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Ma'arat al Numan: The resilience of a Syrian city at war Training specialists in reconstruction: *Université Populaire Syrienne**

Overview

The Syrian city of Ma'arat al Numan, a symbol of countless legendary stories of conquest and liberation, was one of the first cities to participate in the popular democratic uprising of March 2011. "Liberated" in October 2012, today 70% of the city lies in ruins, having lost a large part of its population and almost all of its infrastructure and public buildings.

Thanks to the action of local coordinating committees, neighborhood associations and NGOs, the population is trying as well as possible to rebuild, confronting the immensity of human loss and destruction with pitifully limited means.

Our association – Ila Souria – has been working for over two years towards the launch of a pilot center of the *Université Populaire Syrienne* (Syrian Popular University or Syrian Adult Education*) in Ma'arat al Numan. For more than a year we've been engaged in training reconstruction specialists in architecture, urban planning and sustainable reconstruction, using these experiences in the city to refine the approach. This training is part of a project called "Tahdir," initiated by the European Union. We're partners in the project, along with the Olof Palme International Center in Stockholm, and the Arab Reform Initiative in Paris.

Keywords (in alphabetical order)

Popular Education; Pedagogy; Reconstruction; Resilience; Syria; Training; War.

1. Introduction

Since the fall of 2014, when we carried out a field visit to make contacts and scout locations, our association, Ila Souria (For Syria) has been working to make a very modest contribution to the city of Ma'arat al Numan.

Through our association's activities, linked to our participation in the Tahdir project, we've engaged as many issues as we could, and attempted to find solutions to them, advancing step by step through a landscape of difficult human, contextual and political challenges.

Is this the moment to talk about reconstruction? How can we talk about reconstruction when war is still raging in Syria? Why is it so important to think about reconstruction now? When do we begin to rebuild? What would be the right time and conditions for reconstruction? What and how do we rebuild? With whom do we rebuild?

These questions affirm the focus of our approach, which is above all – despite some understandable scepticism – a humanitarian act: urgent, crucial and (very) long term.

2. Project with three components: Ila Souria, Tahdir and Ma'arat al Numan

2.1 Ila Souria and the *Université Populaire Syrienne*

Ila Souria is a non-profit association, founded in February 2013 with the purpose of organizing events for the reconstruction of Syria and workshops to exchange knowledge and creative perspectives, producing publications for these events, etc.

As of this writing, Syria has been plunged into a relentless and multi-faceted war for nearly six years. The war has annihilated or displaced a large part of its population and ravaged entire sections of its natural and urban landscapes. In the face of so much devastation, we can't afford to simply wait for the outcome of this very complex conflict. We must immediately begin to address the questions of the material, social and psychological reconstruction of this millennia-old country, first and foremost as educators.

Events organized by Ila Souria

Three multi-disciplinary and international symposia and round-table discussions

The first symposium, *ilasouria.01* was titled "Syria: reconstructions, physical and non-material? – the state of things," and included five sessions: "Archeology & heritage," "Architecture & urban planning," "State, civil society: issues," "Intellectual reconstruction" and "What is Syria's immediate political future?"

ilasouria.02 focussed on its main theme "past experiences of cities (countries) with reconstruction," and experiences on the ground in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti, Lebanon, Iraq and New Zealand.

We also held roundtable discussions in June 2014 to consider the following question: how is the revolution and the ongoing upheaval shaking up people's relationship to heritage and freeing-up their creativity, and how do religions interfere with politics?

Finally, *ilasouria.03*, co-organized by Ila Souria and the Modern Secular Democratic Syria Association discussed three themes: "Psychological impacts, external trauma and resilience," "Experiences of reconstruction" in educational projects in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina and "Public involvement in Syria."

Université Populaire Syrienne (Syrian Popular University) – Flagship project of our association

Our association has been working for more than two years to found and develop a *Université Populaire Syrienne*, a space of resilience and shared exploration. Our aim is to respond to the urgent demands for knowledge and the current deficits in educational infrastructure with a new approach for Syria: participatory citizen education, accessible to all.

The *Université Populaire* operates in different locations such as Syrian refugee camps in neighboring countries and "liberated" territories – places where the educational deficit is overwhelming. The teaching activities of the *Université Populaire* take four main forms:

- Practical knowledge, with knowledge transfer intended for populations facing precarious situations.
- Discussions on unifying themes such as citizenship, democracy, feminism, etc.
- University support for students and teachers who don't or who no longer benefit from academic structures.
- Pedagogical training based on the forward thinking of educators, human rights activists and advocates of the *Universités populaires*.

Training of facilitators

To lay the basis for the *Université Populaire Syrienne*, we have begun training about twenty of our “signatories” – a group of nearly 300 people worldwide – committed to contributing their time and unique abilities to building a strong foundation for the project. The main objective of our training process is to encourage participants to gain a solid understanding of the basic principles of Popular Education and to embrace the role of popular educator. Training is intended to prepare facilitators who will go into the field (in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan) to conduct workshops in Popular Education.

