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Informal settlements in the Syrian conflict: urban planning as a weapon

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Abstract

Uprising and war in Syria have induced changes in urban policies towards informal settlements. Syrian urban policies in the 2000s set the issue of informal settlements as a priority item in the agenda. The reform of the legislative urban frameworks, designed with international assistance, and new master plans encouraged both their regularization / upgrading and their renewal (destruction / reconstruction). While competition between these models and objectives delayed decisions and program implementation in Damascus, the beginnings of the Arab Spring elsewhere in the region influenced the orientation of these policies, showing in which different ways urban planning can be used for strategic reasons. Initially, the Syrian uprising led to an inflexion of policies towards more social options for regularization. Subsequently, as it developed into an armed conflict, and with the escalation of physical destructions, the urban renewal option was favoured and overlapped military targets. In return, conflict, destruction and displacements have led to put all urban options back on the table for reconsideration, in the prospects of future reconstruction. This article discusses policies towards informal settlements in Syria before and during the uprising with a special focus on the case study of urban policies in the metropolitan area of Damascus.

During the first decade of the new millennium, urban policy in Syria, both national and local, tackled the problem of informal settlements. The legislative machinery dealing with urban planning and housing was reformed, a host of programmes launched with international cooperation, and studies revived to come up with new master plans for the main cities; the treatment of informal settlements became a central issue. Two main possibilities were under consideration: upgrading (with regularization) or urban renewal (demolition and legal reconstruction). Approaches were diversified; the different models and objectives competed with and sometimes contradicted one another. At the beginning of 2011 many urban policies were still in the development stage or in the process of implementation; few of them had reached completion.

In Damascus, the beginnings of the Arab Spring had an impact on urban dynamics: foreign investment dried up; however, monetary and inflation risks initially boosted construction and as of the very first weeks, informal settlements expanded rapidly. Before demonstrations had even started in Syria, the new situation had also led to a reconfiguration of urban policy towards informal settlements, especially in Damascus; its aims became more social. Though projects undertaken with international cooperation slowed down or were suspended, reform was nonetheless maintained; urban planning went ahead and new decrees were promulgated. But stakeholders, and

their relative strengths, were changing, real estate investment, both national and international, evolved to take account of the changing strategic political and economic environment, and social demand was expressed more forcefully. What effects did the first months of uprising in Syria have on policy as regards public housing and urban planning? What were the impacts, the continuities and the ruptures, what brakes and boosts? What has changed in terms of strategies and paradigms for urban action? Urban planning has often a strategic role in times of wars, as it was in Lebanon, where urban planning was used to displace populations away from a territory, a militarily coveted space or a speculative land [Verdeil 2001]. Conflicts are indeed exceptional times, when the bones of the territorial, political and economic strategic dimensions of urban planning decisions lay bare, at the detriment of the ideal representations of the city [Clerc 2012b]. A few observations will illustrate the evolution of urban public action in Syria and Damascus in the course of the first two years of the uprising and subsequent conflict.

The first part of this article deals with the evolution of the Syrian authorities' policy on informal settlements before the Arab Spring. Policy varied, and guidelines often competed with one another. The second part focuses on the evolution of the guidelines during the conflict: after an initial shift at the outset of the crisis towards social objectives, as informal settlements burgeoned, came a swing towards a logic of urban renewal (i. e. demolition and reconstruction), taking account of the widespread destruction of these settlements in the course of the conflict. This article will discuss policies towards informal settlements in Syria before and during the uprising with a special focus on the case study of urban policies in the metropolitan area of Damascus¹.

1. Competition between urban policies before 2011

In 2004 about 40% of the population of Damascus - approximately 1.3 million of a total of 3 million - lived in informal settlements, defined in Syria as "zones of collective contravention" (*manāteq al-moukhālafāt al-jāmia*) [Government of Syria, 2010; Clerc 2013b]. These zones developed mainly after the 1970s and 1980s, because tools available for urban planning were inadequate [al-Baridi 2005], urbanisation and population growth were rapid, the rural exodus was speeding up, and waves of displaced people and refugees from regional conflicts (Palestinians, inhabitants of Golan, Iraqis) were arriving [Doraï 2009].

Informal settlements in Damascus: close integration

In Syria informal settlements are a lot like formal settlements physically, socially and functionally. Construction is generally in breezeblocks, often with a framework of reinforced concrete. Thanks to the policy of integration, equipment and upgrading (though not necessarily legalisation) applied mainly during the 1980s and 1990s [Sakkal 1998, al-Baridi 2005], informal neighbourhoods are served to a large extent by public infrastructures on a normal legal basis. During the 2000s, the Government continued

¹ This article is based on fieldwork carried out in Damascus between November 2007 and August 2011 at the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO) where I was in charge of the Observatoire urbain du Proche-Orient. Subsequently, as of Autumn 2011, I compiled published data and witness reports received through different channels.

implementing its equipment plans, putting in service infrastructures (schools, healthcare centres, etc.). In 2004 some 97% of the informal neighbourhoods in Damascus had running water; rubbish was collected, and most streets were tarred [al-Dayiri 2007]. In most of these neighbourhoods, however, access was still problematic. In some cases taps ran only a few hours a week, schools were overcrowded and public spaces – in particular parks – were virtually inexistent.

