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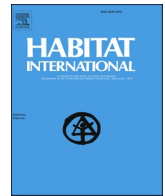
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# The war-time urban development of Damascus: How the geography- and political economy of warfare affects housing patterns

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## ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2019, the Syrian civil war has entered its eight year. Although the heaviest fighting has taken place elsewhere, Damascus is heavily affected by the ongoing conflict. First, large parts of the eastern and southern fringe of the city are heavily damaged or destroyed. Second, the inflow of internally displaced persons is large, which has resulted in a very tense housing market in the undamaged districts. Third, the war-time political economy has changed the role of public and private actors in spatial planning and housing provision. This paper shows how the geography- and political economy of warfare has impacted upon residential patterns and housing practices in Damascus during the civil war. The empirical results are based on satellite imagery, policy documents and a survey among spatial planning experts and students. The results indicate that the formal response to the housing crisis consists of a reinforcement of the existing authoritarian neo-liberal planning model. This model has resulted in the construction of unaffordable luxurious showcase projects at symbolic locations. The informal response to the housing crisis is more pronounced. Alternative housing strategies, such as self-construction, family housing, squatting and sub-letting have increased in popularity, as the formal response does not deliver immediate relief for war-affected households. The use of alternative housing strategies is concentrated in the existing informal settlements. This suggests that the civil war exacerbates housing poverty, but as well contributes to rising levels of socio-economic segregation.

## 1. Introduction

As a result of the ongoing war in Syria, Damascus has gained the reputation of a place of devastation and human suffering due to violent clashes between government forces and rebel militias. Although the armed conflict has ended in the surroundings of the capital city, it has left tremendous scars in the social structure and the urban fabric: a majority of homes in the Eastern and Southeastern fringe of the city are destroyed or severely damaged, whilst other parts of the city have absorbed nearly a million domestic migrants who fled from other parts of the Syrian territory (UNHCR, 2018). While the war is still ongoing in other parts of the country, residents repair their damaged homes, and consortia of public and private parties are in the middle of planning new housing developments (Batraoui, 2018). One thing is obvious: post-war Damascus will not be a replica of its past, as 1) the geography of warfare has reshuffled households across space, and 2) the political-economy of warfare has altered the power balance between actors involved in urban planning and housing development. In this

paper we describe and explain geographical patterns of destruction, reconstruction and housing practices in Damascus in 2019, less than one year after the city has been brought back under government control.

Scholarly attention for post-war reconstruction activities within the field of urban planning is generally limited to practices and strategies employed by international donors in the *post-war phase* (Barakat & Zyck, 2009; Boussauw, 2012; Fitzpatrick & McWilliam, 2016; Pantuliano, 2009). Most studies are carried out in countries where UN-Habitat and other international organizations have supported local governments with developing effective urban planning frameworks, such as Lebanon, Palestine, Kosovo, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Iraq and Afghanistan. Their findings highlight the importance of more transparent and uniform planning regulations for the return of refugees or IDPs, reconciliation between population groups, local entrepreneurship and the social and environmental resilience of local communities (Barakat, Elkahout, & Jacoby, 2004; Barakat & Zyck, 2011; Black, 2001; Cain, 2007). Together, these studies give insight in the strategies through which international donors are able to successfully contribute to capacity

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**Image 1.** Damascus' western suburb of Al-Mazzeah, built in line with modernist principles. Photo: Barend Wind (2018).

building of local planners by using participatory planning models. However, it could be argued that the involvement of international planners is 'too little too late'. Too often a war is simply understood as a period of stagnation, whereas the proto- or pseudo-markets that arise *during* any conflict have a lasting impact upon the post-war development (see e.g. Halaf & Khoury, 1993). Many socio-spatial problems in post-war situations could have been prevented if a different policy path would have been followed from an early stage onwards (Minervini, 2002; Brundiers & Odermatt, 2002; D'Hondt, 2012; Fitzpatrick & McWilliam, 2016). Focusing on geographical patterns of destruction, reconstruction and housing practices and their institutional causes in Damascus, allows us to 1) gain an understanding of reconstruction without much international interference, and 2) to study 'early' reconstruction practices, which might contribute to the formulation of more effective 'building back better' strategies in a later stage.

Scholars from the field of International Relations reflect on the involvement of foreign and international actors in post-war reconstruction activities as a proxy to test the power balance between the involved domestic and foreign actors. After nearly every war, spatial planning is a political continuation of the conflict though which several involved groups make land- and development claims at the expense of the others. The involvement of Hezbollah in Lebanon's post-war reconstruction is a textbook example (Hamieh & Mac Ginty, 2010). Furthermore, the creation of more compatible institutional regimes is often an implicit aim of the involvement of international actors. The 'Western approach' that has been dominant in recent decades is criticized for striving towards integration in the neo-liberal Anglosaxon world order by contributing to establishing a "market-based capitalist economic system, twinned with a political regime that is willing to promote and defend free market capitalism" (Guttal, 2005, p. 73). Urban geographers have pointed out that many states in the Middle East have recently developed their own, distinct model of neo-liberalism: authoritarian, oil-funded and with an interventionist state (Daher, 2013; Elsheshtawy, 2008; Wippel, Bromber, & Krawietz, 2016). Before the war, the political economy of housing and welfare has developed in this direction (see e.g. Clerc, 2014; Goulden, 2011). Our study shows

which housing patterns this regime, that has emerged in absence of Western interference, produces.

In this article, we investigate geographical patterns of destruction, reconstruction and housing practices in Damascus, based on multiple sources of information, ranging from (historic) policy documents and official statistics to satellite imagery and a self-collected small-scale survey. The ongoing conflict limits the availability and reliability of official information. We overcome this bias by comparing information from multiple sources. Notwithstanding the restrictive attitude of the authorities, we have coordinated a small-scale survey among spatial planning students and experts in Damascus in 2019 (N = 234). The results show which districts are perceived to be home to several alternative housing strategies. Together with 'objective' information from satellite imagery showing destruction and (re)construction, this enables us to document how the civil war has affected housing patterns. We present several maps showing which neighborhoods have absorbed internally displaced persons (IDP's) and their housing practices, such as informal self-construction, squatting, co-residence with family members, private renting, et cetera. We explain the changing geography of housing in Damascus on the basis of (historic) developments in spatial planning and housing policy.

### 1.1. The historic origins of segregation

The most recent pre-war sources describing ethnic- and socio-economic segregation in Damascus (see Clerc & Hurault, 2010; Fuccaro, 2003; Goulden, 2011; Naito, 1988), describe the city as a patchwork of higher-status formally-built neighborhoods and lower-status informally-built neighborhoods. Whereas the city is mixed in ethnic terms, several neighborhoods have a historic overrepresentation of minority groups such as Assyrian and Eastern Orthodox Christians, Shia Muslims, Alawites, Druzes or Kurds (Fuccaro, 2003; Naito, 1988). The origin of these ethnic- and socio-economic segregation patterns can be found in the institutional approach to planning and housing followed by the empires that have ruled the city since its foundation 4000 years ago (Ancient Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyads and Ottomans).

The foundation of Syria's current housing regime can be traced back to the Umayyad empire, the first Islamic rulers of Syria in the seventh century. After the establishment sharia-based urban legislations, the role of family-owned private property became a leading development principle. The municipal authorities for spatial planning and civic affairs were abolished and decision-making powers decentralized to Islamic courts, that allowed for any form of development accepted by the neighbors. Because no new extensions of the city were planned, this resulted in a rapid and semi-formal densification of the city (Lababedi, 2008). Large residential complexes, were several generations and family branches lived together emerged, fueled by the Islamic tradition that distributes ownership shares of the family home across all sons after the death of the head of the family (Burns, 2007). During the Umayyad period, many Christian churches (often built on the remains of Roman temples) were transformed into mosques, and the Christian minority retreated into the southwestern quarter of the old city (where the population is still predominantly Christian).

The first forms of large-scale socio-economic segregation emerged when Syria was part of the Ottoman empire (1516–1919). After 1860, the Ottoman empire began a modernization campaign resulting in the construction of several modern neighborhoods with well-sanitized stone houses, connected with geometric streets, boulevards and railways. Examples are Sarouja and Oukaibeh north of the Old City, and Muhajereen as luxurious suburb located on mount Qasioun, with a view over the noisy and polluted Old City. Based on the feudal 'timar system', property rights developed further, which increased speculation with real estate (read: ownership shares in residential properties) because it became widely considered as a financial security for times of economic instability (Al-Qattan, 2002; Mundy & Smith, 2007).

A European approach to planning and housing was introduced to

Damascus during the period of the French mandate (1919–1948). The colonial administration aimed to increase the quality of life and to make the city more ‘governable’ by putting an end to the organic growth of the city, using socio-spatial analyses and urban design (Khoury, 1984). The colonial administration introduced the distinction between formal and informal housing construction in a city that until then grew informally. However, the new regulations and plans could not put an end to the practice of self-construction without a building permit (Verdeil, 2012). In 1935, René Danger drew the first masterplan for Damascus, envisioning French-style neighborhoods with a high level of public facilities. Malky, north of the Old City is an example of such a neighborhood, which has developed into a second city center (Stockhammer & Wild, 2009). The masterplan could be enforced due to the implementation of several institutional changes (e.g. the Law on the Organisation and Construction of Cities [1933], Municipalities Financial Law [1938], and City Building Regulation Law [1938]).

