Photo: Construction of Marota City (Arab News 2018)

REVITALISING A CITY – REDESIGNING A HOMELAND
Urban Reconstruction in Damascus

Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores urban reconstruction in Damascus following the eight-year long armed conflict that has haunted and still exists in Syria. It does so, by exploring reconstruction as a process of urban governance, and sets out to examine which values shape urban reconstruction practises in Damascus – particularly in the case of a new prestige residential development project called Marota City. The theoretical focal point of the research question is the concept of *values* taken from Jon Pierre, that sets values as a system of norms and objectives, and as a variable in urban governance. In this way, the thesis takes it point of departure not only in post-conflict reconstruction but also in urban development in general. In addition to this, I support my analysis by drawing comparisons to post-war Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina and research done on these other cases of post-conflict reconstruction. I mostly draw on parallels to Beirut in the first part of analysis that explores reconstruction as a process of privatisation and revitalization, and in the second part of analysis I turn more to the issues of state-building and securing housing land and property rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina, that are somewhat paralleled in today's Syria.

The first analysis explores unprecedented public-private partnerships at play in reconstruction, as Damascus governorate has established a private holding company undertaking much of reconstruction in Marota City. Here I argue that there is a shift in urban governance towards market oriented and neoliberal values with the aim of revitalising the city after years of war. This is supported by the government taking on a new role of facilitator for private investors rather than as the main developer behind reconstruction. I conclude that this development follows patterns of privatising, rebranding and gentrifying cities that are also seen in non-conflict countries, but that it at the same time entails a literal revitalisation of the city, as conflict has made reconstruction a necessary means to re-establish the city. The value of revitalisation means a desire for a swift and efficient reconstruction and even improvement of the city after the conflict.

The second analysis investigates processes of urban reconstruction and restructuring that cannot be explained by viewing them merely as a wish for revitalisation and privatisation. Here I argue that demolitions and designation of zones of redevelopment strategically target anti-government groups. Furthermore, new Syrian legislation on housing, land and property rights means a great emphasis on documenting and formalising property rights in a way that leaves room in implementation to favour some loyal population groups over others who are less loyal to the current government. I analyse this as a process of demographic engineering, that aims at pushing out anti-government working-class households or discouraging them from returning from displacement.

Lastly, I go on to discuss these two values of revitalisation and demographic engineering as two transitions that the Syrian government desires to push through, and that it does so under disguise of the ongoing conflict. In this sense, the intertwinement of conflict and reconstruction somewhat hides objectives of the government and facilitates these transitions. I thus conclude that urban reconstruction in Damascus is shaped partly by a value of revitalisation, partly by a value of demographic engineering – and that these values both represent transitions that the Syrian government seek to hide in plain sight because reconstruction and conflict become embedded within each other.

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1. Introduction

Armed conflict has existed and been spreading in Syria since early 2011 – a conflict that has grown increasingly complex due to the many different factions and interests at play. In 2019 the conflict is still continuing – but with a different intensity. There are still open conflict and battles, namely in north-western Syria, while other parts of the country see more stable conditions and reconstruction is slowly beginning.

Many countries in Europe, who have provided asylum for refugees from Syria are beginning to consider the repatriation of refugees residing in their countries. In fact, Denmark has recently been the first asylum country to announce that the repatriation of Syrian refugees in Denmark will commence, and the first Syrians in Denmark have had their residency permits revoked (Dahlin et al. 2019). The Syrians who will possibly be repatriated are all from the Damascus area, as this area is considered one of the safest for returnees. In a 2019 Country of Origin Report by the Danish Immigration Service, it is assessed that "since the Syrian government asserted full control of Damascus Province in May 2018, the security situation in Damascus and rural Damascus has improved significantly" (The Danish Immigration Service 2019: 11), and furthermore that "the general security situation in government-controlled areas in Syria, including major cities, such as Latakia, Homs, Hama, Tartous and Damascus, has improved significantly" (Ibid.: 9). But how much does an improvement of the security situation tell us about the actual conditions for return?

When assessing possibilities for a normalised life after a conflict, there are many factors to regard, including themes such as the security situation, the risk of persecution or livelihood possibilities. In this thesis my point of departure is to look at one of the basic needs both for refugee returns, but also for the general revival of Syrian society and conditions for the population; housing. Through the thesis, I will investigate practises of reconstruction of the built environment and specifically housing possibilities both for returnees and remaining population. UNHCR describes the Syrian conflict as a protracted crisis with many people being multiply displaced (UNHCR Syria 2018: 6). Through the years of conflict, we have seen different factions emerging; anti-government rebel groups fighting for democracy, Salafi extremists fighting for an Islamic state, Kurdish groups fighting for independence in Northern Syria and many others. However, with the support from Russia and Iran, the Syrian Assad government has succeeded in recapturing and holding most of the territory in Syria, as well as most of the major cities. What we see now is thus reconstruction and revival carried out by the same government, that in 2010-2011 stifled protests and demonstrations against it and hit hard on pro-democracy protestors. Since then, the conflict has turned in to a complex and dirty civil war, where all parties have been documented to have committed war crimes and several reports show that sectarian divides have only grown among Syrians, both inside and outside the country.

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Currently there is no real expectation of a change of regime, which means that the current government has a monopoly on designing the future Syria and its cities – at least in government-controlled areas. These considerations have led me to formulate the following research question:

Which values shape urban reconstruction practises in Damascus?

What I investigate in this thesis are the reconstruction efforts undertaken by the Syrian government in Damascus. I have chosen Damascus as my focal point, in part because reconstruction here takes a privileged role in Syria and gets a priority as the symbol of revival of the country – and therefore is further developed than in many other cities. I also find it relevant to investigate the conditions specifically in Damascus in light of the possibility of repatriations from Denmark and other European countries, even though repatriation is not the focus of this thesis.

In my analysis, I focus on the Syrian government as initiator and as an important actor in reconstruction. I do, however, take on the perspective of viewing reconstruction practises as processes of governance and thus focusing not only of the role of government, but also on other actors affecting urban reconstruction. The concept of *values*, I take from Jon Pierre as the set of norms and objectives that lie behind a certain process of governance (Pierre 1998: 3-4). It is therefore both norms *and* objectives, in the sense that is can both be something ideological as well as a political objective. This concept is taken from a theoretical point of departure in *urban governance*. I will elaborate on my theoretical and analytical choices as well as the progression of the thesis in the next chapter.

2. Methodological and Analytical Considerations

Before I move to the main part of my thesis, I will use this chapter to account for my choices and considerations regarding the field of investigation, data collection, theoretical choices and the progression of the thesis. This should provide an overview of the thesis to make clear how it is structured, and which considerations have shaped it.

My field of investigation is, as mentioned, reconstruction efforts in the urban area of Damascus. Damascus is particularly relevant because of its symbolic value as Syrian capital, and because reconstruction here is a priority for the Syrian government. Damascus is furthermore the only area in Syria that the Danish Immigration Service deems safe enough for repatriations. During my research I have found it relevant to investigate both current urban developments in Damascus as well as developments that have occurred during the armed conflict, which has lasted since 2011. To narrow my focus further, I have chosen to devote my analysis to a specific case of reconstruction and here I have chosen the reconstruction project in Damascus, that has gained most attention and is farthest along in its realisation – the Marota City project. I will mainly focus on urban reconstruction undertaken or initiated by the government led by Bashar al-Assad, because these efforts have access to most funding and are facilitated by legislation. This is thus not an investigation of reconstruction efforts undertaken by private individuals or other actors, as I have found that the majority of planning and funding is connected to the Assad administration, even if not carried out solely by public authorities. I will generally refer to *the Syrian government* and leave out questions as to the legitimacy of this government, as it currently de-facto controls most of Syrian territory. I will also be mentioning anti-government groups as opposing the Syrian government. This is a very broad definition of a number of groups with different religious backgrounds and different aims. Jon Unruh (2016) has during his research on the Syrian conflict, divided the Syrian population according to their role in the conflict into combatants(military participants in the conflict), constituencies(non-combat support base for combatants from within their own sect) and the larger population that is largely not affiliated with any parties in the conflict (Unruh 2016: 455-56). In this thesis, anti-government groups include both combatants and their constituencies – that is both the military and the non-military parts of anti-government groups in the population. When relevant it is explicitly stated that armed groups are involved, otherwise anti-government groups can be assumed to be both combatant and non-combatant opposition to the Syrian government.

The empirical basis of my investigation is formed partly by Syrian government sources, such as pieces of legislation, official announcements, speeches as well as state-controlled media outlets, mainly SANA – Syrian Arab News Agency. Sources also include websites and announce-ments by relevant actors such as investors and holding companies. Finally, the analysis has been

informed by both international and Syrian opposition media outlets, as well as reports from human rights agencies and think tanks. Data has been collected by doing broad searches on media outlet websites, via ReliefWeb and through websites of relevant actors. For all of the sources used I have sought to confirm facts, dates and events with information from several sources. I have used sources in both English and Arabic as the relevant source material has been mainly in these languages. Quotations from texts that are originally in Arabic are my own translations. In the bibliography, I have translated the title of texts for clarity.

To investigate a multitude of actors and values and move beyond viewing reconstruction merely as government efforts, I have chosen a point of departure in theories of *urban governance* as the overall framework (da Cruz et al. 2019; Pierre 1998). This choice provides a vehicle for critically questioning the values and processes surrounding urban reconstruction and has been made because the case of reconstruction in Damascus holds traits that seem to be just as much related to governing urban development as it is to the post-conflict context. Through this I seek to obtain an analytical focus on a variety of actors and interests both in decision making and implementation, which is done by focusing on governance rather than government (da Cruz et al. 2019: 1-2). This also means focusing on processes rather than institutions, and on interaction between institutions and civil society. In the context of urban governance, processes often include civil society or private actors who gain influence in urban politics. At the same time, government and its institutions become a variable instead of a given entity, in the sense that the role of government is not given but is part of the analysis (Pierre 1998: 5-6). In the present thesis, I will thus focus on both state and non-state actors and determine the values shaping reconstruction through an exploration of processes and interactions between them. In this sense, the thesis is balancing between on the one hand seeing reconstruction practises as examples of urban development and drawing on theories of urban governance, that does not come from the literature on post-conflict scenarios. On the other hand, it focuses on exactly what a context of conflict and chaos does to a process of urban restructuring. This I find necessary in order to highlight how conflict can affect urban development, but also how conflict is not the only factor in determining the trajectory of reconstruction.

Another analytical tool used in this thesis, is to draw on other cases of post-conflict reconstruction, namely from Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina. I choose to do this because these are older cases, that have been studied extensively and I therefore deem it valuable to draw comparisons that might show how reconstruction and post-conflict urban development can be shaped in Syria as well. This does not mean that I expect reconstruction in Syria to follow exactly the same trajectory as other conflicts. Rather, these cases come to function as a kind of mirrors to the current development, as I discuss differences and similarities between the cases.

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The thesis at hand will progress as follows; in chapter three, I will elaborate on my theoretical point of departure through a literature review on post-conflict reconstruction literature, and my inclusion of a theoretical framework that goes beyond post-conflict urban reconstruction. After this I will provide some brief background for the conflict and the political situation in Syria and Damascus in chapter four. In chapter five, I will account for the case of urban reconstruction chosen for the analysis – the case of Marota City in Damascus. Chapters six and seven investigate the two main values that I have identified shaping reconstruction in Damascus– these are 1) a value of revitalisation through privatisation and liberalisation, and 2) a value of demographic engineering to control the composition of population in the revitalised city. In chapter six I especially draw on the urban governance framework to highlight the significance of private actors and public-private partnerships, and analyse mostly on legislation, announcements and other sources of government policies or private actors. Chapter seven relies on theories of demographic engineering, while drawing more on data from human rights advocates in the field. Both chapters of the analysis seek to clarify the impacts of processes of decision-making in urban reconstruction – the first part to explore the involvement of private actors and increased liberalisation, and the second part to build on another layer of government motivation for structuring reconstruction in this way. The analyses will finally culminate in a discussion in chapter eight tackling the question of which role the conflict plays and bring forward how it has contributed to disguise certain processes of urban restructuring.

