



RECONSTRUCTION BY OTHER MEANS?

THE CONDITIONAL RETURN OF YARMUK'S DISPLACED

SITUATION REPORT

19 OCTOBER 2020

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Analysis.....	4
Damascus seemingly bows to popular anger over reconstruction plans.....	4
Another U-turn? Changing HLP policies in South Damascus	5
Yasser Qashlaq to invest in reconstruction efforts?.....	7
What's behind pro-government property purchases?.....	8
Forecasting.....	9
Government-linked business interests coalescing around reconstruction.....	9
Marota city	10
Qaboun.....	10
Humanitarian impacts.....	11

MERCY CORPS HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

THE CONDITIONAL RETURN OF YARMUK'S DISPLACED » 1

KEY POINTS

- › Authorities in Damascus have agreed to allow former residents of Yarmuk to return to their homes based on three criteria. Before returning, residents must acquire: a study demonstrating the structural safety of their former home, proof of ownership of the property, and a security approval from the Military Security branch in Damascus' Adawi neighborhood.
- › The announcement on 5 October will be welcomed by some displaced Yarmuk residents hoping to return to their homes, months after Damascus governorate approved an organizational plan for reconstruction of Yarmuk in late June that was widely feared would erase property ownership of a majority of the camp's former residents.
- › Stipulations regarding proof of ownership and security approvals will still preclude the majority of Yarmuk's estimated 160,000 former Palestinian residents (and many more former Syrian residents) from returning. As such, the latest announcement should be seen as an attempt by Damascus governorate to assuage public anger over the organizational plan applied to Yarmuk in June but without substantially changing the status quo of return to, or reconstruction in, the camp.
- › Additionally, with regional and business interest in government reconstruction plans, there are growing concerns that these will be prioritized over the right of return. The acquisition of considerable real estate by prominent businessman Yasser Qashlaq is a continuation of similar trends in both Marota City and Qaboun, areas also slated for redevelopment.
- › The humanitarian impact is significant. With government-held Syria in a complex, far-reaching economic crisis impacting everything from rent prices to bread, the cost of displacement will continue to grow for many of Yarmuk's hundreds of thousands of displaced, creating further destitution for citizens already struggling.

Cover photo: 30th St. on the western outskirts of Yarmuk. the site of fierce artillery bombardments against ISIS fighters hidden in the outward-facing buildings during the 2018 offensive, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

On 5 October, a Damascus governorate official announced that authorities will now permit former residents of Yarmuk in South Damascus to return to their homes in the near future – albeit with caveats.

Return will be subject to three conditions. As such, former residents must acquire:

- > A study demonstrating the structural safety of the property;
- > proof of ownership of the property;
- > security approval from the Military Security branch in Damascus’ Adawi neighborhood.

Reconstruction plans for Yarmuk have been beset by delays. However, on 25 June, Damascus governorate approved an organizational plan for Yarmuk (and al-Qaboun in the east of the capital).¹ The plan envisaged the full-scale razing and rebuilding of whole areas of Yarmuk, putting at risk the property rights of tens of thousands of former residents. The plan prompted widespread backlash from former camp residents, Palestinian factions and civil society formations; Damascus governorate received tens of thousands of formal objections from former residents, forcing authorities to attempt to assuage public opinion.² While rumors state

that Damascus governorate has since actually *cancelled* the organizational plan for Yarmuk altogether, an earlier statement signed by the Damascus governor on 24 August stated that it had simply been “postponed.”³ The governorate formed a committee tasked with reviewing the organizational plan.

Yarmuk has its own especial context, given its history as Syria’s largest and most significant Palestinian community, which raises the possibility that Damascus will treat Yarmuk differently to other areas of the capital slated for reconstruction. That said, the government does appear to be more sensitive to criticism of its reconstruction policies than previously, although it’s not expected that this will result in substantive changes to the content of these policies.

Although the future of the Yarmuk plan remains in doubt, structural barriers stand in the way of return – in particular, the burden of proof required for former residents to verify and maintain property ownership. As such, the latest announcement should be seen as an attempt by Damascus governorate to assuage public anger over the organizational plan applied to Yarmuk in June but without substantially changing the status quo of reconstruction in the camp. It remains unclear what housing, land and property (HLP) legislation will be applied in Yarmuk, after Damascus governorate signaled that

¹ Humanitarian Access Team (HAT), “[Housing, Land and Property Violations in Government-held Areas of Syria](#)”, 10 August 2020.