Socially and economically, the relationship between informal and formal neighbourhoods was less one of contrast than of continuity. On the formal and informal housing markets, both prices and access were linked. The proportion of rental occupation in informal zones (12%) was the same as that for the city as a whole [Central Bureau of Statistics 2004]. Some informal neighbourhoods were important economic and shopping centres. Though in general it was the least affluent inhabitants of the city who lived there, there were also middle-income families, civil servants and military personnel (sometimes even high-ranking). And urban poverty was by no means confined to the informal zones [al-Laithy et Abou Ismail 2005]. Many of the inhabitants were not recent rural migrants or refugees, and had lived in the city for a long time - sometimes for several decades - in formal or informal housing. And informal neighbourhoods had an appreciable degree of functional diversity; social and family links were multiple and various. As in many countries, these continuities blur the limit between “formal” and “informal” housing, two terms are extensively discussed in the scientific literature as well as among urban practitioners. Additionally, informal practices are widely spread in formal areas, and in return many formal legal and institutional practices play an important role in the production of informal settlements [Clerc 2010].



Figure 1- Informal settlements built on the slopes of mount Qassiu are overlooking the city centre of Damascus. Photo V.Clerc 2009.

Despite all these continuities, however, Syrian informal neighbourhoods were nonetheless distinguished by their urban morphology and land tenure, in addition to their national legal definition. There were two main types of land tenure: some settlements had developed on land that had been squatted by the initial occupants – this was mainly the case with public land and zones on the slopes of mount Qassiu (illegal construction plus illegal occupation of land) - and other settlements built on privately-

owned land which, though legally held by its occupants, was not constructible. This latter type of occupation was mainly to be found in the Ghouta, the agricultural region in the oasis surrounding Damascus to the South and the East. Generally located outside the compass of the urban plans, constructions did not follow the applicable rules and were consequently categorised as *'ašwā'īyyāt* (anarchic). They constituted homogeneous urban spaces that had been organised gradually as the inhabitants moved in, with hierarchies of streets and processes of densification similar to those described in the 19th Century in the suburbs of Damascus [Lena 2012, Arnaud 2008]; plots were small and streets narrow, adjoining buildings were not set back from the street, and buildings were usually low. Last but not least, rates of occupation and overpopulation of housing (i.e. the proportion of housing units occupied, the number of families per unit, and the number of persons per family) were above average; net density of occupation was often two or three times that of the urban area as a whole (and up to 1200 inhabitants per hectare, compared with 260 in the urban area as a whole [Central Bureau of Statistics 2004]).

A supportive political and economic situation

As the Syrian economy opened up, gathering speed after Bachar el-Assad came to power in the year 2000, and again in 2005 when the social market economy model was adopted to restore equilibrium between the social and economic facets of development, new urban policies were adopted with a dual aim: that of liberalising the economy while maintaining at the same time a safety-net of social protection. The legislative machinery dealing with urban design and housing was thoroughly overhauled, with an eye on investment in real estate: urban planning was rejuvenated, rents deregulated, investment in tourism boosted, property law, cooperatives and building permits reformed, land use regularisation and construction infringements regulation reorganised [Clerc 2011]. This legislative push was accompanied by a massive return to the planning of public housing by the Public Establishment for Housing (PEH) - one of the two main producers of public housing (the other being the Military Housing Establishment) - explicitly presented as a social mechanism intended to counterbalance the effects expected to come in the wake of liberalisation [Government of Syria 2006]. Beneficiaries were to be low-income households and in particular young people, the latter pinpointed as the main movers in the development of informal settlements.

The economic juncture being favourable, these reforms succeeded in reviving formal private construction, which had previously (in the year 2000) reached its lowest point since 1975. By 2007, the annual production of housing units in the metropolitan area had been multiplied by seven, and in the suburbs of the capital by fifteen [Central Bureau of Statistics, figures from 2001 to 2010]. Many housing units, however, remained unfinished or empty [Clerc 2012a]. Built mainly as long-term investments for an upmarket clientele, they did not really address existing demand, which came mainly from low-income households. Moreover, the construction of public housing lagged behind private construction. Of the 57,000 units that had been planned for the Damascus area since the year 2000 - i. e. more than the Public Establishment for Housing had built in the region since its inception in 1961 - by 2009 only a few more than 3000 had been completed; on 16,000 of these work was still in progress [Clerc and Hurault 2010]. Low-income households thus continued to invest in informal housing, which pursued its expansion despite the stiffening penalties imposed in 2003 and 2008. The most recent laws (Law 82/2010) and policies have attempted to limit growth in the

number of unoccupied and unfinished units and to speed up the production of social housing (by involving the private sector and enabling public construction of rental housing), but the overall trend has not really changed [Clerc 2013a].

