

# Post-war Urban Projects in Syria, a Toponymic Insight

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## 1. *Syrian place names as “spatialised ideology”*

How do two new toponyms around Damascus, *Marota City* and *Basilia City*, represent continuity and change in the Syrian state's ideology and politics? This paper is exploratory and partially depends on the doctoral research of the author (Keilo, 2018).

Toponyms, being a part of the «organised remembrance» (Arendt, Canovan, 1998, pp. 52, 55), «provide for the intersection of hegemonic ideological structures with the spatial practices of everyday life» as a narrative without “villains” (Azaryahu, 1996, pp. 313-315, 317).

## 2. *The (re)writing of the map of the Syrian Arab Republic since 1920*

In founding new political entities in the Levant (Haut-Commissariat, 1921, pp. 132-141), the French Mandatory Power set in motion toponymic dynamics that still govern the maps of the Syrian and the Lebanese Republics today (Keilo, 2019). Following independence, Lebanon kept intact most of Mandatory toponyms (Keilo, 2017), while Syria followed the “ritual” of «toponymic cleansing» (Azaryahu, 2011, p. 29).

2.1. *The “baathisation” of the Syrian map 1963-2011* – On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1963, the Baath Party seized power and began rewriting the map of Syria: names reminiscent of “colonisation” and “enemies of the Revolution” were changed. The Article 8 of the 1973 Syrian Constitution confirms the Baath Party's pan-Arab and socialist ideology as the state's and the society's (Ace Project, 2022). New names commemorating Baath figures and values were added to map: the process accelerated around 1980. The most visible example on the map is Lake Assad and the Thawra [Revolution] Dam on the Eu-

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phrases: the lake is visible from space and thus is the name of Assad.

At city scale, street names commemorating key dates like Al Thawra [The Revolution], 8 Azar [the 8<sup>th</sup> of March] 1963, 6 Tishreen [The October war], 16 Tishreen [the Corrective Movement of Hafez Assad on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1970] were added to the map in every Syrian city and town.

2.2. *A toponymic war* – In 2011 the civil war began, after popular protests followed by armed opposition to the Syrian government. The ongoing conflict has resulted in a country fragmented in its territory and scarred in its economy, with several millions of its citizens as refugees and as displaced.

For the government's opponents, renaming what is reminiscent of the Baathist era is essential. In 2012, Syrian activists used Google Map Maker to change street names in several locations in Syria. The changes led to accusations of interference from Bashar Jaafari, then Syrian ambassador to the UN: «What does Google have to do with street names in Syrian cities? Isn't this a violation of the UN and Arab League resolutions on standardising geographical names?» (Keilo, 2015, p. 38).

In April 2014, *Abdelaziz Al Saoud Street* is renamed *Hugo Chávez Street*, and a garden in the University of Damascus is named after the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías for «his support for the Syrian people» (Shafaqna, 2014; Damascus University, 2014). Chávez voiced out his «greetings to President Assad and the brothers of the Syrian People who are resisting imperialist aggression» in 2012<sup>1</sup>.

In 2015, *Kim Il Sung Street* and *Garden* were inaugurated in Damascus, in honour of «Kim Il Sung [...] dear friend of the Syrian Arab People» (SANA, 2015).

For commemoration of local “heroes”, in 2015, the Damascus Governorate decided to rename 20 schools after soldiers killed in the war (Syria Daily News, 2015): the dynamic of commemorating “martyrs”, set up by the Mandatory Power in 1920, continues to be used in its broadest sense. In retaliation to the Turkish government's interference in northern Syria, there is a movement calling for the removal of the numerous Ottoman toponyms in Damascus (Moubayed, 2016; Arabi21, 2018).

### 3. *Post-war [probable] urban projects*

The reconstruction of Syria would cost \$ 250-400 billion and needs the support of the international community (Devadas *et alii.*, 2019; Daher, 2019), a theoretical objective in a country where the GDP of 2018 was \$ 22 billion (The World Bank, 2022).

In 2012, while battle was raging around Damascus, the presidential decree N° 66 declared a zone of «redeveloping areas of unauthorised housing and informal quarters» around the southern Ring Road of Damascus (Syrian Parlia-

<sup>1</sup> See his speech (in Spanish) at <https://youtu.be/zfBGspkk1VU> (last access 24/09/2022).

ment, 2012). Later, this zone became two distinct urban projects: *Marota City* to the north of the Ring Road, and *Basilias City* to its south, mostly to be built on some “informal” quarters of Kfar Souseh and El Qadam<sup>2</sup> municipalities, destroyed by the war and their population displaced (fig.1). Other reconstruction projects, still theoretical, followed.