² Humanitarian Access Team (HAT), “[Yarmuk reconstruction plan in jeopardy](#)”, 28 August 2020.

³ Ibrahim Diab, director of planning and organization at Damascus Governorate, confirmed on 27 August that the plan had been postponed, but that the organizational zone could be cancelled altogether, amended or recommenced unchanged at some point in the future. In the meantime, a newly formed committee will review the plans.

redevelopments would not be under Law 10/2018 (as previously stated) but rather under Law 23/2015 and Law 5/1982. This effectively means that even residents who verify ownership of their properties will be denied key protections, such as alternative housing and rent payment support (as was previously promised).

Other potential spoilers to return exist, however. Local sources report that Yasser Qashlaq, a Palestinian businessman in Damascus with links to Syrian intelligence, has started buying-up vacant properties in Yarmuk and the neighboring area of Al-Hajar al-Aswad – another area of the capital’s southern suburbs previously slated for reconstruction under Law 10/2018 and/or other laws.

While the status of Yarmuk’s reconstruction plans now remain in doubt, news about Qashlaq’s involvement in the local real estate market should ring alarm bells. Although a lesser-known government-affiliated business figure in Damascus, Qashlaq is said to have close ties to Syrian intelligence as well as Hezbollah and the Iranians, and he is also secretary-general of the Free Palestine Movement – an organization that has, in the years since its foundation in 2003, turned its hand to everything from political campaigning (around Palestinian nationalist and anti-occupation causes) to service provision and military recruitment. Since 2011, though, the movement is perhaps better known because of its

increasingly influential Damascus-based armed wing, led by Sa’ad Abdel Aal.

ANALYSIS

Damascus seemingly bows to popular anger over reconstruction plans

When Damascus governorate announced it had approved an organizational plan for Yarmuk in late June, the backlash was swift. Various civil society formations voiced their concerns after the plans were approved; on 18 July, a robustly worded open letter criticizing the plans began circulating on social media, signed by thousands of signatories including journalists, writers and community figures as well as activists now in the diaspora who were previously affiliated with post-2011 civil society movements in Yarmuk. The General Union of Palestinian Engineers - Syria also issued a more muted statement, addressed to Assad directly, questioning the efficacy of the plans. Palestinian factions and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) also used back-channels with Syrian authorities to raise their concerns.

During an official 30-day period for former residents to file objections to the plans, Damascus governorate received more than 10,000 objections.⁴ Anger focused on a number of issues, some specific to Yarmuk and others

⁴ According to local sources, many of the objections challenged the plan itself, with former residents calling on the Syrian government to apply a 2004 organizational plan (approved in 2013) that would maintain their ownership as well as the pre-2011 legal status of the camp. Critics also questioned why Yarmuk’s quasi-independent municipality (dissolved in 2019) should now fall under Damascus governorate, threatening its Palestinian nature.

aimed at Syria's reconstruction policies more generally. Damascus governorate officials quoted in pro-government media responded by saying they were listening; the plan was postponed, subject to review.

Another U-turn? Changing HLP policies in South Damascus

There are signs that Damascus governorate has indeed responded to criticism, arguably surprising from a government that has historically stamped out, rather than fielded, dissenting points of view. In fact, there are other signs of U-turns by Damascus governorate regarding other reconstruction developments in South Damascus;

Hay al-Tadamon, immediately east of Yarmuk camp (across Palestine St., which separates the two neighborhoods), was badly damaged during hostilities between the Syrian army and opposition groups starting in mid-2012. Authorities have since signalled that Tadamon will be subject to reconstruction (with only 690 homes listed as habitable), meaning the vast majority of its former citizens are unable to return. However, reportedly following the intervention of a former top commander of the National Defence Forces (NDF), Fadi Saqr (who hails from Tadamon),⁵ Damascus governorate

has announced it will now permit the return of some of the area's displaced residents (with similar restrictions imposed on returnees to those at Yarmuk)^{6,7}

Damascus responding, in a piecemeal fashion, to growing discontent within local communities and loyalist circles should not be mistaken as a U-turn on its reconstruction policies, however. Punitive and arbitrary HLP policies are still a mainstay of the Syrian government's reconstruction strategies in formerly opposition-held and/or badly damaged areas of the capital. Trends displaying this are threefold:

1. Property expropriations

Despite the veneer of legal process, property expropriations have continued: for example, several property seizures have been reported across South Damascus since July last year, including in Yarmuk. From the perspective of the Syrian government, these seizures can be used to expropriate property of perceived dissidents and discourage the return of former opposition fighters and, with it, prevent the emergence of restive quasi-opposition communities (as Dar'a and Rural Damascus have witnessed in recent months). One way that the Syrian government doubles down on this policy is by resettling government employees, security officers and

⁵ Saqr was previously head of the NDF in Damascus, and now leads the Ba'ath Party's youth division in Damascus.

