

## In East Ghouta City of Arbeen, Reconstruction Halted Until Further Notice

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There is currently a halt in accepting requests to restore damaged buildings in East Ghouta's Arbeen. This suspension does not appear to be tied merely to administrative matters, as official statements would suggest. Rather, the issue appears more complicated, given the large number of lost and damaged real estate records, and the Syrian government's refusal to recognise real estate purchases and other transactions that occurred during the period of opposition control from 2012 to 2018.

In late September, the head of Arbeen's City Council issued an administrative order to stop receiving requests to restore damaged buildings in the city until further notice, with the exception of buildings that had sustained severe damage and needed to undergo studies from the Engineers Union. The City Council president said at the time that the halt was temporary, in order to schedule and finish processing requests that had previously been submitted.

But the suspension may prove not to be temporary, as a large number of real estate records in Arbeen have been lost, according to official statements from 2019. This loss presents a major roadblock for the City Council in determining property ownership and restoring real estate records.

Arbeen is witnessing a number of disputes over real estate, due to purchase and sale contracts made during opposition control, according to a correspondent for *The Syria Report* in East Ghouta. After regaining control over the area, the Syrian government did not recognise such contracts, and required the presence of both contractual parties to confirm the documents in relevant government departments. However, such meetings are impossible for most people, as many residents were forcibly displaced to opposition-held northern Syria when the regime recaptured East Ghouta in 2018.

Arbeen is one of the most damaged cities in East Ghouta, due to its location along a frontline between rebels and regime forces. Airstrikes on the city destroyed entire neighbourhoods.

An estimated 25,000 people live in Arbeen today, in contrast with the 50,000 who lived there before 2011. Massive damage to the city has prevented many residents from returning home since the regime recaptured the area, as well as the forcible displacement north of some 6,000 people who had refused to settle their statuses with the regime, as occurred in other formerly rebel-held areas retaken by regime forces.

Last year, the [Ministry of Local Administration and Environment](#) issued Decree No. 5 of 2019, in accordance with directives laid out in Law No. 33 of 2017 calling for the redrawing of real estate documents. After the issuance of Decree No. 5, the [General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs](#) formed a committee for that purpose. After collecting the necessary documents, the committee is expected to issue a decree to approve the new records. Should the committee not finish gathering the documents, the issue will be referred to the judiciary, which will issue the necessary decrees, which will be published in the Official Gazette. Then the decrees can be contested if there is a mistake in listing ownership. The contestor must submit documents proving the validity of his complaint before they are referred again to the court.

The process appears to be moving slowly, as security forces intervene to determine which properties were owned by opponents of the regime, with the aim of placing executive seizures on them and confiscating the properties in accordance with exceptional laws issued by the Terrorism Court.

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Restoration of damaged properties is a lucrative market in East Ghouta and has seen a number of developments since regime forces took control two years ago. At first, influential regime officers would bring construction materials into East Ghouta and maintain control over restoration work themselves, in light of the official ban on such materials entering the area. Some of Arbeen's wealthiest individuals have succeeded in both constructing new buildings and restoring damaged ones through this method. The situation continued until elections were held for the municipal councils across East Ghouta at the end of 2018. Administrative work subsequently began for organising restoration, albeit under the supervision of state security and regime forces.

Recent months have seen the real estate market stagnate due to security forces' increased efforts to determine the identities of property owners, as well as the collapse of the Syrian pound. Poor financial conditions pushed many owners to put their properties up for sale, even if they do not possess the title deeds or other records to prove their ownership. Still, some of the wealthiest and most influential residents in Arbeen are constructing or restoring buildings illegally, thanks to their relationships with regime officers and security forces.

Meanwhile, Arbeen's City Council president issued another directive in mid-September requesting all those who had obtained restoration licences to write a statement that includes the number and date of the licence, as well as the name of the company licensed for importing building materials, and the name of the construction company to carry out the restoration job. The administrative order also stipulated that the council's president must approve, in writing, the new written permit before allowing the licence holder to continue their restoration work. In other words, the original restoration licence itself is no longer sufficient.

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