery process than as an investment opportunity. There is no clear prioritization, no defined funding architecture, and no meaningful institutional framework linking reconstruction to broader recovery needs. Instead, the focus appears to be on attracting investors, while the political and social dimensions of reconstruction remain largely absent from official discourse.”¹⁰

This is evident in the way reconstruction has been presented. Rather than being introduced as a national recovery program shaped by public debate, social needs, and transparent priority-setting, it has been organized as a centrally managed process in which projects are identified, packaged, and marketed from above. The Damascus investment summit at the people’s palace in August 2025 offered a particularly clear example. Officials presented key Syrian cities through an investment map that translated neighborhoods, damaged districts, and urban land into opportunities legible to investors. Even severely war-damaged areas were framed in market terms, as spaces whose destruction could be converted into future value.¹¹

This framing matters because it reshapes the meaning of reconstruction itself. What gets rebuilt, where, for whom, and under whose authority are not merely financial questions. They are political ones, because they determine patterns of return, access, and exclusion in the postwar order. Yet in the current approach, these questions are displaced by a

narrower focus on infrastructure, investment flows, profit projections, and urban redesign. Projects are introduced through land size, estimated value, and projected returns, while more fundamental questions recede: who has the right to return, how earlier injustices are to be addressed, what forms of displacement are being reproduced or reversed, and who gets to shape the future of affected areas.¹²

This approach narrows reconstruction to its most marketable dimensions. Early evidence points less to a strategy based on need than to one shaped by investor appetite. The most publicized projects are concentrated in tourism, large real estate redevelopment zones, high-rises, and mixed-use developments, many of them in Damascus.¹³ These projects are easier to package and promote than the slower, less profitable work of repairing local infrastructure, restoring public services, supporting return, and rebuilding everyday urban life. As a result, reconstruction risks favoring places and sectors that can attract capital, rather than communities with the greatest need.

This sits uneasily with Syria’s damage profile. The World Bank estimates reconstruction needs at \$216 billion, with residential buildings and infrastructure accounting for the largest shares, and Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Homs among the most severely affected governorates.¹⁴ The risk is that investment-led recovery becomes selective, not only in where it happens, but also in the forms of recovery it prioritizes. It may revive selected city centers and attractive tourism sites while leaving damaged informal and peri-urban communities behind.

Similarly, the legal framework governing reconstruction during the transition remains fragmented and uncertain, with priority given to shaping the investment environment rather than addressing previous grievances. Rather than being guided by a single, coherent reconstruction law, decision-making currently rests on a combination of constitutional provisions, amended investment legislation, inherited Assad-era laws and decrees,

9 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, October 2025.

10 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, December 2025.

11 Al Ikhbariah, “Investment Conference at the People’s Palace, Syria 2025” YouTube video, 6 August 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elhrq7ZQs5E>.

12 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, December 2025.

13 Al Ikhbariah, “Investment Conference at the People’s Palace.”

14 The World Bank, “Syria’s Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at \$216 billion,” 21 October 2025, <https://shorturl.at/zmEDu>.

governorate-level decisions, and case-by-case administrative measures.¹⁵

Many Assad-era laws and procedures, including those related to zoning, expropriation, redevelopment, investment, and property documentation, continue to shape what is possible in practice. This is despite the fact that several of these instruments were previously used to dispossess displaced people and political opponents. The transitional authorities have taken some corrective steps, including measures to cancel certain precautionary seizure orders, but these remain partial and do not yet amount to a comprehensive restitution framework.¹⁶

The amended investment framework, introduced through Presidential Decree No. 114 of 2025, has meanwhile become one of the main legal tools shaping reconstruction efforts.¹⁷ It prioritizes attracting capital, simplifying licensing, expanding investor guarantees, creating investment zones, and strengthening dispute-resolution mechanisms. However, it is not a reconstruction justice law. It does not provide a comprehensive framework for restitution, compensation, public consultation, community consent, or safeguards for residents whose property rights may be affected by redevelopment.¹⁸

In practice, this means that some reconstruction files are being handled through investment decisions, governorate-level decrees, and ad hoc administrative procedures. As a result, affected communities face continuing uncertainty over how projects are approved, whether previous property claims will be recognized, what compensation standards will apply, and what remedies are available if redevelopment affects their ability to return to, or remain in, their areas.

2. Reconstruction as a Top-Down Process in a Low-Trust Environment

Although public information on reconstruction governance remains limited, recent announcements suggest a process that is politically centralized but administratively dispersed. Strategic direction and final approval appear to rest with the presidency and institutions operating within its orbit, while implementation is spread across ministries, specialized authorities, and governorates.

The presidency plays the central political role. The institutional architecture of the reconstruction model and its legal framework have been reshaped by the presidency, including through amendments to the investment law. High-profile investment ceremonies and reconstruction announcements have often taken place under presidential patronage or in the presence of President Ahmad al-Sharaa, who appears to play an active role in managing the reconstruction file.¹⁹ This approach signals high-level backing to investors, but it also concentrates authority around the executive and reinforces top-down decision-making.

The Syrian Investment Authority functions as the operational hub of the investment track. It promotes opportunities, engages foreign investors, convenes forums, presents strategic projects, licenses projects, facilitates procedures, grants incentives, supports investors, and coordinates discussions between them and government bodies.²⁰

The Syrian Sovereign Fund has also become a key part of this architecture. Recent disclosures at the Syrian-Emirati Investment Forum suggest that the fund is no longer simply a vehicle for managing inactive state assets, but a major platform for land development, public-private partnerships, and investment-led reconstruction. It reportedly controls around 2,000 properties, more than 70

15 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, October 2025.

16 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, December 2025.

17 Presidential Decree No. 114, Syrian Investment Gate, July 2025, <https://www.shorturl.at/shortener.php>.

18 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, December 2025.

19 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, December 2025.

20 Ibid.

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million square meters of land, and a project pipeline spanning real estate, tourism, construction, energy, transport, mining, and other sectors.²¹ This gives the fund significant influence over which assets are developed, which investors gain access, and which areas are prioritized.

The Syrian Development Fund adds another layer. It has been presented as a vehicle for reconstruction, infrastructure rehabilitation, and development projects. However, both the development and sovereign funds are directly linked to the presidency and operate under its guidance, rather than within a comprehensive reconstruction framework.²²

Sector ministries and specialized authorities retain control over specific files. But, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing, together with the General Housing Establishment, is considered the primary entry point for housing, mixed-use compounds, and redevelopment on state-owned land.²³

Governorates also play a role, although their influence appears to vary depending on the size of the project and the funding involved. In major externally backed projects, governorates seem to play a more limited role once decisions have been discussed with higher authorities. Their influence appears greater in smaller schemes or projects funded without external investment, such as the Haydariyyah redevelopment project in Aleppo.²⁴

The top-down nature of this model is not accidental, nor is the weakness of public participation. Both are tied to a broader mode of governance adopted by the Syrian transitional authorities in which decision-making is concentrated, consultation is thin, and the public is expected to respond to plans rather than shape them. Communities are rarely involved in setting priorities, defining project terms, or determining the balance between public need

and private investment. Instead, they tend to enter the picture late, often once negotiations are already underway between the authorities and the investors or when implementation is being prepared.

