

Q&A: Comparing Beirut's Solidere and Damascus's Marota City

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It has been called "Syria's Solidere". What was once the informal Damascus neighbourhood of Basateen Al-Razi is today being ostensibly "reconstructed" as Marota City, a luxury real estate development financed by figures close to the government. The main company behind the project is Damascus Cham Holding, established in 2016 to finance Marota City.

The project bears some similarities to downtown Beirut, rebuilt from the ground up by Solidere, a joint stock company set up in the 1990s by Rafic Hariri. He later became the largest shareholder. The result of the project: a sanitised, high-end redesign of what was once Beirut's central district before the destruction wrought by the 15-year civil war.

Some lessons can be drawn from comparing the two, writes Noor Hamadeh, a lawyer and non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) in a recent [article](#). The main question, she says, is "who stood to gain" from either project. "Who benefitted in the end?"

The Syria Report spoke with Ms Hamadeh about unequal reconstruction in Syria's urban districts, and the lessons that can be drawn from Solidere. This conversation has been lightly edited for flow.

Why did you initially approach the case of Solidere when trying to understand unequal reconstruction in Syria? What wisdom did you hope to gain from this comparison?

I had read a lot comparing the two [projects] and identifying similarities, and I had seen a number of reports calling Marota City "Syria's Solidere".

That's how I decided to look into Solidere to understand reconstruction in Syria. In terms of what we can gain from looking at a project like Solidere, I think the main thing is who stood to gain from this project. Who benefitted in the end?

In both situations, they are projects that are put forward as methods of reconstruction for the public good. But when you look at who really benefited, on a physical level, or an infrastructural level, it ended up being a form of gentrification. Populations were shifted because the developments that came out of the Solidere project were so high-end that only certain wealthy populations could benefit. And the shares system that was used to compensate people for their properties was not sufficient.

What started out as a project to reconstruct Beirut for the populations that were living in those [destroyed] areas ended up being a method for wealthy elites to benefit from the situation.

When you look at Marota City in Syria, sort of the same thing is happening. Populations are being shifted to make room for wealthier elites to benefit from property that can be used strategically, as Marota City is near the center of Damascus.

For me that's the main takeaway from looking at Solidere when comparing it with Marota City.

Can you talk a bit more about what this "shares" system was with Solidere? How do we see echoes of this in Marota City?

When it comes to Solidere, the idea was to streamline the reconstruction process to mitigate any HLP disputes that would come out of it. Because of the conflict and the number of informal properties that were present, a lot of HLP disputes would have arisen. So to avoid that, [planners]

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gave property owners two options. The first was to sell their property to Solidere for a price that was much lower than market value. The second option was to have their property expropriated but then be compensated with shares in the future Solidere development.

A very similar thing is happening in Marota City. I don't know quite as much about Solidere as I do Marota City, but essentially what's happening is that with Marota City they've categorised different types of property ownership. Properties are expropriated, and then based on the type of ownership, shares are issued within Marota City project.

However, the problem with that is that the shares are pretty low value, and not enough to compensate people for their properties. This makes it difficult for them to obtain new property, whether in Marota City in the future or elsewhere.

So this "shares" system is a way for the Syrian government to say that they are providing an alternative for people whose properties are impacted by the development, in order to legitimise disenfranchising these people.

Yes, that is exactly right. It's a way for the government to say that they're compensating people without actually compensating them.

There are other ways that they're doing this — but like I said, it really depends on what kind of property ownership they have [regarding] different types of compensation. So some people get shares, for other people it's alternative housing. For others, it's monetary compensation for the property.

But it's extremely difficult to get those [forms of compensation], whether alternative housing or compensation for the property. Most people haven't. I think only a very small number of Basateen Al-Razi residents have access. The main reason for this is that the Syrian government just doesn't have the funds.