### 1.2. The Ba’athist housing model

The spatial planning and housing policies implemented after the recognition of Syria as an autonomous republic in 1946 form the foundation for the pre-war housing practices and segregation patterns. In the first decades after independence, French planners (most notably Michel Ecochard) remained involved in city planning in Syria. Following the establishment of the short-lived Ba’athist Egyptian-Syrian state in 1958, which was based on Arab nationalism with a socialist flavor, Ecochard was asked to draw a new masterplan for Damascus. His efforts continued after the establishment of the Syrian Arab Republic in 1963, which came into being after a coup d’état of the Syrian branch of the Ba’ath party. In the first decades of Ba’athist rule, many legislations surrounding spatial planning and housing were adopted, that have had a lasting impact on levels of housing quality, affordability and segregation.

The context in which the aforementioned 1968 masterplan is written, differs radically from the former colonial context, but is simultaneously a continuation of modernist city planning. The main aim has shifted to the “modernization of Syria according to socialist and collectivist options. A moderate form of market socialism emerged in which banks, insurance companies and industries of national importance were nationalized and a planning monopoly was established. The modernization of agriculture pushed people away from their rural homelands, and the absorption of refugees from the region (Palestine, Iraq, Golan Heights) intensified migration towards the bigger cities (Al-Haysom & Pavanello, 2011). At least on paper, planning was considered as an instrument to achieve balanced urban growth. The tandem of urbanization and industrialization yielded positive outcomes: the “GDP per capita increased nearly 10-fold, longevity rose by 28 per cent, infant mortality declined by 76 per cent, and adult literacy rose by 40 per cent” (Goulden, 2011, p. 192).

In order to understand the war-time changes in the housing- and planning regime, we provide a detailed summary of the legal backbone of the regulations that underpin the execution of the first post-independence masterplan of Damascus. First, Law 9/1974 provides tools to local authorities to apply the masterplan on the designated areas. With an additional decree they can include new ‘urban expansion areas’ into the existing general plans. The law on urban planning (law 5/1982) requires that all cities develop general and detailed master plans: blue prints on the basis of which new developments can be approved or declined. However, as no new masterplans have been ratified after 1968, law 9/1974 is a much-used instrument for new extensions of the city. The law on expropriation (20/1983) and ‘planning and construction’ (law 60/1979; 26/2000; 23/2015) position the local administration in a favorable position to develop areas that are included in the master plan. The laws allow public authorities to expropriate land for new (residential or industrial) developments for the estimated agricultural value of the land, or to reserve a share of the private development land for public facilities. A recent interpretation of expropriation and planning law

stipulates that local authorities can transform ownership rights into ownership shares of the new development, while keeping one third of the shares in public hands as a reward for the investments in public infrastructure such as roads, sewage, schools, etc (McAuslan, 2008).

The framework regulating the production of housing within the designated extension areas in the masterplan resembles the approach followed by other market-socialist countries such as Yugoslavia until 1990 (see Image 1). Within the extensions of the city envisioned in the Masterplan, four groups of actors could commission the construction of housing: (publicly-owned) companies, cooperatives, the state, and individuals. From the 1990s onwards, a fifth actor entered the scene: private developers. However, due to the generous opportunities for land expropriation and artificially low construction costs, developers of housing could construct relatively affordable housing. Most units are built in the homeownership sector (more than 75%), a minority in the rental sector (less than 25%). On paper, Syria has a high level of tenure security in the rental sector. Furthermore, rents were regulated on the basis of the estimated production costs of housing, while furthermore limiting the yearly increase in rent. McAuslan (2008) concludes that the legal framework based on below-market-price appropriation of land for new developments by local authorities has resulted in an over-consumption and inefficient use of land, as there is no market incentive to build higher densities. Furthermore, the legal system provides no incentive to produce housing in times of housing shortage, resulting in a continuation of informal construction on agricultural land, outside the boundaries of the masterplan.

The impact of the socialist-inspired spatial planning and housing model, can clearly be seen in the spatial form of the neighborhoods that are built between the 1960s and the 1990s (Mazze, Al-Mazraa, Al-Koussour and parts of Baramkeh). At the time, the Syrian government developed links with the socialist countries and Bulgarian and Polish experts were appointed in various administrations, including the planning one” (Verdeil, 2012). It is therefore not surprising that new city extensions from that period resemble the *mikrorayons* of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. They consist of well-designed concrete residential blocks, profiting from maximum sun light, centered around collective or public court yards or commercial and cultural facilities.

The insufficiencies of the socialist-inspired spatial planning and housing model can be concluded from the continuous increase of informal construction. As Damascus grew from 423.000 inhabitants in 1955 to nearly three million in 1980, legal housing construction has proven to be insufficient to absorb all rural-urban migrants. To protect the Ghouta oasis, on which the city depends for clean water and food supplies, the government issues a ban on new construction in this area in 1977, in line with Ecochard’s 1968 masterplan. However, informal construction continued: between 1981 and 1994, informal self-construction accounted for 65% of the total building activity. Following UN-Habitat’s definition of a slum, most informally-constructed neighborhoods in Damascus cannot be considered as such, as the building quality and sanitation situation is acceptable (Clerc & Hurault, 2010). Six-story buildings, constructed from concrete bricks are no exception in e.g. the western suburb of *Mazze* 86. In legal terms, inhabitants of informal settlements on private land enjoy a considerable degree of tenure security, as the municipality is obliged to offer alternative housing to the inhabitants of informal settlements in case the area they occupy would be expropriated and redeveloped. Prior to the beginning of the armed conflict, the main issue in Damascus’ informally-built neighborhoods was therefore not slum-formation, but the inadequate public facilities in these areas (as the number of schools and health care facilities was generally determined on the basis of a much smaller population) (Fernandes, 2008).

The legal framework that came into being during the French mandate and the post-independence period has generated considerable levels of socio-economic and ethnic segregation. Naito (1988) shows that various waves of migrants ended up in different neighborhoods of

Damascus. The Christian minority, with a centuries-long presence in the city, kept concentrated in the eastern part of the Old City, and the neighborhoods north of the Old City. During the period of Syrian independence, many Alawites moved from the coastal region to Damascus, as they took a more prominent role in the public service and the army. This resulted in an overrepresentation of Alawites in the formally-constructed western suburb Al-Mazzeh' and the informally-constructed suburb 'Mazzeh 86', located next to an important army base. Simultaneously, Druze families settled in the southern suburb 'Jaramana', whereas Palestinian refugees found a home in the Yarmouk camp that over time developed into a permanent (but informally-built) neighborhood (Naito, 1988). After the 1983 drought in Jazira, many Kurdish families migrated to the informally-constructed Akrad/Rukn Eddin suburb (for centuries the Kurdish base in Damascus) on the slope of mount Qasioun. As Syria's housing regime is strongly family-based and residential mobility is limited, there is no evidence that patterns of residential segregation have weakened over time (Fuccaro, 2003).

The Ba'athist spatial planning and housing regime has generated its own segregation pattern, as government employees, army personnel, (industrial) workers from 'competitive' firms, and other prioritized groups could get their hand on affordable apartments constructed by their employer (often in well-planned new developments), whereas a large share of the rural-urban migrants have fulfilled their housing need through informal housing construction. The combination of 'spontaneous' urbanization, resulting in ethnic segregation, and 'planned' urbanization, resulting in socio-economic segregation has led to patchwork of segregation both on the level of the metropolitan scale (higher status areas in the western part of the city, lower status areas in the eastern part of the city), and the district level (many districts are made up from both informal and formal neighborhoods).

### 1.3. The neoliberal housing model

Since the 1990s, the spatial planning and housing regime has changed as a result of liberalizations in different domains of the economy. In 1991 a law was passed to encourage foreign direct investment (Law 10/1991). In 2001, this law was amended to ease the requirements for foreigners to invest in (non-residential) real-estate (Decree 8/2007). Furthermore, investments in rental housing have become more attractive as "private rental laws which for so long made renting unappealing to property owners are being phased out, with traditional protections to renters disappearing [Law 6/2001]" (Goulden, 2011, p. 197). Market liberalizations have boosted the economy that already slumped since the 1980s, but have as well resulted in an upswing of income inequality (Gini-coefficient of 35,8 in 2004).

The partial liberalization of the economy has generated two mismatches: 1) between below-market price expropriation and market-based house prices, and 2) between low disposable incomes of average households and high housing costs. Whereas below-market price expropriation in previous times was considered to be in the public interest as a tool to foster the construction of affordable housing (see for a critic: McAuslan, 2008), the same legal framework became a profit-making tool for the private developers after the turn of the century. As a result, large investor groups from the Arab states have invested millions in flagship projects, of which many are not finished due to the outbreak of the civil war (Clerc & Hurault, 2010). The profitability of rental housing has increased as a result of the deregulation of rent-setting (Law 6/2001). Citizens have paid a high price for the partial liberalization of the economy. Between 2004 and 2006, property prices in Syria increased with 300%, at attractive locations even far more (Goulden, 2011). The liberalization of the economy hampered the construction of affordable housing in another way: as public companies, cooperatives and the state (the three main providers of housing in the Ba'athist welfare state) found their revenues under pressure due to increased international competition, they could not produce the number

of homes they did before.

Informal construction of housing has spiked under the neoliberal housing regime that has emerged in the 2000s. Although Law 1/2003 promised harsh measures on informal construction (high fines, demolition, etc.), informal construction continued due to the large gap between the low average income and the high market price for legally-constructed housing within the perimeters of the masterplan. Goulden (2011) describes this as inherent to the neoliberal transformation of the (late) Ba'athist welfare state: economic growth due to neoliberal reforms could *only* take place by allowing more informal construction. Namely, the increase of property values based on the purchasing power of those included in the international economy fuels the GDP, whereas informal construction is the cheapest option to those who work in the domestic economy, or provide services to those who are included in the international economy. Furthermore, by housing them in an informal housing market segment, their mobility on the housing market does not affect the prices in the formal housing market (Goulden, 2011). Clerc and Hurault (2010) are more nuanced in their formulation and argue that the social logic of welfare has come to collide with the economic logic of private investment. Although the economic logic has become more prominent, the city of Damascus has promoted the construction of affordable housing through social- and cooperative housing schemes in the first decade of the new millennium, following a 'social logic of welfare'. However, these affordable housing strategies are mainly targeted at the middle class, and take a long time before they are realized. Therefore, they de facto exclude rural-urban migrants.

