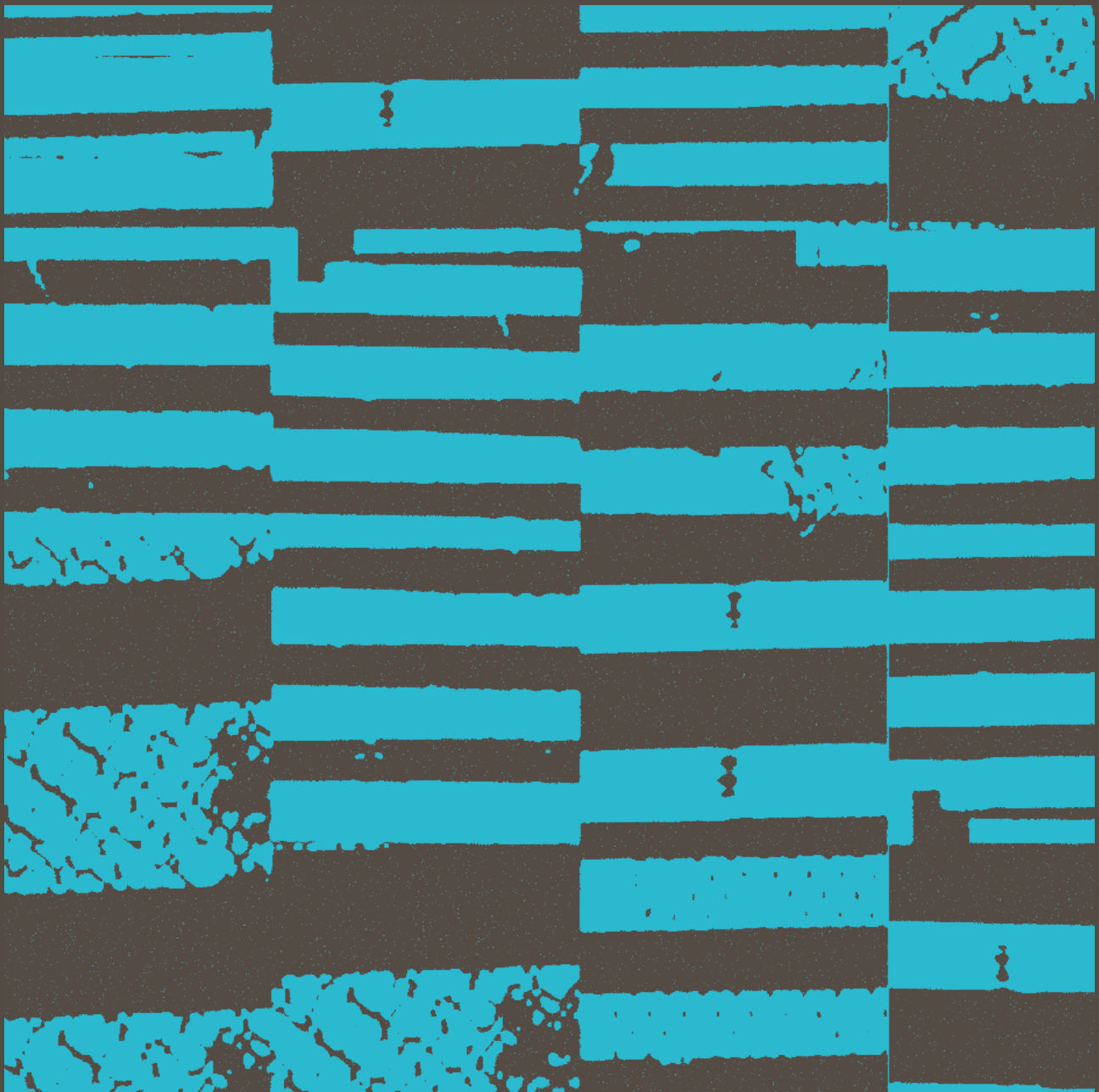


THE LEGACY OF THE SIEGE: THE INFORMAL PLAYERS IN ARBIN'S RECOVERY

By Sana Fadel



Sana Fadel is an independent Syrian researcher specializing in issues of marginalization in the MENA region. Her publications cover a diverse range of topics, including women's empowerment, social movements, digital rights, and public services.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
P.O. Box 116107 Riad El Solh | Beirut 1107 2210 | Lebanon

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
THE WAR GEOGRAPHY	3
CONTROL AND BIAS IN ADMINISTRATION	4
Infrastructure breakdowns under protracted crisis	5
THE POWER CRISIS	6
STRUGGLING INVESTMENT	7
PERSISTENT LABOR	8
THE CIVIL SOCIETY BASE	9
CONCLUSION	11

INTRODUCTION

Since its recapture by the Syrian regime in 2018, Arbin city has experienced a surge in business activity, characterized by the emergence of new enterprises and the reopening of established ones. However, this resurgence has been accompanied by a shift towards smaller-scale production and service-oriented businesses, marking a departure from its pre-conflict industrialization landscape that prevailed until 2011. The adaptability of the Arbin community has expedited the town's recovery, enabling it to revitalize some of its vitality and to rival even stable areas in the Damascus suburbs.