Where consultation occurs, it is often limited, symbolic, or reactive, as illustrated by the case studies examined in the next section.²⁵ In the case of al-Jahiz Park in central Damascus, for example, residents only learned about the rehabilitation project after the agreement had been signed and preparations for implementation were already underway. A follow-up meeting with government officials was then held in response to residents' mobilization against the project.²⁶ Consultations with landowners affected by the Marota City project also appear to have had a limited impact. These discussions took place before work resumed on the project originally launched under Assad. Sources noted that several points had been agreed upon with the committee established by the governorate to negotiate with affected residents. However, when the project resumed, residents said that several of these agreed-upon points had not been addressed.²⁷ Similarly, when Damascus Governorate officials met with residents of Jobar and Qaboun, the meeting was organized to present a reconstruction proposal that the governorate had already prepared without their input.²⁸

This reflects more than administrative weakness. It points to a reconstruction model built on the assumption that political authority, investor confidence, and visible delivery will be enough, and that public acceptance will follow.²⁹ Yet the tensions surrounding recent projects suggest otherwise. Local communities are looking at the proposed projects with suspicion and often rejection.³⁰

This suspicion must be understood against the broader history of dispossession by the Syrian

21 The Syria Report, "Structure and Assets of the Syrian Sovereign Fund Revealed During Emirati Forum," 12 May 2026, <https://syria-report.com/structure-and-assets-of-the-syrian-sovereign-fund-revealed-during-emirati-forum/>.

22 Author interview with Syrian journalist, Damascus, May 2026.

23 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, May 2026.

24 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, May 2026.

25 Ibid.

26 Author interview with a resident from Malki, Damascus, December 2025.

27 Author interview with a community leader from Mazzeh, Damascus, May 2026.

28 Author interview with a notable from Qaboun, Damascus, May 2026.

29 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, July 2025.

30 Haid, "Syria Needs a New Reconstruction Approach."

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regime. Since 2011, the Assad regime has built a legal and administrative architecture that turned property law into a tool of repression. Laws and decrees such as Law No. 19, Decree 63, Decree 66, Law No. 10, Law No. 33, and Law No. 35 were presented as measures for counterterrorism, redevelopment, reconstruction, registry restoration, or military-service enforcement. In practice, they enabled mass property seizures, forced evictions, the manipulation or reassignment of ownership records, and the transfer of land and assets to regime-aligned actors.³¹ These measures were enforced through coercive state institutions, politicized courts, security networks, brokers, officials, and militia-linked figures, often leaving affected families with no due process or realistic path to recovery. Entire neighborhoods were demolished, absentee and displaced owners were excluded from claims processes, and families labeled as “terrorists” or linked to opposition areas lost homes, land, and businesses.³²

This history matters not only because many Housing, Land and Property (HLP) violations remain unresolved, but also because some controversial Assad-era projects have resumed or been revived, as illustrated in the following section. Construction in Marota City has resumed despite continued demonstrations and unresolved grievances among affected residents.³³ The Homs Dream project has also been revived³⁴ and has recently moved into implementation under new branding as Boulevard Homs, while other proposals, including those for Qaboun and Haydariyyah, resemble plans pursued during the Assad era.³⁵ As a result, projects presented by officials as opportunities for investment or modernization can be received locally as threats. They are viewed not only by their stated aims, but by how they fit into longer histories of dispossession, exclusion, and unaccountable planning.³⁶

Another key feature of this model is the uneven distribution of reconstruction costs. Even where projects promise jobs, growth, or improved services, their burdens often fall disproportionately on households and local residents. In Damascus’ Jobar and Qaboun, property and land owners were effectively being asked to surrender a substantial share of their land in exchange for investors financing the reconstruction process, as discussed in the next section.³⁷ In Aleppo’s Haydariyyah, residents faced the prospect of losing homes they had already spent scarce resources repairing, and of bearing demolition costs themselves.³⁸ In each instance, the state and investors were positioned to define the terms of reconstruction, trading property for shares or smaller replacement units, while communities absorbed the uncertainty, delay, and risk.³⁹ The burden, in other words, was not only economic but also social and political.

When reconstruction is organized primarily around attracting capital, attention shifts away from other essential dimensions of recovery: repairing the social contract and restoring trust between people and public authority.⁴⁰ Infrastructure matters, but so do the wider systems through which people regain a sense of security and belonging. When these are sidelined in favor of profitable construction, rebuilding may produce visible change without delivering a socially grounded or even sustainable recovery.

This carries a political cost and has direct implications for trust. In a setting where social cohesion is already fragile, projects introduced without early participation do not simply generate criticism. They deepen the perception that state institutions are opaque, unresponsive, and oriented towards external or elite interests. Official narratives may

31 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, May 2026.

32 Haid, “Restoring Stolen Homes and Livelihoods.”

33 Al-Watan, “A Package of Major Projects in Damascus Worth \$7 Billion,” 6 August 2025, <https://shorturl.at/F750E>.

34 Azzouz, “Basatin al-Qarabis, Not Boulevard al-Nasr.”

35 The Syria Report, “Backlash Over Reconstruction Plan for Jobar and Qaboun,” 31 March 2026, <https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/backlash-over-the-usd-21-billion-reconstruction-plan-for-jobar-and-qaboun/>.

36 Author interview with Syrian journalist, Aleppo, December 2025.

37 The Syria Report, “Backlash over the USD 21 Billion Reconstruction Plan for Jobar and Qaboun,” 31 March 2026, <https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/backlash-over-the-usd-21-billion-reconstruction-plan-for-jobar-and-qaboun/>.

38 Milad al-Shahabi, “Real Estate Development Project in al-Haydariyyah Neighborhood in Aleppo: Legitimate Demands and Violated Rights,” Syrian Press Agency, 1 February 2026, <https://syrianpressagency.org/874732364447543874-2/>.

39 Author interview with Syrian journalist, Aleppo, December 2025.

40 Author interview with civil society representative, Homs, October 2025.

present reconstruction as orderly, developmental, and nationally driven, but local reactions reveal a substantial gap between administrative planning and social legitimacy. Where that gap widens, reconstruction itself can become a new source of tension.⁴¹

3. Reconstruction in Practice: Patterns of Contestation

Reconstruction under the transitional authorities is not unfolding as a single, coherent process. It is taking shape through a range of projects and investment proposals that vary across sectors and locations, each shaped by local conditions and pre-war legacies. Yet across these contexts, many proposals have generated contestation.

