

Imminent Return? What Barzeh, Qaboun and Jobar May Have in Common

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President of the Damascus Provincial Council, Khaled Al-Harah, has visited the neighbourhoods of Barzeh, Qaboun and Jobar in recent days, announcing that residents may return after the structural integrity of local buildings is ensured. Al-Harah added that he had assigned engineers to prepare a rapid and exclusive study of the buildings that are acceptable for rehabilitation so that they can be handed back over to the governorate as quickly as possible.

Although the three neighbourhoods together form the northeastern belt of Damascus, it is unusual to group them together, as they have different organisational statuses. The detailed zoning plan for Qaboun No. 105 was released in June 2020. Meanwhile, Jobar is waiting for its own zoning plan to be announced. As for Barzeh's zoning plan, there are reportedly risks that it may not be issued altogether.

Opposition forces held control of these three neighbourhoods, which were linked via tunnel to the East Ghouta suburbs, between 2014 and 2018. The neighbourhoods faced heavy damage amid fighting, as well as from regime airstrikes and artillery fire.

Residents of the three neighbourhoods are still prohibited from returning to their homes, which are now under the control of various regime military units. Authorities are regularly demolishing buildings in the three neighbourhoods under the pretext that they pose a danger. However, the apparent purpose of the demolitions is to remove the rubble for usage elsewhere.

Most of the people displaced from these three neighbourhoods now live in Damascus proper, as well as the surrounding countryside. The main push factor for returning to Barzeh, Qaboun and Jobar—even if those neighbourhoods are largely destroyed—is the poor living conditions that displaced residents now face, as well as high rent prices they now pay. As for the government, authorities likely have insufficient finances to rebuild these three neighbourhoods and may have little choice but to allow residents to return.

The Syrian regime has so far relied on a strategy of preventing the return of people to the devastated areas of Damascus and its surroundings pending their reconstruction based on new zoning plans. That strategy, legally framed by decrees and laws 66 of 2012, 23 of 2015 and 10 of 2018, deliberately expelled the poor and residents of informal areas, and expropriated their properties with the aim of establishing new cities and communities. However, the lack of funding and the government's inability to implement any of its zoning projects in recent years may force it to accept the return of the people of some of these devastated areas.

In Qaboun, Detailed Plan No. 105 was meant to be issued after fielding objections from local residents and others with the rights to raise complaints. However, the zoning plan now appears unlikely to be issued soon, as the governorate received a large number of objections, including complaints that would allow residents to be granted alternative housing or rent compensation—similar to measures taken for the Marota City project in what was once the neighbourhood of Basateen Al-Razi.

Jobar is the most destroyed of the three neighbourhoods, as it was the closest to Damascus and sat along the frontline of major battles. In addition, the neighbourhood faces a serious engineering problem, as large networks of tunnels were dug beneath it by both opposition and regime forces during various battles, making reconstruction potentially complicated and costly.

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And although the Damascus Governorate has repeatedly said that it will soon announce zoning plans for Jobar, they have not yet been released. Just this October, the governorate announced that it had completed rehabilitating the Abbasid Square-Zamalka road, which passes through Jobar. Only small vehicles and shared *servees* taxis would be allowed to use it, while larger trucks would be mostly prohibited.

Residents who want to check on their houses and other properties in Jobar must pay bribes to regime personnel, who have closed off the area. They pay SYP 10,000 for every 10 minutes of their visit and are not allowed to bring cell phones or cameras with them, or to take anything from their properties.

The situation is even more complicated in Barzeh. There, majority Alawi residents of the two informally built areas of Ish Al-Warwar and Hayy Tishreen have refused any new zoning plan that include their areas. It is possible that residents of the two areas fear that any alternative housing plans brought forth by the government may take a long time to implement or may simply not be achieved. In addition, residents of the two areas often lack formal property ownership documents. Unlike other informally built slums, the Alawi residents of Ish Al-Warwar and Hayy Tishreen, through their family and kinship relationships with some security officers, could convince the governorate to overlook the Full Barzeh Zoning Plans.

A Russian delegation visited Barzeh recently, inspecting several schools and other public facilities. The exact purpose of the visit was unclear. However, provincial council president Al-Harah visited the neighbourhood days after the Russian delegation and spoke about the return of displaced residents, one indication of possible Russian pressure to allow people to go back to their homes under current circumstances.

The government's lack of funds to implement even the broad outlines of general zoning plans, as well as the inability of residents themselves to pay for the reconstruction of their houses according to detailed zoning plans, may soon combine to allow people to return to the ruins that were once their homes.