Such resurgence is largely credited to the infrastructures established during the era of opposition control. Although it suffered from destruction and siege by regime forces during that phase, Arbin welcomed displaced populations from the surrounding opposition areas of Eastern Ghouta, and operated as a vibrant center for opposition-affiliated civil society. Arbin was the target of aid and recovery projects ranging from medical and psychosocial support to cultural and livelihood programs, which required them to recreate their facilities and encompass the services necessary to function.

Since 2012, Arbin's civil society organizations have operated as a vibrant hub for community engagement, which has played a pivotal role in the town's recovery. Arbin's community was heavily involved in supporting the reconstruction of some elements of the town's infrastructure, including the generation of electricity, management of vital services, and delivery of medical aid. Much of this involved improvised facilities and collaborations across informal networks, both within and extending beyond the town. However, although local efforts were vital during the conflict and initial recovery, the continued absence of state planning and support is likely to lead to unsustainable systems.

This paper explores how the business activities and networks established during the years of opposition control contributed to the recovery and resilience of Arbin after its recapture by the Syrian regime in 2018. Additionally, it examines how Arbin - amidst conflict, siege, and subsequent recapture - successfully revitalized its business activity and reestablished essential infrastructures. It underscores local residents' ability to independently manage crucial services such as electricity, water, sewage, and healthcare. It also critically evaluates the long-term sustainability of these solutions and investigates the role of governmental planning in this context.

We utilized diverse methodologies to investigate Arbin's post-conflict status. Through on-site observations, we assessed the current state of infrastructure, business activities, and civil society work, documenting visible changes and ongoing developments. An extensive review of academic literature, reports, and documents related to post-conflict reconstruction, community resilience, civil society roles, and crisis management aided our understanding and guided our research. We conducted 20 interviews between 2019 and 2023 with local residents, community leaders, business owners, and civil society members, which provided invaluable firsthand accounts, personal experiences, and insights into the challenges faced, strategies employed, and the evolving dynamics of Arbin's infrastructure and economy during and after the conflict.

THE WAR GEOGRAPHY

Arbin's location within Eastern Ghouta - the armed opposition former stronghold near Damascus, made it strategically important and comparatively safer than its surrounding towns during the war, due to its proximity to the southern highway as well as its flat farmlands distancing it from the frontlines with the regime Damascus^{1,2}. Unlike nearby towns like Harasta, Jobar, and Zamalka, where the frontlines with regime forces extended into the urban centers, the residential core of Arbin remained relatively safe from massive destruction during the war. While other nearby towns like Jobar suffered up to 90% destruction, Arbin's buildings only suffered partial damage³. When other towns had been rendered inhabitable, Arbin became a refuge for displaced people from other places in Eastern Ghouta who chose to remain outside of regime-controlled areas.

Another crucial factor that helped Arbin to become a hub for the movement of goods and people during the conflict was a tunnel dug by rebels to transfer goods from Qaboun, a town that was under partial siege. The tunnel connecting besieged Arbin and Eastern Ghouta to the west with the semi-besieged towns of Qaboun, Barzeh - and thus the regime-controlled areas- played a critical role in delivering essential goods and food to sustain the people of Arbin and the surrounding areas during the conflict.⁴

After the regime recaptured Arbin in 2018, numerous individuals associated with the armed opposition forces, political figures and civil society departed for Idlib and Rural Hama. A small percentage of the original inhabitants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – who were residents in Arbin during the conflict - remained in the area after its recapture.

Although the main road between Damascus and Arbin was reopened shortly after the regime took back control of Eastern Ghouta, Arbin remained largely inaccessible until 2021 due to the check points and strict regulations imposed by the regime to control the city⁵. The town was located close to the notorious checkpoint of Panorama, and people who wanted to enter it had to provide identification documents and papers proving their residency in Arbin⁷. Additionally, those who entered the town could leave only from the same route they entered, making it extremely difficult for people to move in and out of the town. Over time, the situation gradually relaxed, as investigations with reconciled individuals concluded and the regime solidified its control over Eastern Ghouta⁸.