The cases that follow are not intended to simply catalog episodes of opposition to particular projects, but to illustrate how reconstruction is being advanced and contested in practice. While the specific triggers differ, the contestations point to recurring concerns: limited community participation, a lack of transparency, uncertainty over rights, fears of the privatization of public space, and a broader perception that reconstruction is being driven more by investment priorities than by the needs of affected communities.⁴² Each case highlights a different dimension of the current reconstruction landscape while pointing to common patterns that are emerging across contexts. Taken together, they provide a framework for understanding how reconstruction is experienced on the ground and why certain projects have become flashpoints.

In Homs, Boulevard al-Nasr shows how privately funded redevelopment can reactivate long-standing grievances when it intersects with unresolved histories of expropriation and displacement. It

underscores how current projects are interpreted through the lens of earlier Assad-era schemes associated with exclusion and loss.⁴³

In Aleppo, Haydariyyah highlights that the revival of Assad-era stalled redevelopment plans is also occurring in projects directly led and funded by public authorities. The case shows how restarting such projects – without transparency, participation, or credible safeguards – can reinforce fears that reconstruction is reproducing earlier patterns rather than marking a break from them.⁴⁴

In Damascus, Marota City and Basilia City draw attention to the afterlife of wartime redevelopment frameworks that were initiated under Assad but never completed. These projects illustrate how controversial schemes have been repackaged as investment opportunities, risking the normalization of past injustices rather than their resolution.⁴⁵

The case of Jobar and Qaboun, two heavily destroyed neighborhoods on the outskirts of Damascus, draws attention to the financing model itself. Here, controversy centered on a proposal in which reconstruction reportedly depends on residents surrendering a significant share of their property rights in exchange for redevelopment.⁴⁶ This captures a central tension in the current approach: when rebuilding is financed through the restructuring of ownership, it can be experienced less as return than as a new form of dispossession.

Finally, al-Jahiz Park in Damascus extends the analysis beyond housing and property into the realm of public space.⁴⁷ It demonstrates how investment-led rehabilitation can generate concern when it is perceived to alter access to, or control over, shared urban areas. Contestation here is not

41 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, December 2025.

42 Author interview with Syrian journalist, Damascus, December 2025.

43 The Syria Report, “Homs Begins Implementing Boulevard Project Amid Objections,” 25 November 2025, <https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/homs-begins-implementing-boulevard-project-amid-objections/>.

44 Al Shahabi, “Real Estate Development Project in al-Haydariyyah.”

45 Abd al-Hay Sayyid, “Decree 66: Urban Planning as a War Crime – Not Just the Story of a Neighborhood in Damascus,” *Al Jumhuriya*, 23 February 2026, <https://shorturl.at/D871w>.

46 *The Syria Report*, “Backlash over the USD 21 Billion Reconstruction Plan.”

47 Haid, “Syria Needs a New Reconstruction Approach.”

only about ownership, but also about how urban space is defined, managed, and used.

Taken together, these cases show that contestation around reconstruction in Syria is neither isolated nor uniform. Rather, it reflects a set of recurring tensions that emerge in different forms across contexts. They offer insight into how reconstruction is being experienced at the local level, and how these experiences are shaping what is accepted, contested, or renegotiated in practice. Importantly, they do not point to consistent or widespread resistance, nor do they suggest that every reconstruction project will provoke opposition. Instead, they underline the conditions that tend to generate friction and the varied ways in which such tensions are expressed.

Boulevard al-Nasr: the return of unresolved dispossession

Boulevard al-Nasr, or the “Boulevard of Victory”, was the first major post-transition investment project in Syria to be derailed by local resistance.

Formally unveiled at the 8 August 2025 investment conference at the presidential palace, the project was awarded to a Kuwait-based company owned by a Syrian expatriate businessman and promoted as a flagship symbol for Homs’s postwar recovery. Official materials promised 4,500 housing units, a rehabilitated public park, commercial and investment facilities, a new wholesale market, and upgraded water, electricity, sewage, gas, and road networks. Authorities also said it would create around 15,000 direct and indirect jobs. On paper, it was meant to signal that reconstruction in post-Assad Syria had begun in earnest.⁴⁸

Instead, it quickly met resistance. The land earmarked for redevelopment overlapped with al-Qarabis, a neighborhood marked by mass displacement and a long history of contested planning.⁴⁹ Residents soon linked the project to the notorious pre-war scheme known as *Homs Dream*. First launched in

2005 as an ambitious urban modernization plan, it became deeply unpopular because many residents saw it as a vehicle for clearing existing communities, emptying the old city, and reshaping Homs around elite investment priorities rather than local needs.⁵⁰

Those concerns were reinforced by the area’s earlier history of expropriation. In 1994, around 462 dunams (equivalent to 462,000 square meters) of the Qarabis orchards and surrounding land were expropriated in the name of a public-benefit project tied to a planned “People’s Park”. Long described as the “lungs of Homs”, these orchards supported more than 1,500 people who lived and worked on the land and relied on its produce for their livelihoods. Over time, however, many residents came to see the expropriation not as a public project but as the beginning of a longer process of commercial redevelopment. Legal challenges by original owners failed to halt it. Although much of *Homs Dream* was never implemented, it left behind a lasting association between redevelopment, exclusion, and demographic engineering.⁵¹

This legacy shaped how many residents interpreted Boulevard al-Nasr. For people still living with the consequences of war, displacement, and unresolved property claims, the project felt less like recovery than the return of a familiar threat. What officials presented as a new investment opportunity was widely seen as an updated version of an older pattern: redevelopment built on top of dispossession. The backlash was swift, first on social media and then on the ground. Residents of al-Qarabis organized a protest on 8 August 2025, rejecting the project, carrying banners reading, “No boulevard, no to displacement”.⁵²

Official reassurances did little to ease concerns. On 11 August, the governor of Homs met residents of al-Qarabis and promised that the project would not proceed in their neighborhood without their approval, and that landowners would receive full compensation from the company.⁵³ But the need

48 *The Syria Report*, “Homs Begins Implementing Boulevard Project.”

49 Ammar Azzouz, “Basatin al-Qarabis, Not Boulevard al-Nasr: On the Struggle Against the Expropriation of Green Land in Homs,” *Al Jumhuriya*, 1 April 2026, <https://shorturl.at/0K3pn>.