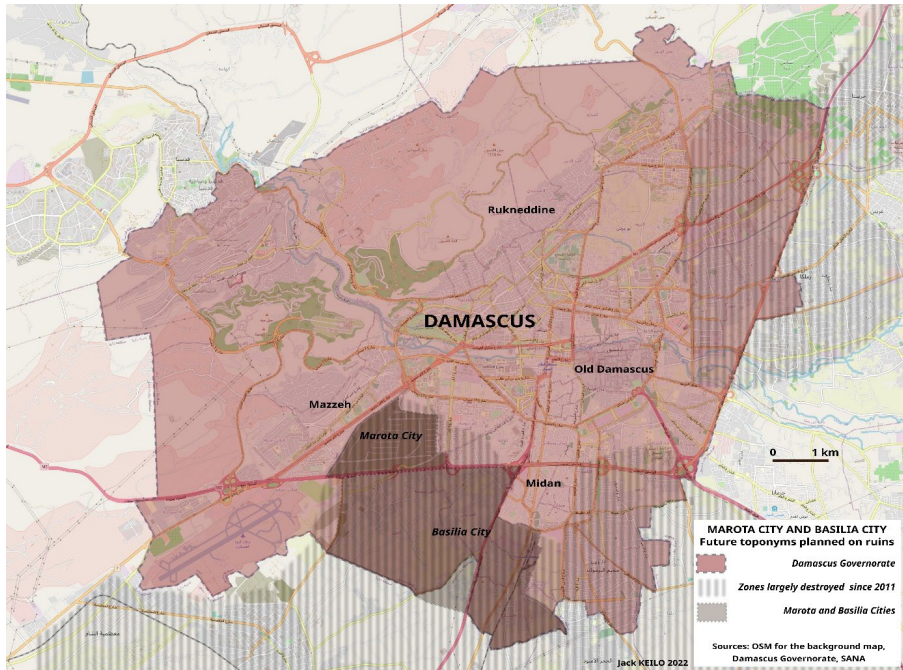


Fig. 1 – Marota and Basilias Cities, two new urban projects/toponyms in Damascus, 2022.  
Source: OSM.

3.1. *Marota City and Basilias City, the “local” in the “global”* – Two unique names were chosen: Marota (2,14 km<sup>2</sup>, 70000 inhabitants) and Basilias (9 km<sup>2</sup>, “alternative housing”, and 4000 properties). Their generic name, *City*, is transliterated as it is in Arabic<sup>3</sup>, thus constituting a shift in the supposedly pan-Arab and socialist toponymic scope of the SAR.

*City* reflects some (aspired) global dimension. We can find this globality in the description of Marota City by its managing society: «the new city that will contribute to the dawn of a new Damascus has a long tradition and history and

<sup>2</sup> Both have traditional pre-modern names: Kfar Souseh is Syriac for «the stud farm». El Qadam was known as El Qadam el Sharif (the Noble Foot) as its mosque was said to host a stone - originally from Bosra - on which an imprint was left of the foot of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, during his journey to Roman Syria.

<sup>3</sup> Even if the first version of the name of Marota City in Arabic was *Medinat Marota*.

puts it on the map of modernity and globalism» (Marota City, 2022). The two projects are described as “smart cities” (Arabrisk London, 2021) and “Dubai-style” (Syrian Law, 2019; Hanna, Harastani, 2019).

Marota, according to a source in the Governorate of Damascus, «will be even more beautiful than Dubai, as we [Damascus Governorate] will use world-class criteria in the [postwar] reconstruction process» (Economy2day, 2017), in a clear reference to *Dubaization* (Elshehstawy, 2012).

3.2. *From the global to the very local* – The two specific names, Marota and Basilia, are supposed to be “Syriac words”: *Marota* is «sovereignty» and «homeland» (SANA, 2017); and *Basilia* is «Paradise» (SANA, 2018).

In Syriac, *Marûta* signifies “lordliness”, and “sovereignty”. The word is related to *Mor* (lord), *Morth* (a lady or Our Lady), and to the name of the Maronites.

*Basilia* is more complex: the Damascus Governorate uses it as “Paradise”, while the word is Biblical and directly related to the Christianity of the Roman Empire. *Basilia*, in Syriac, is borrowed from the Greek *Basileia* [*tou Theou* or *ton Ouranôn*]<sup>4</sup>, meaning “Kingdom” [of God or of Heaven]. The two expressions, common in the New Testament, set a parallel with the *Basileia ton Rhômaion*, “Realm of the Romans”, the popular name of the Roman Empire that time<sup>5</sup>.