During the rise of the neoliberal housing model, a new geographysy of housing has emerged: rising house prices and limited authorized housing production have pushed (domestic) migrants with low- and moderate incomes into informal settlements at the fringes of the city, including the Ghouta Oasis, Harasta and Douma (Clerc, 2014). A new masterplan, prepared in 2011, attempts to get a grip on informality, but has never approved due to the outbreak of the civil war (when the Lebanese company that prepared the plan left the country). The proposed masterplan envisioned investment in 'satellite cities' in the city's fringes, such as Yaafour, Dummar, Douma and Sahnaya. Furthermore, it proposed the westward extension of the city center, a 'business corridor along the highway to Jordan, and the development of mixed-use developments south- and southwest of the extended city center. In the strategic plans, special attention was paid to the informal settlements. Some are designated to be subjected to urban renewal (demolish-rebuild) whereas others are planned to be upgraded and legalized. The decision to upgrade or renew is based on an analysis of the quality of the housing units and infrastructure, carried out by the Regional Planning Commission. However, decisions about upgrading are often postponed (Clerc, 2014). Furthermore, strategic considerations play a role, as some of the informal settlements occupy spaces that are envisioned in the masterplan as mixed-use (internationally-competitive) developments or satellite towns. Because the Masterplan was never approved, the old Masterplan is changed to include some of the envisioned developments.

### 1.4. A geography of warfare

In the beginning of 2011, the 'Arab spring' inspired protesters in several Syrian cities to demand more freedom of expression, institutional reforms, and a revocation of the state of emergency (in place since 1963). When these protests turned into an armed rebellion, the center of gravity came to be located in the informal settlements (and several regular neighborhoods with a low socio-economic status). This is not surprising, as they were home to a large group of households that had not profited from the economic liberalizations of the first decade of the 21st century, while simultaneously being confronted with lower levels of social support and higher prices for basic necessities (Clerc, 2014). After an increasingly violent period of protests, a chaotic period followed in which several armed rebel fractions took control of large parts

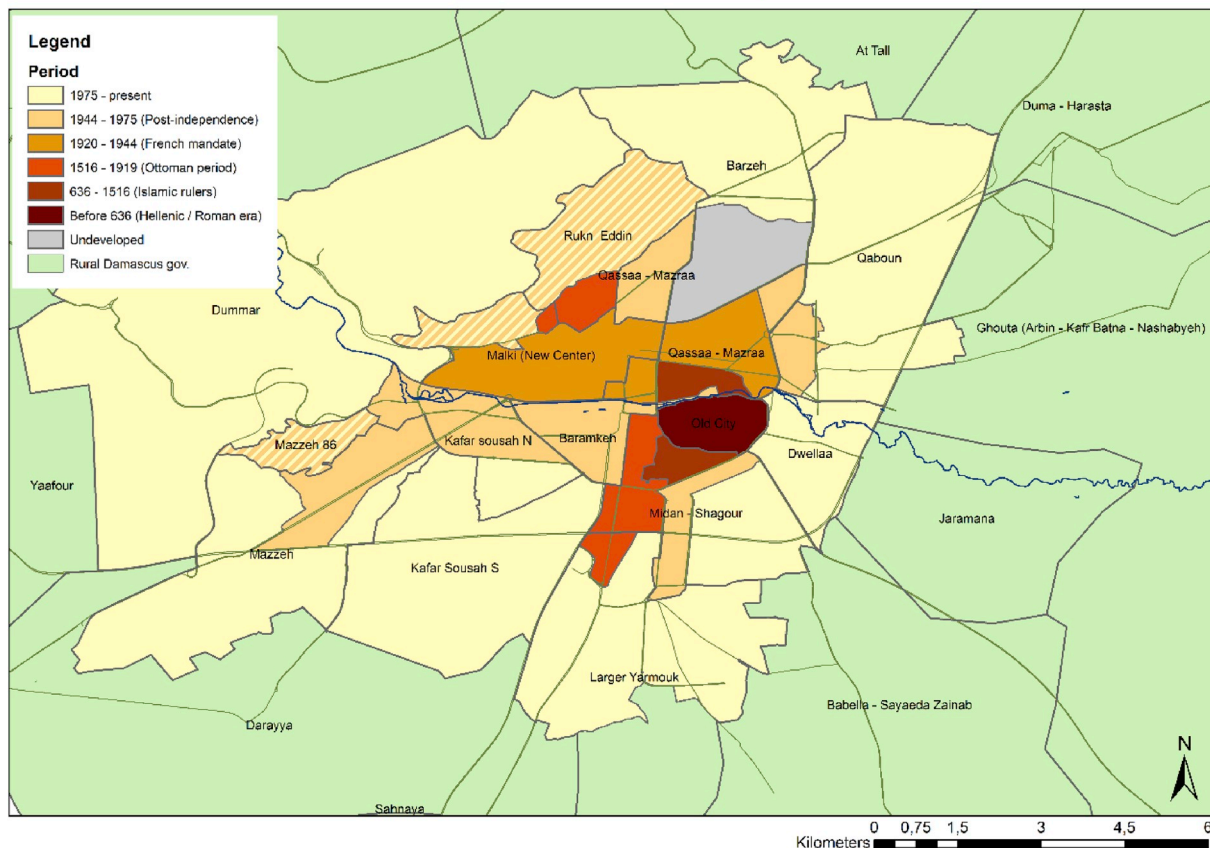
of (Greater) Damascus. In 2012, nearly all districts on the eastern side of the Old City (Qaboun, Jobar, Harasta, Irbin, Douma, Ghouta, etc.) came under rebel control, even as southern suburbs such as Yarmouk (a former Palestinian refugee ‘camp’), Darayya, Kafar Sousah and Babilla. In the years that followed, government forces have slowly pushed back armed rebels by generating surrounded pockets. Darayya and Kafar Sousah (southern suburb) and Barzeh (northeastern city district) were conquered relatively soon (2013), the two remaining pockets (greater Yarmouk and Ghouta) were fully conquered in 2018 after a long and devastating guerilla war with Free Syrian Army Fractions such as Tahir Al-Sham, Jaysh Al-Islam, Al-Rahman, Ahrar Al-Sham (in Ghouta), and ISIS and Al-Nusra (in Yarmouk) (Live Universal Awareness Map, 2019) (see Maps 1 and 2).

Map 3 shows which administrative districts have (partly) been dominated by rebel fractions between 2011 and 2018. For easier comprehension, adjacent neighborhoods with a similar socio-economic, ethnic and political background are merged into larger districts (based on discussions with local partners), and named after the known urban sub-center. Map 3 gives an indication of the maximum length of the front line (in 2012) before government forces repulsed rebel activity to two pockets. Using the ‘Live Universal Awareness Map’, which documents nearly all acts of war in Syria, all districts that have continuously remained under government control, are indicated in green. These districts have only suffered limited damage. Comparing satellite images from different moments, UNITAR (United Nations Institute for Training and Research) has analyzed the damage density of residential properties in neighborhoods that have been the scene for heavy fighting (UNITAR, 2018). We have classified neighborhoods on the basis of the most occurring ‘damage class’ distinguished by UNITAR, ‘ranging from destroyed/severely damaged, to moderately damaged and undamaged.

In the neighborhoods classified as severely damaged more than half the properties is destroyed or damaged beyond repair. Since the UNITAR analyses do not cover the entire territory of most administrative units, the results are extrapolated to the entire district. For areas that are largely uncovered by the UNITAR analyses (Darayya, parts of Barzeh, and the east part of Duma/Harasta), additional information from the ‘Live Universal Awareness Map’ has been used. Based on photographic evidence of the situation after the battles, we have classified these districts in the same way as UNITAR. However, as these results can be considered less precise, these results are displayed as hatched in Map 3. Map 3 shows that especially the final rebel strongholds east of the Old City (Qaboun, Douma, Harasta) and south of the Old City (Yarmouk) are destroyed or severely damaged. The above-mentioned offensives have destroyed large parts of the urban fabric. The districts in the east part of Damascus mainly consist of collapsed housing units, interspersed by still-inhabited buildings with a substandard quality (either due to a low construction quality or due to war damage) (see Image 2).