50 Ibid.

51 Azzouz, “Basatin al-Qarabis.”

52 Ibid.

53 Al Ikhbariah, “Homs Governor Announces Details of the Boulevard al-Nasr Project,” 11 August 2025, <https://alikhbariah.com/?p=21800>.

for such assurances only underscored the central problem. The project had already been announced, advertised, and politically endorsed before any meaningful consultation with affected communities had taken place. Residents were being asked to respond to a plan already in motion, rather than shape it from the outset. There had been no serious public hearings, no visible participatory planning process, and no clear channel through which local concerns could influence the project before decisions were made.⁵⁴

Opposition was driven by how the project had been introduced and by what it risked reproducing. As one local resident put it:

The problem people had with the project was not the idea itself, but how it was imposed on people without any consultation. It is widely viewed as a residential complex on destroyed land. People did not believe the promises given to them because they had been burned before. It brought back all the trauma that people there had lived through for decades. This was not just a piece of land but a memory as well. This could have been avoided if people had been involved in the discussion, not notified after it was finalized. They refused to be treated as an afterthought.⁵⁵

The pressure was strong enough to force a partial retreat. After mediation by the Homs governor, the company eventually canceled the most contentious part of the project, the section running through the disputed al-Qarabis neighborhood, which had sparked public opposition.⁵⁶ In one sense, this marked an important departure from the Assad era: local resistance produced at least a partial reversal. But it also exposed a deeper continuity. Reconstruction projects are still being conceived behind closed doors and introduced from above, with consultation arriving only after public backlash begins.

Haydariyyah: Rebuilding stalled plans without trust

Haydariyyah, an informal housing area, offers a parallel case from eastern Aleppo, illustrating how reconstruction under the transitional authorities is encountering persistent concerns over rights and trust. In August 2025, Aleppo's governor, Azzam al-Gharib, announced the launch of the Haydariyyah redevelopment project at the Damascus investment conference. The plan envisioned a fully integrated neighborhood spanning roughly 270 dunams and designed to accommodate around 1,800 families. It was framed as more than a housing project: alongside residential units, officials promised schools, kindergartens, a clinic, commercial spaces, green areas, and improved infrastructure, all aimed at creating a more organized and livable urban environment. Initial construction costs were estimated at around \$40 million for the buildings alone, with completion projected for the end of 2027.⁵⁷ According to the head of the contracted construction company, the project is being financed by the Aleppo Governorate.⁵⁸

In formal terms, the project reflected a model of recovery centered on planning upgrades and service provision. On the ground, however, it quickly generated concern among residents of Haydariyyah. Many said they first became aware of the project only when heavy machinery arrived to begin demolition and debris removal. The sudden start of works came as a shock not only to residents but also, reportedly, to the local mukhtar, who had spent months seeking clarity from authorities without receiving a clear response.⁵⁹

These concerns are closely tied to the project's earlier trajectory. A previous version of the redevelopment scheme had been launched in 2019 under the former regime, accompanied by expropriation measures, demolition, and partial infrastructure

54 Author interview with a resident of al-Qarabis, Homs, October 2025.

55 Author interview with a resident of al-Qarabis, Homs, October 2025.

56 Azzouz, "Basatin al-Qarabis, Not Boulevard al-Nasr."

57 Al Shahabi, "Real Estate Development Project in al-Haydariyyah."

58 Sawt al-Ahrar, "Interview with the Official Responsible for the al-Haydariyyah Project in Aleppo," *YouTube video*, 18 December 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyNX4kMOR6k>.

59 Al Shahabi, "Real Estate Development Project in al-Haydariyyah."

works.⁶⁰ Like similar projects across Aleppo, it stalled, leaving behind cleared land and unresolved questions around ownership and compensation. These concerns were especially acute because Haydariyyah had been classified by the Aleppo City Council in late 2016 as an informal housing area and included in redevelopment plans after the former regime retook eastern Aleppo. This classification deepened residents' fears that redevelopment could weaken their claims, limit compensation, or make it harder to recover property rights.⁶¹

The current plan appears to build on that earlier effort, drawing on the same data and assumptions while presenting it as a new initiative.⁶² For many residents, this continuity shaped how the project was understood. Rather than a fresh start, it appeared as the continuation of an approach that had already generated uncertainty. The issue was not only the prospect of demolition, but the lack of clarity about how decisions were being made and what they would mean in practice.⁶³

Residents repeatedly pointed to the absence of written information on compensation, alternative housing, timelines, or allocation criteria. Some, particularly those without complete documentation, feared that ownership could shift toward municipal authorities, leaving them with limited or conditional rights. Others worried that the project could reproduce earlier patterns in which residents lost their homes in the name of development and were left waiting for solutions that never fully materialized.⁶⁴

These concerns were heightened by some residents' recent experiences. Many families had returned to Haydariyyah after Assad's fall and invested what they could in repairing damaged homes. Without prior notice, they then discovered that those same homes were marked for demolition. For low-income

households, the risk of displacement without a clear rehousing plan was immediate. Rents in Aleppo remain high, incomes are limited, and the loss of housing could push families back into instability.⁶⁵

The response was swift. Residents organized protests and raised complaints publicly, emphasizing that they were not rejecting reconstruction, but objecting to how it was being carried out. Some said they had been asked by the city council to cover the costs of demolishing their own homes and clearing debris. They called for a halt to demolition, the removal of machinery, and a shift toward repairing and servicing the area rather than clearing it before addressing ownership and compensation.⁶⁶

Faced with mounting pressure, officials moved to contain tensions. A delegation composed of representatives of Aleppo Governorate and the reconstruction company met with the mukhtar and local representatives, offering assurances of alternative housing or financial compensation and pledging to preserve property rights. Authorities also indicated that the allocation of new units would be overseen by specialized committees. They further agreed to limit implementation initially to a smaller area in an effort to build confidence and avoid widespread disruption to residents.⁶⁷ These steps appeared aimed at easing concerns and preventing a broader confrontation.

Even so, these reassurances came after the project had already begun. Residents were being asked to accept a process they had not helped shape and for which no clear framework had been publicly outlined. While some appeared cautiously reassured, others remained unwilling to leave, citing continued uncertainty, weak guarantees, and the absence of viable alternatives.⁶⁸

60 Ahmad Sukkar, Sawsan Abou Zainedin and Hani Fakhani, "Informal Settlements in Syria: What Approach After the Conflict?", Arab Reform Initiative, 28 October 2021.

61 Al Shahabi, "Real Estate Development Project in al-Haydariyyah."

62 *Ibid.*

63 Syria Now, "Sudden Eviction Notices in al-Haydariyyah Neighborhood," Facebook Reel, April 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/reel/906789778966131>.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Al Shahabi, "Real Estate Development Project in al-Haydariyyah."

66 Syria Now, "Sudden Eviction Notices in al-Haydariyyah Neighborhood."

67 Alikhbariah, "Aleppo Municipality Begins a Real Estate Project in al-Haydariyyah Amid Residents' Calls for Clarification," YouTube Shorts video, 25 October 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Dr3MIPW4fc>.