Lastly, I would like to devote some thoughts to the difficulties of obtaining and validating data for this thesis. With regard to data collection, I have found it hard to access several types of data, which probably stems the fact that events are so current and still ongoing, and recent developments have not been researched and sometimes not even yet confirmed. This has led me to rely heavily on reports authored by human rights agencies and advocate groups – mainly Human Rights Watch, but also the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Lebanese NGO SAWA for Development and Aid, and think tanks Carnegie Middle East Center and Washington Institute. I consider all of these to be proponents of a human rights perspective in different ways, as they all take have a rights-based point of departure that is not necessarily common to all actors in this thesis. For the purpose of this thesis, much data is available through these sources, because they have extensive reporting and research on the conditions of reconstruction and return of refugees, and as this data is not readily accessible to me in other ways, I build on data collected by these actors. These kinds of sources thus come to inhabit two roles in the present thesis: on the one hand, they are sources of data, and on the other hand, they are part of the political field surrounding reconstruction in Syria, and their analysis, voice and human rights advocacy stance also make them actors in reconstruction. I have chosen to rely on data from several of these sources, because I judge their role as sources to live up to standards of factuality, even though they are not impartial.

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       I have been constantly aware that reconstruction efforts in Syria are highly politicised from all sides. There have been many critical voices of the reconstruction strategies of the Syrian government. Many opposition media outlets as well as human rights-agencies have especially criticised the legislation that shapes reconstruction and it has received a lot of public attention from critics of the Syrian government (SyriaCall 2018; The Syrian Observer 2018a; The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2018). This criticism was even voiced in a July 2018 letter to the UN Security Council by over 40 countries that called housing land and property legislation in Syria "a comprehensive policy to alter the sectarian, social, economic and political landscape of Syria and the fabric of local communities"(United Nations Security Council 2018). This also means that many have already analysed on the effects of the legal framework that shapes reconstruction and urban renewal (Enab Baladi 2018a; Haugbølle 2018; Picali 2016; Yahya 2018) – analyses that I have included sometimes without adhering completely to the criticism voiced by other researchers. In the end, this all goes to show that neither legislation, reconstruction strategies or policies are neutral or objective. My mission here is to move beyond or across these different politicisations of reconstruction and to look at the values that shape the process.

3. Literature Review

I build this thesis on a background of a corpus of literature concerning post-conflict reconstruction, while also including theories of urban governance and demographic engineering to explain the specific example of urban reconstruction in Damascus. This chapter introduces literature that has laid the background for the thesis and my theoretical point of departure.

In the literature on post-conflict reconstruction there is a focus on reconstruction on several different levels, not only the physical reconstruction. I will just provide a brief account of some of the researchers in the field – some of which focus on the economic reconstruction, some on institutional reconstruction and capacity-building and some focus of course on reconstruction of the built environment. Economic reconstruction often revolves around rebuilding the private sector, as a means to increase business, decrease inflation, re-establish trade possibilities, pay of debt and create a sustainable economy without need for international assistance. Furthermore, an objective will often be to create employment both for the remaining civil population, but also for returnees and ex-combatants as a means for these groups to return to normal life. Stabilising the economy and creating employment can be part of the peace process. In some ways economic and institutional reconstruction are interlinked, as post-conflict societies will often be characterised by high levels of corruption, poor governance, poor rule of law and human rights violations (del Castillo 2008: 29-38). Securing long-term development and stability will then mean securing good governance and transparency, as well as enhancing the trust of the population in their leaders and their government (Barakat 2005: 254-55; Zetter 2005: 164).

According to Roger Zetter (2005), a precondition for these dimensions of reconstruction will be restoring the physical infrastructure and built environment. Rebuilding roads, public buildings and the like is the first step to a functioning economy and institutional framework, while reconstruction of housing is crucial for the basic security for the local population and their rights to a place to live. Of all kinds of built environment, housing is often hit hardest by conflict and civil war. At the same time, it is the kind that has the greatest significance for community building and restoration of social capital after conflicts (Zetter 2005: 156-7, 169). For this reason, Zetter argues that restoration of housing possibilities should be a priority in post-conflict scenarios. Apart from the rebuilding of housing, post-conflict cities will also have to deal with questions of property rights as part of the reconstruction process. According to Lynellyn Long and Ellen Oxfeld (2004), a challenge will often be that returnees and other post-conflict populations have new expectations and demands to their state and authorities (Long & Oxfeld 2004: 13-14). It can be a challenge to rebuild the capacity to deal with property rights at all, as registration systems of ownership and tenure need to be re-established and property disputes need to be resolved (Leckie 2005: 5-9). In some cases,

lawful land titles will have been acquired under different regimes, which can cause confusion as to rightful ownership. In other cases, records of ownership will have been destroyed or confiscated during conflict (Fitzpatrick 2002: 3-8; Leckie 2005: 15; Zetter 2005: 157, 164-68). Lack of records can also lead to issues of double ownership or double occupancy, as abandoned houses have often been occupied by others than the original inhabitants during conflict years. For these reasons, issues of property or land rights are very common after conflicts and dealing with these claims is crucial to reconstruction processes (Zetter 2005: 166-68). The restoration of housing, land and property rights is thus important in order to ensure that conflict does not erupt once again (Fitzpatrick 2002: 3; Leckie 2005: 12).

One final perspective that has shaped the understanding of the impacts of reconstruction for this thesis, is the question of return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) after conflict or civil war. For most refugees, return is the plan eventually – either permanent return or as some form of circular migration or provisional return to inspect the state of family property, see relatives or the like (Long & Oxfeld 2004: 7-13). Return can be viewed as a long-term process of reintegration in the country of origin and achieving a sense of permanency and stability (Noll 2000: 103), but is often studied in a context of repatriations undertaken by asylum countries, where less voluntary kinds of repatriation have become the preferred durable solution in the past few decades (Chimni 2004: 55-61). Even when returning to home regions, returnees will often experience arriving to a foreign place. For ethnic minority groups, and often for all returnees the experience often involves creating and negotiating both old and new social relations in a new context of post-conflict. In this regard, returnees can sometimes represent a threat to the state both politically and economically (Jansen & Löfving 2008: 6-15; Long & Oxfeld 2004: 13-14). The political and societal conditions for return in this way also shape the possibility of recreating a permanent life in the homeland and of affecting reconstruction in the country of origin.

All of these perspectives show that there are many different interests in play regarding reconstruction and prioritisation, that can lead to conflicting narratives and objectives. Each of these dimensions of reconstruction can have an effect on securing sustainable peace and development – which seems to be the overall focus in academic literature on reconstruction. My argument is that reconstruction in Syria cannot alone be explained as an attempt to secure sustainable development – at least not for all citizens – and I find it relevant also to explore the specific values that go into urban reconstruction from perspectives of urban development and governance. When I choose to focus on reconstruction as urban governance it is to highlight the highly processual nature of the restructuring of the city. Government institutions do not hold a fixed role, but their role also change. According to Jon Pierre (1998), the focus on governance rather than government addresses this, because urban governance here is viewed as a process, where institutions interact with civil society

and a range of private actors, and where these private actors are able to gain influence in urban politics. Pierre proposes to look at three related clusters of variables: process (transactions between public and private), values (system of norms and objectives) and institutions (role of public actors in transaction process) (Pierre 1998: 3-6). I will not use these variables directly in my analysis, but the concept of *values* has informed my research question and all variables shape my understanding on the levels of urban governance at play in the reconstruction process.

I furthermore draw on other investigations on the development of *urban governance* in European countries, by Frank Moulaert, Erik Swyngedouw and Arantxa Rodriguez (2001) and Nuno F. da Cruz, Philipp Rode & Michael McQuarrie (2019). Here, especially the roles of local government and non-state actors are investigated, as private involvement is often involved in cases of local governance. This leads to deregulation and privatisation of public services and infrastructure and the (local) state often becomes an enabling actor rather than an active one, to remove barriers for commercial interests or inclusion of citizen interests (da Cruz et al. 2019: 2-10). In this process, the goals for urban restructuring becomes a revitalisation of the city, often in the form of *urban mega-projects* – that is prestige property development to rebrand and upgrade cities. These development projects often adopt a business logic and private sector features to ensure efficiency and urban regeneration (Moulaert et al. 2001: 78-81).

My analysis shows that urban governance and renewal alone cannot explain the values that goes into reconstruction in Damascus, and for this reason I also include theories on *demographic engineering*. This concept is often used in connection to conflict strategies, especially in ethnic conflicts, or to manage minority opposition groups (McGarry 1998; Morland 2014). Demographic engineering will often include either majority or minority movements to secure a composition of population that is most fruitful for the state – either to divide or evict rebel groups or to secure the control over valuable locations (McGarry 1998: 615; 624). The concept of demographic engineering has often been used in relation to conflicts between ethnic groups (Morland 2014: 24) – for the sake of this thesis I do not so much relate to the emphasis on ethnicity, but rather see demographic engineering as a tool that could potentially be used in all kinds of conflicts where certain groups oppose each other. In relation to the analysis on demographic engineering, I also include the only academic research I have been able to find on reconstruction practises as a tool to demographically engineer Syria, in the form of a 2016 study by Jon Unruh, based on fieldwork among Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries in 2014-15. Unruh argues that the statutory tenure system in Syria was exploited to manipulate with public records and documentation, target anti-government groups and gain land and property for the government through expropriation (Unruh 2016: 453-4).

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I draw on the literature I have accounted for, to shape my understanding of the significance of different factors and possible considerations in reconstruction. I do, however, especially draw on the theories of urban governance and demographic engineering, that have been chosen as point of departure. I do this to contribute with an understanding of reconstruction that does not over-emphasise the post-conflict scenario but looks at it as a process of urban restructuring that stems from more than conflict.

4. Background: Conflict in Syria and Damascus

To set the scene for the context of reconstruction, I will briefly draw up how the situation in Syria and namely Damascus has unfolded throughout the past eight years of armed conflict. This is not a comprehensive account of the conflict, but merely an attempt to contextualise who the parties to the conflict are and how Damascus in particular has been affected by conflict.

The population of Syria has a majority of Sunni Muslims, but also includes a number of different sects and religious denominations. Since the 1970s the government has been led by the Assad family under Baathist Alawite rule. The Syrian Baath Party was rooted in socialism, secularism and pan-Arabism, and gained power at a military coup in 1963, followed by another coup in 1970 by later president Hafez al-Assad. The years under Hafez al-Assad have been described as a harsh rule, but when his son Bashar al-Assad assumed presidency in 2000, it was perceived to be a chance of opening up and renewal of an old and hard regime. This however changed, as Bashar al-Assad began hitting down hard on insurgency and demonstrations, and as minorities such as Kurds, but also Sunni Muslims continued to be suppressed (Balanche 2009: 122-3; Jörum 2014: 30-32; Scheller 2013: 7-8; Zisser 2006: 183). Pro-democracy protests and demonstrations started in early 2011 in the city of Daraa in southern Syria. Use of excessive force and killing of protesters by government forces resulted in widespread protests in major cities, and eventually in opposition groups taking up arms against government forces while demanding the resignation of Bashar al-Assad. Anti-government groups evolved into rebel brigades and battled the government for control over territory and cities. The rise of jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front and others further complicated the conflict and turned it into a civil war with many fronts and actors. This also includes international actors, as particularly Russia, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah have supported the Syrian government, while opposition groups have gained support from a number of Arab and European countries, as well as the US. The conflict, which started as anti-government demonstration, many of which called for a more democratic and open rule, evolved into several different factions, all fighting for their own goals. The conflict is somewhat fought along sectarian lines, as it often pitches the Sunni majority against the Shia Alawite sect. On the other hand, there are several Sunni Muslim groups still loyal to the Assad government. This goes to show that there have been many different frontlines, alliances and enmities. In addition, UN has found evidence that all parties have committed war crimes during the years of conflict (Balanche 2009; BBC 2016; Pinto 2013: 205-7, 229-30).