At the same time, several programmes and urban projects, both national and local, were designed with the aid of international cooperation (European Union, Germany, France and Japan). Since 2009, the Governorate of Damascus (which covers the centre of the conurbation) has re-launched studies with a view to renewing the master plan for Damascus and its suburbs (the 1968 master plan drawn up by the planners M. Ecochard and G. Banshoya is still in force today), while the Governorate of Rif Damascus (i.e. the Governorate of Rural Damascus, surrounding the Governorate of Damascus) has launched studies to produce a regional blueprint (including the periphery of Damascus).

Urban policies towards informal settlements compete in the new millenium

At the turn of the century, the constantly expanding informal settlements became a central issue in urban policy. The two main orientations - renewal (demolition of a neighbourhood and planned reconstruction-modernisation) and upgrading (improvement of existing zones by introducing infrastructures) - prolonged the policies implemented during previous decades [Clerc 2013a]. At that time, town planning services were drawing up detailed master plans with a view to the total reconstruction of certain zones, while other zones were provided with infrastructures and services by municipalities, in accordance with the upgrading alternative [UMP 2001].



Figure 2 - Old informal neighbourhood of Tabbaleh, South of Damascus, upgraded in the 1990s. Photo V.Clerc 2009

The new policies were launched in the beginning of the 2000's. A new law in 2003 required the destruction of all buildings that infringed regulations (and in 2008

stipulated stiff prison sentences for persons involved in any way in the building operations); but on the other hand it also made enabled the legalisation of neighbourhoods built before this date, on condition that the existing buildings were compatible with the local master plan; this however was usually not the case. Detailed master plans for suburban municipalities were massively revised to integrate these neighbourhoods. Therefore, the policies dealing with these zones followed two main trends: on the one hand, upgrading of the neighbourhood (i.e. improvement of existing structures) together with the legalisation of its land occupancy, for which the modification of the master plans would be required so as to adapt them to existing realities; on the other hand, renewal (i.e. demolition and reconstruction) following a master plan that differed from existing reality; the feasibility of this latter option was presumed, by its promoters, to be ensured by the arrival of investors attracted by the opening-up of the economy.

The Ministry of Local Administration and the Environment (MLAE), in charge of urban planning since 2004, took part in several programmes aiming at the *upgrading* of informal neighbourhoods. A series of laws (33/2008; 46/2004) had recently created the necessary administrative tools. Together with the Regional Planning Commission, set up in 2010, the Ministry drew up an *Informal Settlements Upgrading and Rehabilitation National Programme* [Government of Syria 2010]. The first phase of a *Municipal Administration Modernisation* programme [MAM 2005-2008], carried out with the assistance of European Union (MEDA Programme), called in recognised international experts, who unanimously recommended the upgrading of informal neighbourhoods [Wakely 2010, Fernandes 2008, McAuslan 2008, Serageldin 2008]. The same recommendations figured in the *Sustainable Urban Development Program* [UDP 2007-2010] worked out by the Governorates of Alep and Damascus with the support of German cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit - GIZ) [Syrian Arab Republic 2009], and the *Upgrading Informal Settlements in Rif Damascus Programme* drawn up by the MLAE and the Governorate of Rif Damascus with the aid of the World Bank and Cities Alliance.



Figure 3- Recent informal settlement of Bahdalieh, southern suburb of Damascus, included in the *Upgrading Informal Settlements in Rif Damascus* Programme. Photo V.Clerc 2010.

At the same time, the Ministry of Housing and Construction together with the Public Establishment for Housing set the statutory conditions and the administrative regulations governing the policy of *urban renewal* (i.e. demolition and reconstruction) of the informal settlements, based on the attraction of major private real estate investors (Law 15/2008, directives deriving from Law 26/2000). The State was to provide the private investors with publicly owned land on which housing for low-income households was to be built, and also with land for the renewal of informal neighbourhoods. In the early 2000s, the Governorate of Damascus shared this vision working out detailed urban plans for the informal zones, a zone of tower-blocks [JICA 2008] and in 2007 a series of studies (named Detailed Studies), conducted by consultants for the urban renewal of 17 inner urban zones defined by the governorate, including several informal ones.

The policies of upgrading and urban renewal were thus implemented side by side by different local authorities and administrations, without close coordination. In some cases, these rival policies even competed with one another when the same neighbourhoods were concerned. It was the case for example in 2010 in Aleppo. The Municipality was conducting an upgrading project with the cooperation of the GTZ German international aid on two parcels of public land occupied by informal settlements. At the same time, these plots had been offered by the government to investors to realize an urban renewal project under Law 15. The contradictions emerging from these competing policies became apparent too when national programmes conducted by the MLAE, promoting rehabilitation, were implemented in Damascus Governorate through renewal projects [Clerc 2011]. How did this come about? A reasonable hypothesis is that while the government signalled its willingness to implement social market policies, a conflict sprang up, between the economic logic of private investment and globalisation and the logic of social welfare. This was particularly the case as to the use of informal settlements land. With the economy opening up and real-estate values climbing, this situation shows how both rival visions

of the city (which social groups to favour? which urban fabric to promote?) and competition for land (who will appropriate its value?) framed approaches in urban policy.