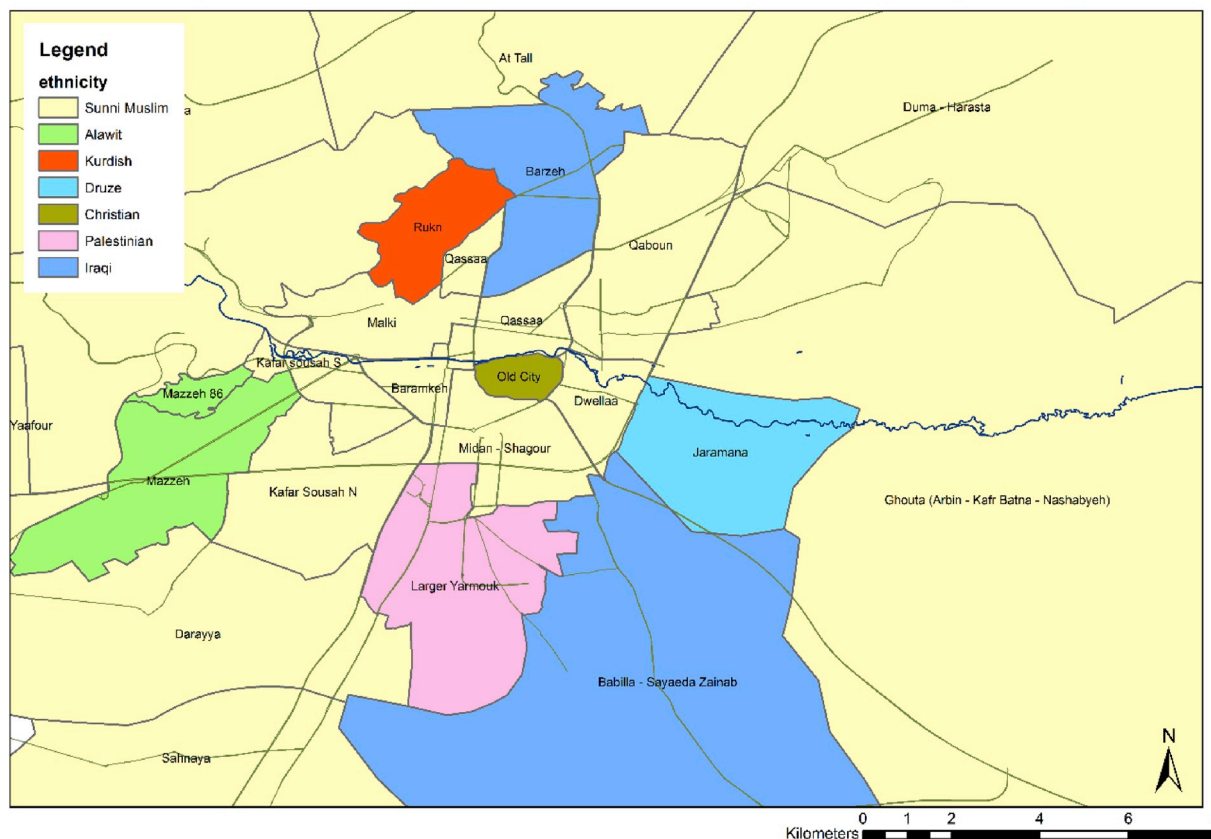
Satellite imagery show that informal construction has surged during the first years of the civil war (2011–2013), especially in the rebel-controlled urban fringe (Clerc, 2014). This is the result of 1) continuing rural-urban migration and 2) an absence of law enforcement. Policies that artificially suppressed the supply of informal housing prior to the start of the armed conflict were removed, resulting in an upswing of self-construction. In the later years of the civil war (2014–2018) the rebel-held positions have been subjected to mortar shelling, bombing and artillery fire of the Syrian Arab Army and allies. As a result of these offensives, the population of these districts has declined. First, civilian- and rebel casualties caused a decline of population. Second, the months prior to the fall of the rebel enclaves marked an exodus of inhabitants through ‘humanitarian corridors’. However, due to the large number of

Historical growth of Damascus Metropolitan Area



Map 1. Overview of the growth of Damascus, divided in four periods. Hatched units are densified in a later period. Source: Naito, 1988; Al-Qattan, 2002; Lababedi, 2008; Verdeil, 2012; Stockhammer & Wild, 2009).

Overrepresentation of ethno-religious groups in districts of Damascus Metropolitan Region



**Map 2.** Neighborhoods with an overrepresentation of ethno-religious minorities in Damascus. Source: Naito, 1988; Al-Haysom & Pavanello, 2011; Fuccaro, 2003; Burns, 2007; Al-Khalidi, Hoffmann, & Tanner, 2007; Dorai, 2008).

destroyed or severely damaged housing in the former rebel-held territories (see Map 3), a considerable share of the original population has not returned to their former homes. Instead, they reside in camps in the vicinity of Damascus or with family members elsewhere. Graph 1 shows the population development before and during the civil war. As this graph is based on official statistics, derived from household registrations, it is most likely a conservative estimate. Whereas the total Syrian population has declined as a result of refugee flows to the surrounding countries and Europe, the population of Damascus City has increased as the area has turned into a ‘safe’ haven for IDPs. The population of Rural Damascus, where most rebel-held areas were located, shows an increasing trend until 2014, but a decreasing trend afterwards. Until 2014, informal self-construction has summited, but the war damage afterwards has caused a downward trend.

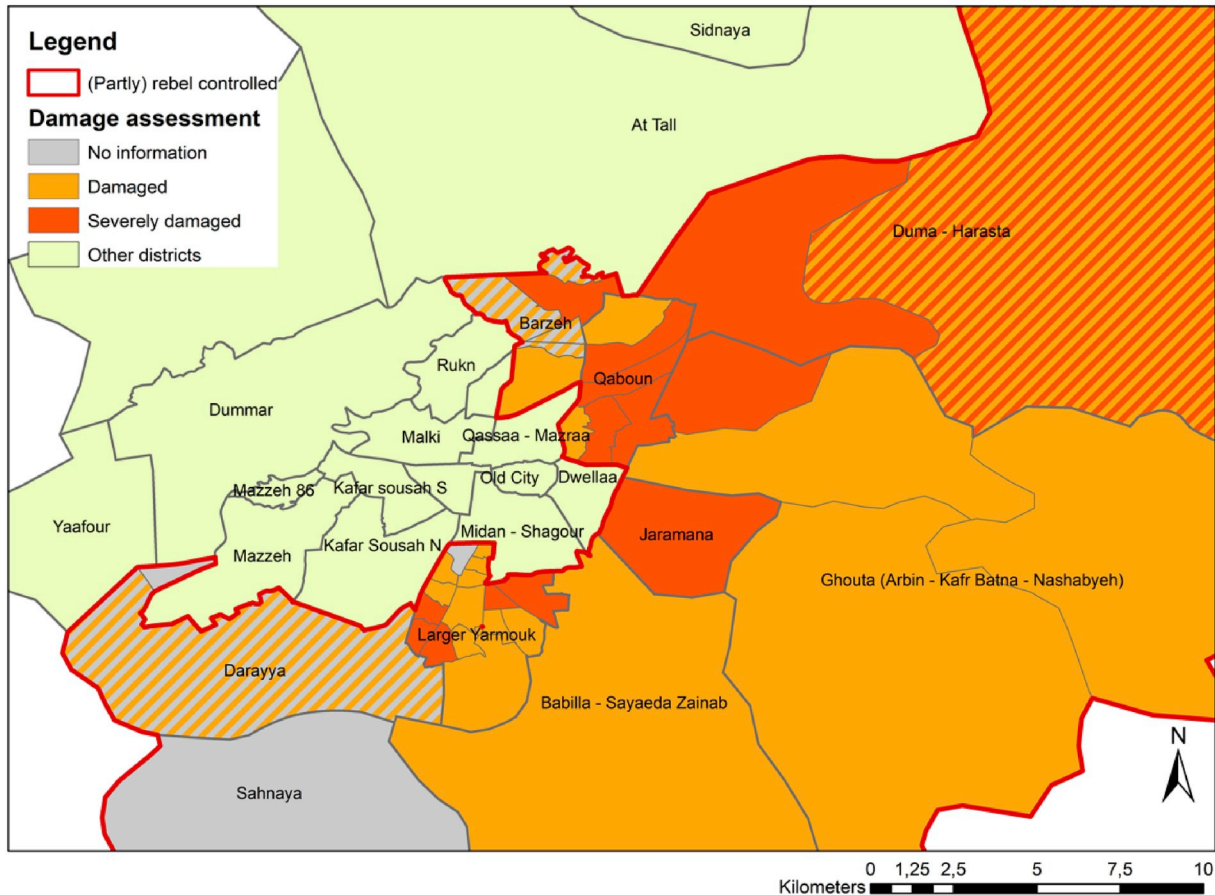
Map 4 shows the geography of informal self-construction in the Damascus Metropolitan Region. The areas displayed in red are recognized by the Regional Planning Commission as informal areas outside the masterplan for Damascus in 2011. Another type of informal construction is informal densification in existing (legal) settlements. Districts that are widely known for informal densification are shown as hatched units on Map 4. Comparing satellite images of 2011 with those of 2018, an analysis is made of the geographical expansion of informal construction outside the areas of the masterplan. These areas are displayed in a darker color of red. The results show that informal construction was common in the southern and the eastern fringe of the city. This pattern is reinforced during the civil war. Whereas informal construction might have been concentrated in the rebel-held eastern fringe during the beginning of the conflict, in later stages it appears to have become more common in the government-held southern fringe.

1.5. A political economy of warfare

Spatial planning and warfare are intrinsically connected, not just because spatial plans repair the damage done, but merely because they alter the strategic and cultural meaning of places. As Clerc (2014) argues: “conflicts are indeed exceptional times, when the bones of the territorial, political and economic strategic dimensions of urban planning are laid bare, [at the expense of] [...] of spatial and design considerations” (p.35). Organizations such as Human Rights Watch question the causality between war-time destruction and post-conflict reconstruction. HRW (2014) warns that spatial planning regulations are used to demolish informally constructed neighborhoods with rebel activity (planning as an act of warfare). They documented that between 2012 and 2013, in Damascus security reasons have been used as a legitimization for the destruction of informal settlements where rebel fractions attacked government positions.