⁶ *The Syria Report*, "[Conditional Return for Tadhamon's Inhabitants](#)", 23 September 2020.

⁷ According to *The Syria Report*, "Returnees must bring documents proving their ownership of their properties and remove any remaining rubble at their own expense within the first two months of receiving their homes. They must also provide a document proving that they have no debt and that their financial record is clear, and then pay outstanding electricity, water, and telephone bills. Returnees also must assume full responsibility for the structural integrity of their properties. This includes obtaining a restoration permit from the municipality of the neighbouring Al-Midan district before undertaking any reconstruction work.

For more information, see: *The Syria Report*, "[Conditional Return for Tadhamon's Inhabitants](#)", 23 September 2020.

pro-government combatants (and their families) in the place of former residents. This has already taken place in Yarmuk, where the area known as the 'Old Camp' now hosts up to 250 families. According to local sources, these families have been permitted to return since 2018 by virtue of their links to government bodies, security agencies and/or pro-government Palestinian factions (including the PFLP-GC, Fatah al-Intifada and Free Palestine Movement).⁸

2. Closure of displacement shelters for IDPs

Another concerning trend is the closure of displacement shelters in and around the capital: media reports in late September stated that authorities were preparing to close the Bab al-Mussala shelter in southeastern Damascus,⁹ which houses individuals and families displaced from areas including Eastern Ghouta and South Damascus, many of whom now have no homes to which they can return.¹⁰ This points to the potentially unsustainable situation for IDPs who may be, as yet, unable to return to their homes, but without sustainable access to shelter in

government-supported displacement shelters or rented housing.

3. Structural barriers

Perhaps most crucially, though, structural barriers still exist barring returnees from actually going back to their homes. Many former Yarmuk residents do not have the required proof to verify their ownership under Syria's HLP laws (given levels of informality in the area before 2011), while danger involved in acquiring security permissions will also preclude many from returning.¹¹

Despite authorities stating that security permissions will be issued within one month, HAT understands that some families who applied three months ago are still waiting for approval. Further delays should be expected, particularly if large numbers of former residents start applying for security approval in the wake of Damascus governorate's announcement allowing returnees. At the same time, according to local sources, the required costs for security permits and licenses are in the region of 200,000 SYP (approximately \$390), an amount out of

⁸ According to local sources, the Free Palestine Movement has housed commanders, fighters and their families in housing commandeered during the Syrian government's 2018 offensive on Yarmuk. It was not possible to independently verify whether these properties previously belonged to said faction-affiliated individuals, although there is precedent across government-held Syria of security officers and combatants commandeering housing through extra-legal and arbitrary means, or by pressuring former owners into giving up their ownership.

⁹ Sowt al-Asmeh, "[Shelters in Damascus...more migration and homeless families](#)" (Ar), 30 September 2020.

¹⁰ Media reports also stated [earlier in September](#) that authorities in South Damascus evicted displaced families from a number of schools in the South Damascus area of Yalda. While the stated reason for those evictions was to rehabilitate schools ahead of the new academic year (which began at the start of September), humanitarian agencies should continue to monitor similar developments closely given that many of the shelters' inhabitants were previously displaced from areas now subject to restrictions on residents' freedom of movement and/or reconstruction plans. For those families without the requisite documentation to return to their homes or prove ownership of property in the future, shelters are an important lifeline keeping them from the increasingly volatile, expensive rental market in Damascus, or even homelessness.

¹¹ Authorities appear to have used applications for security permits to detain applicants. According to The Syria Report, security forces in South Damascus detained dozens of young men, including 12 Palestinian men from Hajar al-Aswad, "under the pretext of searching for opposition sleeper cells and drug dealers" after they recently applied for security approvals to return to their homes. For more information, see: *The Syria Report*, "[In Destroyed Damascus Suburbs, Arrests Show Dangers of Requesting to Return Home](#)", 14 October 2020.

reach of many Palestinian-Syrian and Syrian families already struggling with war-time poverty and the broader economic downturn in government-held Syria.

Yasser Qashlaq to invest in reconstruction efforts?