In reality, rival options were combined, either implicitly or explicitly. General consensus finally emerged among the political and technical actors promoting the two different options. Upgrading would not be foreseen for several very central zones of the capital, and renewal would not take place in the distant periphery. But priorities nonetheless differed. Before the crisis, conflict between the visions boiled down to that of the relative proportion of Damascus neighbourhoods to be renewed and to be upgraded (e.g. 60% of one and 40% of the other); how were the zones concerned to be selected, and what criteria should be adopted?

2. Uprising, war and urban policy on informal neighbourhoods

At the beginning of 2011, when the uprising that came to be known as the Arab Spring broke out, implementation of all these projects was still in a very early stage. The *Informal Settlements Upgrading and Rehabilitation National Programme* was still in the process of adoption, and implementation of the section of Law 15/2008 on informal neighbourhoods was only just beginning. In Damascus, implementation of these policies still depended on the choices to be made in the master plan revision, which was still proceeding, and these choices had not yet been made. The overall trend was still towards urban renewal, though after the 2008 production of a document detailing the new strategic directives for the City of Damascus [Governorate of Damascus 2008] did to some extent change the game, a broad upgrading and legalisation sometimes being envisaged. Meanwhile only the urban policies actually being applied were pursued: the equipment of neighbourhoods with infrastructure, and the removal of housing located on the land requirement of major road developments. Pending the issue of guidelines for planning instructions, the Governorate's Detailed Studies and the urban projects embodied in international development cooperation programmes were suspended, and only land remote from the capital city was made available to investors in subsidised housing; within in the framework of law 15, no site occupied by informal settlements was still provided to private investors for development in Damascus.

Such was the situation when demonstrations started in March 2011 with an unprecedented wave of anti-establishment protests. Demonstrators demanded greater freedom of expression, reform of the State, revocation of the state of emergency that had been in force ever since 1963 and, after the violent repression of the demonstrations by the Government, the departure of the head of State. Gradually confrontation took on a military character; in Autumn 2011 the Free Syrian Army was formed. In Syria, however, the uprising did not become symbolised through a central Square, as was the case in Cairo's Tahrir or Bahrain's Pearl Square, but instead there were a multitude of local confrontations in villages and urban and suburban neighbourhoods. The urban quarters and the peripheral towns in which most informal settlements were situated rose in revolt. This is not to say, however, that the map of revolts was the same as that of informal settlements; the two were far from coinciding, although in many informal areas there was merely frustration with the Government's strategy of urban development, and illegal occupation was often associated with opposition to the regime.

Links did nonetheless exist between revolts, informal settlements and urban policies. The demonstrations and then the conflict had an impact on urban policies, leading to changes in the pace of reform, and more importantly to abrupt swings in policy.

Revolts and acceleration of informal urbanisation

From the very outset of the uprising, illegal construction began to boom: numerous infringements took place in the formal zones while in informal zones construction soared. No survey has put precise figures to this boom, but its existence has nonetheless been confirmed by the inhabitants, by many outside observers and by the constructors themselves operating in the zones concerned, and by satellite images (see figure 4). After some months local urban planners who were interviewed estimated the rate of increase at about 10% in Damascus, basing this figure on visits to the terrains and on photos. This fits in with the increase recorded in sales of cement, which as of April 2011 (480,000 tonnes) had gone up by 115% on the figure for March, according to the records of GOCBM (General Organisation for Cement and Building Materials, the authority supervising the production of cement and construction materials by State-owned companies), in line with increases in the prices of construction materials and labour². In times of trouble, when the currency seems risky, households tend to seek security by diverting investment to real estate. The amplitude of this trend was no doubt increased by the fact that informal construction had been slowed down by implementation of Law 59/2008 on real estate infringements. Households in the neighbourhoods concerned simply put off investment until later. Apparently taking advantage of the fact that the public authorities were busy with the demonstrations and wanted to avoid open conflict between the police and the population, as soon as the troubles started, households put up new buildings and raised the height of existing ones. To limit this activity the Government soon asked the GOCBM to demand construction permits before selling cement to its clients; however, the trend continued notwithstanding³.



Figure 4: Illegal construction began to boom from the very outset of the uprising in 2011, and continued in 2012, as illustrated here on the satellite images of a plot located in Douma (Rif Damascus). Source: @Google Earth snapshots of 09/11/2009, 5/05/2011 and 23/05/2012.

At the onset of the storm (2011 and beginning of 2012): illusions of normality and the exploitation of urban policies

² *Syria Report*, 4 May 2011, "Construction Activity Leads to Surge in Demand for Cement", <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/construction-activity-leads-surge-demand-cement>.

³ *Syria Report*, 4 May 2011, "Construction Activity Leads to Surge in Demand for Cement", <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/construction-activity-leads-surge-demand-cement>.

The year 2011 was marked by the pursuit of existing urban policies, which even gathered speed: despite the revolt, a certain illusion of normality was preserved. Urban programmes were used – inter alia – in an attempt to appease public opinion and turn it in favour of the Government.