Throughout the war, a new nexus between formal plans and informal construction has emerged, which has altered housing- and segregation patterns. On the formal side, the Syrian government has approved a set of spatial planning-related presidential decrees and laws aimed at reconstruction right after the beginning of the conflict. Close inspection shows that these endeavors should not be considered as a framework for reconstruction, but merely as a deepening of the fragmented neoliberal spatial planning approach that was followed during the first decade of the 21st century. In 2012, the parliament has approved Decree 66/2012 in which two areas on the southwestern side of Damascus (Basateen Al-Razi and Al-Lawan) are included in the masterplan as mixed-use developments (see Map 3). Marota City (the marketing name of this new development) can be seen as a pilot for (post-) war-time spatial developments elsewhere in the country. The plan for Marota City envisions

## War-Damage (2011-2018) in districts of Damascus Metropolitan Area

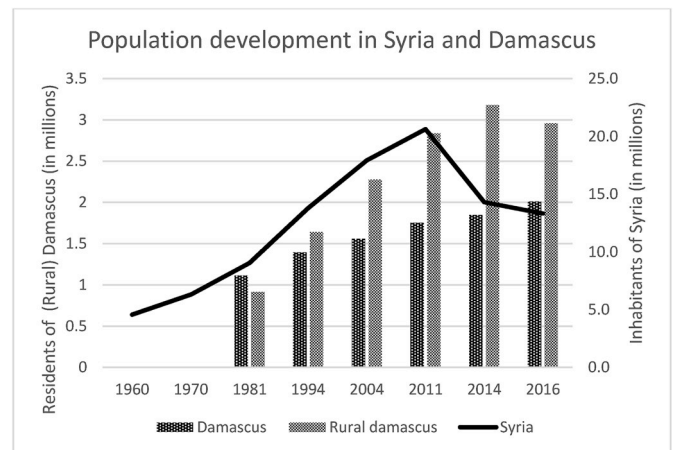


Map 3. Overview of rebel-controlled districts and the share of damaged housing in these areas.



Image 2. War damage in Harasta. Photo: Barend Wind (2018).

the demolition of the informally-constructed neighborhoods that occupied the site, and the redevelopment into mixed-use areas of housing (13.000 units), offices and recreational facilities with modern architectural design. The project aims to provide Damascus with a ‘showcase project’ that is able to compete with luxurious housing- and business developments elsewhere in the Arab world (Yazigi, 2017). The development of a mixed-use development was already envisioned in the not-implemented masterplan, which underlines that Marota City is rather a continuation of existing views than a new approach to reconstruction.

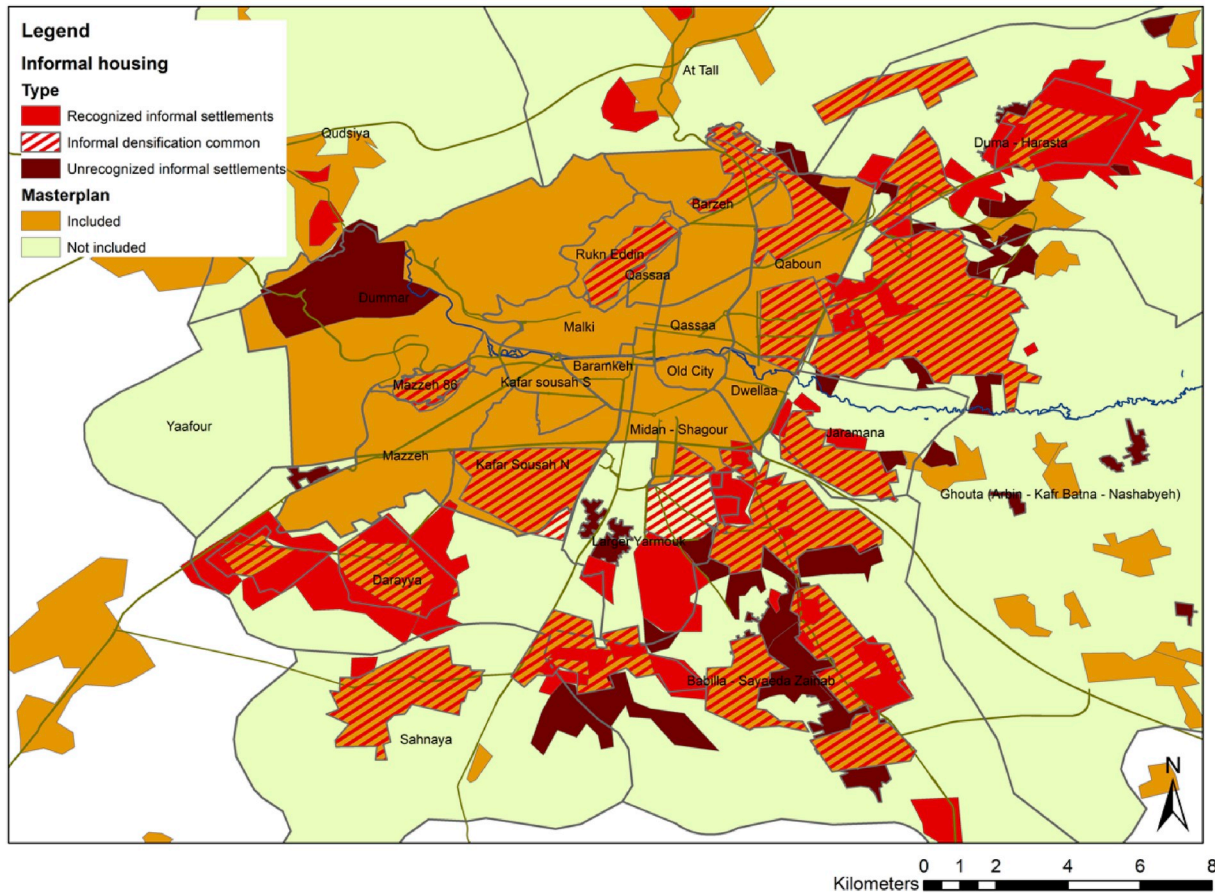


Graph 1. Population development in Syria (left-hand axis), Damascus City and Rural Damascus (right-hand axis) between 1960 and 2016 in millions. Source: CBS (2019).

Two factors set the war-time urban developments apart from their pre-war predecessors: their underlying objectives and their organizational structure. First, whereas pre-war urban developments mainly served an economic interest, war-time urban developments are as much developed from a symbolic rationale. The construction site of Marota City is located in close proximity to the former frontline between the army and rebel factions in South Damascus. The construction of modern



## Informal housing in Damascus Metropolitan Region



**Map 4.** Informal construction in Damascus. A distinction is made between areas recognized as informal in 2011 and informal construction of a later date. The hatched units are known for informal densification.

and luxurious eye-catching developments symbolizes the emergence of a post-war political and economic order in which legal developers have reclaimed land from informal tenants (see [Image 3](#)). From an economic point of view, the project has a strategic location, close to the Old City and the popular high-status Al-Mazzeh neighborhood (where Alawites form the largest ethnic group). Due to the proximity to areas with relatively high house prices, Marota City can offer investors relatively high yields. Second, whereas pre-war developments were characterized by a distinction between public and private interests, Marota City is funded through a Public-Private Partnership (PPP). Decree 19/2015 allows local authorities to establish their own investment companies. In the case of Damascus, it has resulted in the creation of the Damascus Sham holding. A PPP between this holding and several private investors develops Marota City. The first step of the planning process has entailed the transformation of the property rights of the land owners into shares in the new development company. However, only 66% of the shares is distributed among the former land owners, since the Damascus Sham holding is entitled to 33% of the shares as a reward for the realization of public infrastructure. Anecdotal evidence shows that many former landowners have sold their shares to private investors as they could not afford the development costs associated with their share. The background of the private investors is unknown. It is assumed that some of them are ‘empty shells’ that represent the interest of wealthy domestic and foreign investors with ‘good connections’ (a development that [Batrawi \[2018\]](#) describes as crony capitalism). A new law (10/2018) stipulates that landowners need to be physically present to claim their share in the development within three months (later prolonged to a year). If a share is not claimed within due time, it legally becomes part of

the Damascus Sham Holding. The travel restrictions due to the civil war have limited the number of former landowners claiming their share, allowing for a larger public share in the Marota City Development ([NRC, 2016](#)). The above-mentioned framework allows the City of Damascus to remain in charge of spatial planning and spatial design, even now the financial resources have dried up due to the armed conflict.

Reviewing the planning process underscores that symbolic reasons, rather than reconstruction needs, are the leading rationale behind the Marota City development. During the planning- and construction phase, the plan has been modified several times. Whereas the initial plan was to



**Image 3.** Arist impression of residential tower that will be built as part of the Marota City project. Source: Marotacity.sy (2019).

construct a large share of affordable housing in the first phase (directly adjacent to Al-Mazzeh), the final plan foresees the construction of 13.000 apartments, of which an absolute majority will be luxury (100–130 M<sup>2</sup>, 950 euro/M<sup>2</sup>). The production of affordable homes has been transferred to the next phase (south of the initial phase in Al-Lawan). As a consequence, informal settlers that lived in Basateen Al-Razi - whose destroyed homes stood on land they did not own - bear the burden of the new mega project. They are displaced without alternative housing being provided. Anecdotal evidence shows that many displaced tenants have moved into new informal settlements, on the south edge of the new development. We draw two conclusions. First, the final outcome is a return to the pre-war ideal to transform this area in a luxury mixed-use development, only legitimized in the initial stage by a promise of the construction of affordable housing. Second, the change of plans can be considered as what De Clerc and Hurault (2010) describe as a clash within the state between the social logic of welfare and the economic logic of private investment within.

The construction of Marota City impacts upon segregation patterns in Damascus. Due to high house prices, the area will hold a much higher socio-economic status than before. Interestingly, due to its location, a new corridor of high-status neighborhoods will emerge between Al-Mazzeh and the northern part of Kafar Sousah, taking socio-economic segregation to a higher geographical scale level. Simultaneously, the construction of Marota City reinforces sharp geographical boundaries between adjacent low- and high-status neighborhoods. After the construction of the mega project, Damascus remains a ‘patchwork city’.