Université Populaire Syrienne Citizen Cafés

Between May 2015 and September 2016, we held 10 UPS Citizen Cafés – events which facilitated constructive exchanges between UPS signatories and guests. Here are some themes addressed at these evenings:

- Creation of an MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) devoted to journalism.
- Condition of the sites and monitoring: how to protect the Syrian archaeological heritage taken hostage?
- “*Maison de Palmyre*” project (site of education and cultural activities).
- How to live in and rebuild Syria together, with culture as a unifying element.

Actions on the ground

The various components of Ila Souria that we’ve just reviewed (and not exhaustively) have been experienced in different contexts: at the Al Salam school in Reyhanli and with the Un Rêve Syrien (A Syrian Dream) association in Antakia in Turkey; in the Za’atari Syrian refugee camp in Jordan (academic conferences and a workshop in humanitarian design) and in Ma’arat al Numan in Syria (to be discussed later in this article).

2.2 Tahdir

Tahdir – a phonetic transcription of an Arabic word meaning ‘preparation’ – is the name of a call for projects launched by the European Union in May 2014. The proposal request highlighted these key words: Syria; Afterwards; Reconstruction; Education. When we were asked to participate by the Arab Reform Initiative Association, we offered to contribute our domains of expertise: architecture and urban planning. The proposal was submitted in September 2014. We finally received a positive response from Brussels in September 2015, for a project slated to begin in January 2016 and to run for a duration of 32 months, financed by the European Union and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Partners of the Tahdir training project

This Tahdir project addresses five fields of study. We’ll deal only with the one that concerns us directly – providing university training for Syrian men and women in three domains: local administration, law and security sector reform and architecture and urban planning. It consists of three groups:

- An eight-member scientific committee, which meets four times a year and oversees the overall program implementation process.
- A structured project management team with 14 people who ensure its implementation (led by a small team in Stockholm and a core group in Paris).
- Three two-person teams that develop, plan and manage the courses. Each team consists of a project

manager and an assistant responsible for direct contact with trainees in their respective fields.

The Arab Reform Initiative took responsibility for the first two domains cited while our association, Ila Souria: “Architecture and urban planning: sustainable reconstruction,” handled the training sessions. Our first face-to-face was held with students in Gaziantep in Turkey while two others took place online using a suitable Web platform.

2.3 Ma’arat al Numan

Ma’arat al-Numan is a town in the north-west of Syria, in the province of Idlib, between Aleppo and Hama. Covering an area of 2,318 square kilometers, it had 70,000 inhabitants in 2010 and saw that number fall to 15,000 in 2014, after three years of conflict. Today, in response to a precarious lull in the conflict, its population has rebounded to 30,000 city dwellers.



Ma’arat al Numan, Province of Idlib, Syria

With one of the richest histories in Syria, Ma’arat al Numan flourished under many different civilizations including Muslim, Byzantine, Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman, finally gaining its independence at the end of the French protectorate in 1946. The city is also known as the birthplace of the illustrious poet Abu al-’Ala al-Ma`arî – a legacy which still brings it literary fame throughout the Arab world. It’s a prosperous city with a substantial built heritage, important government buildings and public institutions (at least for what they once were) and rich surrounding agricultural areas.

The destruction inflicted on the city is massive, as illustrated by a disturbing set of percentages: 30% of the civil service buildings, 70% of the registered structures, 80% of the Palais de Justice, 60% of the electric company, 35% of the water company, 60% of city administration facilities. Towering over these numbers is the destruction of virtually all school facilities and an exorbitant number of dwellings.

Thanks to the action of local coordinating committees, neighborhood associations and NGOs, the population is trying as well as possible to rebuild, confronting the immensity of human loss and destruction with pitifully limited means.

Our association – Ila Souria – has been working for over two years towards the launch of a pilot center of the *Université Populaire Syrienne* in Ma’arat al Numan. For more than a year we’ve been engaged in training reconstruction specialists in architecture, urban planning and sustainable reconstruction, using the city as a testing ground.

3. Training in “Architecture and urban planning, sustainable development”

Content

The first 5-week training session took place in April and May 2015 in the city of Gaziantep in Turkey. The session was attended by ten Syrian trainees (nine architects and one civil engineer, including five from Syria and five living in Turkey), supervised by seven lecturers who shared the workload during this very intense period. Training took place five to six days a week with theoretical classes in the mornings and project workshops in the afternoon (all conducted in Arabic).

Pursuing a main objective of detailing and completing the training of architecture and urban planning graduates in the field of reconstruction and sustainable development, the trainees followed the program offered by the seven lecturers (people whose identities must remain confidential, along with those of the trainees). The architects, urban planners and researchers contributing to the program came from Canada, France, Switzerland, Syria and Turkey.