The beginning of the protests in Syria soon slowed down, and eventually froze all international cooperation projects in urbanisation. As of Spring 2011, all European experts left the country; the experts from GIZ left in April, the foreigner European Municipal Administration Modernization - MAM programme staff in May; the foreign experts from the Lebanese engineering consulting company Khatib and Alami in charge of the Damascus master plan left in November (they subsequently operated from Beirut). Projects that were still being set up were put on hold. European funding (European Investment Bank EIB/French Institution for Cooperation and Aid- AFD) earmarked for a MAM urban project was frozen and new project agreements – e.g. aid to local administration planned for EIB and AFD for the upgrading of informal settlements in Syria - were simply not signed. As international cooperation programmes with Western countries came to a halt, Syria explored as of 2011 ways to reactivate cooperation with Iran in the fields of construction, housing and urban planning, to benefit from Iranian expertise in these fields⁴

Nonetheless, programmes that had already been launched went on, with local teams continuing the operations. The principal urban policies affecting informal settlements were pursued apace throughout 2011, as though the pursuit of the reforms were playing an essential role in gaining the support of the population, downplaying the importance of the opposition and keeping up continuity in urban policies and in state power. Development of the nationwide policy of upgrading informal settlements, though temporarily slowed in Spring 2011 by the change in Prime Ministers, was pursued during summer, and the policy was adopted in December. As of May 2011, the Regional Planning Commission was working on the definition of a typology of neighbourhoods, and pilot schemes were being studied. And at the end of 2011, it was announced that a public body and a fund “for the development and upgrading of zones of irregular housing” would be established the next year⁵.

Besides this, the studies went on for the Master Plan of the Governorate of Damascus and for the Regional Planning of the Governorate of Rif Damascus, with phases 2 being adopted in autumn; phases 3 were launched. In the Governorate of Damascus, some Detailed Studies were launched again for informal settlements (with re-publication in October 2011 of a call for tenders for the execution of the project for the informal neighbourhoods of Qassioun, Tabbaleh and for King Feisal area). A pilot project was worked out for upgrading on Mount Qassioun. The policy of urban renewal was also pursued, a second series of sites being opened under Law 15; and more importantly, the Public Establishment for Housing was reformed in June 2011 in an attempt to speed up the production of subsidised housing by involving the private sector, to build public

⁴ *Sana* 14/12/2011, “Clôture des réunions du comité de suivi syro-iranien pour la coopération économique” <http://www.sana.sy/fra/51/2011/12/14/388350.htm> and *Sana* 13/12/2011, “Le comité de suivi syro-iranien de la coopération économique examine les perspectives de la coopération bilatérale” <http://www.sana.sy/fra/51/2011/12/13/388059.htm>.

⁵ *Sana* 6/12/2011, Création d'un organisme public et un fonds national pour le développement des régions d'habitat irrégulier, http://www.sana-syria.com/index_fra.html.

housing for rental occupation (decree 76/2011)⁶, and (in February) to open applications for 50,000 subsidised public housing units⁷.

Lastly, though officially major projects developed by private investors are suspended - e.g. the Abraj Souria tower blocks in the city centre came to a halt in autumn 2012⁸- the announcement in June 2011 that work on the major Eighth Gate project by the Dubai's real estate developer Emaar would go ahead, and in August 2011 the announcement by the also Dubai's developer Majid al-Futtaim (MAF) - that work would start on the major mixed-use mega project at Yaafour, Festival City – Khams Shamat (investment estimated at a billion Euros)⁹ sought to give the impression of continuity and economic well-being in the midst of the storm. This went at least until spring 2012, when after it had been announced that the Yaafour Festival City – Khams Shamat project would be suspended, it was subsequently denied, the developer confirming that it had “no plans to exit Syria despite ongoing violent political unrest in the country”, and that it was still progressing with its planned project in the design phase¹⁰. In line with this trend, in December 2011 the Government organised the 7th Forum on investment in tourism, with the Ministry of Tourism proposing some forty projects to investors¹¹, despite the scepticism of the investors who had been invited. The announcements concerning investment then continued. The government announced that 25 industrial townships would be launched and that the Syrian Investment Commission had approved the establishment of 180 investment projects with the amount of more than a billion dollars¹².

In actual fact, however, the impact of the Arab revolutions on urban policies, projects and programmes could be felt in Damascus through a social reorientation of housing policies, even before the outbreak of demonstrations in Syria. In January 2011, following the fall of President Ben Ali in Tunisia, and as massive demonstrations started in Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Governorate of Damascus gave additional social emphasis to the discourse accompanying the new master plan. In dealing with informal neighbourhoods, the authorities lost no time in paying greater attention to the social acceptability of its plans. They immediately asked the team responsible for the Master Plan of Damascus to plan a higher proportion (60%) of informal settlements to be upgraded than it was considered previously. At the time the Arab Spring seemed to be contagious, and though in Syria demonstrations had not yet started, it seemed important to avoid any social conflict that could trigger them off. With this in mind, the Syrian Government adopted

⁶ *Sana* 28/06/2011, http://www.sana-syria.com/index_fra.html.