Places like Basateen Al-Razi in Syria were mostly low-income and informally built urban neighbourhoods, whereas Solidere was constructed over what was formerly Beirut's central district. How might the informal nature of Basateen Al-Razi make it easier for the Syrian government to dispossess people there, compared to in downtown Beirut? How does that dynamic play out?

Sites like Marota City are deliberately planned over "ashwa'i" informal settlements and neighbourhoods that are perceived to be primarily [pro-]opposition. I think that's what differentiates Solidere from Marota City. There's sort of a reprisal or punishment aspect to projects like Marota City, as opposed to Solidere.

In Marota City, there are two things happening. One: it's a way to punish those opposition communities. Those communities were involved in protests [and are] perceived to be opposed to the Syrian government, so they are targeted for these methods of reconstruction.

But then there is also the informal nature of a lot of the properties or tenancies in Basateen Al-Razi and these informal settlements — the fact that they're informal means that people there have fewer rights in general.

Someone who has full property ownership is [the most fortunate] in this situation. For everyone else, they have lower and lower levels of property rights, and are less able to prevent the government from taking their properties. And so then the government has a sort of justification within the legal system, which is that "this property is informal, but we're still doing this good thing, which is compensating them even though they don't necessarily have these rights under the law."

It is easy for the government to violate their rights, because people don't have the rights that someone with a formal property document would.

One other apparent difference between Solidere and Marota City is that in the latter, the

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government seems much more blatant in its aim to displace a very particular sector of the population. Is this a fair assessment?

That's definitely an understanding I had as well. In Syria the government is very intentionally hoping to displace a particular population, which is impoverished and mostly appearing to be pro-opposition, or at least against the current Syrian regime.

There is also the idea of "destructing with the intent to reconstruct". The Syrian government claims to be reconstructing these areas, firstly because of their informal nature, and secondly because of the destruction caused throughout the conflict since 2011. There have been numerous reports of certain locations being targeted by aerial bombardment [with the intent to destroy](#) those areas so they can use them as a justification to reconstruct them into projects like Marota City.

What about the structures of the Solidere and Cham Holding companies has also proven harmful? Can you compare the two?

In the case of Lebanon, the government agency that was tasked with orchestrating reconstruction was the Council of Development and Reconstruction (CDR). They were contracting the main companies, and were primarily staffed by people who were close to then-Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Hariri had bought, I believe, [\\$125 million in shares](#) in Solidere. He was the majority shareholder of Solidere. And so very quickly it became clear that he was the main beneficiary of the project.

In the Syrian case, when it comes to Damascus Cham Holding, the Syrian government allowed governorates throughout Syria to create holding companies. In Damascus, the holding company that the governor created was the Damascus Cham Holding company. It allows reconstruction to be a cross between public and private [responsibility].

Damascus Cham Holding is contracting a number of private entities to engage in the reconstruction of Syria. A lot of the companies that are being contracted are owned by people who are very close to the Syrian government, for example the likes of Rami Makhoul.

The people who are behind what reconstruction will look like are those who participated in the conflict and are the perpetrators of a number of human rights abuses. Multiple people involved in Marota City were sanctioned...for their involvement in the project, and also for their close ties to the Syrian government, for their financing of the government's human rights violations and international crimes.

Finally, are there any positives we can find here? What organisations or initiatives are working to improve the situation of property rights for those in Syria impacted by projects like Marota City?

Two initiatives that are really valuable are [The Aleppo Project](#) and [Syrbanism](#). The Aleppo Project works with different stakeholders — Syrian refugees as well as academics and policy experts to identify different ways to rebuild Syria post-conflict. That includes identifying issues with the way the Syrian government is going about reconstruction, and what it should look like instead, and how reconstruction can happen in a way that promotes the return of refugees and a post-conflict life for Syrians generally.

Syrbanism is also a great initiative that aims to identify and work toward a socially just reconstruction in Syria. They are highlighting and raising awareness about projects like Marota City and why they are problematic. Syrbanism is particularly important because they are trying to target the average Syrian in some of their videos.

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