While Damascus governorate rehashes the details of its reconstruction plans, pro-government actors appear to be readying themselves to invest in real estate markets. Aside from the restrictions on returns, which will preclude the return of former residents without adequate proof of property ownership or 'clean' files vis-a-vis security branches, pro-government business interests present another spoiler for future returns.

In particular, pro-government Palestinian businessman Yasser Qashlaq has reportedly started buying up vacant properties and/or rubble in areas of western Yarmuk (around 30th St. and 15th St.) that were previously designated for all-out reconstruction according to the organizational plan for Yarmuk. While the organizational plan is now in doubt, families without adequate proof of ownership (or families in dire socio-economic circumstances as a result of their displacement and possibly high

rents since displacement) may be pushed into considering selling their properties, or the rubble that once constituted their homes.¹²

Although not a Damascene business actor in the mode of Samer Foz or [Wissam Qattan](#), Qashlaq has played a bit-part in many of the significant events within Yarmuk's Palestinian community since 2011.

A Yarmuk-born Palestinian businessman who made his money in Qatar in the years before 2011, Qashlaq became more prominent as a pro-Damascus business figure, and then political actor, after the outbreak of Syria's uprising.¹³ When Palestinian protesters marched on the border-fence at Majdal as-Shams, in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, to mark Nakba Day (15 May) and Naksa Day (6 June) in 2011, Qashlaq was reportedly involved in logistics, providing buses to transport Palestinians from Yarmuk to the Golan. Qashlaq's name then appeared again in mid-2012 when the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC) started arming groups of popular committees (*lijaan sha'abiyeh*) with the stated aim of protecting Yarmuk's neutrality.¹⁴ Qashlaq was also reportedly involved in arming groups within Yarmuk, distributing weapons among small groups of armed men who would go on to

¹² Poverty rates are particularly high among Syria's Palestinian community: UNRWA figures suggest that more than 90% of Palestinian-Syrians still residing in Syria live in absolute poverty.

¹³ Qashlaq's name first emerged from Yarmuk during the Second Intifada, when he launched the Free Palestine Movement as a campaigning and funding group for Palestinian nationalist and anti-occupation causes. One of these campaigns was a flotilla from Lebanon aimed at 'breaking the siege' on the Gaza Strip.

¹⁴ While the popular committees project was initially successful at de-escalating tensions between Yarmuk camp and opposition-held communities in South Damascus, several committee commanders appear to have been recruited by Syrian intelligence to spoil relations and invite opposition groups into a fight for Yarmuk (which eventually took place when opposition groups stormed the camp in December 2012). According to local sources, one of these commanders, Maher al-Muezzin, is now recruiting in South Damascus on behalf of Aleppo-based faction Liwa' al-Quds and its Russian backers..

form part of the pro-government Free Palestine Movement's armed wing. Sa'ad Abdel Aal, from another pro-government Palestinian faction (as-Sa'iqa), later came on board to lead the fledgling militia. Since then, the Free Palestine Movement has taken a more prominent role in Palestinian-Syrian militia politics¹⁵; for example, there are signs that the group is involved in service provision, opening a medical centre in South Damascus as well as engaging with Palestinian-Syrian relief actors active in the area.¹⁶ Some of these engagements appear to have been conducted in concert with Iranian actors, with Abdel Aal photographed receiving an Iranian politician to inaugurate the medical centre in South Damascus in the wake of the 2018 offensive.

What's behind pro-government property purchases?

The reasons behind Qashlaq's reported property purchases are still unclear. Qashlaq has proven himself in the past to be a deft operator, finding various ways to profit from the war economy.¹⁷

With that in mind, this latest initiative either be driven by a desire for personal profit and/or expanded revenues for Qashlaq's affiliated business interests (including the Free Palestine Movement).

That said, reports suggest that Qashlaq's reconstruction investments are conducted through a Syrian-Iranian real estate company, [Nikan](#), which reportedly received a license to operate in Syria in early 2020.¹⁸ The company's shareholders are Iranians and Syrians,¹⁹ and it also invests in Sayeda Zeinab, an area of South Damascus of significant interest to the Iranians and Iranian-backed armed groups given its historical Shia presence.

Qashlaq also reportedly coordinates with Rustom ash-Shehabi, a Palestinian contractor from Yarmuk with purported ties to Syrian intelligence and security bodies.²⁰

While Iran's role in reconstruction is a hotly debated topic, with some observers often framing the *raison d'être* of Iranian involvement in reconstruction as all-out sectarian demographic engineering and nothing but, the reality is likely more nuanced. Iranian companies

¹⁵ For example, after the fall of Yarmuk to opposition groups, the Free Palestine Movement became an increasingly prominent fighting force on frontlines in South Damascus. It is likely the group's armed wing received support and/or training from Hezbollah sometime after 2015. The Free Palestine Movement's militia then played a role in the spring 2018 pro-government offensive to retake Yarmuk from ISIS.