Lecturer 1

Sustainable development: introduction to a second type of utopia – Project management – *Université Populaire* & reconstruction – Humanitarian design.

Lecturer 2

Reconstruction and resilience – Vulnerability and sustainable development – A theoretical approach to and case studies of temporary and permanent post-conflict reconstruction.

Lecturers 3 and 4

Reconstruction of the city after the war: visions, plans, strategies, policies and tools – Participation of the population in the reconstruction of cities (during and after the war) – Post-war reconstruction models.

Lecturers 5 and 6

Introduction to a water strategy for Syria – Water resources management, during and after the conflict.

Lecturer 7

The role of culture and cultural heritage in the reconstruction process – Socio-anthropological research in the reconstruction phase.

Through this program, trainees have been prepared for jobs as research managers, reconstruction project managers, project assistants, etc. All of these profiles are intended for use in multiple reconstruction situations.

Trainee projects

The 10 trainees in this first training course in Turkey began their projects during the workshop sessions in mid-April and continued at a distance until mid-July 2015.

Participants submitted six projects on five themes: Heritage, Urban Master Planning, Housing, Schools, and Sustainable Reconstruction. The scope of this article only permits us to show you a few images that are far from reflecting the scope of the trainees' work (required for each project: a 30-page document and a slideshow of 50 slides).

Project 1 "Phoenix"- Belonging - Heart of the city

البدء بإعادة تأهيل ساحة مركزية لتكون مكان للنقاش المجتمعي بخصوص عملية إعادة الإعمار
وضع مجسمات فنية للتعبير في وسط الساحة وتوثيق النتائج بالصور وعرضها



Project 2.2 "Correlation"- Urban Planning



الحدائق داخل المدينة :

مخططات إعادة تأهيل بعض المساحات
كحدائق ومساحات خضراء داخل المدينة
ومخطط الغابة على أطراف المدينة



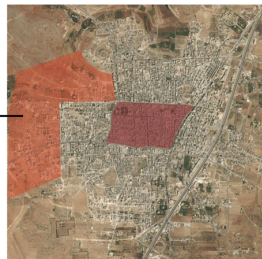
Project 3 "Doors"- Temporary and permanent housing

أين التدخل؟

نقوم بدراساتنا الحالية ضمن عملية إعادة الإعمار داخل المدينة. على جزء من منطقة المعرة والتي تعد المعرة القديمة.
وتضم هذه المنطقة أهم المراكز التاريخية في المعرة. كجامع الكبير و الخانات و غير أبي العلاء المعري. والمركز الثقافي
حاليا.

و تعرضت هذه المنطقة لدمار كبير في المرحلة الأخيرة

منطقة التوسع في الجهة الغربية
من المدينة والتي ستحتوي على
السكن المؤقت



منطقة السكن المؤقت
منطقة التدخل في السبع القادم
منطقة السبع السكني الجديد

3 slides of project presentations 1, 2 and 3

4. Next Steps

Two online courses

Two online courses, with about thirty trainees per domain, are planned. The second training session began in mid-January 2017 and will continue with 25 participants over a period of six months. The third and final training session will begin in early summer 2017 and will run until the beginning of 2018. These training courses follow the outline developed during the first session in Turkey.

A study center in Ma'arat al Numan

The study center is due to open during the first half of 2017, with a team of two people sharing responsibility for assisting trainees who want to work at the site. The center will also organize evening discussions at the city's cultural center, with talks focussed on our three domains of training and related issues raised by Ila Souria – the center's main facilitator.

Study tours in Europe for the trainees

A visit will be organized in Europe for a selection of trainees from the first two training sessions to study sites such as Dresden in Germany, Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Le Havre in France.

We have already selected four trainees from the first training session and we'll be selecting the same number of candidates from the second session. These trips will take place in early 2018 and the trainees will be supervised by local professionals.

5. Conclusion

The reconstruction of Syria, whatever the "ultimate" political scenario, will take decades. We're very conscious that our initiative is merely a drop in the bucket, relative to the immensity of the task ahead. Yet this modest initiative has its place, for it is indeed through the sum of an unlimited number of "small" projects that this country will one day be able to get back on its feet and envision new landscapes, both human and built.

The objective is not only to reconstruct buildings (as in Ma'arat al Numan) but to rebuild a society and thus also to repair the non-material damages of the war. Through the Tahdir project and other activities of Ila Souria, our preliminary role is to define as much as possible the new foundations on which we can work together to advance ethical and sustainable planning.

We are convinced that to meet this objective, these new approaches to teaching future architects, educators and students – as well as the civilian population – are essential. It's precisely this population – the general public – who are the people we need to work with, the basic tenet of Popular Education.

Every day that passes we gain a deeper appreciation of the immensity of the task we are undertaking and the absolute urgency of our mission to inspire the new generations who will rebuild Syria – our Syria!

Paris, February 20, 2017

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