A total of 21,976 residents, estimated to constitute 25% of Arbin's pre-war population, returned after the area was recaptured by the regime^{9,10, 11}. Clearing debris was essential to reopen roads and enable people to move around, but locals were either left to remove rubble from the backstreets on their own or had to pay the municipality to do its work¹². In most cases, the municipality does not take part in operations, but rather organizes the NGOs to undertake these tasks. However, local administrations often take credit in state media when the task is finished^{13,14}.

1 Ghouta denotes the historical orchard area encircling Damascus, comprised mainly of villages that largely amalgamated as an extension of the city during the nineties. This transformation converted the region into a semi-urban area, inhabited by a lower-middle-class populace whose livelihoods relied predominantly on crafts, agriculture, real estate and manufacturing. Ghouta bore significant political weight as a bastion for protests and opposition fighters.

2 Or "Almotahalik Aljanobi", a highway located east of Damascus city, connecting the M5 highway to the north and south of the city.

3 BBC News, "Eastern Ghouta Syria: The Neighbourhoods Below the Bombs", March 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43154146>

4 Semi-besieged Qaboun and Barzeh experienced restricted movement between their areas and those controlled by the regime. While they were allowed to bring in food in small quantities, certain medicines and tools were not permitted through the checkpoints at their entrances.

5 Enab Baladi, "Rural Damascus Governorate Opens Main Arbin Road Connected to Harasta" (in Arabic), June 19, 2019, <https://shorturl.at/HLJsj>

6 Mostly residents and business owners in Arbin, of whom are originally from Damascus city.

7 Damascus Governorate, "A Panorama of the October Liberation War in Damascus" (in Arabic), <http://www.damascus.gov.sy/Home/gov/Damascus/Panorama>, last accessed June 19, 2023.

8 Interview with a former fighter with opposition forces from Arbin in May 2022.

9 UNOCHA Syria. *Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic*. December 2022. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/hno_2023-rev-1.12_1.pdf.

10 Arbin population was estimated at 89,595 according to the General Census of Population of 2004.

11 Masoud, Abdel Moneim. "Ambeerat Subscribers in the City Are 12 Thousand... Chairman of the Arbin Council Told Al-Watan: Ambeerat Investors Have Submitted Their Papers for Licensing, and the Governorate Has Not Yet Decided on Them." Al Watan, March 31, 2024. <https://alwatan.sy/archives/384291>.

12 Interview with a man from Arbin, December, 2019.

13 UN Global Marketplace. "Request of EOI, Debris and Rubble Removal in Arbin City with UNON and UN HABITAT Syria Program." December 15, 2022. <https://www.ungm.org/Public/Notice/188876>.

14 "The Municipal Council in Cooperation with the Civil Society and the Service Situation in Arbin." SANA, October 20, 2019. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1038651>.

The transportation landscape in Ghouta underwent significant changes during the conflict, such that the system looked very different by the time local fighting had ceased. The locals who remained in Eastern Ghouta during the conflict devised a transportation system employing pickups, small vans, and private cars to offer services within the area. Following the area's recapture, their focus shifted to transporting people to and from Damascus city, to which purpose they put the same vehicles. Privately owned taxis and small buses (microbuses) rely on government subsidies for fuel, which has led to restricted mobility or to increases in their prices when buying fuel on the black market¹⁵. Additionally, many transport providers altered their residence and routes during the conflict, a trend that persisted even after its conclusion, further contributing to reduced mobility among residents.

Despite the challenges, residents and IDPs of Arbin deemed the reopening of roads and reconnecting their town to the capital a key priority even with the security and transportation restrictions. It enabled them to access medical services and food supplies that were previously out of reach or extremely expensive, and prompted many displaced individuals to consider returning¹⁶.

CONTROL AND BIAS IN ADMINISTRATION

The state prioritized control over authority structures, which manifested in inconsistent and biased governance across recaptured regions. Following the regime's return to control, Military Security checkpoints were placed at the town's entrances. These checkpoints reflect the regime's stringent approach, treating passing citizens with suspicion and often subjecting them to unwarranted harassment. Moreover, said checkpoints heavily depend on bribe revenues imposed on trade trucks, further complicating their mobility and increasing transport cost subsequently. Furthermore, the police station and the Real Estate Register in Arbin were reopened before bakeries or schools, highlighting the focus on controlling property and behavior^{17, 18}.

The local administration in Arbin is often accused of ineffectiveness and partiality, which has been attributed to various factors such as lack of resources, corruption, and political interference. The governorate of Rural Damascus has reopened all municipalities in the villages and towns of Eastern Ghouta. New municipal councils have been elected to manage daily issues and oversee the rebuilding process in their respective areas, but the election process was marred by nepotism¹⁹.