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In Damascus, the conflict has generally been between the Syrian government and anti-government protestors and armed groups. In the early stages of the conflict, especially the Sunni Muslim majority suburbs of Damascus experienced big demonstrations. These suburbs are often comprised of working-class families who have settled in informal settlements in the outskirts of Damascus – a pattern similar to other Syrian cities. Often informal settlements are built on publicly owned land and comprise almost 40% of the population of Damascus (Smiley et al. 2018).

In July 2012 Damascus experienced extensive fighting between government forces and opposition groups. Fighting in the southern districts of Damascus resulted in the defeat of several opposition groups. After the summer of 2012 the Syrian army declared that they had reconquered all of the capital with military officials reporting that they had "cleansed all the districts of Damascus" (Naharnet 2012; Peçanha et al. 2012). However, some fighting still continued in the following years. In 2013 rockets with the nerve gas sarin was fired at several suburbs around Damascus. The suspicion of launching the rockets fell on the government, who themselves blamed rebel groups for the attack (BBC 2016). The attacks were reported in districts in the outskirts of Damascus, in Eastern and Western Ghouta, which were at the time contested between rebel groups and government control. Both the US, France and several human rights groups have declared that they find sufficient proof that the Syrian government was to blame (BBC 2013). In 2018 many of the last anti-government groups were forced out of Damascus in a military offensive by government groups. This included rebels in the suburb of East Qalamoun, which was abandoned by rebels, who had conceded to leaving for Idlib in North-western Syria. At the same time shelling in other Damascus neighbourhoods continued. Rebel groups had held Eastern Ghouta as their stronghold in Damascus district since 2012 but were ousted by government operations in 2018 with heavy fighting and also here allegations of chemical attacks (Al-Jazeera 2018). Damascus has been mainly controlled by the government since these operations with anti-government groups pushed out of the city.

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The overall situation in Syria at the moment, is that the government controls a majority of the terri-tory including most major cities, as illustrated below:
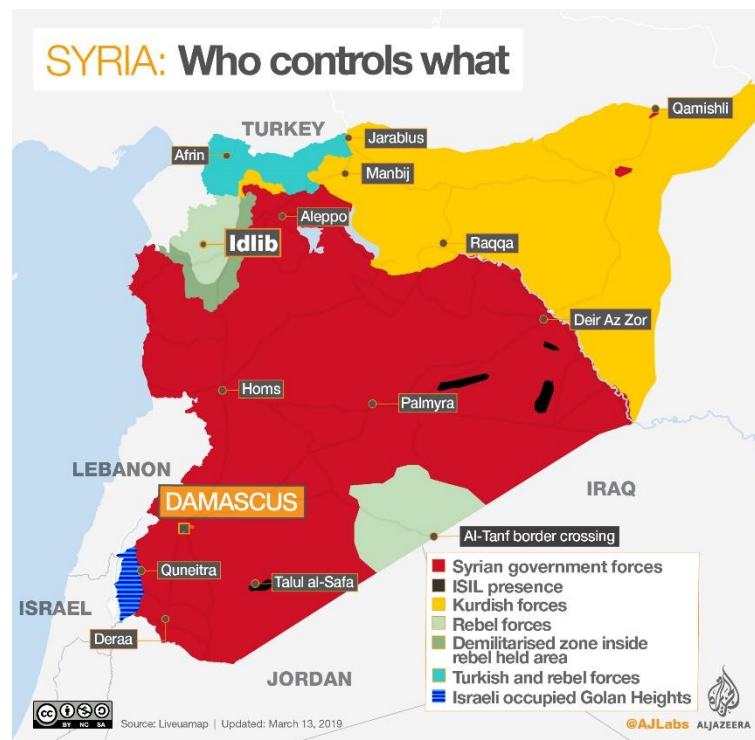

Figure 1: Syria: Who controls what (Chughtai 2019)

Damascus city and the surrounding area is also almost completely controlled by the government. This has been the situation through most of the conflict for the historic centre of Damascus, while there has been fighting between pro- and anti-government groups in many of the suburbs and peripheral areas, as accounted for in this chapter. Despite of battles, some areas in Damascus have remained relatively stable, especially in the later years of the conflict. In fact, Damascus' population has almost doubled during the conflict, as many have fled to the capital because of violence and fighting in their home regions (Abu-Nasr 2019). Now, I will move from this overall situational picture of Syria and Damascus to devote my attention to the particular case chosen for this thesis.

5. Case: Marota City, Damascus

As I now move to analyse on practises of reconstruction in Damascus, I find it useful to take up a specific case to illustrate one very prominent example of reconstruction. I have chosen to focus on the case of a new residential area in Damascus, Marota City. This choice has been made, because I have found it to be a case that both illuminates different interests of the Syrian government as well as of private investors, and serves to exemplify one direction, that reconstruction in Syria could perhaps take in general. Furthermore, Marota City is one of the first major building projects announced in Damascus, and for this reason alone it could point to the direction that Syria will take in terms of reconstruction. It has been speculated by several observers that as Syria's largest investment project, Marota City will 'set the blueprint' for reconstruction in Syria (Arab News 2018; Rollins 2017).

Marota City is a new residential area in south-western Damascus, which is mainly located in the part of the city called Basateen al-Razi in the district of Mezzeh (Syrian Law Journal 2019). The area is on the outskirts of Damascus and in the decades leading up to the conflict it transformed from being an area of farmlands to an area of mainly irregular and informal housing as underprivileged Syrians moved from the countryside to the city (Arab News 2018; Yahya 2018). When completed, the estimated number of residents in Marota City will be 60.000 (Arab News 2018). The area is planned to hold 186 residential buildings with between 11 and 22 floors, as well as a number of commercial skyscrapers and services both for education, sports and governmental buildings. It is also supposed to hold at least one shopping mall, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. New roads will be built in the area and leading to (Fouad Takla 2018; Marota City 2019a). About 40% of the buildings in Marota City will hold service facilities of Damascus governorate (Al-Lababidi 2019: 7). Marota City will have a number of features associated with contemporary requirements of residential areas in for instance Northern Europe, such as biking lanes, green building standards, waste management systems and facilities for disabled persons. It will also fit in big green public spaces – all as part of making Marota City an attractive living space (Fouad Takla 2018). The cost of purchasing residential apartments start at high prices and caters to buyers who are attracted to high living standards (Al-Lababidi 2019: 7).

The whole area of Marota City is planned out in detail with spaces devoted to residential and public areas and government buildings. On the website of Marota City, a diagram of the planned layout can be found (see Figure 2) and it is possible for potential buyers or investors to follow news on the development of the area (Marota City 2019b).
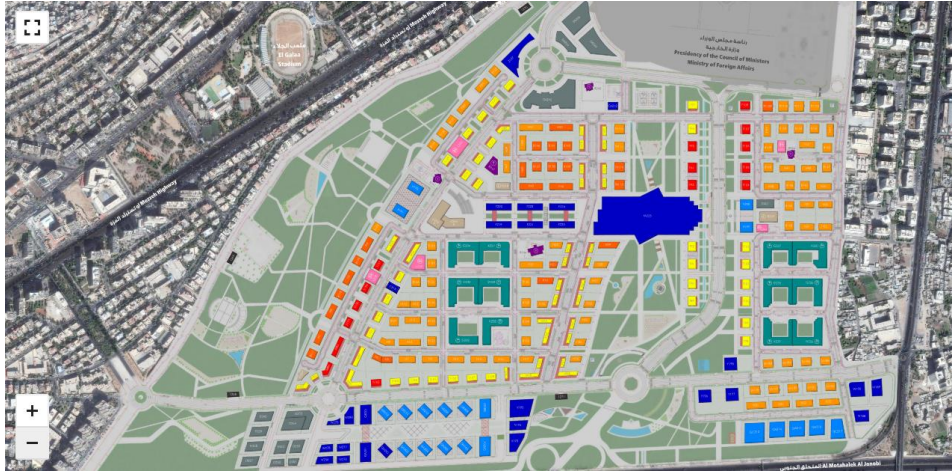

Figure 2: Visualisation of the planned layout of Marota City (Marota City 2019a)

Figure 3: Satellite photo from Google Maps on 7 May 2019 (Google Maps 2019)

It is evident form the above figures that there are elaborate plans for Marota City, and also that construction has only partly begun. Even though construction work is beginning in Marota City and is vividly reported by their website (Marota City 2019b), the only building already completed in the area is the headquarters of Damascus Cham Holding, the holding company established by Damascus governorate to undertake building of the basic infrastructure of the area (Al-Lababidi 2019: 8). I will elaborate on the role of this holding company in the following chapter.

Marota is often translated to mean 'sovereignty'– stressing the symbolic importance of the project for the image of reconstruction in Syria in general (SANA 2017a). The main developer behind Marota City is Damascus governorate, and the approval and planning of the project go back to 2012 as the location was designated as a redevelopment zone by the Syrian government by presidential Decree no. 66 (Syrian Law Journal 2018, 2019). Decree no. 66 of 2012 designated two zones in Damascus for redevelopment on the basis that these areas mainly consist of informal and illegal housing (People's Council of Syria 2012). Marota City is currently the reconstruction project that is farthest along and is closest to being realised in Damascus. It will, however, be followed by Basilia City, a similar project further south in the city. Both of the two locations of future Marota and Basilia Cities were designated for redevelopment in 2012 by the same decree (Arab News 2018). In this way Marota City is already announced to be the first reconstruction project of its kind, with others to follow the same organisational structure, and within the same purpose of creating new residential areas fulfilling all needs and requirements of future inhabitants.

6. Reconstruction and Private Investment

This chapter constitutes the first part of my analysis, and here I explore the organisational structure of the Marota City project and the crucial role that private investors take. Marota City is organised in a way that is quite new to Syrian urban planning practises, and I will now show that privatisation and public-private partnerships are central to understanding how reconstruction is shaped. I choose to look at these practises through a lens of urban governance to see how transactions between actors both in the public and private spheres unfold. This leads me to identify that reconstruction is shaped by a value of revitalisation, that is manifested by privatisation and liberalisation to ensure an efficient redesign of the city.

6.1. Local Government and Public-Private Holding Companies

The first factor to understanding the organisation of reconstruction efforts is a step towards privatisation of the field – a new law allowing governorates of Syrian cities to form private holding companies to undertake urban development. Decree No. 19 of 2015 allows cities to establish private holding companies to manage "among other things, building infrastructure, issuing construction permits, and managing the financial transactions of towns or governorates" (Yahya 2018). The law provides a number of privileges to holding companies, such as tax exemption when transferring property to shareholders, granting building licenses and granting residence permits (Syrian Arab Republic Prime Ministry 2015). Following this decree, Damascus governorate formed the private holding company Damascus Cham Holding in 2016 to undertake the reconstruction of one of the zones designated in Decree no. 66 into the new suburb of Marota City (Syrian Law Journal 2018). It also led to the governorate of the city of Homs establishing a private holding company for reconstruction purposes in 2017 (Al-Watan 2017). Damascus Cham Holding had 25.000 co-owners in 2017 and was worth SYP 60 billion ($279 million). At this time, reportedly there were built a new network of roads as well as the project headquarters of Damascus Cham Holding (Rollins 2017). The holding company has a number of subsidiary companies regarding development of different parts of Marota City. Ownership of the public properties in Marota City, that is the plots that were publicly owned or has been expropriated, has now been transferred to Damascus Cham Holding (SANA 2016). According to the Syrian state media SANA, the project was initiated with a loan from the Commercial Bank of Syria of 20 billion Syrian pounds (SANA 2017a).