68 Author interview with a resident of Haydariyyah, Aleppo, December 2025.

Marota and Basilia: Repackaging contested redevelopment

Marota City and Basilia City, two large development projects in Damascus originally established under the Assad regime by Decree 66 of 2012, underscore how incomplete wartime redevelopment plans are now resurfacing in a new form. By recasting these controversial schemes as investment prospects, current efforts risk entrenching past injustices instead of confronting them.

In August 2025, Damascus Governorate marketed both zones to foreign investors at the Syrian investment conference held at the people's palace, presenting them as key components of the capital's wider "investment map". The message was clear: despite their contested history, the authorities were prepared to move forward without revisiting underlying grievances or meaningfully engaging affected residents.⁶⁹ This was evident when the Damascus governor announced, on the sidelines of the conference, the signing of an agreement with a Syrian-Emirati investor to construct 25 towers in Marota, expected to accommodate around 3,500 families.⁷⁰

Yet, these were never ordinary redevelopment schemes. Both originated in Decree 66 of 2012, one of the most controversial planning measures introduced under the former regime. Marota City covered Basatin al-Razi behind al-Razi Hospital and parts of Kafr Sousa, while Basilia City extended across wider sections of Kafr Sousa, Darayya, al-Qanawat, and their orchards. Officially, the decree was framed as a tool to redevelop informal housing areas. In practice, it became closely associated with displacement and exclusion.⁷¹

In 2012, many residents were forced from homes built over decades without viable alternatives. Some demolished their own houses before clearance began, salvaging materials to survive. Property

rights were redefined through a complex system of shares rather than direct ownership. Many owners were either excluded altogether or allocated low-value shares across the wider zone, while the cost of "alternative housing" was set at levels most could not afford. Over time, many were pressured to sell these shares, while land was consolidated for high-end developments disconnected from the original social fabric of the area.⁷²

This history shaped how residents responded after Assad's fall. For many, the transition created an opening to revisit the injustices embedded in Decree 66. Some formed committees of lawyers and engineers to argue for amending the decree while protecting the limited rights that displaced residents had managed to retain. Others called for its full repeal, viewing it not as a neutral planning law but as a mechanism of wartime dispossession.⁷³

These were not abstract legal debates. They reflected years of displacement, unresolved property claims, unaffordable housing alternatives, and a deep sense that original residents had been excluded from the future of their own neighborhoods. Yet while these demands were being raised, the Damascus Governorate continued to promote Marota and Basilia as investment-ready projects. Residents were not brought into a new planning process; instead, they watched the same zones being repackaged for foreign capital.⁷⁴

This disconnect helps explain the backlash. The anger was not only about the projects themselves, but about what their continued promotion represented: the normalization of past injustices. The fact that authorities were discussing towers, investment packages, and alternative housing with foreign investors while fundamental questions of justice remained unresolved deepened the perception that reconstruction was once again being shaped from above, through the logic of investment rather than redress.⁷⁵

69 Al-Ikhbariah, "Investment Conference at the People's Palace, Syria 2025."

70 Al-Watan, "A Package of Major Projects in Damascus Worth \$7 Billion," 6 August 2025, <https://shorturl.at/F750E>.

71 Haid, "Restoring Stolen Homes and Livelihoods in Post-Assad Syria."

72 Sayyid, "Decree 66: Urban Planning as a War Crime."

73 Haid, "Restoring Stolen Homes and Livelihoods in Post-Assad Syria."

74 Author interview with Syrian researcher, Damascus, October 2025.

75 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, December 2025.

Residents responded through protests, advocacy campaigns, and coordinated efforts to assert their claims. These protests were limited in size and did not occur frequently, but they attracted significant media attention and helped bring the issue into wider public debate. Some established associations to represent affected communities, using social media, petitions, and direct engagement with officials to press for accountability. Their demands were consistent: participation in any review of the decree, recognition as rights holders, and a meaningful role in shaping decisions affecting their neighborhoods.⁷⁶

Under sustained pressure, the authorities were eventually forced to respond. In October 2025, the governor of Damascus announced the suspension of Decree 66's implementation in Basilia, Marota, and other affected areas, pending a legal review aimed at reaching a fairer outcome.⁷⁷ This was followed in December 2025 by the formation of a presidential committee to reassess the status of the zones covered by the decree.⁷⁸

By early May 2026, however, Damascus Governorate said the committee had failed to reach a solution. It maintained that Decree 66 should be treated as an urban planning measure rather than an act of expropriation.⁷⁹ The governorate also announced a compensation package intended to resolve long-standing disputes over Marota City to allow reconstruction work to resume. The measures included a 13.9% increase in the shares allocated to original owners, a 35-fold increase in rental assistance for displaced residents and those eligible for alternative housing, the settlement of accumulated back payments owed to residents, faster implementation of alternative housing, and steps to address the cases of owners who had previously been unable to receive allocations for security or legal reasons. It also said it would take

the necessary measures to proceed with Basilia City's development in coordination with the local community.⁸⁰

Many residents affected by Decree 66, however, rejected the proposed compensation measures, arguing that they failed to adequately protect property rights or address the harm caused by the project. They said the governorate was not a neutral party and called for an independent review of the decree, the compensation framework, and the process by which land was transferred. They also demanded higher compensation, broader inclusion of affected residents, a revaluation of the area, and reconsideration or revocation of the decree. Residents have since resumed demonstrations against both the project and the governorate's decision to restart reconstruction work.⁸¹

Marota and Basilia show how quickly reconstruction efforts can run into unresolved grievances over land, property, and wartime injustice. The central issue is no longer only whether these projects proceed, but whether they can be addressed through a framework that prioritizes rights, accountability, and meaningful participation.

Jobar and Qaboun: Reconstruction without return

Jobar and Qaboun, two heavily damaged Damascus neighborhoods with histories of displacement, provide one of the clearest examples of how reconstruction plans in post-Assad Syria can raise concern when they are seen to reshape ownership rather than restore it. The reconstruction proposal for these neighborhoods was presented by the Damascus Governorate on 13 March 2026 at a private meeting attended by around 30 participants, including neighborhood committee members, lawyers, engineers, and local dignitaries. With an estimated cost of nearly \$21 billion, the proposal was introduced as a flagship project that could generate some 200,000 jobs and transform eastern Damascus into a new center of investment and urban

76 Ibid.

77 Enab Baladi, "Damascus Governor Announces Suspension of Decree 66 Implementation," 20 October 2025, <https://wp.me/p7cv3Y-nxU>.

78 Enab Baladi, "Decision to Form a Committee to Review Decree Procedures," 5 December 2025, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/786999/>.

79 Enab Baladi, "Damascus Governorate Announces Measures to Compensate Those Affected by Decree 66," 6 May 2026, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/807332>.