Despite the state's presence in Arbin and other recaptured regions, the services provided by the government are largely symbolic and functionally ineffective. Prior to the war, Arbin thrived as a hub for small industrial business (workshops) and warehouses, leveraging its proximity to Damascus. But following the area's recapture, it encountered obstacles due to inadequate infrastructure. While such insufficiencies are consistently a problem across many regime-controlled areas, there is a noticeable bias in their distribution, with pri-

15 While the subsidized liter of fuel cost 11,500 SYP in subsidized price, it costs around 20,000 SYP in the black market.

16 The smuggling of goods through tunnels incurred additional costs and reduced the quantity of goods delivered due to the complexity of the smuggling process.

17 "Arbin Police Station Provides Services Around the Clock" (in Arabic), SANA, April 6, 2018, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=735370>

18 The Syria Report. "Arbin's Real Estate Registration Office: Return to Demarcation and Registration?" November 16, 2021. <https://shorturl.at/GmCyE>.

19 Ayman Al-Desouki, "Governance of Local Administrations: What do the Results of the Local Administration Elections Tell Us?", (in Arabic), Omran Strategic Studies, November 15, 2018, <https://shorturl.at/9f4yX>

ority for functional services given to loyalist areas^{20, 21}. Consequently, residents in locations recaptured from opposition control feel unsupported, neglected, or even punished. Despite this, Arbin has managed to sustain alternative service systems created during the siege, leveraging local resources independently.

Water accessibility has been crucial to the residents to invest in improving the town's infrastructure. During the siege, the residents of Ghouta left the damaged water lines and instead installed new water pipes outside the buildings. Fixing old water pipes was complicated and time-consuming, and it was more manageable and easier to replace or to install new pipes. After the recapture, the Public Water Company was able to restore 14 wells, which provide the town with 1500 square meters of drinking water per day. However, those facilities aren't enough for the residents of Arbin, and 11 wells are currently out of service²². The sewage system is also limited due to damaged pipes, leading locals to improvise by installing new lines and using ill-equipped sewer receptacles²³.

INFRASTRUCTURE BREAKDOWNS UNDER PROTRACTED CRISIS

Amidst a protracted economic crisis, many service sectors like health care and transportation have been left to INGOs and private solutions all over Syria. Health services before the war were provided by a state infirmary and private medical practices. During the war, local civil society took over the provision of healthcare, using funding from international and local humanitarian aid organizations. After the recapture of the town, some state-provisioned health services have been restored. The state infirmary in Arbin has resumed operations, offering services such as free

immunization and reproductive healthcare^{24, 25}. While there are no other state medical services available in Arbin, a hospital was rebuilt with support from Japan in nearby Harasta and is frequented by Arbin residents. A few private health providers, pharmacies, and clinics managed to continue to operate throughout the siege and became more active afterwards. Although medical services in Syria are less expensive than in other countries due to cheap local production of some supplies, the country's health system has been hindered by shortages of some medicines and equipment, especially after the onset of the ongoing economic crisis. In Arbin, access to vendors of medical supplies and medicine is a major challenge²⁶.

Bread is central to the Syrian diet, and many people depend on state and semi-state (public-private partnership?) bakeries to obtain subsidized bread²⁷. However, due to the economic crisis, only one state bakery was operational in Arbin, while others are privately owned - they rely on state subsidies to acquire wheat, but then sell the bread at a higher price²⁸. There is only one bakery that offers bread at subsidized prices and it caters to Arbin and its neighboring areas, but customers endure long queues for hours to secure subsidized bread—a common scene observed in many areas under regime control.

Private communication companies have become increasingly vital for accessing the internet and making calls, notably after the installation of new cellular towers to replace the older ones. The old towers were stolen during the conflict, leading to a loss of cellphones coverage. Many people in Arbin are still without essential means of communication (e.g. landline telephones and mobile internet) as the Public Communication Company has yet to fix its lines adequately. Landline connections, which provide access to affordable Wi-Fi networks via ADSL technology, are still unavailable in many areas of Arbin.

During the years of conflict, most schools managed to continue operating under siege. By 2019, they were fully under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Many locals contributed to the rehabilitation of their elementary and secondary public schools by utilizing their skills as craftsmen and carpenters, fixing chairs, desks, and other facilities. However, as

20 Electricity and water shortages, along with reductions in subsidies and low-quality service in state facilities, have become widespread norms. However, there is a noticeable disparity in the provision of water and electricity, with richer and loyalist areas receiving preferential treatment. For instance, nearby military housing in Dahiyat al-Assad receives approximately 8 hours of electricity supply per day, whereas recaptured areas in eastern Ghouta often receive 1-2 hours.

21 Interviews with residents in Arbin and Eastern Ghouta in 2022 and 2023.

22 UNOCHA Syria. Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic. December 2022. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/hno_2023-rev-1.12_1.pdf.