Damascus Cham Holding is owned by Damascus governorate and has the Governor as its chairman (Syrian Law Journal 2019). This means that the local public authority has chosen to act through a holding company to undertake the task of reconstruction in several areas in Damascus – acting as a private company and taking on the task as if it were a private actor. According to Syrian

Law Journal, this makes the governorate able to avoid rigid public sector rules (Ibid.). Furthermore, it makes processes regarding reconstruction less transparent and questions of accountability become harder to pursue.

When viewing the role of local governments in general, they have historically had a dual role of service provider on the one hand, with what has been called a 'managerial' approach, and a political role of promoting democracy and participation on the other hand. Through the 1990s governance models emerged, that promoted market over politics and private interests over collective action. I take these points from Jon Pierre, and it is worthwhile to remember that Pierre's context is the US and European countries (Pierre 1998: 2-4). Therefore, the historical development is not necessarily relevant, because Syria has followed a different trajectory. However, it is evident that in Syria there is also a slide towards privatisation of public tasks of urban planning, as private-public partnerships take over. Here, the local government take on a role of facilitator for private and business interests, as the holding company creates opportunities to act more flexible according to business opportunities. Even though the Syrian context is different than Pierre's, it is still possible to see similar traits of private interests gaining more importance than political ends

Damascus governorate has set up a technical committee that has authority to approve or reject design submissions from developers prior to obtaining a building permit and other permits to start building. According to Syrian Law Journal, developers have unprecedented freedom in terms of design with the technical committee having very few demands and specifications. The resulting designs submitted to the technical committee consist of "a Dubai-style skyline packed with towers some of which may have iconic status" (Syrian Law Journal 2019). This could be seen as a sign that private developers are given as much freedom as possible in terms of deciding the layout for Marota City. Following this, the governorate is not the direct provider of housing or the main planning institution behind the building project, but rather become an actor, that can shape the direction only to a certain degree. At the same time, the governorate takes on the role of including and recruiting private companies and businesspersons and in this way providing funding and personnel for the urban planning strategy. This is in some ways a novel role for the local government, who have before been the main service provider. In this new shift in urban governance, the local government is not only governing the city, but also navigating other political interests and other levels of government, lobbyist interests and (ideally) democratic considerations. In this process, it is often seen that power shifts towards private actors e.g. private companies or consultants – especially on the local level, where local governments often tend to become a network coordinator rather than the direct service provider (da Cruz et al. 2019: 2, 10). This delegation of public tasks to private undertakers is exactly the trend we see in Damascus, where the governorate becomes more of a network coordinator affecting relations between public and private actors.

6.2. The Role of Private and International Investors

Damascus Cham Holding does not own all of the project of Marota City, and neither does Damascus governorate. There are a number of other investors and private persons, who are also shareholders. Former property owners in the area expropriated by the state, who have been able to validate their ownership, have now become shareholders in the project. Damascus Cham Holding is contracted to build the underlying infrastructure of Marota City and holds 68 out of 280 plots as shareholder in the project. According to Damascus Cham Holding, Damascus governorate owns 30% of the Marota City project, while the rest is owned by former landowners and residents (Damascus Cham Holding 2019a; Syrian Law Journal 2019). To develop the plots owned by Damascus Cham Holding, the company has entered into joint ventures with private investors, creating joint stock companies and giving up some of their shares in return for funding. Damascus Cham Holding owns 49% of shares in each stock company, meaning that private investors have a majority of shares in these companies. Such companies were established throughout 2018 with several different investors (Damascus Cham Holding 2019b; Syrian Law Journal 2019). According to Syrian Law Journal, this is the first time that Syrian public authorities have given shareholder majority to a private actor and as such transferred control over public development (Syrian Law Journal 2019). To sum up, this means that private investors take two roles in the project: one is as shareholders in the Marota City project amounting to 70% of the land. The other role is as shareholders in stock companies established by Damascus Cham Holding, here having a majority say in decisions on infrastructure and real estate projects. This means that private investors altogether have a stronger voice in developing Marota City than Damascus Governorate does through their holding company.

Damascus Cham Holding furthermore functions as a catalysator of international investment in the Marota City project, and its headquarters in Marota has reportedly welcomed visitors and delegations from a number of Middle Eastern and Asian countries, such as Lebanon, Jordan, UAE and China to discuss investments in Marota City (Damascus Cham Holding 2019a). In late 2018 there were talks with at least two Russian private companies on investment in Marota City (Emmar Syria 2018). A prominent Syrian businessman, who is also involved in politics, also led a delegation of Syrian businessmen and heads of chambers of commerce to the UAE in early 2019. UAE has invested in Marota City in several ways and has been one of the first Arab countries to reopen an Embassy in Damascus (Damascus Cham Holding 2019c; Fouad Takla 2019). In addition to this, the Syrian and Iranian governments have signed agreements on both public and private Iranian investment in Syrian energy, housing and transport sectors, among them private investment in building 30,000 residential units specifically in the three biggest cities in Syria (Fouad Takla 2019; The Syrian Observer 2018b). To attract foreign investment, Damascus International Fair was re-established in 2017 after five years absence with participation from Jordan, Lebanon, Iran, Russia,

China and a number of other countries (SANA 2017b, 2018a, 2018b). It is interesting here to note that the EU and other western countries were not participating in the fair, in part because of EU sanctions on commercial affiliation with Syria. However, the Syrian government and business world still rely on international investment, and foreign investors – public and private – show interest in development in Syria. For instance, Chinese Ambassador to Syria announced during the fair that Syria was a natural partner in Chinese "The Belt and Road" Initiative (SANA 2018a).

On the domestic level, Damascus Cham Holding have signed several contracts with a number of private investors regarding different parts of Marota City such as a mall and many residential buildings. Among them, are several expatriate Syrian businessmen, many of whom were well-known in Syria before the conflict erupted (Syrian Law Journal 2019). Some of the shareholders in Damascus Cham Holding include Samer Foz and Rami Makhlouf, two well-known Syrian businessmen, where the latter has strong ties to the Assad family and the government (Arab News 2018). Makhlouf has also been a major shareholder in other real estate projects and is the president of Syriatel – a leading communications company (Al-Iqtisadi 2018; Al-Lababidi 2019: 12-14). Foz' company also holds shares in Al Baraka Bank and the Syria International Islamic Bank – two of the largest private Syrian banks, that are also both involved in providing private loans for the Marota City project. Muhammad Hamsho, another businessman who is prominently involved in rubble removal and other reconstruction related activities, and prominent in the real estate sphere, is at the same time serving as both Secretary General of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, Secretary General of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce as well as member of parliament for Damascus (Al-Lababidi 2019: 17). These are merely examples of the most prominent business-persons involved in Marota City – as well as other urban development projects in Damascus. These examples show that the Syrian business world and the public and legislative sphere are very closely connected. In fact, many of the most involved businessmen in the Marota City project are on the EU 2016 sanctions list for this exact reason – that they have close ties to the Assad family or the Syrian government and as such enjoy a privileged position under it (Ibid.: 12).

To explore the significance of the intertwinement of public and private worlds, I find it useful to draw a parallel to reconstruction efforts in post-civil war Beirut in neighbouring Lebanon. In the process of reconstruction of the built environment in Beirut, much focus and resources were devoted to the destroyed central district of Downtown Beirut. The reconstruction here was undertaken by the publicly-traded corporation Solidere, whose founder Rafiq al-Hariri would become prime minister of Lebanon for several years (Nagel 2002: 722). Solidere was established in 1992 just before al-Hariri was elected prime minister and has undertaken reconstruction projects ever since. The choice of Solidere as undertaker of comprehensive reconstruction is prescribed mainly to the influence of al-Hariri on the inefficient post-war government and his promise to rebuild

without financial support from the state. The Lebanese parliament passed new legal framework that would make the plans of Solidere possible, including laws on dispossession of owners and tenants and expropriation of areas of land (Schmid 2006: 369-77). In the case of Beirut, we see that there were very close ties between government and business world, and that both would have common goals or be able to facilitate each other's goals in terms of funding and legislation combined.

In this case, the reconstruction came to be undertaken very much on the conditions of the private sector and the government used its power to facilitate large prestige projects in the city. This of course has the advantage that influx of funding and real estate developing experience can kickstart developing projects and in this way can perhaps facilitate a swift and efficient reconstruction process. If the overall goal of actors is financial gain, it does, however, lead to development being limited to the scope of specific projects and their success, rather than a comprehensive and coherent reconstruction effort. In the end, this means that there is limited focus on the socio-economic needs of the population, and thus a less holistic approach to reconstruction, as was the case in Beirut, where many were dispossessed of their property. On the other hand, reconstruction in downtown Beirut was undeniably boosted by the involvement of private actors and funding. This also seems to be the aim of reconstruction efforts in Damascus, where public-private partnerships and corporate logics are prevailing. With privatisation and both national and international investment in prestige projects, reconstruction in Damascus definitely set out to restructure and rebrand the city. I will now move to addressing the motivations for choosing this model of urban governance and reconstruction.

6.3. Visions of a Revitalised and Privatised Damascus

Nasouh Nabolsi, chief executive officer for Damascus Cham Holding, has stated that he expects the commercial centre of Damascus to shift to Marota City (Arab News 2018). The company also states on their website that Marota City is at the centre of Damascus – something that would probably not have been the case before the conflict erupted, but now shows the layout of the new city, that is being restructured. It is stated by Damascus Cham Holding that Marota City is the first step towards prosperity, and that this project will contribute to positioning Syria as a modern and global actor (Damascus Cham Holding 2019d). The modernisation of Syria and, in this case, Damascus also shines through the design choices for Marota City. Renditions of all approved designs can be found on the website for the project –all comprising of high rises and towers with glass facades and a futuristic design:
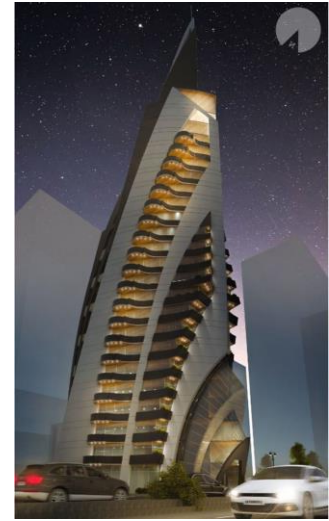
Figures 4-6: Examples of approved designs for residential buildings (Marota City 2019c).

The design of residential buildings in Marota City is described to be a "modern urban style" (Damascus Cham Holding 2019b). Marota City is branded by Damascus Cham Holding as a new city and the beginning of a new history. In this narrative, Marota is the first step in rebuilding Damascus, re-establishing the city in an international context and securing prosperity. It will be built according to both international standards and ideas, as well as living up to the high Syrian taste and a specific Levantine character (Damascus Cham Holding 2019d). Damascus Cham Holding in this way stresses both the international and cosmopolitan character of the new prestige city, while at the same time asserting that the design has its roots in its Arab and Syrian background. It is thus both a city of the future and a revived golden past – a new and better Damascus.

To achieve this vision of a prosperous and evolving city, the efficiency of reconstruction is crucial. The creation of a holding company and the transfer of responsibility to public-private partnerships is described as having the advantage of legal flexibility and that this is a modern and innovative way of managing properties and urban development (SANA 2016). There have been given different estimates for the price of reconstruction – the Syrian government's own estimate at 400 billion USD is among the highest. However, on the Syrian budget for 2019 hardly any means were allocated for reconstruction compared to the estimated amount needed for the purpose. This could show that the government puts its trust in private investors and interests in terms of reconstruction (Al-Lababidi 2019: 8; Haddad 2018). This could be done out of need, because the Syrian economy has suffered heavily from years of conflict.