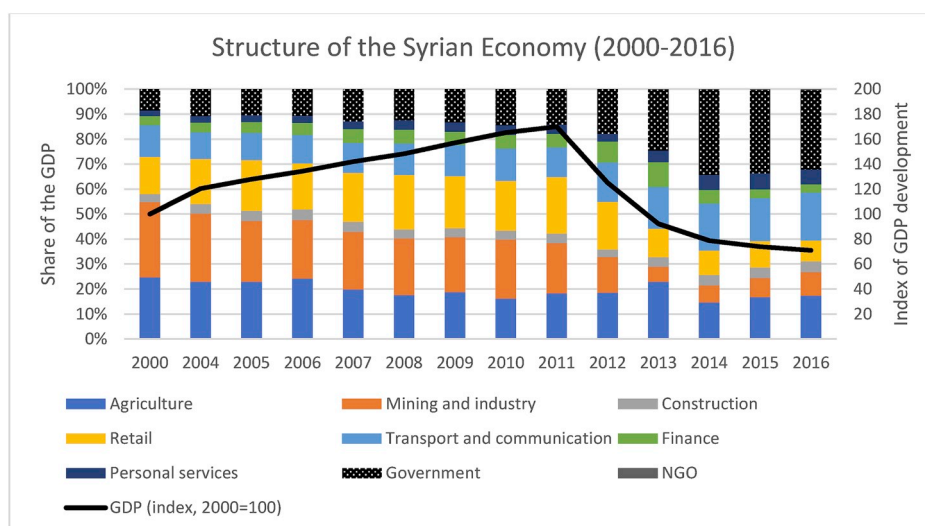
The informal response to the housing crisis is as much as the formal planning approach part of the war-time political economy of housing and welfare. We argue that the formal approach only exists by the grace of rising informal housing practices. Namely, allowing informal construction solves urgent housing needs and silences cries for more state interventions, whereas it does not equip residents with legal ownership rights, which keeps open future frontiers for redevelopment and associated rent gaps.

Informal housing practices have skyrocketed as the war has deepened the mismatch between house prices and disposable incomes. Furthermore, the social demand for housing has increased as a result of the large number of IDPs (6,1 million according to UNHCR, 2018) who lost their home and livelihood due to warfare and sought refuge in Syria’s safer cities (Latakia, Tartous, Damascus). The supply of affordable housing has been limited, as the production costs have increased and the government has prioritized the construction of several luxurious new developments that are considered to be in the national interest such

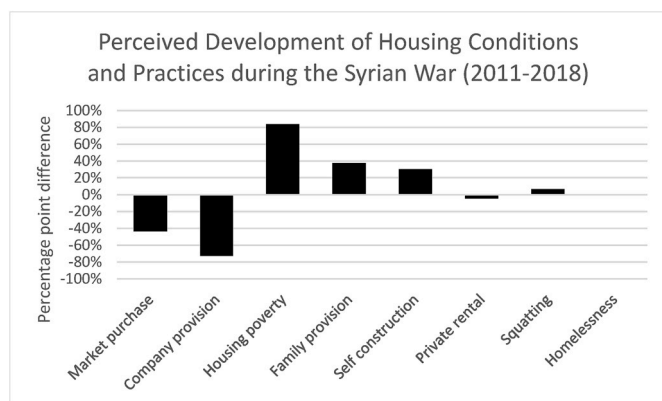
as Marota City. Simultaneously, the income position of many families has deteriorated due to the 63% GDP loss between 2011 and 2016 (WorldBank, 2017). The destruction of production facilities, cut-off supply routes and international economic sanctions, have resulted in unemployment and a loss of purchasing power for those who remained in employment. Graph 2 shows the rapid decline in the GDP after 2013, and the increasing role of the public sector in the Syrian economy (CBS, 2019), indicating the emergence of a pseudo-welfare state for those working in public service. The limited supply of legally constructed affordable housing within the boundaries of the masterplan, has pushed households that are excluded from this pseudo-welfare state (non-public sector employees) towards informal housing construction. Especially in times of high inflation (factor 10 between 2011 and 2018) investing in housing assets becomes much more attractive than savings or investing in domestic financial assets. In turn, this tightens the supply of legal housing even more, because many owners postpone the sale of their (vacant) properties, as they are waiting for house prices to rise after the end of the conflict. High inflation combined with uncertain future expectations has turned the Damascene housing market into a waiting game that results in vacancies within the legal housing stock and extensions in the informal housing stock.

### 1.6. War-time housing patterns

There is limited reliable evidence available from official sources about the development of the changing housing situation in Damascus during the civil war. Official statistics are not collected, biased or not available on a low geographical scale level. Due to a restrictive attitude of the authorities regarding data collection, our data are derived from a self-collected small-scale online survey among spatial planning experts (academics and professionals) and spatial planning students (from different public and private universities) within the authors’ network in Damascus. The survey is carried out in the spring of 2019 and has 234 observations. As a consequence, we do not have enough observations to generalize claims about their neighborhood of residence. Instead of generalizing from individual experiences, we have asked all respondents to indicate which housing practices they know to be common each of the 25 districts displayed on e.g. Map 5. These districts are collections of adjacent neighborhoods that are similar in the public imagery, based on spatial form and socio-economic status. Respondents are asked to select max five districts where certain socio-spatial characteristics are most/least pronounced, or certain housing strategies are most/least common. How often a district is mentioned determines the aggregate score. We



**Graph 2.** The structure of the Syrian economy between 2000 and 2016. The left-hand axis shows the percentage of each sector relative to the size of the total economy. The right-hand axis size of the economy relative to the size of the economy in 2000 (100). Source: CBS (2019).



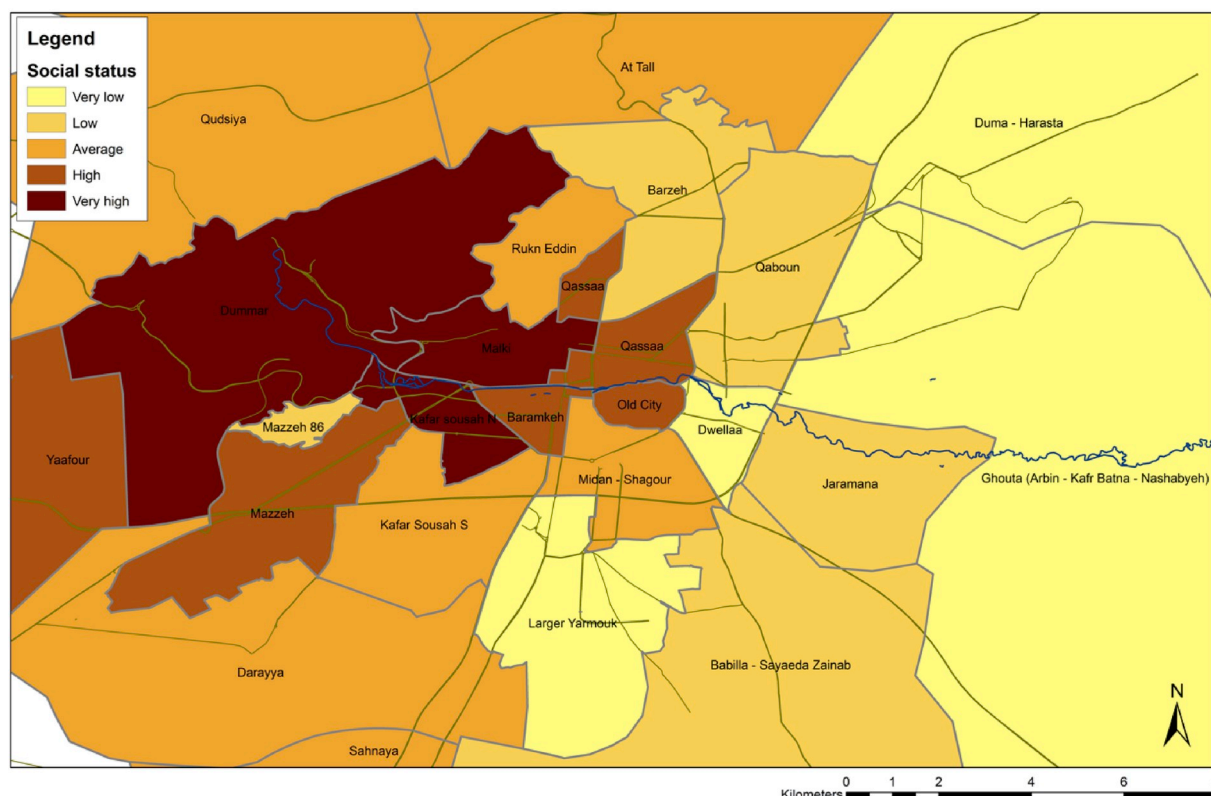
**Graph 3.** Perceived development of housing conditions and practices during the Syrian war between 2011 and 2018, based on the percentage point difference between those who perceive a decrease and an increase. Source: Authors' survey.

expect that the war-time context impacts upon the reliability of the data in at least two ways. First, socially desirable answers might be more common. Second, many respondents might have only second-hand information about several districts as they have been inaccessible for several years when they were under different control than their own district. We have checked the reliability of the survey data by comparing the actually-observed distribution of informal construction (from satellite imagery) with the distribution of informal construction indicated by respondents. We observed only small differences, largely based on the different geographical scale level of observations.