23 Middle East Institute and Etana Syria. Despair and Decay: East Ghouta after 18 Months of Renewed Regime Rule. November 2019. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/despair-and-decay-east-ghouta-after-18-months-renewed-regime-rule>.

24 Vaccines for children were available through state infirmaries even during the siege, thanks to the diligent efforts of local governmental employees who maintained relationships with state ministries.

25 The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) fund state infirmaries work in Syria.

26 Interview with a pharmacist in Arbin.

27 Semi-state bakeries are usually funded by the state, run by private investors, and sell bread at state-set price.

28 While one subsidized kilo of bread costs 200 SYP, the private bakeries priced in 2000 SYP and more.

with many other areas, there is still a shortage of teachers to serve the estimated 11,000 students in Arbin²⁹. To fill the gap, locals invested in two private schools: one is associated with the local church and caters to the Christian population as well as others, and the other has a strong affiliation to the *Qobaisiat* Islamic organization^{30, 31, 32}.

THE POWER CRISIS

While the provision of many utilities requires collaboration between the state, INGOs, and civil society, the private sector was able to address some of the needs of the people in Arbin with minimal state support. When the opposition claimed control of Arbin in 2012, the town was totally disconnected from the main power grid in Syria, prompting citizens to find other ways to get electricity. People and businesses all over Eastern Ghouta started using a system called *Ambeerat*, where a single individual invests in a large generator, then sells the energy produced to households for a fee based on either the kilowatt consumption (if there is a meter) or a lumpsum subscription.

When the regime forces entered in 2018, the public electric company started supplying the area with around 12% of its previous power supply and making use of only six transformers, which provided an hour of power daily³³. The erratic voltage of this power made it unreliable for consistent use, essentially restricting its utility to charging batteries. Consequently, residents continued to rely on the *Ambeerat* system to meet their other energy needs.

This system has both pros and cons. On the one hand, residents of Arbin are paying a large amount of their income for their subscriptions to the *Ambeerat* system, which limits affordability and access to electricity³⁴. On the other hand, the existence of the *Ambeerat* system provides an alternative to make up for the insufficiencies of the state power supply. Residents of Damascus – where most neighborhoods were not under siege and so not that pressured to set up private generators - express envy about the *Ambeerat* system in recaptured areas³⁵.

This dual system has empowered a group of local profiteers who used their connections with regime forces to procure fuel during the siege years. They continued to invest in this 'partnership' after the town's recapture and have developed an oligopoly on the generators used in the *Ambeerat* system. Their family names are prominently displayed on electricity boxes

29 "Gradual Improvement of Services in Arbin... and Residents Are Demanding More." SANA, October 22, 2019. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1040298>.

30 Al-Qubaysiat is an Islamic women's organization that was founded in Syria and spread to other Arab countries and beyond.

31 Seifan, Samir. "Al-Qubaysiat Organization and Its Relationship with the Syrian Regime." *Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies*, January 6, 2023.

32 Author Observations in April 2023 in a visit to Fajr Al Amal School - Arbin.

33 Author Observations in April 2023.

34 The minimum cost is 200,000 SYP (around 15 U.S. Dollars) to run three lamps and charge a battery. This is considerably a high monthly cost comparing to the Syrians wages that may not exceed 20 USD monthly for a governmental employee.

35 Bey Al-Sharif, Fadi. "Criticism of the Increase in Random 'Amps' in Neighborhoods and the Increase in Rationing Hours to More than 10 Hours per Day! ...The Director of Electricity [Company], in Response to Members of the Capital Council: Increasing Rationing Hours Due to Winter." *Al Watan*, January 17, 2024. <https://alwatan.sy/archives/375361>

located near small offices where they collect fees and manage subscriptions.

Another private power option is to rely on solar panels. However, installing solar panels is a substantial investment that is not affordable for all residents, with costs starting at ten million SYP (Syrian Pounds) for a basic home system, an equivalent of around 700\$ as of July 2024. The average monthly salary for private sector workers is around 800,000 SYP, putting solar solutions out of reach for many^{36, 37}.

The scarcity of fuel and electricity poses a significant challenge for business investors. Alternative energy solutions stand as one of the limited options people can rely on to sustain their work. Moreover, solar power and the *Ambeerat* system are primarily utilized for cooling devices and light machinery. However, workshop proprietors in industries such as joinery and furniture manufacturing must invest in private generators to operate their heavy machinery. Some workshops are creating hybrid systems for energy production to reduce their costs while meeting their needs.