At the same time legislation is set up to sanction shareholders in Marota City who do not apply for a building permit within one year and start building. In order to get a building permit, it is necessary to present a financial guarantee, and the project must follow a tight time schedule

(Syrian Law Journal 2019). These are measures put up to secure that projects are initiated and finished timely. This efficiency is also secured by involving private actors in the development to enhance economic interests of more parties to the projects. Securing efficiency is thus delegated to private actors instead of the governorate being responsible for building projects being finished on time. Allegedly, the strategy of selling off shares to private investors is chosen by the Syrian government to save money and get access to bigger budgets for reconstruction, and that the proxy holding company has been established to avoid unnecessary taxes, obligations and bureaucracy regarding the transferral of areas and projects to private partners (Enab Baladi 2018b). The project of Marota City has been expected to create 110.000 jobs (Emmar Syria 2018). As most of construction is still in very early phases, this can be no more than an estimate, but the mission is clear: construction of this huge luxury complex is planned to directly boost the Syrian economy. Especially in terms of private and international investment in the project, which eventually also will be channelled to the Syrian economy via job creation and taxpayers.

When we draw on theories of urban governance in a non-conflict stage, it has been theorised that governments will often aim for a *revitalisation* of their cities with the main focus on economic growth and rebranding the city internationally to attract even more capital. This leads to what has, by Frank Moulaert, Erik Swyngedouw and Arantxa Rodriguez, been termed *urban mega projects* – urban developing that is often focused on large infrastructure and property redevelopment. Often in these urban mega projects, funds are channelled through quasi-governmental institutions and public-private companies. Many projects have a "business oriented and urban renewal logic" and urban mega projects are seen as the most effective way to achieve revitalisation. In non-conflict related cases the perceived need for urban development and regeneration will often stem from a wish for increased competitiveness following a market logic adopted by the state (Moulaert et al. 2001: 74-76, 82). In Damascus we of course have to regard that the context is the aftermath of a civil war and that the city is largely destroyed. It is therefore not only a case of increasing competitiveness, but a very literal *revitalisation* that is aimed for. On the other hand, the choice of organisation for building projects with public-private endeavours, as well as the aim of creating an upper-class neighbourhood point to the fact that it is also a project aiming for growth, and a modern and international re-branding of the city of Damascus. For instance, Syria' permanent representative to the UN said about the reopening of the International Fair in Damascus that the purpose was to show the world that the country was recovering and returning to normal, as well as being ready to be an economic and political partner internationally (SANA 2017c).

In Beirut after the long civil war, some of these urban mega projects were, as discussed earlier, undertaken by the public-private company Solidere. On the one hand, Solidere's reconstruction could be viewed as reinforcing religious and class segregation, as for instance a highway was

created along the former Green Line (the war-time separation line of Beirut) as a physical division of the city, as well as around the newly built downtown area, effectively creating a "ghetto of the rich and powerful" and catering mostly to the upper class (Schmid 2006: 373-4). On the other hand, the initial plans by Solidere was a vision of recreating an idealised Beirut with social openness and diversity, as well as highlighting common Lebanese history, by for example creating public spaces around archaeological excavations. In this view, the physical reconstruction was creating a picture of a unified nation with a conscious forgetfulness in leaving out any trace of the civil war (Nagel 2002: 723). Schmid depicts the reconstruction as an international project of creating a business capital with Solidere's mission of creating a "Hongkong of the Mediterranean" – a prestigious comercial city centre (Schmid 2006: 374-77). I see here a clear parallel to the current rhetoric surrounding reconstruction in Damascus as the city is being rebuilt to attract private and commercial partners and to be re-branded as an international and prestigious city, with the help of private partners. This prestigious city will in effect not attract all segments of the population and is clearly directed towards population groups who fit in to this new business capital. I find it relevant here to turn towards addressing the groups who do not fit into this glamorous picture of the new city.

6.4. The People Who Will Not Live in Marota City

The piece of land that is about to become Marota City was expropriated by presidential decree in 2012 for redevelopment purposes, to turn areas of illegal and substandard housing into a new and more glamorous city. However, the current organisation of the project causes the land to be shared among many shareholders, many of them private investors, and to be controlled to some degree by private and commercial interests. The role of private investors in reconstruction and urban development projects has on the other hand been criticised by government opposition for being a return to the ways of clientelism and nepotism, that characterised the practises of the Syrian government already before the conflict, and for giving private businessmen too prominent a role in Syrian economy (Al-Lababidi 2019: 11-12). Often when privatisation is a priority for urban governance, the state takes the role of removing barriers for commercial interests or inclusion of citizen interests. In general privatisation of public services and infrastructure means less accountability and less room for long term visions that are for the public good (da Cruz et al. 2019: 6). I will try to explore this trend in the context of Damascus.

Because private investors now hold majority of shares in the Marota City project, it means that the task of rebuilding a big area of what used to be informal housing lies with actors who do not have to live up to standards of accountability or regard for the interests of former residents, returning population or the like. When private interests weigh more heavily, the local population can often be the ones whose interests are not secured, and the question arises as to who will be the

inhabitants of Marota City – of this revitalised and improved city? If we look at the Syrian population, the fact is that in 2015, almost half of the Syrian population was displaced, either internally or externally (Unruh 2016:458). This might not be a bad point of departure for building new housing opportunities. However, in 2019 83% of Syrians live below the poverty line (UNHCR 2019). At the same time prices of apartments in Marota City, that are already sold in advance, are reportedly very high, starting from 2 mil. SYP per square meter – far more than the average Syrian will be able to afford (Enab Baladi 2018c). Syrian Law Journal reports that there are speculations that wealthy Syrian expatriates will want a luxury apartment as a summer home, or that foreign investors might want to buy residential areas with expectations of the value increasing in the coming years (Syrian Law Journal 2019). The fact is that even though some apartments have been sold, no one yet knows who will inhabit Marota City or any of the other urban mega projects underway in Damascus, but that it will definitely not be possible for the majority of the population.

Drawing a parallel again to Beirut, the privatisation and market-orientation of the reconstruction there led to the exclusion of an important factor in the post-conflict setting: the local population, and namely house owners, tenants and internally displaced persons who had taken residence in abandoned buildings. They were forced out and excluded from decision-making processes. Laws were passed to facilitate the dispossession and subsequent compensation of owners and tenants, both present in Beirut and having fled abroad, and the expulsion of illegal residents, often internally displaced persons. This is seen by Heiko Schmid (2013) as a very critical neo-liberal development, as private actors take a privileged position in decision-making processes, and property rights are expropriated from original owners directly to a private real estate company. Schmid also sees it as an example of *New Urban Governance*, when power is transferred to public-private corporations, and the focus shifts to short term commercial goals rather than long-term non-profit visions (Schmid 2006: 366-70). These considerations lead me to a further perspective on the values shaping reconstruction. The public-private partnerships that undertake urban development not only caters to private interests of competitiveness and revitalisation, but the intransparency of such endeavours can also facilitate certain demographic strategies of the Syrian government.

6.5. Subconclusion

In this analysis I have argued that a clear value of the Syrian government in terms of urban reconstruction is that of revitalisation of the city, happening through privatisation and liberalisation of urban development. Reconstruction has here been analysed as a process of urban governance, where non-state actors get bigger roles, and the government become more of a facilitator for private actors. This is seen in public-private partnerships, where the government benefits from private investments, and at the same time facilitates private reconstruction endeavours. It is further done through liberalisation via legislation and via transfer of power and decision making to private companies through the publicly established stock company Damascus Cham Holding.

Private investors hold the majority of shares in development projects and are in effect able to shape the design and nature of Marota City, whereas the government decides where redevelopment will happen and the overall infrastructural frame. This I argue, is a strategy of a government than wants to prioritise prestige luxury projects, and as such it is a deliberate choice to outsource urban mega projects to private investors. Theories of urban governance and public-private partnerships are thus useful for understanding the motivation of the Syrian government to bring in private partners in the reconstruction of Damascus. The motivation and the value behind this choice is the revitalisation of the city – a literal revitalisation, after much of the built environment has been destroyed in conflict.

On the other hand, in the specific Syrian context, there are also other values at play, as private investors are not only representing sources of investment, but also loyalism to the Syrian government, and as money are flowing only to gentrificating projects of luxury residential areas, while the majority of the remaining Syrian population live in poverty and have very little say in the future of their housing situation. This discrepancy between the conditions and the needs of the local population and the reconstruction strategies, I will address in the next part of my analysis.

7. <u>Reconstruction as a Tool of Demographic Engineering</u>

In the next part of the analysis, I investigate how reconstruction practises do not cater to the majority of the local population and how there are traces of a deliberate strategy of the Syrian government to re-engineer the composition of the population and change the post-conflict demographic. I argue that this is a value of demographic engineering that the Syrian government lets shape reconstruction. As mentioned earlier, the location that now holds the very first signs of the emerging Marota City used to be an area of farmlands and informal housing. The majority of the urban development zone was a neighbourhood called Basateen al-Razi – mainly a working-class neighbourhood, which saw demonstrations and armed clashes intensely in the first years of the conflict. This means first and foremost that this was not an empty location. Reconstruction choices for this area had implications for the local population, and big parts of the inhabitants were evicted as result of urban development – many of whom now reside in other inexpensive parts of Damascus, or in neighbouring countries (Arab News 2018; Smiley et al. 2018). As I have referred to earlier, the Syrian government is now in a position of having reconquered the vast majority of Syrian territory, and arguably effectively having won the military side of the conflict, with support from Russia and Iran. This means that the conflict is now in stage where questions of reconstruction and return of refugees and IDPs are imminent and more and more urgent. Therefore, reconstruction affects the ability of both remaining and returning populations to rebuild and create a stable life.

7.1. **The Homeland – Government Rhetoric**

In general, they Syrian government has given a picture of a country, that is returning to normality and starting to welcome returnees and to rebuild the nation. This is very evident in a speech given by Syrian minister of foreign affairs and expatriates, Walid Al-Muallem, at the 2018 UN General Assembly. In the speech, Al-Muallem stresses that "the return of every Syrian refugee is a priority for the Syrian state. Doors are open for all Syrians abroad to return voluntarily and safely" (SANA 2018c). He further states that the Syrian government is rebuilding areas destroyed in the conflict – or "destroyed by terrorists" as he puts it. In the picture he paints, Syrian refugees had to leave their country because of "terrorism and the unilateral economic measures that targeted their daily lives and their livelihoods" (Ibid.).

As a contrast to this, president Bashar al-Assad has at an earlier stage – in 2015 – reportedly said that "the homeland does not belong to those who populate it or hold its passports or nationality. Homeland belongs to those who defend and protect it" (Enab Baladi 2018a). In this picture, not all Syrians are welcomed back or regarded as true Syrians. Perhaps this discrepancy between the two speeches can be traced to the fact that the Syrian government is now on a quest to

"restore normalcy" as Al-Muallem puts it (SANA 2018c), and thus legitimacy to their rule. In fact, al-Assad has also softened his rhetoric, and has last year called on all Syrians to return – but especially Syrians with business in Syria (TASS 2018). This might be a hint that the Syria of the future is being engineered by the current government, and that returning Syrians will have to find their place in the new Syria, where economic interests come before considerations for the public good. In fact, the conflict in Syria is in the government rhetoric a war against terror to defend the harmony in the country – as expressed in another 2018 presidential speech (RT 2017). In this rhetoric there is no question whether the reconquered territory is harmonious nor about the nature of the nation that is being rebuild – it is the nation that fits the visions of the Assad-led government and administration.