Apparently, such toponymic dynamics will shape new toponyms. In September 2021 a new presidential decree creates a redevelopment area on a deeply destroyed zone to the north of Damascus. According to Faisal Srour, of the Executive Bureau of the Damascus Governorate, «A new name of the area will soon be chosen, and will follow the same style of Syrian toponyms that represent Damascus in the Syriac language» (Alwatan, 2021).

#### 4. *Toponyms of change?*

Meanwhile, the official pan-Arab policy of the Syrian state has not changed. The Syrian constitution of 2012, without giving the formal leading role to the Baath Party, asserts the ideas of “Arab civilisation”, “Arab identity”, and “Arab homeland”, all while claiming the SAR as «proud of its Arab identity» (Constitute Project, 2022). President Assad himself, in 2020, in a speech at the Syrian Waqf, asserted the importance of the Arab identity and indirectly criticised the “Syriac-ness” of Syria, all while maintaining the official discourse of “protection of minorities (Christians)” (Al Sharq Al Arabi, 2020).

Yet the names of the new urban projects reflect a more complex reality. In this regard, we can propose some further possibilities of research: at first, some inventory work on the changes in the Syrian toponymy since 2011 will be indispensable to understand real estate, scheme, topographical, and prop-

<sup>4</sup> For example see Matthew 5:3, 6 :33, Mark 14:25, Luke 17:20-21, John 3:5.

<sup>5</sup> See primary sources on the names of the Roman State in Keilo 2020, <https://centrici.hypotheses.org/1873> (last access: 23/09/2022).

erty adjustments in the post-conflict Syria<sup>6</sup>, as to comprehend post-conflict spatial planning and management. Out of this inventory, reading the changes in the light of the new political and economic alignments of the Syrian government will also be a precious tool to understand both prospective planning in Syria and its ever-changing foreign and domestic policies. Which toponyms will define the Syrian landscape of tomorrow?

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<sup>6</sup> According to a toponymic analysis study in Dubai, conducted by the author in 2019 and 2020 (yet to be published), some toponymic changes appear in schemes as contractual place names, but are not included in the Cadastre or in the topographic maps: will Damascus and other Levantine cities follow a similar pattern and separate between “commercial” and cadastral place names?

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### *Post-war Urban Projects in Syria, a Toponymic Insight*

How will Syria's post-conflict toponymy be? Since the civil war (2011-), toponymic reconfiguration has been used to consolidate the state's control and showing continuity of its Baathist ideology (1963-), but also to mark its qualitative changes. During the war, names of "heroes" and "friends of the Syrian people" were added to the map. Two new urban project names, Marota and Basilia Cities, reveal new trends not in line with the official pan-Arab and "socialist" past toponymic scape, but an aspiration to integrate global economy, to "be like Dubai", as to appear as "minority-protector" or nuance the official narratives of the country's history. The inventory of the Syrian new toponyms since 2011 shall inform us about the new political and ideological alignments of the Syrian state.

### *Progetti urbani postbellici in Siria, uno studio toponomastico*

Come sarà la toponomastica siriana postbellica? Dalla guerra civile (2011-), la riconfigurazione toponomastica è stata utilizzata per consolidare il controllo dello Stato e mostrare la continuità dell'ideologia baathista (1963-), ma anche per segnare i suoi cambiamenti qualitativi. Durante la guerra, sono stati aggiunti alla mappa nomi di "eroi" e "amici del popolo siriano". Due nuovi nomi di progetti urbani, Marota e Basilia Cities, rivelano nuove tendenze non in linea con il passato toponomastico ufficiale panarabo e "socialista", ma un'aspirazione a integrare l'economia globale, a "essere come Dubai", ad apparire come "protettore delle minoranze" o a sfumare le narrazioni ufficiali della storia del Paese. L'inventario dei nuovi toponimi siriani dal 2011 ci informerà sui nuovi allineamenti politici dello Stato siriano.

### *Projets urbains d'après-guerre en Syrie, étude toponymique*

Comment sera la toponymie syrienne post-conflit ? Depuis la guerre civile (2011-), la reconfiguration toponymique a consolidé le contrôle de l'État et la continuité de son idéologie baathiste (1963-), mais aussi a marqué ses nouveaux alignements idéologiques. Pendant la guerre, des noms de « héros » et d'« amis du peuple syrien » ont été ajoutés à la carte. Deux nouveaux noms de projets urbains, Marota et Basilia Cities, révèlent de nouvelles tendances qui ne correspondent pas au paysage toponymique officiel panarabe et « socialiste » du passé, mais à une aspiration à intégrer l'économie mondiale, à « être comme Dubai », à apparaître comme « protecteur des minorités » ou à nuancer les récits officiels de l'histoire du pays. L'inventaire des nouveaux toponymes syriens depuis 2011 nous renseigne sur les nouveaux alignements politiques de l'État syrien.