⁷ *Sana* 22/01/2012, “Le ministère de l'Habitat annonce la souscription au projet de /50/ mille logements dans les gouvernorats syriens”, <http://www.sana.sy/fra/51/2012/01/22/395851.htm>.

⁸ *Syria Report* 08/10/2012 “Abraj Souria Project Suspended”, <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/abraj-souria-project-suspended>.

⁹ <http://www.ameinfo.com/272040.html>

¹⁰ It is only in autumn 2013 that MAF announced that it will not pursue investments in Egypt and Syria until stability returns to the two countries. *Syria Report* 27/03/2012, “MAF Suspends Yaafour Development”, <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/maf-suspends-yaafour-development>, *Syria report* 30/04/2012, “Khams Shamat Development Awaits Contractors”, <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/khams-shamat-development-awaits-contractors>, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/maf-committed-syria-despite-violent-unrest-455451.html> and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/28/us-emirates-retail-idUSBRE98R07820130928>.

¹¹ *Sana* 5/12/2011, “7ème Forum touristique propose 40 nouveaux projets à travers les gouvernorats du pays”, http://www.sana-syria.com/index_fra.html.

¹² *Sana* 15/01/2012, “Vers la construction de 25 nouvelles cités industrielles” and *Sana* 17/01/2012 “La commission syrienne de l'Investissement a approuvé en 2011 l'établissement de 180 projets” <http://www.sana.sy/fra/57/2012/01/17/394984.htm>.

(in mid-February 2011) yet further social measures, cutting e.g. the taxes on food staples, raising subsidies for fuel, implementing the social aid fund to benefit some 500,000 people, and hiring an additional 67,000 government employees. This reorientation of urban policy towards informal settlements was subsequently confirmed: by December 2011 the upgrading of a large majority of informal settlements was seriously examined; in March 2012 even, an option in favour of their legalisation was announced by the Governor; in May 2012, with the exception of a few areas due for renewal in the city centre - in particular around the future railway stations and near major urban institutions, such as the Presidency of Council of Ministers - all informal neighbourhoods were announced to be awaiting for upgrading and legalisation.

In the midst of hostilities (2012-2013): intervention in the city as remedy for crisis, as preparation for reconstruction and as a weapon in the war

As of 2012, planners' intervention in the informal settlements was to change radically once again. On the one hand, a number of decisions were made to indemnify the victims of destruction and to prepare the way for reconstruction. On the other hand, the authorities used urban planning as a weapon, not only by destroying opponents' houses and bombarding the quarters held by the armed opposition, but also by drawing up projects for urban renewal (i.e. demolition and reconstruction) of specific neighbourhoods.

As of spring 2012, extensive demolition of the urban environment started in combat zones. Urban zones were subjected to bombardment and saw armed combat, undergoing large-scale destruction that pushed whole communities to the brink of collapse. Public areas and basic utilities (water, electricity, health and educational facilities) were to a large extent destroyed, exacerbating pre-existing hardships, and very numerous housing units were destroyed, either partially or totally, though it is not possible to tell exactly how many. Some figures show their extent. The loss due to the partial or full damage to capital stock incurred as a result of the conflict (destroyed firms, equipment and buildings) until end of 2012 have been estimated 20.8 billion USD in January 2013 by the Syrian Center for Policy Research [SCPR 2013]. And in May 2013 the United Nations, working through the UN Economic Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), estimated that almost a third of housing units, i.e. 1.2 million, had been affected by the conflict¹³. This figure would seem to be an upper limit in the band of fluctuation, taking account of the fact that at the same date, some 1,2 million refugees¹⁴ and 4,25 millions internally displaced people¹⁵ had left their homes (i.e. some 1,1 million housing units). Premises left vacant were in some cases partially or completely destroyed, but often they were simply rented out, occupied illegally, rented out or sold by persons other than the legal owners, or in some cases even sold simultaneously to

¹³ They correspond to 400 000 housing units completely destroyed, 300 000 partially destroyed, and 500 000 having suffered structural damage (*Reuters*, cited by *Syria Report*, 13/05/2013, « Demand for Cement to Surge Threefold Post Conflict », <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/demand-cement-surge-threefold-post-conflict>). In 2010 there were 4.1 million housing units in Syria (Central Bureau of Statistics). As things stand at the end of 2013, these estimates cannot be confirmed.

¹⁴ In April 2013, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. In November 2013, the number of refugees registered at the HCR has reached more than 2 millions refugees, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> [accessed 4 November 2013].

¹⁵ UN estimate, by April 2013, among which more than 170 000 (4,1%) live in public shelters, according to the Ministry of Local Administration, <http://syria.unocha.org/>, [accessed 4 November 2013].

several different persons [Hassan 2012]. Most destruction of housing apparently took place in the informal parts of zones affected by the conflict, near the principal cities: Homs, Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa and Deir ez-Zor¹⁶. Around Damascus, East Ghouta and the informal settlements to the south and southeast seem to be those most affected.