¹⁶ The Free Palestine Movement has conducted relief work in Palestinian communities since 2013, through a team of volunteers who conduct awareness-raising campaigns and small-scale distributions among in-need communities.

¹⁷ According to local sources, Qashlaq has helped funnel funds for Palestinian factions in Syria via Lebanon, taking a percentage. Qashlaq also participated in the smuggling of pro-opposition Palestinian activists from South Damascus during the government-imposed siege, with activists paying large sums to leave the area without being arrested or disappeared by Syria's security services.

¹⁸ *Enab Baladi*, "[Iranian company receives license in Syria](#)" (Ar), 10 January 2020.

¹⁹ The three shareholders are: Mohammad Mahdi Qassem Baqeri, Iran (75%), Ali Adel Al-Homsi (12.5%) and Mohammad Rida Sayed Mohammad Tabatbani Hakim, Iran (12.5%). For more information, see: The Syria Report, "[Nakin Syria LLC](#)", undated.

²⁰ Ash-Shehabi is already engaged in construction works around Damascus: the Facebook page of his company demonstrates its involvement in an ongoing luxury real estate development ("al-Fayha") on the western outskirts of Damascus, near Yafour and as-Saboura.

stand to benefit from the economics of reconstruction first and foremost, while Hezbollah and Iran may employ sectarian HLP policies in more sensitive areas due to be rebuilt in the future.^{21,22} Local sources suggest that Iranian business interests could be investing in areas of South Damascus in recompense for Iran handing over the political process to the Russians when the area was brought back under Syrian government control in spring 2018.²³

Regardless of the reasoning behind the investments, Qashlaq's role may reflect a worrying precedent (of particular concern to humanitarian agencies assisting displaced populations in and around Damascus): creating a way for the Syrian government to enforce built realities on the ground without the need of an official reconstruction plan – in effect, reconstruction by other means. This point further undermines the processes of appeal and accountability purportedly written-in to Syria's post-2011 HLP legislation, and emphasises the urgent need for adequate legal aid and property restitution programmes within government-held areas of Syria – a sensitive topic for humanitarian agencies operating in Damascus,

but one that is important to address as more areas face reconstruction plans in the future.

FORECASTING

Despite promises of return, government-linked business interests still coalescing around reconstruction

Syria's government has repeatedly stated that reconstruction is for the benefit of the people and the nation; when addressing a planning meeting last November, during which Yarmuk was discussed, former Prime Minister Imad Khamis spoke as if addressing ordinary citizens, claiming that reconstruction plans would “compensate you for the losses caused to your property by terrorism,” and stressing that reconstruction would soon begin “in both words and action.”²⁴

However, other reconstruction developments around Damascus (including Marota City and Qaboun, discussed below) suggest that the primary beneficiaries to date have been business

²¹ After the fall of Darayya (Rural Damascus) to the Syrian government in late 2016, reports in opposition-affiliated media outlets suggested that Iran was preparing to house Iraqi Shia families in the abandoned town. It later transpired that the only source for this report was an article in Saudi daily *Asharq al-Awsat*, citing a single, anonymous source. There has been little evidence to date that Iran, or the Syrian government, is preparing such an initiative.

²² As one example, Hezbollah has manipulated the HLP and real estate conditions in Qusayr, a highly strategic town near the Syrian-Lebanese border, by heavily restricting returns of the area's majority-Sunni residents and denying them rights to property restitution. Displaced Shia families from Homs and Dar'a governorates, meanwhile, have been allowed to take up shelter in the abandoned homes of former Sunni residents. Reconstruction plans will likely cement these sectarian disparities in the future. For more information, see: Javier Gonzales, “Land, house occupations, and destruction in a strategic area: The case of al-Qusayr in Syria”, in ed. Hannes Baumann, “[Reclaiming Home: The struggle for socially just housing, land and property rights in Syria, Iraq and Libya](#)”, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019.

²³ Although there were different initiatives in play before 2018, a Russian-led reconciliation process was ultimately responsible for returning the ‘three villages’ (Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahem) back under government control, with the mediation of Russian-backed negotiators including Ismail (Hani) Shamout. Shamout has since been linked to recruitment drives of Palestinian young men from the area to deploy to Libya, on behalf of the Russian-backed 5th Corps.