Graph 3 indicates which housing conditions and practices have become more or less common during the Syrian war. The scores indicate

the balance between respondents who observe an upward- (more common/much more common) and a downward trend (less common/much less common). A score close to 100% indicates that respondents unanimously perceive a development in the same direction, whereas a score close to 0% means that an equal share of respondents perceives a positive and a negative development (most likely due to differences experiences in the districts they are most familiar with), or that a large share of the respondents does not perceive any change between 2011 and 2019. Three headlines can be extracted from Graph 3. First, the two 'golden routes' for acquiring an adequate home have become obstructed during the war. Purchasing a home on the market has become less common as a result of a low supply of housing (Graph 3: bar 1). Economic instability has caused a severe drop in constructions completions, whereas the expectations that house prices will increase after the end of the civil war causes individuals to postpone the sale of their home if they are financially able to do so. Obtaining a home through one's employer has become much less common (Graph 3: bar 2), as many state-owned companies are negatively affected by the conflict (supply routes have been cut off, production facilities destroyed and demand plummeted) which leaves them with less resources to invest in their employees' homes. Second, respondents almost unanimously indicate that housing poverty (spending more than 50% of the household income on housing) has risen sharply during the conflict. More than 85% of the respondents perceives an increase, whereas the rest of the respondents does not observe a clear pattern. Third, family provision and self-construction (see Graph 3: bar 3 and 4) have become the main alternative housing practices. Resource pooling within the extended family has been an important way in which households from affected areas could find adequate shelter (e.g. by moving in with family members who live in a safer city). Self-construction has increased during the conflict as a strategy for those who fled from affected areas, and for those with a desire to establish an independent household. The increase of self-

### Social Status of Districts in Damascus in 2018



**Map 5.** The social status of districts in the Damascus Metropolitan Region in 2019. Source: Authors' own survey.

construction is confirmed by Map 4, comparing satellite images of 2011 and 2018. The respondents are ambiguous about the development of private rental, squatting and homelessness during the civil war, most likely due to the uneven geographical distribution of the use of these housing strategies.

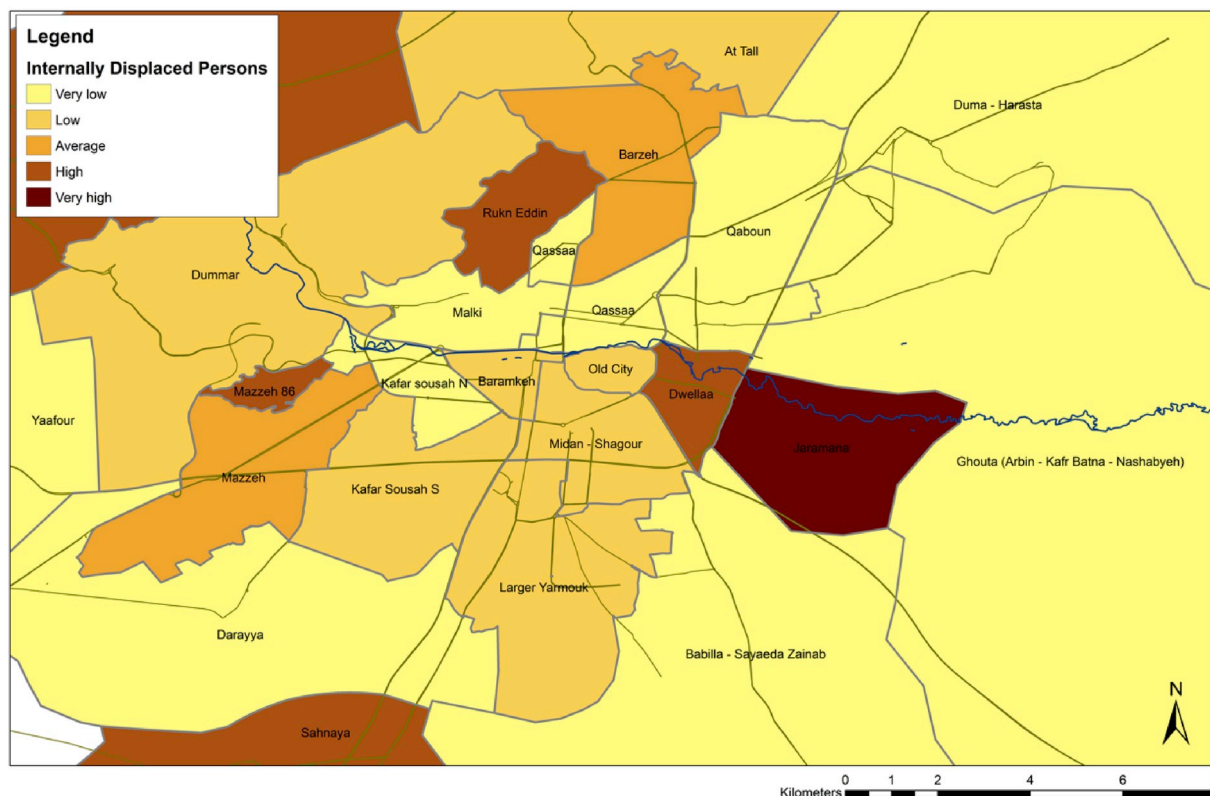
The use of the above-mentioned housing strategies differs between different districts within the Damascus Metropolitan Area. Whereas purchasing one's home on the market and company provisioning have become less common across the board, and family-provision more common, the use of 'alternative' housing strategies, such as informal construction, family-housing or squatting are much more common in some districts than in others. Two contextual factors impact upon the use of the above-mentioned housing strategies in different districts. First, the opportunity space for several informal housing strategies is limited by the social status of the neighborhood, since one can expect that informality is less tolerated by the population in these areas. Second, the arrival of IDPs confronts several neighborhoods with an urgent housing issue. One could expect that in these 'neighborhoods of arrival', 'alternative' housing arrangements have become more prominent.

Map 5 shows in which quintile of the status hierarchy different districts are located. The results are based on two survey questions, asking respondents to select max. five districts with the lowest and the highest social status from a list with 25 districts. The results show that three districts, located at the western side of the old city, are characterized by a high social status: Malki, Kafar Sousah and Mazzeh. A large part of Malki is built as an elitist estate during Ottoman rule (Muhajereen) or during French rule (Abou Roumaneh), whereas Kafar Sousah and Dummar are constructed as modern and well-planned housing estates since the 1980s. Other districts with a relatively high social status are Mazzeh and the old city and its northern surroundings. The districts with the lowest social status can be found in the southern and eastern fringe of the city. It concerns districts with a high degree of informal housing in

the Ghouta oasis, such as Duma, Harasta and Arbin, and the former Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk and its surroundings. Map 6 shows that during the Syrian war, IDPs have mainly migrated to neighborhoods with a relatively low social status, and a high degree of informality. Two informal settlements close to the Old City that have remained relatively undamaged during the war (Mazzeh 86 and Rukn Eddin) have attracted many IDPs. These settlements have not increased in size, but have densified during recent years due to overcrowding and the addition of new floors. Another area that has received many IDPs during the conflict is located on the former frontline between government forces and rebel factions in the eastern side of the city: Dwellaa and Jaramana. The results clearly show that the presence of IDPs is low in districts that have only recently been subject to open warfare, such as Qaboun, Duma, Harasta, Arbin and Darayya. This means that the incoming IDPs have increased the pressure on the existing housing stock and the facilities in these neighborhoods.

Damascus is characterized by a housing paradox: during the conflict, the number of vacant properties has increased due to out-migration, whereas the housing shortage among IDPs is enormous. Although both trends might be present in all districts of Damascus, they manifest differently in different districts. First of all, there is a group of districts with a low social status and a high degree of informal self-construction, where homes abandoned by international asylum seekers are squatted by incoming IDPs. Map 8 shows that squatting is especially prominent in several districts in the far eastern fringe of the city, such as Duma, Harasta, Arbin, and Yarmouk in the southern fringe. Second, there is a group of districts with a high social status and a planned urban design where the homes of international asylum seekers have remained vacant. Their owners are either planning to use the property after returning to Syria after the civil war, or wait with the sale of the property until property prices have risen. Map 7 shows that especially in Malki, Kafar Sousah North, and Dummar many inhabitable properties are vacant. It

### Internally Displaced Persons in Districts of Damascus



Map 6. Internally Displaced Persons in the Damascus Metropolitan Region in 2019. Source: Authors' own survey.

does not come as a surprise that vacant housing is more common in more elitist neighborhoods where property rights are well-defined. It is in these neighborhoods that property rights are easier to guard. On the contrary, when inhabitants of informal settlements leave their premises, their place is easily taken over by new residents that have just as little tenure rights and tenure security. (See [Map 8](#))