On the one hand, from 2012 onwards, the order of the day was to be reconstruction, construction of housing, and investment. At a local level, the interventions were limited to emergency services and infrastructure work (electrical and hydraulic networks, solid waste, sanitation, medical and educational services, police), both in zones under control of the government and in those under control of the opposition, through the local councils [Baszko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2013]. At a national level, a reorganisation of government administration provided for a major Ministry of Housing to be set up in Autumn 2012; it was to be in charge not only of housing and the Public Establishment for Housing, but also (once again) of urban planning, together with regional planning and informal settlements (infrastructure was to be assigned to another ministry). Work on planning would have to be resumed. Laws were passed to provide a better framework for investment and to stimulate it. Thus in Spring 2012, a law was passed to enable mortgage funding, and to authorise the establishment of companies to finance and refinance real estate projects: public limited companies, and companies refinancing real estate held either privately or jointly¹⁷. At this juncture the Real Estate and Development Investment Company set up in 2008 approved 35 real estate development companies¹⁸. Several measures concerned housing provisions. At the beginning of 2012, the Ministry of Housing and Construction officially launched a new construction programme for 50,000 low-cost housing units¹⁹. Reconstruction indemnities were earmarked for persons who had suffered damage and a reconstruction commission set aside a billion Syrian pounds (20 million USD) for the year 2012 to compensate citizens for the damage they had incurred (advancing 50% of the evaluation)²⁰.

On the other hand, however, and whatever the parties to the conflict, destruction is used against adversaries: buildings are destroyed, and even entire neighbourhoods were bombarded and/or wiped out to get rid of combatants and their possible supporters, or simply to gain control of strategic positions. UN reports on war crimes document cases in which Government forces and affiliated militia intentionally burned and destroyed the homes and businesses believed to belong to suspected anti-Government activists and their supporters during raids. Overt destruction included burning, the use of explosives, and could inflict damage beyond repair. Looting was a frequent precursor to destruction (United Nations General Assembly 2013).

¹⁶ *ANSAMed*, cited by *Syria Report* 10/04/2013 "A Third of Syria's Housing Damaged or Destroyed by Conflict », <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/third-syria%E2%80%99s-housing-damaged-or-destroyed-conflict>.

¹⁷ *Sana* 10/04/2012, "Le président al-Assad promulgue une loi sur la fondation de sociétés de (re)financement immobilier", <http://www.sana.sy/fra/51/2012/04/02/410094.htm>.

¹⁸ *Syria Report* 26/02/2012 "REDIC Licensed 35 Real Estate Development Companies », <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/redic-licensed-35-real-estate-development-companies>.

¹⁹ *Sana* 23/01/2012, Le ministère de l'Habitat annonce la souscription au projet de /50/ mille logements dans les gouvernorats syriens, <http://www.sana.sy/fra/51/2012/01/22/395851.htm>.

²⁰ *Sana* 04/10/2012, <http://sana.sy/fra/51/2012/10/14/447066.htm>.



At top, the area of Damascus known as Tadamon, as it appeared on 22 August 2011. By 3 January 2013, at bottom, large portions of the neighborhood had been razed. UNOSAT analysis estimates that almost 1,000 structures in the area were destroyed by demolition. Images copyright 2013 DigitalGlobe; image from 22 August 2011 obtained from Google Earth.

Figure 5: Satellite images presented by the *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (February 2013) to show the demolition of part of the informal neighbourhood of Tadamon, in Damascus.

Moreover, urban planning and laws towards informal settlements are used as a weapon in the conflict. Besides the bombardments, or following them, bulldozing opponents' houses was a regular practice, as has been documented by the UN Commission of Enquiry. Witnesses in Damascus during summer 2012 also mentioned seeing Governorate employees using land survey registers to pinpoint houses to be destroyed in informal neighbourhoods near Kafar Souseh. Sometimes entire neighbourhoods were targeted. "Instances of razing in urban locations in Syria were documented. Typically, after shelling and bombarding an area, Government forces moved in with bulldozers and razed hundreds of civilian homes in residential areas (...) In summer 2012, 300 homes were destroyed by explosives and bulldozers in [the informal neighbourhood of] Al-Tadamon, Damascus. The razing followed shelling, which had caused the residents to flee. Anti-Government groups may have staged attacks from Al-Tadamon. Satellite imagery showed approximately 1,000 structures destroyed (see

Figure 5). [The informal neighbourhood of] Qaboon, north of Damascus (October), experienced the same (...) The Government justified the above-mentioned demolitions as [there were allegedly] pre-existing urban plans to remove illegal buildings” (United Nations General Assembly 2013, p.23).

Plans and projects were now transformed into arguments - and even weapons - in favour of, or to actually bring about the lawful demolition of entire neighbourhoods. In May 2012, a new decree came to reinforce this tendency. It again prohibited further construction in these neighbourhoods, ordering, as of the date of the decree, the demolition of all unauthorised buildings, and making provision for sanctions, fines and prison sentences to be imposed on all persons convicted of involvement in the construction concerned, including even officials who had failed to prevent the infringements (decree N°40, 20/05/2012). Besides this, implementation of national policy on the treatment of informal zones went ahead, with ten billion Syrian pounds in the budget for 2012 earmarked for the treatment.