Businesses often encounter heightened production costs due to the initial establishment fees associated with alternative energy systems. And even once installed, there are additional ongoing costs associated with maintenance, battery preservation and replacement, and specialized motors for low voltage equipment. Nonetheless, the availability of private energy options like the *Ambeerat* system gives Arbin a relative advantage in terms of access to power and has subsequently diverted business deals from companies in Damascus, particularly in the clothing sector, as this sector is restricted to seasonal orders that cannot be delayed.

STRUGGLING INVESTMENT

The power advantage has not fully offset the challenges posed by the communication and transportation infrastructure, coupled with the substantial cost of property rehabilitation. As a result, Arbin has become less appealing for both residential living and business establishment. Nonetheless, some external investors remain interested in the locality, although they have shifted in numbers and characteristics since before the conflict. The once prevalent large-scale external investments have been supplanted by smaller, more localized businesses.

During the 2000s, Arbin experienced an economic boom, which was further bolstered by the opening of the Southern Highway and a new connection with the M5 highway in 2009. The town was therefore located along a route that enabled trucks and cars transporting goods from Damascus to bypass Eastern Ghouta and arrive at their destination in a shorter time. Unlike other areas in Eastern Ghouta that are filled with either industrial workshops or warehouses, Arbin has managed to bring both facilities together, making it an attractive destination for traders from Damascus before the war. With its wide-open spaces, the town quickly became a hub for big warehouses owned by a variety of trade and distribution companies - from those dealing in heavy machinery and food products to those handling sensitive equipment³⁸. Additionally, it took pride in hosting factories for the food industry, as well as a thriving medical sector, complete with a private hospital, multiple clinics, and laboratories.

Economic activities were significantly reduced during the conflict, but Arbin continued to provide clothing and food products to other towns in Eastern Ghouta. Located away from frontlines, it also served as a safe haven for businesses from other places in Ghouta, especially those engaged in carpentry, sewing and food processing.

After its recapture, Arbin witnessed a boost in a diverse range of enterprises, especially in the food industries, with a focus on canning plants such as Algo-ta, Four Seasons, and Zahr Albustan. One particularly successful facility is the Durra factory. Established as a family business by a prominent local family in 2000, the factory had to relocate to Egypt and Jordan during

36 In 2022, this cost usually cover the installation fees, a power inverter, a battery, cables and panels.

37 Al-Ali, Julnar. "The Difference in Employment Wages Between Damascus and the Rest of the Governorates Reaches 300. Interest... Qurait to Al-Watan: Because the Labor Force in Damascus Is More Skilled and Administrative Costs Are Higher Than Elsewhere." Al Watan, October 9, 2023. <https://alwatan.sy/archives/363872>.

38 Interview with a manager of a company of medical equipment and telecommunication company owner in Damascus. August 2022.

the war³⁹. However, following a decline in military operations in the area, the factory was rehabilitated and resumed production, focusing primarily on the export market. This strategic shift capitalized on favorable exchange rates, enabling the business to sustain itself despite losses from challenges such as power shortages and corruption. While smaller businesses encounter fewer visits from local authorities like the governorate, health, and customs officials in recaptured areas, larger investments dispatching trucks to Damascus and other regions have had to account for bribes and royalties.

Another notable firm is the Zanobia company for ceramics, owned by Muhammad Al-Sahar the former Vice President of the Damascus and Rural Damascus Chamber of Industry⁴⁰. It possesses a sizable warehouse and distribution point situated in Arbin, adjacent to its factory in Adra town. This facility closed during the conflict but reopened in 2023.

The main trend in Arbin's economy has been the loss of medium-sized businesses. Many businesses in Arbin suffered significant losses during the war due to destruction as well as looting by both locals during the siege and loyalist forces when the area was recaptured by the regime. As a result, some were forced to sell their warehouses and close their businesses entirely; many investors who used to occupy large industrial warehouses are no longer present⁴¹. Due to ongoing safety concerns, warehouses operating in the area – primarily engaged in wood trading - still require hiring guards, which may not be feasible for all businesses.

PERSISTENT LABOR

The original inhabitants of Arbin, those who never left or who returned after it was recaptured by the regime, continue to live their lives and make a living in the city. This is especially true for those with lower incomes who lack the means to relocate and establish themselves elsewhere. Following the city's recapture, there was a surge in construction work driven by the necessity to repair damages sustained during wartime and the looting that followed. This included reconstructing walls, laying new tiles, replacing windows and doors, and mending plumbing. In contrast, the expense of rehabilitating closed and damaged facilities presented a significant hurdle for many business owners. The rising costs of construction materials, driven upward by import sanctions as well as inflation, made rehabilitation costlier than what many business owners could afford.