This rhetoric flows into issues of urban reconstruction as well, as for instance according to Damascus Cham Holding's website, the company is a partnership to "build a homeland" (Damascus Cham Holding 2019b). The project of Marota City is even given a nationalistic angle by private investors, when a partnership between Damascus Cham Holding and a Syrian developer is depicted as a "duty towards the homeland" before going on the glorify Syria as the home of ancient civilizations, and the birthplace of alphabets, numbers, musical notes and olives (Damascus Cham Holding 2019d). This kind of rhetoric is in line with the before mentioned wish for revitalisation of the city – and here as a starting point for revitalisation of the whole country. But further than that, it is also depicting a recovering and harmonious country that has survived years of war to now stand united for a future. This, however, does not seem to be the case for everyone affected by urban changes.

7.2. Demolitions, Conflict and Return

According to Maha Yahya, a researcher from Carnegie Middle East Center, the apparent revitalisation and gentrification embedded in reconstruction efforts are merely creating an illusion, aimed at covering deliberate attempts of political and socioeconomic cleansing. This is according to Yahya, evident because a majority of areas designated for redevelopment are exactly the locations of demonstrations and anti-government uprisings – and because other areas of unformal housing, that were not sites of protests but instead hold pro-government population are not assigned as redevelopment zones (Yahya 2018). Basateen al-Razi is one of these areas of former opposition control, but the pattern goes all across the suburbs and areas of informal housing of Damascus – several other areas, that saw large protests or early clashes are today also planned for demolition or redevelopment (Smiley et al. 2018).

In addition, this these planned demolitions, there have been reports of the Syrian government demolishing neighbourhoods as part of the fighting in suburbs around Damascus – especially in suburbs that used to be the residence of rebel and anti-government groups (Human

Rights Watch 2014: 43; Human Rights Watch 2018a). As an example, Darayya – one of the areas designated for reconstruction – has been one of the birthplaces of demonstrations, uprisings and political opposition and was under opposition control from 2012-16. Human Rights Watch has registered several examples of returnees unable to reach their property, and who have furthermore experienced lack of transparency regarding policies and procedures of property registration, as well as arbitrary and intransparent administration of property claims. Human Rights Watch argues that the strategic denial of access to residential areas and property could be seen as forced displacement, and lack of freedom of movement, and even that the demolitions of residential areas may be war crimes (Human Rights Watch 2018a). As an example of demolitions being used as part of the conflict, Human Rights Watch has recorded the following statement from a Syrian woman:

> *After the demolition, the army came to our neighborhood, saying through*
> *loudspeakers that they would destroy our neighborhood like they destroyed Wadi*
> *al-Jouz and Masha` al-Arb`een should a single bullet be fired from here*
> (Human Rights Watch 2014: 17-18).

The mentioned areas are all in Hama, another Syrian city now under government control. The same pattern of demolitions has been found in the Damascus neighbourhoods of Tadamoun and Qaboun, where residential buildings were demolished immediately following a military offensive by government forces, and as such as part of the conflict (Human Rights Watch 2014: 4, 20-25). According to Human Rights Watch, the practise of demolitions as part of fighting and as a punitive targeting of civilian goals is against a number of human rights and the laws of war. The criticism by Human Rights Watch goes to the fact that arbitrary demolition and evictions are against both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Arab Charter on Human Rights, which both guarantee the right to property (Human Rights Watch 2014: 5; Human Rights Watch 2018a; Kayyali 2018). I would argue that what we see here, is that demolitions are not only used as a punitive tool as part of the fighting, but that this is also used as a threat to subdue dissidents and potential rebel groups, and to deter them from residing or returning to these areas.

Demolitions could in this sense be viewed as an immediate punitive action or a targeting of opposition groups. However, it has the long-term effect that undesirable population groups are forcibly moved out or deterred from returning and undesirable informal housing is at the same time removed to give way for a different kind of residential area with a different demographic – wealthier and more loyal population groups. In this lies that an underlying premise of practises of reconstruction is the fact that it will also inevitably shape return possibilities of refugees and IDPs (Black & Koser 1999: 7-8). In the conflict in Syria, many have been several times displaced, both

internally and outside the country. As the intensity of the conflict shifts from one location to another, and as Syria has gradually become more stable, the question of return will be imminent for both refugees and IDPs. When talking about refugees, I mostly consider the perspectives for refugees in neighbouring countries. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey are coping with the weight of big refugee population from Syria, as most refugees are currently in neighbouring countries. In 2016 only around 10% of all Syrian refugees had fled to Europe (BBC 2016). I consider spontaneous return more likely to happen from countries close to Syria, where borders can more easily be crossed, and these groups are thus more likely affected by the development in Syria.

For many Syrians, the question of housing and livelihood possibilities, access to education and health care weigh just as much as the question of an end to armed violence. To draw a comparison with return dynamics in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, Stef Jansen (2006) has found that many Bosniacs did not wish to return to their former places of residence as minority returnees because their concerns were of a wider spectre, including socio-economic security and possibilities as returnees. In addition, he found that in this case potential returnees saw their displacement as part of a bigger situation of precariousness and uncertainty. They, therefore, found it hard to jeopardise whatever small security that they had found during their displacement (Jansen 2006: 183-4). This parallels very well some of the stories of provisional return, that the Lebanese NGO SAWA has reported. Several of their informants have attempted return to their former homes in Syria, only to find their houses gone, new families occupying their houses and police unwilling to assist or even hostile towards returnees (SAWA 2019: 28-32). I will address here specifically the issue of rights restoration and housing possibilities.

7.3. Housing Land and Property Rights

We know from literature on other cases of post-conflict reconstruction that Housing, Land and Property (HLP) are central issues both in shaping return patterns of the displaced population, but also in securing their successful reintegration (Black & Koser 1999; Zetter 2005). It is likely that this will highly affect the post-conflict returns in Syria as well – as concluded in a study by the Lebanese NGO, SAWA, that shows that HLP challenges are one of the reasons that Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not find it feasible to return to Syria – many have even attempted return and seen themselves forced back to displacement in Lebanon (SAWA 2019).

Here, it is relevant to look at how HLP rights are being secured in Syria, in relation to reconstruction efforts. The two areas designated for urban development in Damascus in 2012 – the areas, that are to become Marota and Basilia City are both examples of expropriation by the Syrian government to develop urban areas with informal and sub-standard housing. This meant that there would potentially be many people with a claim to the land or who owned property in these locations.

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Syrian authorities announced that they had resolved all cases of property disputes in 2013. At this time, they counted more than 27.000 cases of disputes, most of them about ownership of land or of rightful occupancy of different parts of the former housing (Al-Iqtisadi 2013). Tools of compensation for the expropriated lands, and for solving disputes over ownership or tenancy were at that time embedded in the decree, that expropriation is based on – Decree no. 66 of 2012. This decree designates two redevelopment zones in southwestern Damascus: one in south-eastern Mezzeh (later becoming Marota City) and one that stretches across several suburbs in southwestern Damascus (later zoned to become Basilia City). The decree states that owners have one month to prove their ownership in order to receive compensation (People's Council of Syria 2012). This decree was created to "redevelop areas of unauthorised housing and informal settlements [slums]" in Damascus specifically. It serves as legal basis for reconstruction in several Damascus suburbs, among them Basateen al-Razi (Rollins 2017). Following Decree no. 66 areas with informal housing can be designated for expropriation and subsequent redevelopment. Former residents who can prove ownership or whose ownership is registered in public records receive shares in property development projects as compensation for expropriation (Smiley et al. 2018).

Decree no. 66 was only designating zones of urban development in Damascus governorate but could be viewed as a hint as to which direction urban reconstruction would take at the end of the conflict, and almost as an experiment in terms of how a city could be redesigned. In 2018 a new piece of legislation was passed, that received even more attention from critics of the Syrian government – Law no. 10 of 2018. Law no. 10 is an evolution of Decree no. 66, in the way that it expands the possibility of expropriation to all of Syria, and not only Damascus. According to the law, redevelopment zones can be announced all over the country as means to expropriate land for government purposes (Syrian Arab Republic Prime Ministry 2018). Inhabitants would have to prove their ownership or rightful occupancy within 30 days from declaration of the redevelopment zone to obtain compensation. This period was later extended to one year through Law no. 42 of 2018 (Middle East Eye 2018; SANA 2018d). The law also goes further than Decree no. 66 in not only addressing areas of informal or irregular housing, but now areas of regular and registered housing can be designated as a redevelopment zone as well (Arab News 2018). Law no. 10 has been used to expropriate several areas in Damascus for reconstruction purposes (Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Local Administration and Environment 2018).

According to the law, when ownership is established, property owners can either register their part of the property and their name and become shareholders in the project, sell their shares in a public auction, or create an investment company with their shares. For tenants, local authorities will compensate with up to two years' rent to tenants or with alternative housing within four years, according to the law (Human Rights Watch 2018b). However, there are some vaguely

worded provisions as well as ambiguities in the law, that are left open to administratively fill out (Ibid.). Law no. 10 was internationally criticised, and a letter from 40 countries was sent to the UN Security Council voicing concerns that the law could be used to "expropriate the private property of millions of displaced Syrians, depriving them of their homes and land" (United Nations Security Council 2018: 1). To understand the implications of Law no. 10 and the harsh criticism from the UN member countries, it is urgent to understand that it is not only the law in itself which can hurt the HLP rights of the local population. Rather, it is the implementation and use of the law that will leave a room for re-engineering the composition of the population, because it will affect some demographic groups harder.

Both Decree no. 66 and Law no. 10 hold provisions for compensation, but these provisions might be hard to carry out in practise and the implementation of the law will have great significance for HLP rights. First of all, Law no. 10 is weighing heavily that ownership can be documented in order to obtain compensation and rights to alternative housing in cases of expropriation (SANA 2017a). This emphasis on documentation can be problematic in many cases, because many inhabitants have abandoned their property during the conflict, and such documents are often lost during displacement – either because they were not brought when people chose to flee, or because many have lost belongings during their displacement. Furthermore some are not even able to document their identity, because they have lost documents or because data required for proving identity such as birth, death and marriage certificates have not been officially recorded in the first place – simply because this is not common practise among members of the underprivileged working-class (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016: 15). In the same way, it has not been common to have formalised ownership or to register property in public records. Before the conflict, almost 40% of the Damascus population lived in informal housing (Yahya 2018). It follows that documentation of ownership might not be the right requirement to apply to secure the HLP rights of former inhabitants. Even though it seems as if the rights of the local inhabitants are being upheld when compensation is offered, this might not be the fact due to informal practises of housing arrangements in Syria.

In addition, Law no. 10 and the rhetoric surrounding it give the impression that documentation for HLP rights is easily done and a natural part of the tenure system. This, however, is not the case, as property rights in Syria are a mixture of remains of old Ottoman laws, the modern Syrian Civil code and a mixture of customary and Islamic laws (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016: 7-8). Often lower income neighbourhoods used to have their own informal decision-making procedures – and local leaders would resolve disputes over property or facilitate property trans-actions. Meanwhile, in rural areas land would often be acquired through extended family networks and thus also in informal and unrecorded ways (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016: 6; Unruh 2016:

457). For these reasons, property rights are often very complex and related to family ties, local consensus and the like, rather than official records. It also follows that the communities that are most likely to suffer from not having officially recorded property rights are rural groups who relied on customary and family based tenure system, refugees living in Syria before the conflict (namely Palestinians) as well as the communities in informal and irregular housing areas on the outskirts of major cities – often very large areas with many inhabitants. Incidentally, especially these informal suburban areas, in the case of Damascus and other cities as well, often also hold anti-government groups and sentiments. The government has especially targeted the population in areas that is both anti-government and has valuable lands or properties (Unruh 2016: 458-9). This could be argued to be the case for instance the outskirts of Damascus, that is meant to be the new commercial centre – close to the old centre of Damascus and valuable now that it is 'cleansed' of anti-government communities.

