

Conditional Return for Tadhamon's Inhabitants

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The Damascus Governorate has finally allowed some displaced people to return to the capital city's southern Al-Tadhamon district, although the Governorate is still only permitting certain people who have obtained security clearance.

The district, once controlled in part by rebel forces, was heavily damaged over the course of the war. Tens of thousands of residents fled as their homes were damaged or destroyed.

Starting on 14 September, the Damascus Governorate began allowing some 50 people to return each day, according to Damascus Governor Adel Al-Olabi, who conducted a tour of the district the previous day. He called on displaced residents to provide the necessary paperwork to the "relevant authorities" in the area, so that they could obtain approval to allow their return home.

Accompanying Al-Olabi on his tour of Al-Tadhamon was Fadi Saqr, head of the youth section at the Baath Party's Damascus branch. Saqr was previously the commander of the National Defence Forces in Damascus and is from Al-Tadhamon. His name was included in a [US sanctions list](#) released in August.

Officials who participated in the tour of Al-Tadhamon on 13 September said that residents would need no more than two weeks to obtain security clearance to return, as long as their papers were completed and they had no security "issues". Homes would be handed back over to their owners after they signed documents acknowledging that they had received the houses, with signed dates and addresses.

However, the Damascus Governorate has imposed an additional set of complex conditions on displaced Al-Tadhamon residents who wish to return home. 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.

Al-Tadhamon sits some six kilometres southeast of the city centre and is known as the southern entryway to Damascus. The neighbourhood largely sprouted up after 1967, when thousands of people fled encroaching Israeli forces in the Golan Heights and Quneitra. Those who fled built informal neighbourhoods, known in Arabic as *ashwa'iyat*, on farmland in the Al-Tadhamon area of Damascus.

The low rent and cheap real estate in this informal district later attracted many newcomers to Damascus from the countryside. Their home villages, towns and ethnic origins are reflected in the unofficial names of Al-Tadhamon's neighbourhoods: Al-Shawam, meaning Damascenes; Al-Adalbeh for people from Idlib; Al-Turkman for Turkmen; and Al-Druze for the Druze community. Nisreen Street, another neighbourhood named after its main road, is also home to many Alawites.

Some 200,000 people were estimated to live in Al-Tadhamon before 2011, amid poor services and inadequate housing conditions.

Many residents rose up against the Syrian government in 2011, with opposition forces taking control of the southern part of the district in 2012. Regime forces then besieged and bombed Al-Tadhamon,

The Syria Report

causing massive damage. The opposition-held section of the district came under Islamic State control in 2015, pushing most remaining residents to flee. The regime recaptured the area three years later.

Both rebel and regime forces dug tunnels beneath Al-Tadhamon during battles there, damaging the land and threatening the buildings above them with collapse, a former Free Syrian Army commander in the district told *The Syria Report*.

Bishr Al-Sabban, a former Damascus governor, formed a committee in 2018 to apply [Law No. 3 of 2018, which dealt with removal of rubble](#). The measure would include the southern part of the district, where authorities would remove and recycle debris, and determine which buildings were still habitable. The head of the committee, Faysal Srour, who was also a member of Damascus Governorate's executive office, said in October 2018 that the committee had concluded there were only 690 habitable homes residents could return to until Al-Tadhamon in its entirety had been re-zoned according to [Law No. 10 of 2018](#). The law stipulates that authorities can establish one or more zoning areas within general zoning plans.

Srour did not clarify in his statement whether the 690 habitable homes were spread across Al-Tadhamon or were only located within the formerly rebel-held, besieged southern neighbourhoods.

The announcement that Al-Tadhamon would be re-zoned sparked discontent among some residents. They protested along Nisreen Street, demanding that they be allowed to return to their homes and denouncing Governorate plans to draw up new zoning charts for their district. Compared to areas of Al-Tadhamon that were under rebel control, the Nisreen Street neighbourhood did not see large-scale displacement. The area remained under government control over the course of the war, serving as a major stronghold for the National Defence Forces and pro-regime Palestinian militias.

The National Defence Forces, which now control all of Al-Tadhamon, supported the protesters' demands to return, as they considered the area a popular support base for their group. In response, the militia formed a committee that met with Damascus Governorate officials, sometimes with Fadi Saqr, the Baath party youth official and former National Defence Forces commander who toured the district with governor Al-Olabi in September.

In return, the governorate promised in late 2018 that there would be a speedy rehabilitation of the district, with houses evaluated to see which were suitable for living and allowing "honourable" residents who could prove their real estate ownership to return under the supervision of the local mukhtar.

Governorate officials then divided Al-Tadhamon into three sectors — A, B and C — in order to study the technical conditions of properties in the district. It counted 2,500 liveable houses, and then numbered and stamped them with red wax. As a preliminary count, authorities said there were 1,000 uninhabitable houses across areas A and B. Area C took up the district's southern neighbourhoods, which officials concluded were highly damaged and uninhabitable.

Then, in May 2020, Al-Olabi issued Decree No. 3191, which determined nine areas of Al-Tadhamon that would be restored so that residents could return home. In a statement at the time, he said that the south-eastern part of the district was mostly expropriated and destroyed by terrorist activity.

Pro-government newspaper *Al-Watan* later reported that Al-Olabi had been alluding to the district's south-eastern Al-Tabbab neighbourhood, which had been seized by the [Military Housing Establishment](#). It was unclear exactly when and why the area came under the [Military Housing Establishment](#)'s seizure.

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