Small carpentry workshops supply the city and its surrounding areas with wooden construction materials such as doors and windows. While the quality of the products may be lower, the workshops primarily cater for low-income Syrians in the vicinity, rather than the wealthier people from Damascus city who were the main target customers before the war.

More positively, an estimated 300 workshops have reopened in Arbin⁴². Sewing and garment workshops have resumed their operations, taking advantage of the availability of power through the *Ambeerat* system to run their machines. These workshops attract companies in Damascus, many of whom don't have *Ambeerat* systems yet, and they even take orders from INGOs⁴³. Some provide hands-on training for women, providing access to income while imparting empowering livelihood skills⁴⁴.

An array of shops selling goods ranging from toys, clothes, accessories and mobile phones to groceries are available in Arbin. Most of the imported goods these shops have on display, similar to other regime-controlled areas, are lower quality products from China. While vegetables and meat are locally available, there is minimal consumer demand due to a decrease in Syrians' purchasing power. Additionally, it can be challenging to find customers outside of the immedi-

39 Durra company official website, the company board page, accessed April 7 2023. <https://aldurra.com/main/board>

40 "Muhammad Al-Sahar: Zenobia Ceramics Competed Internationally in Wartime Conditions." *Almashhad Online*. YouTube video, October 31, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRPetpgixq4>.

41 Interview with a garment workshop owner in Arbin, March 11, 2023.

42 "Gradual improvement of services in Arbin.. and residents demand more – Video", SANA, October 20, 2019. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1038651>

43 Interview with a garment workshop owner in Arbin, March 11, 2023.

44 Interview with a staff in the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), October 22, 2020.

ate surrounding area, as Damascus city residents may still view the area as a no-go zone.

The majority of Arbin's residents are employed in the industrial sector, with only a small portion working in the services sector. During the conflict, women's employment saw a significant increase, primarily driven by the scarcity of male laborers, the loss of men as primary breadwinners, and the heightened need for additional income during sieges and economic crises, which resulted in rising costs of food and goods. Their contributions extended across various sectors, including teaching, pharmacy, and medical aid provision. Active engagement in NGOs during conflict periods facilitated their increased presence in public spaces. Because Arbin was a refuge for people from other areas in Ghouta, numerous local women have spearheaded civil society projects⁴⁵. And while many women have opted to work from home, crafting handmade products such as jams and embroidery, others have joined workshops and factories to work outside their homes. Unfortunately, the sector where women have historically engaged heavily, agriculture, has been diminished due to water scarcity.

In the aftermath Arbin's recapture, there has been a noticeable upturn in economic activities and endeavors compared to the conflict years. Despite the increased work opportunities, the returns for investors have not seen significant growth. Consequently, the residents of Arbin have had to be resourceful to maintain their livelihoods, particularly amid an ongoing economic crisis. Among the available resources are civil society organizations and diaspora networks, which serve as essential lifelines for the residents, providing indispensable support that the community heavily relies upon.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY BASE

Civil society was extremely active during the years of opposition control, with all kinds of organizations respond to the needs of the besieged population, depending on the resources and funds to which they had access. Work in the public domain during wartime years became a target for the regime's security forces after the city's recapture, who treated it as a political accusation and a reason for arrest⁴⁶. This has caused hesitation among the population to engage in civil activities within Eastern Ghouta, preferring to participate in activities elsewhere - namely in areas where religious minorities predominate, such as Jaramana town. Nonetheless, Syrian NGOs and prominent figures in the diaspora are finding creative ways to support Arbin, such as lobbying among other INGOs and masking their projects as economic activities within a challenging security climate.

Individuals who stayed in the area after the regime regained control had to find ways to live under the regime's stringent authority. They have become more vigilant and cautious, as any perceived connection to external or opposition funding could be construed as an accusation of supporting terrorism and may result in serious allegations. Civil society in the area is now integrated into both state and semi-state bodies, including organizations like the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and well-established charitable associations⁴⁷. While INGOs based in Damascus typically operate through these bodies, local economic actors and professionals continue to contribute their expertise and support community initiatives independently⁴⁸.

One well-known local organization is the Seraj NGO, which exemplifies the network involved in facilitating activities under regime control. Established in 2018, it is headed by a relative of the mayor of Arbin and the Endownments (*Awqaf*) manager in Rural Damascus. The Seraj NGO collaborates with several ministries and organizations to provide aid and services to the community. In partnership with the *Awqaf* Ministry, it provides food aid and offers literacy and English language courses in collaboration

45 Interview with a woman who started a poetry group in a social center in Arbin in 2013. May 8, 2021.

46 That include relief, livelihood, medical and psychological support, women empowerment, child protection and more.

47 SARC Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and Syria Trust are strongly affiliated with the regime and are considered tools for its policies.