One further aspect to note, is that housing and property administration offices in anti-government areas and their records have reportedly deliberately been destroyed by bombings – especially in opposition areas of Homs and Damascus (Unruh 2016: 458-9). In Homs, the same areas where property records were lost, were later designated for urban renewal under Law no. 10 (Yahya 2018). This means that any official records of land and property owners in these areas are non-existent, making it much harder to prove ownership for former inhabitants or returnees. All of these factors show that even though the HLP legislation holds provisions for compensation and obtaining alternative housing on the surface, it will not in practise be possible for former residents to enjoy these privileges. In this context the legislation around HLP rights does not suffice because of cultural practises of unrecorded property ownership and because a long conflict has made it unlikely that property owners will still be able to document their ownership or even their own identity. Furthermore, experiences with both Law no. 10 and Decree no. 66 show that people get too little compensation even when they are compensated – not enough to allow them to reacquire property, even when they can prove ownership (Human Rights Watch 2018a; Kayyali 2018).

To draw a parallel, once again, to post-war Bosnia Herzegovina, it was actually the case that the focus, especially in terms of returning minorities, was too heavily on HLP rights. In this case Jansen especially criticises foreign intervention agencies of being pragmatically 'blind' to the politicised context, and merely applying an objective human rights approach. This meant very narrow understanding of rights in the way that focus was only on restoration of property and on the right to return to the exact place of origin regardless of the complete change in social and demographic context (Jansen 2006: 187-91). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, this meant that many either did not want to return to their restored property or that it would be sold off briefly after, because the demographic composition or livelihood possibilities had changed, and return was not desirable for retur-

ning Bosniacs. In the case of Syria, the danger is not the same blind focus on HLP rights, but rather that the government is able to argue that these rights are being upheld if the socio-cultural context and the post-conflict chaos are disregarded – since provisions for compensation are provided in the legislation. I would argue that the post-conflict situation in Syria is different from the one in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but that in both cases there is a lack of holistic approach. If the assessment of rights and legislation lacks context and claims objectivity, rights are not necessarily upheld in practise.

All of these considerations also become a question of the feasibility of return. Researcher Samar Batrawi puts it like this in an interview:

> *Think about all this from the perspective of a refugee looking into Syria right now: There is no structural economic assistance for people going back to Syria and you can't afford any of the new or existing houses that are in the urban centers, which is where most of the job opportunities and infrastructure are located*
>
> (Al-Maleh 2018).

What Batrawi expresses is that all of the challenges to restoring HLP rights become part of a wider set of socio-economic and political challenges, that all together discourage refugees from returning, when they are not part of the desirable population groups in terms of relations to the government. All of these issues show that in practise there is very poor protection of HLP rights of former inhabitants in areas expropriated by the Syrian government, and that there is a definite targeting of areas holding anti-government groups.

7.4. Engineering the Future

I will argue that all through practices of demolitions, expropriation and redevelopment, there is an underlying objective of demographic engineering. The concept of demographic engineering describes the deliberate moving of ethnic groups by states to manipulate demographics in a way that is fruitful to state's agenda – often to either increase the concentration of desirable ethnic groups or force out undesirable ethnic groups (McGarry 1998; Morland 2014). I will get back to the focus on ethnicity in the theory – for now I will elaborate on how reconstruction can be a strategy of demographic engineering. The tools for expropriation that the legislation provides, are in themselves the first tool of demographic engineering: the ownership of many areas is transferred to the state for the state to decide the future of urban development and housing possibilities. This happens according to both Decree no. 66 and Law no. 10 for redevelopment purposes. It should be noted that there are also several other laws that are possibly used for strategically transferring ownership, for instance Decree no. 63 of 2012, which transfers property ownership to the state, if the original owner falls under laws of counterterrorism. The issue here is that definitions of terrorism in the law are so broad

that non-violent journalists, protestors and humanitarian workers get convicted of terrorism because of political affiliations, and as such could lose their land and property rights as a consequence (Human Rights Watch 2013; Human Rights Watch 2018b). For the Syrian government, the result will thus be the ability to confiscate land belonging to political opponents to use for reconstruction purposes.

Using expropriation or housing policies as tools to redesign or engineer the demographic composition is nothing new – it is a common tool used by states to either move certain population groups by force or to create incentives for them to relocate, often to peripheral or less desirable locations. This can either happen by moving in loyal population groups are by pushing or moving out opposition or enemy groups, if they pose a problem or an obstacle for government. Sometimes these techniques are used as part of conflict, or to push out minority groups. This will often happen if there is a perceived risk of rebel groups being a security risk to the state (McGarry 1998: 613-5, 624-5). McGarry actually argues that these deliberate techniques of demographic engineering used by states are often overlooked when for instance studying migration patterns, and that they can actually be part of wider state-persecution (Ibid.: 614). Because both demolitions and evictions are hitting a specific demographic group, it effectively redesigns the population in these areas. According to Maha Yahya from Carnegie Middle East Center, the practises of restoring property according to Law no. 10 might come to serve as a form of "vetting mechanism" of political opponents. This could create and administrative leeway of deciding who will and will not receive compensation (Yahya 2018) – and this will in effect create divisions of who is able to return and under which economic conditions.

It furthermore has a deterring effect on refugees or IDPs looking for possibilities of returning to their old homes and re-establishing their lives and livelihoods. Generally, returnees after conflicts will at times end in internal displacement – often as a result of agendas in the home country (Long & Oxfeld 2004: 11-13). Even when return is to the place of origin, vulnerabilities can be created after return. This can happen as results of bad housing solutions or unequal distribution of land and property (Black & Koser 1999: 8-11). Here minorities are especially vulnerable, as their reintegration is harder, and their voluntary return will sometimes be lower (Zetter 2005: 156-7). These points all come from research on other conflicts, but it seems that the current trajectory proves that Syria is no different; many potential returnees are deterred from returning, and government agendas and implementation of new property laws make it hard to access adequate housing and to re-establish a sustainable life.

So, who do these practises favour and who does the Syrian government want to in the Syria of the future? This is not easily answered, I have found, perhaps as Syria right now is still recovering and only slowly starting to improve economically and in terms of stability. There is a big

power in administration of property rights – often pro-government groups get an advantage and are able to gain from government HLP policies. At the same time people not affiliated with the government get discouraged from entering the system of HLP rights and documentation, for fear of being targeted by the authorities (Unruh 2016: 458).

The Syrian conflict is often seen as being fought along religious divides, but the pre-war population was very heterogenous, and even though the conflict was fought along some sectarian lines, simply viewing it as a religious-sectarian conflict does not suffice. Examples of complex sectarian allegiances are for instance that many members of the Alawite sect, that the Assad family belongs to, are in stark opposition to the government and have been mistreated. At the same time Christian groups have often been very loyal to the Assad government and enjoyed a number of privileges. The big Sunni Muslim communities contain many different groups ranging from Salafist extremists to the secular Syrian Democratic Forces. These groups are defined both by their level of secularism versus piousness as well as their class relations (Unruh 2016: 456). This means that even though many of the anti-government groups I have mentioned, who fight the government are made up of Sunni Muslims, the conflict cannot merely be seen as the dominant Alawite sect fighting Sunni Muslim insurgency. I will not go into all of the complexities that are grounds for alliances and aims of different groups in Syria, but simply use this to argue that the redesign of the population, that the Syrian government is undertaking, is not a case of religious cleansing that targets specific religious communities. For instance, many of the early protests were undertaken by massive crowds of Sunni Muslim working-class communities, that felt subdued. At the same time, many of the government's staunchest supporters – such as the businessmen and loyal private investors mentioned earlier – are also Sunni Muslim. My point here is that the demographic engineering is more a matter of loyalty and class divisions than anything else. There have been reports of a growing Iranian population, both military and businesspersons as well as regular working-class, who are both provided with property and documentation as well as citizenship. At the same time pro-government Syrian citizens who have remained in Syria are encouraged to take over property vacated by people, who have fled (Ibid.: 460-61).

The concept of demographic engineering is often used in connection to ethnic conflicts and the strategic engineering of ethnic demographics (McGarry 1998; Morland 2014). I will argue that in the case of Damascus the demographic engineering that is the result of reconstruction practises is not a specifically ethnic engineering and cannot even solely be explained by the sectarian nature of the conflict and growing sectarian divides. Instead, it is just as much an engineering of class and socio-political demographics in the sense that the privileged groups in post-conflict, post-engineered Damascus will be the ones who are loyal and wealthy – the ones who have something useful to offer for the Syrian government and the future Syria.

7.5. Subconclusion

In this second analysis I have argued that several different reconstruction strategies of the Syrian government combined can be characterised as following a value of demographic engineering of the Syrian population. I have explored how the Syrian government rhetoric is about a recovering and harmonious homeland that is ready to invite back its people. I do, however, argue that the Syria, they are welcomed back to, is a demographically engineered and redesigned country, suiting a desirable demographic of loyal citizens that are potentially economic assets.

The background for urban mega projects and revitalisation of Damascus, is that the revitalised and redeveloped locations have been expropriated by the Syrian government and that legislation has been passed to facilitate expropriation and hinder access to HLP rights, such as compensation and access to adequate housing. Tools of demographic engineering include demolitions as punishment and deterrence meant to target anti-government groups who are still inhabiting Damascus or live in displacement as IDPs or refugees. It also includes intransparency and difficulties in obtaining or keeping houses and property, and gentrification and prioritising prestigious mega projects that does not fulfil the housing needs of the broader population.

It is thus not one of these strategies but all of them combined that cause demographic engineering to occur. The combination of legislation, demolitions and urban development plans together is meant to privilege population groups with closer and more loyal ties to the government, while especially working-class groups affiliated with anti-government protests or armed rebellion are deemed less desirable and so pushed out of certain urban areas or discouraged from returning there after displacement. In this way the reconstruction of the only city becomes a revitalisation for the ones who benefit from the choice of prestigious urban mega projects, and the ones who are not targeted by these other strategies of urban development. Now, I will seek to address how the emergence of these values have been made possible.

8. What Reconstruction Hides

I have up until now argued that there are two simultaneous values at play in reconstruction in Damascus; a value of revitalisation through privatisation and liberalisation, and a value of demographic engineering as reconstruction practises and legislation effectively changes the composition of the population. In this chapter I will wrap up these arguments, to discuss how these can exist simultaneously. First of all, I would like to devote some thoughts to the use of the two sets of theoretical frames that have been applied so far.

The overall focus on urban reconstruction as urban governance has allowed the changing role of government and public institutions to become visible and to see how the relation between public and private actors is crucial, as reconstruction does not follow traditional ideas on the role of government. I have argued here that the urban governance model of reconstruction of Damascus in the case of Marota City can be seen as following patterns of privatisation and marketisation and the entry of a neoliberal logic in urban governance, that is also evident in the trajectory of some European and American cities, according to Pierre(1998) and Moulaert et al.(2001). In this analysis, I have found these theories very useful to understand the motivation of the Syrian government to kickstart reconstruction with these grand prestige projects rather than housing that would cater to the socio-economic needs of the local population and displacees. In this way, this theoretical framework highlights the motivation of development and renewal that goes into reconstruction and to restart a society and a city after conflict.