**2. Conclusion**

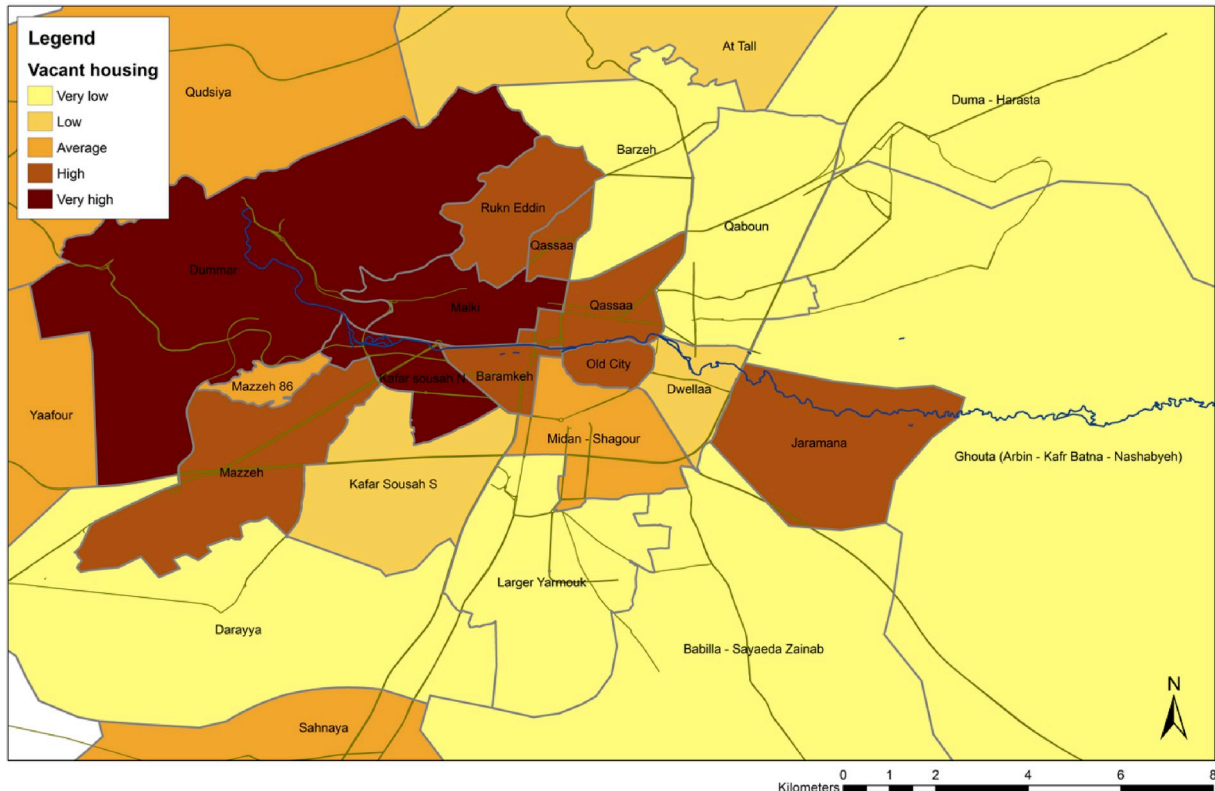
After eight years of civil war, Damascus is faced with an enormous humanitarian crisis: nearly a million internally displaced persons from unsafe areas have settled temporarily or permanently in the city, whereas a large share of the residential properties in the formerly rebel-held eastern and southern fringe of the city is destroyed. The social demand for housing is huge, whereas the market supply for housing is limited due to economic uncertainties. At the same time, Damascus reaches its environmental limits, and the absorption of many newcomers might overstretch the city’s social resilience. The need for binding, strategic visions on the spatial development of the city is larger than ever. This paper positions current, war-time, approaches to spatial planning within the political economy of housing and welfare, and reflects upon possible solutions.

On the outset of the Syrian war, the country’s political economy of housing was a hybrid between a Ba’athist market-socialist model based on the expropriation of private land to construct affordable housing (distributed by social housing providers, cooperatives and public companies), and an authoritarian neo-liberal model in which private firms could capture windfall profits due to favorable regulations. Informal construction has always been a dominant part of the Syrian housing regime, under the Ba’athist market-socialist model due to insufficient housing production, under the authoritarian neo-liberal model due to rapidly increasing house values. This has pushed many low-income

rural-urban migrants to Damascus’ informally-built fringe.

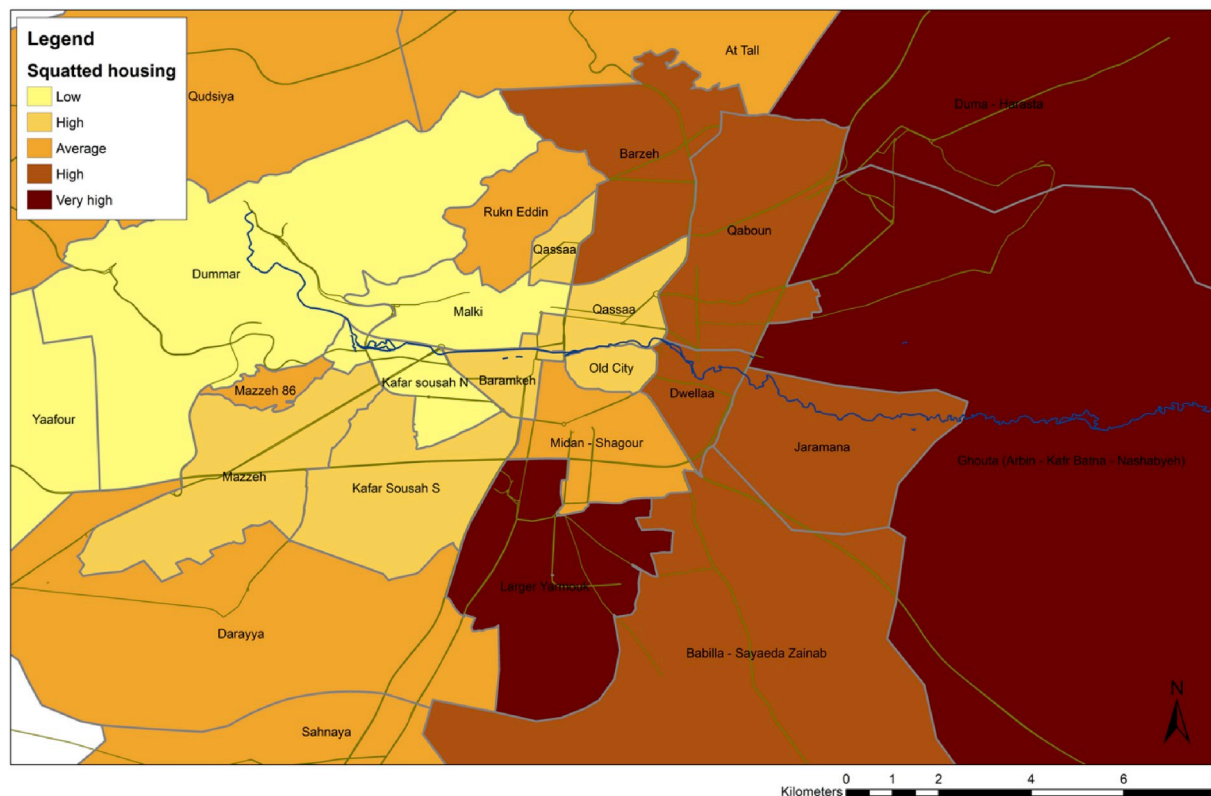
War-time urban developments in Damascus cannot be considered as reconstruction projects. Instead, they are a continuation of the earlier initiated authoritarian neo-liberal planning model, supplemented by a new set of laws and decrees that allow local authorities to form private-public partnerships to share the financial benefits of new investments with private investors. The largest luxurious mixed-use development, Marota City is a showcase project to underline the emergence of a new political and economic order on a location of civic discontent during the initial phase of the conflict. The current developments are problematic due to two reasons. First, they displace informal settlers with limited compensation, whereas former land owners have limited possibilities to receive a share of the development gain. Second, the new developments are luxurious and unaffordable for those who are in need of housing most: families that lost their home due to warfare. Informal housing strategies are the most common solution to the war-time housing crisis. During the conflict, informal construction has spiked in the southern and northern fringe of the city. Furthermore, centrally-located informal settlements such as Mazzeh 86 and Rukn Eddin have densified to host IDPs. Squatting is widespread in informally constructed settlements where residents have fled their premises. In elitist neighborhoods where property rights are well-defined, housing remains vacant when owners have moved abroad, speculating on higher house prices in the future. Although Damascus is moderately mixed in terms of socio-economic status, the difference in housing strategies found in the informal settlements compared to planned neighborhoods aggravate socio-spatial inequalities. We argue that formal neo-liberal urban developments and the expansion of informal housing practices are two sides of the same coin. Formal urban developments entitle those with ‘good contacts’ to a share of future house price gains, whereas the rise of informal construction alleviates urgent housing needs for those without many resources. Furthermore, the existence of large informal settlements right next to

**Vacant (but Inhabitable) Residential Properties in Districts of Damascus**



**Map 7.** Vacant but inhabitable properties in the Damascus Metropolitan Region in 2019. Source: Authors’ own survey.

## Squatted Housing in Districts of Damascus



**Map 8.** Squatted housing in the Damascus Metropolitan Region in 2019. Source: Authors' own survey.

prestigious new urban developments yields the promise of ever shifting (and for investors: profitable) rent gaps, until Damascus' fragmented pattern of socio-economic segregation becomes homogenized.

Before the onset of the civil war, international and Syrian experts have advised to modernize the planning system in order to be able to accommodate social, economic and environmental trends in a more efficient, effective and equitable manner. The need for a new strategic vision to replace Michel Ecochard's 1968 (still valid!) masterplan is more urgent than ever. However, especially the instruments to realize such a vision deserve scrutiny. Whereas international experts prior to the start of the armed conflict have emphasized the importance of a market-based expropriation system to give landowners a fair share of the development gain, market regulations that limit private profits to foster housing affordability seem more useful in the post-war situation. Within the current neoliberal approach to planning the government faces an insurmountable dilemma: policies that increase housing production by increasing the profitability for investors (and the state), decrease the affordability for potential tenants and homeowners and reinforce socio-spatial polarization. The social demand for housing can only be absorbed by formal housing production when civil society organizations and citizen cooperatives are engaged in 'building back better' approaches, in which they collectively invest in the improvement of their homes in a non-commercial fashion. The state might support these initiatives through a conditional legalization scheme, supplemented by stricter rent price regulations. Although a move towards a more collectivist planning approach with room for citizens would fit Syria's political heritage and contribute to post-conflict reconciliation and trust-building, it remains a very unlikely path. A model with profitable showcase projects, surrounded by informal settlements that are neither upgraded nor redeveloped (and therefore easy to expropriate) seems to become a cornerstone of Syria's post-war development model.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Barend Wind:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Writing - original draft. **Batoul Ibrahim:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2019.102109>.

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