²⁴ *Al-Watan*, “[Organisational plans for Yarmouk and Qaboun by next year...And soon, compensation for the people of the ‘Damascus Belt’...Khamis: Reconstruction will begin in word and deed](#)” (Ar), 12 November 2019.

interests with close ties to the government itself. As yet, there is little evidence to suggest that business interest will not be prioritized over the needs of displaced residents from areas slated for reconstruction.

With the Syrian government already struggling to provide basic services to populations under its control, nominally ‘private sector’ business interests are arguably better placed to make

more headway in real estate developments at present. At the same time, these business activities do not have the best interests of former residents in mind, with their involvement often leading to arbitrary demolitions and expropriations of properties for the primary benefit of business interests within the sphere of President Assad’s inner circle or the security services.

MAROTA CITY

In ‘Marota City’, the Syrian government’s flagship redevelopment project on the southwestern outskirts of Damascus, progress has been made on plots of land funded by government-aligned business interests while former residents promised alternative housing and compensation (for giving up their homes) are still waiting for news. There have been signals from Damascus Governorate that alternative housing is still being planned for former residents of the area, previously known as Basateen a-Razi, after the General Housing Establishment reportedly drew up a list of 5,516 people eligible for housing in Marota and another, much larger, plot slated for redevelopment (known as ‘Basilia City’).²⁵ Further delays should be expected.

QABOUN

In eastern Damascus’ Qaboun, the other reconstruction plan approved (with Yarmuk) on 25 June by Damascus governorate, government-aligned business interests have used security connections and monopolies over construction economies – including rubble clearance and scrap metal collection – to establish more promising investments for when reconstruction actually takes place in the future. After participating in property demolitions, in part to secure scrap metal and rubble from the area, prominent businessman Muhammad Hamsho reportedly purchased significant amounts of land in Qaboun before collaborating with local merchants to ratchet up real estate prices (presumably to benefit Hamsho-owned companies in the future).²⁶

²⁵ *The Syria Report*, “[Alternative Housing for Marota and Basilia City: Will It Actually Happen?](#)”, 7 October 2020.

²⁶ *Ghouta Media Centre*, “[Qaboun after the destruction...Reconstruction in the style of Marota City](#)” (Ar), 22 September 2019.

HUMANITARIAN IMPACTS

As HAT recommended in a [previous in-depth study of reconstruction plans in Qaboun and Yarmuk](#), humanitarian agencies should build contingency in their programming in government-held areas of Syria to respond to the needs of those Syrians dispossessed and/or displaced by reconstruction developments, but also continue (and regularly update) conflict sensitivity and human rights diligence reviews of would-be partners who may be contributing to, or benefitting from, resulting HLP violations.

The impacts of updated reconstruction plans range from the individual on the one hand, and the community at large on the other. New stipulations by Damascus governorate related to building conditions, proof of ownership and security approvals effectively atomize Yarmuk camp into individual cases which will differ from family to family, building to building. As for property purchases by pro-government actors and businesses, purchases effectively remove the property ownership of individuals or families who may be unable to verify their ownership according to Syria's post-2011 HLP laws; but also set dangerous precedents that could impact

much larger numbers of residents and former residents in the future. As happened in Qaboun, if government-aligned business interests begin manipulating the local real estate market then they will price out many former residents who may then be encouraged to consider selling up with a view to making short-term economic gain. Rising rents will further challenge former residents' access to sustainable shelter in, let alone return to, their former areas of residence, continuing the expensive rent market in Damascus more broadly.

The role of government-aligned business networks is important for another reason. With government-held Syria in a complex, far-reaching economic crisis impacting everything from rent prices to the availability of state-supplied staple items such as bread, the cost of displacement has already been incredibly dear for many of Yarmuk's hundreds of thousands of displaced. However, the current trajectory of Syria's reconstruction plans – even when subject to new stipulations supposedly designed to assuage public anger – suggest that former residents will be offered little support whether or not they manage to maintain hold of their homes in Yarmuk.

CONTACT

Nicholas Bodanac

Humanitarian Access Team

nbodanac@mercycorps.org

The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. Successful humanitarian and development interventions require a nuanced and objective understanding of the human ecosystems in which these interventions occur. To this end, the HAT's most important function is to collect, triangulate, synthesize, analyze and operationalize disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly nimble, adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the Syrian conflict.