However, it might allow other values and objectives of reconstruction to remain invisible or slip under the radar. Here, I argued that reconstruction practises cannot be explained by wishes for revitalisation alone, but that there are also nationalistic incentives of changing the demographics of Damascus at play. I have based this analysis on theories of demographic engineering while also relying on human rights advocacy actors who have already heavily criticised reconstruction practises as they are currently shaped by the Syrian government. This means that much of the perspective of demographic engineering comes to rest on an evaluation of whether the rights of the population are being upheld, and of how democratic the reconstruction efforts are. It could be argued that the strategy of privatisation and liberalisation is not a bad strategy for rebuilding and rebooting a city after war. I of course also argue that this strategy does not consider the socio-economic needs of the broader population, but it does none the less, seem that it is efficient in terms of attracting both foreign and Syrian investment as well as attention from desirable potential buyers. It could be argued that an alternative to a Marota City project could be creating housing that would be affordable and attract different classes and political groups, and that this would be a way to unite a nation instead of dividing or redesigning it. This is highly speculative, but I include these

speculations to highlight the fact that the values now shaping reconstruction are chosen deliberately – they are a prioritisation of how Damascus will be rebuilt and which kind of reconstruction the Syrian people can expect.

The theoretical framework on demographic engineering has allowed me to see how the conflict is deliberately used to further the interests of the Syrian government both during the conflict and related to reconstruction. And this, I argue, is actually a point in itself: that conflict and reconstruction cannot easily be separated, but rather are intertwined and do not exist as two distinct phases. In the analysis of reconstruction practises I have found it striking that there are several examples of urban planning and development on the one hand, and armed conflict on the other being mixed up and that it is not always clear to what purpose urban changes are happening. For instance, Human Rights Watch have reported that demolitions close to Mezzeh airport in Damascus were officially announced to be according to Decree no. 66, because the area held illegally built houses, and it was as such part of urban development plans that predated the conflict. However, governor of Damascus countryside, Hussein Makhlouf said in an interview in October 2012 that "demolitions were essential to drive out opposition fighters" (Human Rights Watch 2014: 4, 32). In this case urban planning legislation and tools are used for conflict related purposes. It is of course not surprising that demolitions can be a means to a military end, but the striking thing is that the official explanation is of a non-military nature, and as such there is not a clear line between when conflict ends, and urban development begins.

As explained earlier, there are many examples of demolitions following battles in Damascus, that have been seen as punishment aimed at anti-government inhabitants. Many of these areas were after a short period of time designated for redevelopment because of the condition they were in following combat (Human Rights Watch 2013). Here the official purpose of demolitions was military, but the result was that demolitions was a tool to redesign the city. According to Jon Unruh (2016), over one-third of all real estate in Syria was destroyed by shelling in the first year and a half of the conflict, with most of the shelling concentrated on the poor areas at the outskirts of major cities, among them Damascus (Unruh 2016: 460). It is not within the scope of this thesis, to draw a comprehensive picture of the connection between demolitions and 'redeveloped' areas, but I will use these examples to illustrate that there does seem to be a pattern that some areas have been deliberately destroyed to be able to build new residential areas and other facilities for loyalist communities.

Regarding this, critical journalists argue that many investors in Marota City do not only have a commercial interest in the project, but that investors in urban development projects are screened and selected from a range of government loyalists (Enab Baladi 2018c). This could either mean that they are used strategically by the current government, or that they are part of the rule of

this government – businessmen so involved in decision-making that they not only get power trans-ferred but that there is no division of public and private spheres. In the international community, there is somewhat an understanding of this connection between reconstruction and conflict, as several Syrian businessmen are subject to EU sanctions, due to the fact that they have close ties to the government in Syria and help finance the government's efforts to build on expropriated land. Out of 11 businessmen added to the EU sanctions list in January 2019, eight are linked to the Marota City project through Damascus Cham Holding, and this involvement is cited as a direct reason for their sanctioning, because they either benefit from or support the Syrian government (Council of the European Union 2019: 1-4).

As I have argued, urban planning and conflict strategies are in many cases mixed up and used interchangedly – both with regard to demolitions and of urban restructuring leading to new parts of the city being built. There is thus not a clear line between when conflict ends, and recon-struction begins. The two are not separate phases – one before and one after the end of conflict. Often, they are not even two separate processes happening simultaneously. Rather conflict and reconstruction are embedded within each other. The demolition of the areas, that were subsequently designated for urban development goes back to the early years of the conflict – as far back as 2012 (Human Rights Watch 2014), and even before the conflict erupted, the issue of informal and illegal housing was a priority of the Syrian government in terms of legislation (Syrian Law Journal 2018). This could of course go to show that the Syrian government has been consistent in their urban planning. It could also, however, show the effect that a war can have in terms of creating chances to pass questionable legislation and redesigning cities under the disguise of the chaos of armed conflict. In this regard it is evident that the Syrian government has passed a number of laws during conflict years pertaining to HLP rights and the possibility of expropriation (Norwegian Refugee Council 2016: 8-9). Already in the early years of the conflict, older laws were used to expropriate property for purposes of for instance electric power projects or conserving historical buildings (Unruh 2016: 462-3).

Marota City could be like any other prestige project of luxury apartments catering to the wealthy and privileged in post-conflict Syria with its glitzy malls and facilities for biking and jogging. These kinds of projects are seen in processes of gentrification in major cities all over the world as part of making certain urban areas attractive to a desirable demographic group. However, Marota City is not only a case of gentrification. Because these luxurious residential buildings and fancy malls will be built on expropriated land and Marota City is largely framed as a reconstruction project it is crucial to see this project as a product of the armed conflict, that has dominated the country for eight years. It is only when we apply the context of demolitions, involuntary evictions and deterrence of return, that it becomes evident that Marota City is definitely a grim example of

gentrification, but not only this – it is also an example of a deliberate strategy of using armed conflict as a cover to transform a city.

Reconstruction is often depicted as apolitical – as a necessary process in the aftermath of war, conflict or natural disasters. Reconstruction is, of course, necessary but the process can take a multitude of forms and shapes, all of which are subject to political processes. In post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina the precariousness experienced by underprivileged Bosniacs was a result of not only the post-war context and displacement, but also of post-socialist transitions that had both political and economic consequences (Jansen 2006; Martin-Diaz 2014). According to Jordi Martin-Diaz, commercialisation became part of reconstruction, and international visions pushed for transition to a market economy. Much like in Damascus, this transition included an increased focus on commer-cialisation and possibilities of consumption in the structure of the city, as well as a change in relations between the public and private sector and social and economic polarisation (Martin-Diaz 2014: 305-9). Here, Stef Jansen proposes to look at both a forced displacement in the post-war context, but also at a forced transition, that affects both returnees, remainees and IDPs. In this way, he sees a double context of simultaneous post-war reconstruction and socio-political transition. In the case of post-war Bosnia Herzegovina, the transition towards capitalism was also majorly seen as a 'modernisation' of society – a necessary change of trajectory towards modern international society (Jansen 2006: 186-93). I find it very useful here to draw on Jansen's notion of two simultaneous forced processes – one of reconstruction and one of transitions. It might even be the case that it is valuable to see reconstruction in Syria as a case of political transition first, and then only secondly as post-conflict case, as it can expose what the reconstruction hides.

In the case of Damascus, reconstruction is on the one hand shaped by a wish for revita-lisation and improving the international reputation of the city after years of armed conflict have hurt the Syrian economy and the built environment. On the other hand, the process of reconstruction is also subject to a nationalistic effort by the current government to shape the demographics of the Syria of the future, and to punish or discourage anti-government groups through demolishing and expropriating their houses and properties. These two values could be viewed as wishes for a transition; a transition towards a neoliberal society where the loyal upper-class is welcomed and supported, and where the dis-loyal political opponents are discouraged or evicted through legislative and administrative means. In this way it is a transition to the future and redesigned Syria.

To carry out this transition in full, the mission of the government is to 'normalise' the view on Syria and to apoliticise reconstruction to create a sense of obviousness or naturalness around the need to rebuild the country and the capital. Both of the values I have discussed in this thesis are societal transitions that are strategized by the Syrian government and facilitated by the state of conflict in Syria and the following chaos. If we, like Jansen, see the cases of reconstruction as political

transitions, rather than merely post-war necessities, practises become deliberate political projects for the future and not just about rebuilding something from the past. Reconstruction, international cooperation, visits of delegations – all are strategies of normalisation, and prestige buildings projects with international investment is a feature of future, modern Syria, not of a war-torn country. This is the story that the Syrian government wants to tell, and the transition they are aiming for. Reconstruction can thus be argued to be a continuation of the war by other non-military means and calls for international assistance might be attempts to normalise circumstances surrounding reconstruction, as well as attracting funding (Mneimneh 2018), while the government on the other hand continues to invest in reconstruction projects that do not fulfil the needs of the broad population, but only of a privileged and loyal elite.

As a final point regarding the use of conflict to hide these transitions, I would argue that the international focus during the Syrian conflict has diverged from the pro-democracy protests in 2010-11 that was part of what was termed 'the Arab Spring' to mainly focus on a fight against terror and extremist Islamism with the emergence of fundamentalist groups, especially with the Islamic State, that succeeded in both gaining much territory and much international attention. This fight against the actor that was the most extreme – both in terms of military means and of ideological aims – has perhaps allowed focus to slip away from what was being carried out by another actor who used legislation and urban planning as a tool as well as military means. I do not argue that there has been no attention on human rights violations by the Assad government, but rather that there might be more of an acceptance of the lesser evil that the Syrian government represents. This could serve as a hypothesis which would be interesting to put further research into.

To sum up, I will argue that the chosen theoretical approaches have allowed me to see some of the values shaping reconstruction in Damascus. This does not mean that my analysis has been comprehensive, in the sense that is has not asserted to deal with all values possibly at play. The values that I have identified, however, are here seen as transitions towards a different Syria and a redesigned Damascus, that are only made possible by the increasingly blurred lines between conflict and reconstruction.

9. Conclusion

This thesis has investigated which values shape reconstruction in Damascus through analysing on government announcements, legislation and reports from different actors, both pro- and anti-government. I have approached urban reconstruction as a process of urban governance to explore the roles of different kinds of actors and relations. This has led me to conclude that there are different values at play simultaneously, and that these represent different interests and objectives.

First of all, I have argued that reconstruction is shaped by a value of revitalisation, realised through adopting a marketised logic of privatisation and liberalisation. Revitalisation means an efficient reconstruction meant to rebrand the city as a modern, cosmopolitan and recovered capital ready for business and economic revival. This is especially the case as private investors are included to take a crucial role in reconstruction, and as the public administration of reconstruction is outsourced to the public-private holding company Damascus Cham Holding, established by Damascus governorate. In this way public institutions are taking on new roles as network coordinators and private-public partnerships emerge to facilitate a revitalisation of the city and a more effective and commercial way of urban development. As such, this value is both connected to reconstruction as a result of conflict but is also an urban development choice to focus on turning some areas into prestigious urban mega projects, while neglecting other areas. This might come with the consequence that transparency decreases and most inhabitants in the development areas lose access to housing and tenure possibilities.

Building on the first analysis, I argued that the value of urban revitalisation cannot explain all processes of urban reconstruction. This has led me to conclude that another value shaping reconstruction is a deliberate demographic engineering to privilege access to housing for some groups, while others are discouraged from returning or neglected in terms of housing, land and property rights. This is done through using demolitions following fighting to destroy areas of unwanted housing, by expropriating certain areas and by making adequate compensation and alternative housing difficult to access. I argue that this deliberately mainly hits areas previously inhabited by anti-government groups, and that priority is given to luxury residential projects designed for a wealthy upper-class. The strategy of prestige urban development projects becomes problematic not because it seeks to revitalise the city and its image, but because it does not accord with the needs of the local population, and thus in effect demographically engineer the future Damascus.

Lastly, I have discussed how both of the values of revitalisation and demographic engineering can be seen as desirable transitions, that are carried out by the Syrian government and facilitated by the state of conflict, that the country has been in for several years. This is made possible

by the fact that conflict and reconstruction have become embedded within each other to a certain degree. Here I argue that it is the chaos and complexity stemming from the long conflict that allow these transitions to be carried out. This is, in itself, a further value or objective of the government; that the conflict becomes a facilitator for desirable transitions and changes.

10.   <u>Bibliography</u>

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