80 Ibid.

81 Enab Baladi, "Those Affected by Decree 66 Protest Governorate Decisions," 8 May 2026, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/807613>.

growth. Officials said investors would finance and implement the project in exchange for a substantial share of the land, presenting this as the only viable option given the scale of destruction and the limited capacity of both the state and the domestic private sector.⁸²

Residents were immediately alarmed by the financing model underpinning the proposal. Many understood the plan less as reconstruction than as a redistribution of ownership. Under the proposal, owners in formally zoned areas would receive housing in new developments equivalent to only 50% of the area of their former homes. In informal settlements built on land still classified as agricultural, compensation would fall to just 30% of the land area, regardless of the buildings that had long existed there. This approach overlooked the lived reality of places like Jobar and Qaboun, where neighborhoods may have been technically informal but had been built up and inhabited for years. It also failed to account for tenants, shared ownership, and the difficulty of verifying claims in areas where many buildings no longer exist.⁸³

Resistance followed quickly. On 29 March, figures from Qaboun, including dignitaries, lawyers, and professors, issued a statement titled “Towards Fair Reconstruction that Preserves Land and Dignity”. The statement rejected the investment model and warned that elements of the proposal could amount to “forced displacement with an administrative character”.⁸⁴ Its signatories argued that compensation rates of 30% effectively constituted dispossession and violated Article 16 of the Constitutional Declaration, which protects private property and prohibits expropriation except for public benefit and fair compensation.⁸⁵

82 The Syria Report, “Backlash Over Reconstruction Plan for Jobar and Qaboun,” 31 March 2026, <https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/backlash-over-the-usd-21-billion-reconstruction-plan-for-jobar-and-qaboun/>.

83 Ibid.

84 Kassoun, “A Statement by Residents and Lawyers of Damascus’s Qaboun Neighbourhood Describes the Damascus Governorate Project as ‘Forced Displacement’ and Proposes Alternative Solutions,” 31 March 2026, <https://kassoun.org/news/item/85824-2026-03-31-09-50-44>.

85 Walid al-Nofal, “Disguised Expropriation: Jobar and Qaboun between Planning and Exclusion,” *Syria Direct*, 1 April 2026, <https://shorturl.at/4oj3k>.

Residents from both neighborhoods voiced similar concerns. Many argued that the plan effectively shifted the cost of reconstruction onto property owners by deducting it from the share they would later receive.⁸⁶ Those living in informal settlements stood to lose the most. As one resident from Qaboun put it, “This plan would make me lose most of my property. I own a small building with several flats, and the compensation would be split between all of us. Treating this land as agricultural ignores the fact that people have lived and built here for years. It reduces our rights and makes the plan unfair”.⁸⁷

Residents also argued that the proposal treated areas devastated by war primarily as future investment zones. The emphasis, they said, was on attracting capital and generating revenues rather than enabling return or restoring rights. What was presented as reconstruction appeared, to many, closer to redevelopment without return. As one resident from Jobar put it, “Rather than ensuring our return, this investment comes at the expense of people like me. Reducing property sizes will push me and many others to sell our assets in order to find more affordable and appropriately sized homes elsewhere”.⁸⁸

In response, residents and advocates called for a different approach. They argued that rebuilding, particularly in areas heavily damaged during the conflict, should recognize ownership, guarantee return, and treat affected communities as rights holders with enforceable claims.⁸⁹

In an attempt to contain the controversy, the Board of Trustees of Jobar, an unofficial community body, stated that the proposal remained verbal and unofficial and had not yet been submitted in writing. It added that any final decision would need to be reviewed by a specialized committee and approved by residents.⁹⁰ By that point, however, the core issue had already become clear: communities were being asked to respond to a project shaped in discussions with investors, rather than to participate in defining

86 Ibid.

87 Author interview with a resident of Qaboun, May 2026.

88 Author interview with a resident of Jobar, May 2026.

89 al-Nofal, “Disguised Expropriation: Jobar and Qaboun.”

90 The Syria Report, “Backlash Over Reconstruction Plan for Jobar and Qaboun.”

its terms from the outset.

The Jobar and Qaboun proposal highlights a deeper concern at the center of current reconstruction efforts: that rebuilding could become another mechanism of exclusion, formalizing wartime dispossession through the language of investment and urban renewal. It also underscores the risk that, without transparency, participation, and enforceable safeguards, reconstruction may entrench rather than resolve the grievances left by the conflict.

Al-Jahiz Park: Defending public space

Community pushback against the government's approach to reconstruction extends beyond housing, land, and compensation to a broader question: who gets to shape the city itself? The case of al-Jahiz Park in Damascus brings that debate into the realm of shared urban space. It offered another early warning that even smaller projects can trigger backlash when people feel excluded from decisions affecting places they use, value, and regard as their own. In August 2025, residents of the upscale Abu Rummaneh neighborhood discovered that part of the neighboring al-Jahiz Park, one of the capital's last remaining public green spaces, had been quietly allocated to a private investor under the banner of "rehabilitation". New billboards promised cafés, parking facilities, and enclosed sections, presenting the plan as an upgrade to the park and its services.⁹¹

For officials, the project appeared to fit the broader post-transition logic of redevelopment through investment. It was framed as an effort to use private capital to rehabilitate public spaces, something the government lacked the resources to do on its own.⁹² For many local residents, however, it looked like something else: the gradual privatization of one of Damascus's few accessible green spaces. The concern was not only about the proposed physical changes, but about what they signaled. A park used by families, children, and older residents as a rare,

shared space was suddenly being repackaged as an investment site, with little prior consultation and no meaningful public debate over whether such a transformation was wanted at all.⁹³

That is what made the reaction so immediate. Anger spread quickly online, with residents arguing that the project would erode the park's public character and restrict access in the name of rehabilitation. But the backlash did not remain online.⁹⁴ Families and local residents gathered inside the park for a sit-in, holding signs demanding protection of the space and rejecting its conversion into a commercial project.⁹⁵ Videos of the protest circulated widely, petitions gained traction, and the issue quickly became an important local cause.⁹⁶

The authorities moved quickly once the backlash gained momentum. Governorate officials met community representatives, canceled the agreement, and pledged that any future rehabilitation would be carried out in direct consultation with local residents.⁹⁷ In one sense, this was a relatively small case compared with the larger disputes over housing and redevelopment elsewhere. Even so, it showed that residents were willing to mobilize publicly when they felt their rights and shared spaces were being encroached upon.

Yet this response did not alter the government's broader view of parks as strategic investment assets. Investment opportunities listed on the official website of the Syrian Investment Authority, the main government body responsible for regulating and promoting investment, include several parks presented as attractive commercial opportunities.⁹⁸

91 Al Maghiro, "Response to Public Demand to Halt the Investment of al-Jahiz Park," Facebook video, 19 August 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1058722289628314>.

