

Housing in 'Post-Conflict' Syria: Is There Room for a Just Reconstruction?

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Syria's housing needs are greater than ever—and the issue must be included in reconstruction strategies, as active warfare dies down in much of the country, argues Syrian economist Samir Aita in a new [report](#), *Urban Recovery Framework for Post-Conflict Housing in Syria*, published in September 2020.

Housing, Aita argues, "stands at the core among the most effective root causes that contributed to the uprising and its subsequent transformation into a civil war."

Much of Syria's housing today is either damaged or destroyed. But Syria needs a "transformative revival," writes Aita, rather than simply a reconstruction of the physical structures damaged and destroyed by war.

Chief among concerns over this "revival" is that of the so-called "urbicide" that has been committed against Syria's cities and neighbourhoods over the course of the war—that is, both physical structures and "urban life itself" have been destroyed in the fighting. Moving forward, urban planning must account for re-establishing the social fabric and "urban vitality", in addition to "physical reconstruction", Aita writes.

Such considerations are vital, especially in historic heritage neighbourhoods, where rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts must take care to prevent outright gentrification. Aita gives the oft-cited example of the [Solidere](#) development in downtown Beirut, launched in the 1990s over the destroyed remnants of what was once the Lebanese capital city's vibrant downtown. The area is now more or less a luxury outdoor shopping mall.

The same concerns are important in informal, largely working-class housing areas, such as the Baba Amr area of Homs, which was mostly destroyed in the early years of the war. Neglect of these areas can lead to further harm, writes Aita. Since 2019, "the conditions that marked the failure of previous planning efforts in Syria and led to the creation of informal areas are being replicated in most of the 'reconstruction' master plans produced so far".

This recent tendency towards "master plans," drawn up without significant consultation with residents themselves, will hinder proper, just urban planning efforts in post-conflict areas, Aita argues.

Aita mentions four approaches to reconstruction, each of which "depends on the context of city and neighbourhood": provisional housing, repairing damaged houses (a "preferred solution" when the scope of damage is low), constructing new housing (a potentially problematic venture that authorities may abuse to their own benefit) and a so-called "build-yard" approach that would support affected communities in rebuilding their own housing.

No matter the approach, the scale of reconstruction needed is massive. According to Aita, the cost of housing reconstruction is estimated to range between USD 14 billion and 31.5 billion if reconstruction takes place over five years. How might all this be funded? Aita cites Keynes's post-conflict analysis of the First World War, adding that in the Syrian context as well, the key is that the "economy continues to function, is well managed and recovers quickly."

Meanwhile, aid funding may be ineffective. Aita warns of the so-called "aid curse," wherein "the

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ruling elites would redirect aid money to their own interests, instead of using it for reconstruction." Similar post-conflict situations in Lebanon and Iraq have seen poor aid effectiveness for this reason, Aita writes.

Creating jobs outside the public sector, including within the housing reconstruction sector itself, could also ensure that sustainable reconstruction comes along with other economic benefits.

Crucially, Aita writes, "housing reconstruction in Syria appears to be more a matter of good governance and management of a recovering economy than of huge amounts of foreign aid directed at physical reconstruction." In particular, he argues, Syria's Central Bank should be key in "managing the financial end of the housing reconstruction process."

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