Lastly, the re-launching in autumn 2012 of the Detailed Studies projects concerning Southern Damascus sprang from thinking that was largely geo-strategic in nature. This reactivation raises once again the option of urban renewal (i.e. demolition for reconstruction) of the informal neighbourhoods. The two contiguous zones proposed for upgrading in Decree N°66 issued on 20 September 2012 correspond to the “Detailed Studies” of Zone 4 (253 hectares) comprising inter alia the informal neighbourhoods of Mezzeh, situated behind the Razi hospital, and Zones 9 and 16 (857 hectares), south of the peripheral road, comprising the informal neighbourhoods of Dahadil, Nahr Aicheh, Louan and Qadam (see figure 6). The Governorate had launched these studies in 2007, instructing at the time consultants in charge of them to plan for urban renewal. Subsequently in 2009 these studies were suspended pending completion of the Damascus master plan that had been launched in the meantime; the master plan was to decide which zones were to be rehabilitated and which renovated. The new 2012 decree reactivated the suspended projects and determined that the zones be redeveloped (i.e. demolition and reconstruction) within five years, including modalities to indemnify and re-house inhabitants temporarily, despite the overall shortage of housing. Owners of the sites expropriated were to be compensated (it should be noted that compensation in projects of this type is markedly under-assessed and is generally considered to be unfair). Government officials announced that other zones were also being targeted, such as Jobar, also well known for its opposition to the regime, and also previously the object of a detailed study.



Figure 6: This urban renewal project is designed to replace the informal neighbourhoods of Mezzeh behind Razi, Dahadil, Nahr Aicheh, Louan and Qadam. Launched in 2007, then suspended in 2009 for the time of the studies for the Master Plan of Damascus, it was reactivated in autumn 2012 (Decree N°66) and began implementation through the demolition of the informal settlements. Source: http://www.syriandays.com/?page=show_det&select_page=49&id=33964

In the event of rebuilding of the city, the renewal option (demolition and reconstruction) of these sites will probably turn out to be the more relevant of the two if these neighbourhoods are destroyed by war. Here it is far from being the case. On the contrary, this project appears to be a planned demolition, carried out as part of military strategy, with a view to rebuilding in line with a complex of political and financial interests. As the press reported, the destruction of these quarters, where since March 2011 so many demonstrations had taken place, gave the impression that they had been selected in order to punish the population and demolish areas that had sheltered opponents of the regime²¹. The Government's aim would have been to gain complete control of this space, a vulnerable link in the military chain holding down Damascus: a key point of access to the city for armed adversaries of the regime, and the site of many battles. Moreover, the area is adjacent to the new buildings belonging to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers; it is thus strategic from both a political and an economic point of view. Informally used land, well-situated but only sparsely populated, near the affluent neighbourhood of Kafar Sousseh, it is said to be already the object of numerous real-estate transactions - not to speak of illegal appropriations.

Conclusion

Before the demonstrations broke out, there was already competition between two types of urban policy concerning informal settlements in Damascus: renewal and upgrading. The beginnings of the uprising and the political crisis in Syria led the authorities to modify their stance, as they aimed at creating the illusion that despite the agitation, things were still quite normal. However, they subsequently used urban policies to bolster the regime. In the early stages, this led the Governorate of Damascus to prioritise

²¹ *Syria Report* 17/12/2012, "Government Says to Start Work on Rebuilding Two Damascus Districts », <http://www.syria-report.com/news/real-estate/government-says-start-work-rebuilding-two-damascus-districts>

the option that was most acceptable from a social point of view: upgrading. Announcing rehabilitation of informal neighbourhoods, however, had no effect on the development of the crisis. Nor did the legislative context and the tools for urban planning undergo any noteworthy development. Administrative bodies and local professionals who had remained in the area continued to put forward their usual ideas; political players simply stuck to their accustomed long-term vision. The re-orientation towards upgrading as a more social option was mainly to an announcement effect aimed at appeasing a radicalised social demand. And the pursuit of urban-planning policies served as a tool for the Government's strategy, at a time when events were transforming the very basis of urban policies.

The fact remains that both the 2011 building boom in informal settlements, and the widespread destruction of many of these quarters in the course of combats as of 2012 bring back the basic question: what should be done about these zones? The first trends responded to social demand; but subsequently, in the midst of war, the authorities' attitude was dominated less by concern for the image of the regime than by considerations of military strategy. Local professionals have commented ironically not only on the military and politically targeted nature of the demolitions, but also on the urban planning targeted nature of the military destruction of informal settlements. In actual fact, as the planning itself, far from being neutral, was being used as a military tool, some planners and inhabitants suspected the war destruction being used to accelerate urban planning decisions. And indeed, the wholesale demolition of entire neighbourhoods, both formal and informal, has now completely transformed the planning issues of the future. As to informal settlements, the fact that entire zones have been wiped out lends unprecedented weight to an option in favour of urban renewal. Reconstruction of Syria and its cities will make the country an enormous worksite in which the issue of informal settlements, whether demolished or not, will be raised in completely different terms.

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