92 Author interview with Syrian official, Damascus, October 2025.

93 Nabd, "Damascus Parks: Between Investment and Preservation," 21 August 2025, <https://nabdapp.com/t/159737402>.

94 Yawmiat Qazifah, "Protest by Residents of Abu Rummaneh against the Investment Project in al-Jahiz Park," Facebook video, 18 August 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1290920809248944>.

95 Ibid.

96 Chams Plus, "Petition Issued by the Abu Rummaneh Neighbourhood Committee," Facebook photo, 16 August 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yc3nx8ad>

97 Nabd, "Damascus Parks".

98 Syrian Investment Authority, "Investment Map," accessed 24 April 2026, <https://invest.gov.sy/Home/InvestmentMap>.

These include al-Baramkeh Talaa al-Bath Park, King Adel Street Park, Ibn Asaker Park, al-Madfa Park, and Mazzeh Children's Park, all of which follow a similar model.

These proposals consistently recast parks as sites for large-scale commercial development. Beneath nearly every park, the plans include multi-level underground structures for commercial use, including markets, event halls, and parking facilities. Above ground, the parks are to be "rehabilitated", but with added revenue-generating features such as restaurants, cafés, sports facilities, and entertainment venues.⁹⁹

Crucially, all of these projects are structured under long-term Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) contracts lasting 35 to 40 years. In effect, parks are being treated as long-term revenue streams rather than purely public goods. As with other reconstruction and investment projects, these plans have been designed and promoted without consultation with local communities.¹⁰⁰

To ease concerns, officials have stressed that the aim is to improve services while keeping parks free, open, and green. They say private operators may use no more than 5% of a park's area for small services such as kiosks or cafés, in exchange for fully rehabilitating and maintaining the space, including its greenery, lighting, cleanliness, seating, sports areas, and children's facilities.¹⁰¹

Even so, concerns about creeping privatization remain widespread. As one resident in Damascus put it, "There are very few green spaces left for families, and they've become even more important as free public spaces shrink and the cost of living continues to rise. These investment plans are worrying. They say only 5% will be used, but there's no real guarantee. The parks will also have to close for long periods during construction, which could last months. Trust in official promises is very low".¹⁰²

These concerns were further amplified in May 2026, when media reports suggested that similar investment contracts in Jdeidet Artouz, in rural Damascus, had resulted in the effective privatization of large parts of the city's public gardens. Residents said investors had cut down trees and used much of the public green space to establish cafés and restaurants, with some reports claiming that more than 70% of these areas had been taken over for commercial use. The case reinforced fears that even limited investment arrangements can expand in practice, especially where oversight is weak, and residents have little ability to challenge implementation.¹⁰³

This approach to green spaces raises a broader question at the heart of current reconstruction efforts: whether shared urban spaces will remain public in practice or gradually be redefined as assets within an investment-driven model of urban development.

Ultimately, the authorities responded positively to public pressure in most of the cases and largely moved in line with residents' demands. That matters. It marks an important departure from the approach associated with the former regime, under which such objections would have been far less likely to produce any official adjustment. But these reversals should not obscure the underlying problem. If anything, they underscore the need for a shift in the public authorities' approach to reconstruction.

99 Suzan Ladhqani, "Tendering for the Rehabilitation of Damascus Parks Raises Questions," *Al-Thawra*, 18 March 2026, <https://thawra.sy/report/-استندراج-عرض-لتأهيل-حدائق-دمشق/>.
[/نيثير-تس](#).

100 Author interview with civil society representative, Damascus, May 2026.

101 Ladhqani, "Tendering for the Rehabilitation of Damascus Parks."

102 Author interview with a resident of Damascus, Damascus, May 2026.

103 Syria TV, "Environmental and Service Concerns over Public Park Investment in Jdeidet Artouz," 19 May 2026, https://x.com/syr_television/status/2056857435575636238.

4. Towards a Rights-Based Reconstruction: Recommendations

The main weakness of the current reconstruction model is not only weak public engagement, but a deeper assumption that rebuilding can move forward before questions of rights, accountability, and unresolved grievance have been addressed. This is evident in the authorities' efforts to turn the page quickly and present reconstruction as a marker of recovery, even as many affected communities continue to face uncertainty over property, compensation, return, and participation.

As a result, official narratives of recovery and modernization often clash with local experiences of risk, exclusion, and unresolved harm. When rights-based concerns are sidelined in favor of visible construction and investment attraction, reconstruction risks remaining incomplete, even where it appears successful on paper.

Changing that pattern does not require abandoning private investment or slowing the pace of rebuilding. It requires rethinking who shapes reconstruction decisions, under what rules, and with what protection for those most affected. The following recommendations are addressed to three sets of actors – Syria's transitional authorities, international donors and investors, and civil society – and are tiered by time horizon.

For the Transitional Authorities

Immediately

The most urgent change is procedural: no reconstruction project should be publicly announced, contracted, or marketed to investors before affected communities have been informed and given a structured opportunity to respond. The cases of Boulevard al-Nasr, Haydariyyah, and al-Jahiz Park all show that announcing projects

before consultation poisons the relationship with communities from the outset, forcing authorities into reactive damage-control rather than genuine partnership. A simple requirement – that project terms be publicly disclosed and a minimum consultation period observed before contracts are signed – would not slow reconstruction significantly. It would, however, substantially reduce the risk of the delays, protests, and partial reversals that have already undermined several flagship projects.

Alongside this, the authorities should institute a moratorium on projects, especially ones involving demolition, in areas where ownership, compensation, and return arrangements have not been publicly established and accepted by affected residents. In Haydariyyah, families discovered their homes were marked for demolition only when machinery arrived. In Jobar and Qaboun, residents were asked to absorb the cost of reconstruction through the loss of property they had no role in valuing. Demolition that precedes agreement on rights does not just generate protest. It also forecloses options and entrenches facts on the ground that are very difficult to reverse.

Finally, every ongoing and planned reconstruction project should establish a publicly accessible grievance mechanism: a clear, accessible channel through which residents can raise concerns, receive written responses, and escalate unresolved disputes to an independent body. The current pattern, in which communities must resort to social media pressure, street protest, or political mediation to be heard, is inefficient for the authorities as much as it is unjust for residents.

In the medium term

Syria needs a framework law on reconstruction that establishes binding standards for participation, compensation, and tenure protection across all projects, regardless of their financing model. Currently, reconstruction proceeds through a patchwork of governorate decisions, investment decrees, and ad hoc arrangements. This legal ambiguity is a key source of community distrust, because residents have no reliable basis on which to assess what their rights are or whether commitments made to them are enforceable. A framework law should, at a minimum, establish: mandatory participatory planning requirements before project approval; compensation standards that reflect actual use and occupancy, including for

informal tenure; protections for tenants as well as owners; and an independent review body with the authority to suspend projects that violate these standards.