48 Al Kheder, Mohammed. "Locals Offer Their Help to Rehabilitate the Schools of Arbin." *Almayadeen Channel*. YouTube video, August 17, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSajRECyS-E>.

with the Ministry of Culture. It also works with the Syria Trust to offer legal aid and awareness-raising initiatives, and partners with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and World Food Program (WFP) to distribute cash and food aid⁴⁹.

Favoritism remains a common problem within charitable work in Syria. During the phase of recapture, volunteers typically facilitate their work through intermediaries such as *mokhtars* (local administrative leaders), and the aid often prioritizes families of martyrs from the Syrian army as beneficiaries⁵⁰. However, many local charities in rural Damascus face the challenge of reaching out to those in need. Locals may not be aware of how to access the services and aid, which can result in misunderstandings and accusations of favoritism or lack of transparency.

INGOs take a cautious approach when handling projects within recaptured areas, focusing on specific skill-based programs. The majority of livelihood programs in Arbin target women, emphasizing projects such as sewing, making bags and accessories, and the production of cleaning products. Additionally, there are initiatives centered around recycling, candle-making, and offering training in English language proficiency and computer skills⁵¹. In contrast, in religious minority areas and in Damascus, more intellectual and creatively-oriented projects may find a place as lower degree of regime political censorship marks the scene⁵².

The Russian coordination center also provides food aid and stationery for schools in a symbolic manner⁵³. They offer assistance to the Church of *Mar Gorgios* located in Arbin and to the Eastern Christians, who are the main sect supported by Russia. Such aid initiatives often operate on a small scale and are highly securitized, yet they receive extensive coverage in the Syrian media.

The civil society landscape in Arbin predominantly operates on private efforts by local residents. This

involves individuals exercising their expertise and personal initiative discreetly to implement modest changes without attracting undue attention. Some take on the responsibility of re-establishing facilities for accessing essential services, while others use the Islamic culture as a basis for charitable endeavors. They use Zakat to provide much-needed aid to those in need, or disguise their support as commercial partnerships⁵⁴. In this landscape, civil society initiatives are best undertaken with flexibility and discretion.

49 [The Syria Trust for Development](https://bit.ly/46C7SyG), also known as the Trust, is a non-governmental organization founded by Asma Al-Assad, the wife of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Business Profile: Syria Trust for Development, *The Syria Report*, April 11, 2023. <https://bit.ly/46C7SyG>

50 "More than 1,300 Daily Meals from the Kitchen of Al-Sarraj Charity Association in Arbin - Video." SANA, April 11, 2023. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1874399>.

51 Norwegian Refugee Council, Shams Church Aid Organization Center, First Step Center for Wome, St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee

52 Nessian Cultural forum in Jaramana conducts seminars with writers and CSOs actors, <https://www.facebook.com/NessianOrganization/>

53 „Distribution of Aid Provided by the Russian Federation in Arbin in Rural Damascus." SANA, February 4, 2023. <https://sana.sy/?p=1830965>.

54 *Zakat* is an Islamic financial term. As one of the pillars of the faith, it requires all Muslims to donate a portion of their wealth to charity.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the paper was to understand and examine state of Arbin city following the cessation of military activity in the area, focusing on its development and recovery. Arbin's progress has been driven primarily by the efforts and towards the needs of the local population, rather than through recovery initiatives provided by the government in Damascus. Conversely, the energy crisis, combined with inflation and the necessity of reconstructing following extensive destruction, has significantly compounded the challenges of Arbin's socioeconomic recovery. Obstacles such as a lack of state service provision, encroachment of security services, and corruption, have hindered the potential for successful revitalization. In a socioeconomic sense, the area is far from being under effective governance by the regime, except for the collection of royalties through checkpoints and the imposition of a securitized atmosphere by force.

INGOs have become significant players in providing social and basic services for the population of Arbin. The political sensitivities that exists there, however, necessitates that they operate with discretion. They often fail to reach all individuals in need, and their fairness is sometimes disputed. There are accusations that they cater only to specific demographics or those with access to certain networks or affiliations.

Finally, Arbin current recovery is dependent on local players within Syria and relies heavily on local markets and aid funds, which further limits opportunities for large-scale development. Despite attempts to overcome such challenges, local efforts cannot be scaled up if they are isolated from a comprehensive national plan.

Investing in infrastructure rehabilitation would significantly contribute to addressing the area's developmental challenges. And due to the absence of a stated plan to fund and implement modern infrastructure at a large scale, Arbin is expected to remain underdeveloped for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, exploring established channels by local networks, connections to diaspora groups, and engaging with NGOs could offer valuable support. Investing in innovative and eco-friendly solutions to address ongoing crises emerges as a critical method to spur progress in the region's recovery.