Decree 66 and other leftover decrees from the Assad era require specific resolution, not ongoing management. The presidential committee convened in December 2025 has so far failed to reach an agreement, and the governorate's May 2026 compensation package has been rejected by affected residents as inadequate and partial. An independent review of measures taken so far under these decrees should be mandated, with a clear brief to assess whether the decree's implementation constituted expropriation, what restitution or fair compensation is owed, and under what conditions, if any, the projects can proceed in a form that respects the rights of original residents.

Over the longer term

Reconstruction cannot be politically durable if it proceeds in isolation from transitional justice. The grievances that communities bring to reconstruction disputes – over Decree 66, over the Qarabis orchards, over the dispossession embedded in Assad-era planning – are not merely administrative complaints. They are justice claims, and they will not be resolved by better project management alone. Syria's emerging transitional justice process needs to explicitly include property restitution, return rights, and accountability for wartime dispossession as core elements, not as a separate track that reconstruction can safely ignore. The authorities should begin now to establish the formal linkages between these processes, ensuring that reconstruction decisions do not foreclose justice outcomes, and that transitional justice bodies have a formal role in reviewing reconstruction proposals affecting disputed land and property, notably in communities and areas that were heavily impacted by Assad-era violations.

Local participation also needs to be institutionalized beyond individual projects. The current model produces ad hoc consultations when pressure demands it, and silence otherwise. What is needed are standing mechanisms such as local planning committees with genuine decision-making input, legally established community consultation procedures, and representative bodies that are inclusive of displaced persons and other marginalized groups. In a post-conflict environment

where trust in public authority is low and the memory of exclusion is recent, institutionalized participation is one of the primary tools through which the state can begin to rebuild legitimacy.

For International Donors and Investors

International actors (from donor governments to multilateral institutions to private investors) have significant responsibility in shaping Syria's reconstruction model and have so far exercised it unevenly. Investors have, in some cases, proceeded with projects without adequate due diligence on contested ownership, community opposition, and the risk that projects could contribute to displacement, exploitation, or exclusion. Without proper due diligence, investors may expose themselves to legal, financial, reputational, and operational risks, including future disputes over property, procurement, and compensation.

Donors should make participation requirements, HLP protections, transparency standards, open procurement processes, accessible public records, independent oversight, and independent grievance mechanisms explicit requirements of reconstruction financing. Communities affected by conflict and displacement must be meaningfully involved in decisions regarding redevelopment, housing, and local economic planning. Without such participation, reconstruction risks reflecting the priorities of political and economic elites rather than the needs of residents.

Investors, for their part, should recognize that the social and political risks of proceeding without community acceptance are also commercial risks. The cases in this report – projects delayed, revised, suspended, or canceled under public pressure – demonstrate that social license is not an ethical add-on but a precondition for execution. Before entering reconstruction agreements, investors should require evidence of community consultation, clarity on ownership and compensation frameworks, responsible partnerships, labor protections, transparent procurement, and accessible grievance mechanisms. Responsible business practices should not be viewed as obstacles to investment. In Syria's post-conflict setting, they are increasingly commercial necessities: companies associated

with transparency, community engagement, and accountable practices are more likely to attract credible partners, maintain regional legitimacy, and navigate future regulatory changes successfully.

For Civil Society

Syrian civil society has already played a significant role in the contestation documented in this report. Residents' committees, lawyers' associations, community advocates, and local journalists have challenged specific projects, documented injustices, and in several cases helped force partial reversals. That work deserves recognition and support.

Going forward, civil society organizations have a specific role to play in three areas. First, documentation: systematically recording the terms of reconstruction projects, the consultation processes used or avoided, and the outcomes for affected communities. This evidence base is essential for accountability and for learning across cases. Second, legal advocacy: building the capacity to challenge reconstruction decisions through administrative and legal channels, and to represent communities, particularly displaced persons and those in informal settlements, whose claims are most likely to be overlooked. Third, coalition-building: connecting communities facing similar issues across different cities and projects, so that the shared patterns identified in this report become the basis for coordinated advocacy for a fairer legal framework, rather than isolated local campaigns.

Conclusion

Syria's reconstruction is entering a defining phase. What began as announcements and investment signaling is now moving into implementation. The urgency is clear. The country faces extensive destruction and severely constrained public finances, and external capital will be essential to any meaningful recovery. Without it, large-scale rebuilding is simply not feasible.

Yet, as this report shows, capital alone will not determine outcomes. Reconstruction is unfolding in a complex environment shaped by displacement, contested ownership, and unresolved grievances. In this context, the success of projects depends not

only on financing and design, but on how they are governed, how risks are managed, and whether they are seen as credible and fair by those most affected.

The authorities' response to recent pushback reflects a mixed picture. In several cases, officials have shown a willingness to adjust, suspend, or amend projects in response to public pressure. This marks a departure from the rigidity of the previous regime and suggests a degree of responsiveness that did not previously exist. However, these responses have largely been reactive. They address tensions after they emerge, rather than preventing them at the outset. As a result, the underlying issues – unclear rules, limited early engagement, and uncertainty around rights – remain largely unresolved.

This has direct implications for how reconstruction unfolds. When projects are developed within narrow decision-making processes and introduced late, uncertainty is built in from the start. That uncertainty shapes how projects are received, how quickly they move forward, and whether they can be sustained. Reconstruction is therefore not a linear process. It evolves through ongoing interaction between state institutions, investors, and communities on the ground.

The role of the government is central. Public authorities are not only facilitators of investment; they set the terms under which reconstruction takes place. This includes establishing clear legal frameworks, safeguarding property and return rights, ensuring access to information, and balancing private investment with public interest. Where these functions are weak or inconsistent, risks increase for all actors. Where they are credible and predictable, they create the conditions for more stable implementation.

For investors, these dynamics are not peripheral. The cases examined here show that social and political factors directly affect project viability. Unresolved ownership issues, limited transparency, and weak community engagement can lead to delays, disputes, reputational risks, and even project cancellation. Local acceptance is not an added benefit. It is a core condition for execution.

Looking ahead, the challenge is not only to mobilize resources or maintain momentum, but to reduce the uncertainties that already surround many projects. This requires moving from reactive adjustments to more predictable and structured processes that

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anticipate points of friction and address them early.

If this shift does not take place, reconstruction is likely to remain uneven and contested, with projects advancing in some areas while stalling or unraveling in others. If it does, there is an opportunity to build a more coherent and durable framework for recovery – one that aligns investment with local realities and reduces the risk of disruption.

Ultimately, the question is not whether Syria can rebuild, but whether it can do so in a way that holds. The choices made now will determine whether reconstruction stabilizes the country or introduces new fault lines. Physical rebuilding can move quickly. Restoring confidence cannot. Without that, even the most ambitious projects will struggle to endure.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis